Credibility and the War on Terror

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Credibility is a nation's greatest asset in international affairs. It is the hardest to earn and the most difficult to maintain, but once possessed it makes it possible to compel changes in behavior.

—John McCain[1]

Were the United States to withdraw prematurely from Iraq, warned Donald Rumsfeld in August 2006, the consequences for global stability would be catastrophic. Dominoes would fall across the region, and then beyond. "The enemy would tell us to leave Afghanistan and then withdraw from the Middle East," he told the Senate Armed Services Committee. Then "they'd order us and all those who don't share their militant ideology to leave what they call the occupied Muslim lands from Spain to the Philippines." The harm to the credibility of the United States would be nearly irreparable, and before long, the American people would be forced "to make a stand nearer home."[2]

Clearly, Henry Kissinger's decades-old observation that no serious policymaker doubts the importance of prestige, honor, and credibility still applies today.[3] Experienced practitioners of foreign policy take for granted the notion that actions taken today can affect (and perhaps prevent) the crises of tomorrow. The messages sent by foreign policy actions can sometimes seem to be more important than the actions themselves, since other states—including current and potential enemies—are watching every move, making judgments about the credibility of U.S. threats and promises. To question the wisdom of the imperative may seem terribly naïve, and perhaps even dangerous.

This "credibility imperative," in historian Robert McMahon's words, has occupied a central position in every major foreign policy debate in the last

[1] John McCain, "No Time to Sleep," *The Washington Post*, 24 October 2002.
[2] "The Sound of One Domino Falling," *The New York Times*, 4 August 2006.
[3] Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Co., 1979), 228.

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50 years.[4] However, many scholars remain, for the most part, unconvinced. Since the war in Vietnam, a competing conventional wisdom has been building momentum in scholarly circles, one that considers the obsession with credibility to be an illusory waste of time at best, and a producer of profoundly destructive misguidance at worst. Few issues currently separate the policy community from scholars in a more profound and important way. Resolving this curious disconnect between the beliefs of scholars and those of practitioners could hardly be more urgent. For better or for worse, the credibility imperative will probably have an enormous effect on U.S. foreign policy throughout the "long war" on terror, shaping all of the most vital decisions that will have to be made.

At first glance, Islamic fundamentalists appear to pose a difficult challenge to the credibility imperative's many academic skeptics. Osama bin Laden and his allies apparently considered the United States to be a feckless, cowardly "paper tiger," which is a perception that may have emboldened them to strike. When attacked, effete Americans sue; they send lawyers, not soldiers. September 11 might even have been prevented, so this logic goes, if Washington had responded to previous al Qaeda attacks with a more determined show of force. Perhaps the war on terror will prove the conventional wisdom of the practitioner regarding the lessons of credibility to have much more value than scholars think. Did a lack of American "credibility" lead al Qaeda to believe that it could strike the United States with impunity? Would a reputation for resolve keep a country safer during the war on terror?

Surely it behooves both policymakers and scholars to re-assess occasionally the wisdom of even their most closely held assumptions. Few beliefs are more deeply ingrained in the foreign policy conventional wisdom, and more in need of re-examination, than the nearly universal belief in the vital importance of national credibility. This paper investigates this curious divergence between scholars and practitioners when it comes to credibility. It reviews conventional wisdoms and speculates on how they developed. After making a series of observations about the effect that the "credibility imperative" has on the foreign policy debates, the paper discusses the uses and abuses of the concept in the war on terror. In the end, it is hard to escape the conclusion, even during the current era, that credibility is an illusion—and an exceptionally dangerous illusion at that. Since it remains impossible for any state to control the perceptions of others, the continuing concern with credibility and reputation in the post-Cold War world is deeply misguided, and likely to cause many more problems than it solves. Keeping an eye on the future, although natural and comforting, often creates profound myopia in the present.

[4] Robert J. McMahon, "Credibility and World Power: Exploring the Psychological Dimension in Postwar American Diplomacy," *Diplomatic History* 15 (Fall 1991), 455–471.

THE CREDIBILITY IMPERATIVE IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

The term "credibility" has been used in so many contexts that it can at times seem to mean all things to all people. The credibility of a state is a mixture of its competence, legitimacy, resolve, trustworthiness, willingness to take casualties, and/or rigidity of purpose. In perhaps its most central and common usage, however, credibility is simply the capability to be believed or trusted. Perhaps most crucially for policymakers, credibility is often used as a code word for the prestige and reputation of a state.[5] It is, in Kissinger's words, "the coin with which we conduct our foreign policy," an intangible asset without which a state cannot influence the actions of others.[6] In periods of high credibility, a state can deter and compel behavior and accomplish goals short of war; when credibility is low, skeptical adversaries and allies may be tempted to ignore a state's threats and promises. To policymakers, therefore, solid credibility is worth many divisions at the negotiating table.

The credibility of a state forms the basis of its reputation, which is little more than an impression of fundamental national character that serves as a guide for others trying to anticipate future actions.[7] Classical deterrence theory holds that if a state fails to rise to a challenge or pursue a goal with sufficient resolve, it risks earning a reputation for weakness, which might encourage aggression from enemies and discourage the loyalty of allies.[8] Threats made by a state without credibility may not be believed, setting off a cascading "domino effect" of aggression from emboldened rivals, possibly until they challenge an interest that is truly vital, making a major war unavoidable. The credibility imperative is also clearly related to the post-war Western obsession with "appeasement," which is, of course, a code word for a show of weakness that inadvertently encourages an aggressor.

Credibility is a unique and complicated national asset. Perhaps some of the profound insecurity that some policymakers display regarding their credibility may be tied to the fact that its status is ultimately beyond their control. No state owns its reputation—it can be affected by the actions of a state to be sure, but

[5] Ibid., 455.

[6] Dan Williams and Ann Devroy, "U.S. Policy Lacks Focus, Critics Say: Bosnia Cited as Prime Case," *The Washington Post*, 24 April 1994.

[7] Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 6.

[8] Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960); Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966); Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense: Toward a New Theory of National Security* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961); Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974); Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976); Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981); and Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, and Janice Stein, eds., *Psychology and Deterrence* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

in a very real and important sense, it exists in the minds of others. "Credibility exists," John McCain has noted, "only in the eye of the beholder."[9] Given this complexity, perhaps it is little wonder that scholars often omit the credibility imperative from their otherwise-parsimonious explanatory models of U.S. foreign policy behavior. All psychological variables are difficult to measure and inherently unquantifiable; credibility is no different. However, U.S. foreign policy is impossible to understand without it.

The Origin and Development of the Credibility Imperative, in Theory and Policy

A variety of explanations have been proposed to account for the power that the credibility imperative has had over U.S. policymakers since World War II. First, it is possible that concerns about reputation go hand in hand with great-power status.[10] Perhaps small powers, whose basic security is often not assured, have less need to worry about the messages that their actions send to potential enemies and allies. The weak do not fear the credibility of their commitments to the strong—no dominoes will fall if a small state fails to keep a promise. According to this explanation, as the power of the United States grew over the years, perhaps it was quite natural for its leaders to become more concerned with intangible assets. Credibility might be a concern only for those participating in geopolitics on a global scale.

Second, the nature of the Cold War surely helped the imperative to take root. Since both sides were for the most part interested in avoiding direct conflict, the contest for global supremacy was fought in nontraditional arenas. In a very important sense, the Cold War was a battle of ideas, pitting competing systems of socioeconomic organization against each other in the minds of the masses as much as on the field of battle. Intangible, psychological factors took on increased importance for security and stability, with success and failure often measured by perception as much as reality. Credibility for the United States was therefore also a measure of the viability of the system it espoused, so when it was low, policymakers worried that others might get the impression that history was on the side of the Soviets and communism. Walt Rostow, who was the director of policy planning in John F. Kennedy's State Department, was perhaps the strongest advocate of this argument. Rostow felt that since it was vitally important to convince the third world to follow a capitalist model of development, reverses in the periphery could be strategic disasters.[11] More than merely the "coin with which we run our foreign policy," credibility became the measuring stick by which to judge which side was winning the

[9] McCain, "No Time to Sleep."

[10] McMahon, "Credibility and World Power," 469.

[11] John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 208–209.

struggle, and which camp the wise third parties would join. On the Cold War scorecard, credibility points were won each time Washington kept its commitments, and lost whenever it did not.

The dominant weaponry of the Cold War also enhanced the imperative to remain credible. The nuclear revolution changed not only how states acted, but also how policymakers thought about international relations.[12] Since much about the use of nuclear weapons seemed irrational—after all, only "madmen" would contemplate nuclear war—security professionals were forced to deal with basic questions about sanity and insanity. The psychology of the opponent, in particular, became a much more important point of emphasis. As McMahon has argued, "The very essence of security in the nuclear era has been based on conjectures about the cognitive process of others."[13] The wise policymaker took all possible steps to influence those cognitive processes in productive ways. Maintaining credible commitments was perhaps the most obvious way to do so.

Third, some scholars have suggested that there may be something in U.S. political culture that makes it particularly susceptible to the credibility imperative.[14] While all states are concerned to some degree about their reputations, no country seems to have taken the imperative to remain credible as seriously as has the United States since the Second World War. Scholars have not been able to detect similar levels of concern over credibility in any other state, even in the Soviet Union, which presumably faced many of the same challenges during the Cold War without exhibiting a similar influence of the imperative.[15] Jerome Slater has argued that "it does not occur to ordinary states to imagine that their 'vital interests' are integrally linked to outcomes of local wars in tiny countries thousands of miles away from their borders."[16] The United States, of course, has never been an "ordinary" state.[17]

Finally, the prevailing conventional wisdom in academia has helped to provide an intellectual justification for the belief in the importance of credibility. Deterrence theory, which was, of course, one of the major intellectual orthodoxies of the early Cold War, preached the essential *interdependence* of foreign policy actions across time and space. Since the actions of a state send messages to others about its probable behavior in the future, irresolution in crises can teach rivals and allies alike that the state is unlikely

[12] See Michael Mandelbaum, *The Nuclear Revolution: International Politics Before and After Hiroshima* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[13] McMahon, "Credibility and World Power," 469.

[14] Ibid., 471.

[15] Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*; McMahon, "Credibility and World Power," 471.

[16] Jerome Slater, "The Domino Theory and International Politics: The Case of Vietnam," *Security Studies* 3 (Winter 1993/94), 218.

[17] Robert H. Johnson, *Improbable Dangers: U.S. Conceptions of Threat in the Cold War and After* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994); and Frances Fitzgerald, *Way Out There in the Blue: Reagan, Star Wars and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Touchstone, 2001).

to respond to any challenges anywhere.[18] Emboldened by such perceptions, adversaries would be likely to press their advantage and engage in adventurism elsewhere. If, instead, the state is resolute in honoring its commitments, even in cases of seemingly small importance, potential aggressors will take note and serious future crises will be less likely. "Essentially," explained Thomas Schelling, "we tell the Soviets that we have to react here because, if we did not, they would not believe us when we say that we will react there."[19] The imperative to remain credible was part of the training of nearly every American foreign policy professional for decades. Its importance was taken as a given, almost as the political science equivalent of settled law.

Cold War policymakers often had deep backgrounds in academic theories of international relations. Indeed no policymaker provides a better example of the interdependence belief in practice than Henry Kissinger, a former academic who often seemed to interpret all international events through zero-sum, interdependent lenses. Kissinger was but the most visible of a brand of foreign policy generalist who, along with such men as Dean Acheson, John Foster Dulles, Robert McNamara, Paul Nitze, Richard Nixon, and Zbigniew Brzezinski, tended to fit every event, no matter how local or peripheral it might have seemed, into a tightly knit framework of global competition. When India intervened in the Pakistani civil war in 1971, for example, Kissinger saw the hidden hand of the Soviets, which underlined the importance of maintaining the credibility of U.S. threats. "Had we acquiesced in such a power play," he wrote, "we would have sent a wrong signal to Moscow and unnerved all our allies, China, and the forces for restraint in other volatile areas of the world. This was, indeed, why the Soviets had made the Indian assault on Pakistan possible in the first place."[20] When the Soviets threatened to construct a submarine base in Cienfuego in 1970, Kissinger thought that "the Kremlin had perhaps been emboldened when we reacted to the dispatch of combat troops to the Middle East by pressing Israel for a cease-fire."[21] The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was only possible, thought Brzezinksi, Kissinger's successor and former academic, because the United States had lost credibility by not responding more forcefully to communist adventurism in the Horn of Africa, which, in turn, was a result of the abandonment of Saigon.[22] The belief in the importance of credibility may have partially begun in the academy—but the current skepticism of scholars, which began in earnest during the war in Vietnam, has not had similar real-world traction.

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[18] Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 35–91.

[19] Ibid., 55.

[20] Kissinger, *White House Years*, 913–914.

[21] Ibid., 641.

[22] Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1983), 429.

The Point of Divergence: Vietnam

The credibility imperative had become firmly embedded in the psyche of the U.S. foreign policy establishment by the time some of the crucial decisions regarding the war in Vietnam needed to be made. Without the imperative, the war would not have been fought. More than any other single factor, a fear of the message that a communist victory would send to the neighboring (and not-so-neighboring) states compelled the United States to try to prop up the corrupt, unpopular, Roman Catholic South Vietnamese rulers. In a 1965 memo released with the *Pentagon Papers*, Secretary of Defense John McNaughton described the reasons that the United States was in Vietnam as 70 percent "to avoid a humiliating U.S. defeat (to our reputation as guarantor)," 20 percent to prevent communism from overtaking South Vietnam, and only 10 percent to help the people of South Vietnam.[23] The damage that a failure in Vietnam could do to the reputation of the United States was potentially catastrophic. President Lyndon Johnson warned his cabinet that "if we run out on Southeast Asia, there will be trouble ahead in every part of the globe—not just in Asia, but in the Middle East and in Europe, in Africa and Latin America. I am convinced that our retreat from this challenge will open the path to World War III."[24] Kissinger agreed, warning that if South Vietnam were allowed to fall, it would represent a "fundamental threat, over a period of time, to the security of the United States."[25] Only when framed inside the prism of the credibility imperative did victory in Vietnam become a vital national interest.

Skepticism grew steadily as the war dragged on, and as the credibility imperative drove policymakers to believe that withdrawal from what seemed to be an unwinnable war would lead to national catastrophe. Intellectuals in the anti-war movement led the way, expressing moral outrage that a war would be fought primarily for the messages it would send to our enemies and allies.[26] Academic skepticism about the importance of credibility grew alongside questions about the tangible interests at stake, especially after it became clear that the costs in blood and treasure were not proportional to any potential benefits that could conceivably be gained from the survival of an anti-communist South Vietnam. To prominent realists such as Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz, intervention in isolated, resource-poor Vietnam was irrational, "moralistic," and mistaken. Only "if developments in Vietnam might indeed tilt the world's balance in America's disfavor,"

[23] Quoted by Bruce W. Jentleson, "American Commitments in the Third World: Theory vs. Practice," *International Organization* 41 (Autumn 1987), 676.

[24] Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Vantage Point* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 147–148.

[25] Quoted by Barbara W. Tuchman, *March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1984), 375.

[26] Jonathan Schell, *The Time of Illusion* (New York: Knopf, 1976), 337–387.

argued Waltz, would the war be worthwhile.[27] They did not, of course, since from a purely material perspective, Vietnam was next to irrelevant to U.S. national security. The cost of a loss to U.S. credibility, however, appeared incalculable.

The war in Vietnam marked the beginning of the current debate over the importance of credibility, and the point of divergence between scholars and practitioners. Despite dire warnings from many of its leaders, the United States not only withdrew its forces from Southeast Asia but also cut back on its aid and watched North Vietnamese troops overrun Saigon in 1975. Since this "cut-and-run" and subsequent loss of an ally were undoubtedly unmitigated disasters for the credibility of the United States, presumably a string of foreign policy setbacks should have followed. If international actions are truly interdependent, as policymakers believe, then the 1970s would probably have seen evidence of allies beginning to question U.S. commitments, dominoes falling where the reputation of the United States maintained the status quo, and increased levels of Soviet activity in the third world. The conventional wisdom suggests that the humiliating rooftop helicopter evacuation of the U.S. embassy in Saigon should have heralded a dark period for U.S. foreign policy.

However, no such string of catastrophes took place. Perhaps most obviously, there is no evidence that any allies of the United States were significantly demoralized, or that any questioned the wisdom of their allegiance. If anything, many of Washington's closest allies seemed relieved when the war ended, since many of them had doubted its importance in the first place and had feared that it distracted the United States from other, more pressing issues.[28] Certainly no state, not even any "client" states in the third world, changed its geopolitical orientation as a result of Vietnam.

The damage to U.S. credibility also did not lead to the long-predicted spread of communism throughout the region, as even Kissinger today grudgingly acknowledges.[29] On the contrary, in the ten years that followed the fall of Saigon, the non-communist nations of Southeast Asia enjoyed a period of unprecedented prosperity.[30] The only dominoes that fell were two countries that were even less relevant than Vietnam to the global balance of power— Cambodia and Laos, both of which were hardly major losses for the West,

[27] Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Politics of Peace," *International Studies Quarterly* 11 (September 1967), 206. See also Hans J. Morgenthau, *Vietnam and the United States* (Washington DC: Public Affairs Press, 1965).

[28] Johnson, *Improbable Dangers*, 160–161.

[29] Henry Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War: A History of America's Involvement in and Extrication from the Vietnam War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), 561. See also Shiping Tang, "Reputation, the Cult of Reputation, and International Conflict," *Security Studies* 14 (January– March 2005), 34–62; and Slater, "The Domino Theory and International Politics."

[30] George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 2nd ed. (New York: Knopf), 270.

especially given the tragedies that followed. Nationalism proved to be a bulwark against the spread of communism that could not be overcome by any loss of confidence in U.S. commitments.

Most importantly, the Soviet Union apparently failed to become emboldened by the U.S. withdrawal, and did not appreciably increase its "adventurism" in the third world, compared to the 1950s and '60s, when U.S. credibility was high.[31] In an important and convincing study, Ted Hopf examined over 500 articles and 300 leadership speeches made by Soviet policymakers throughout the 1970s, and found that their public pronouncements did not show evidence of a belief that U.S. setbacks in the third world signaled a lack of resolution. "The most dominant inference Soviet leaders made after Vietnam," concluded Hopf, "was not about falling regional dominoes or bandwagoning American allies, but about the prospects of détente with the United States and Western Europe."[32] Soviet behavior did not change, despite the perception of incompetence that many Americans feared would inspire increased belligerence. Kissinger has referred to Soviet decisions to intervene in Angola and Ethiopia as evidence of the negative effect of Vietnam, but Hopf found no evidence that perceptions of U.S. credibility affected Soviet decision makers. It appears as if those interventions—which, of course, were in strategically irrelevant countries anyway—were independent events that probably would have occurred no matter what had happened in Vietnam. Other negative events in the 1970s, such as the fall of the Shah, seem even more independent of the catastrophe, despite half-hearted efforts to link them together.[33] As it turns out, Vietnam was all but irrelevant to international politics, which is of course exactly what critics of the war had maintained all along.

The immediate post-Vietnam era actually contains a good deal of evidence to bolster a conclusion opposite to the presumptions of deterrence theorists. Robert Jervis has argued that states often act more aggressively in periods of "low" credibility following a reversal, or in response to the perception of irresolution. The Soviets might well have expected the United States to act like a wounded animal, perhaps even more willing to defend its interests than before the withdrawal from Vietnam. "A statesman's willingness to resist," Jervis argued, "may be inversely related to how well he has done in the recent past."[34] Indeed, U.S. policymakers, believing that

[31] Ted Hopf, *Peripheral Visions: Deterrence Theory and American Foreign Policy in the Third World, 1965-1990* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

[32] Ted Hopf, "Soviet Inferences from their Victories in the Periphery: Visions of Resistance or Cumulating Gains?" in Robert Jervis and Jack Snyder, eds., *Dominoes and Bandwagons: Strategic Beliefs and Great Power Competition in the Eurasian Rimland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 167.

[33] Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War*, 561.

[34] Robert Jervis, "Domino Beliefs and Strategic Behavior" in Jervis and Snyder, eds., *Dominoes and Bandwagons*, 37.

the national credibility had been damaged, seemed eager to reverse such perceptions abroad. The seizure of the *Mayaguez*, which occurred immediately after the fall of Saigon, provided the opportunity to do so. The response of the administration of Gerald Ford was rapid, decisive, and belligerent. As the President said at the time, "I have to show some strength in order to help us ... with our credibility in the world." Kissinger had told reporters off the record that "the United States must carry out some act somewhere in the world which shows its determination to continue to be a world power." He wanted to react rapidly, arguing that "indecision and weakness can lead to demoralized friends and emboldened adversaries." Even though a rapid military response might have put the captured crew at risk, their lives were unfortunately a "secondary consideration," argued Kissinger, since the "real issue was international credibility and not the safe return of the crew."[35] As will be argued below, the credibility imperative rarely supports negotiated solutions. This was by no means an isolated incident. The invasion of Grenada, for example, cannot be understood without reference to the perceived loss of credibility that followed the removal of troops from Lebanon after the bombings of the embassy and Marine barracks. The intervention in Somalia was in large part a response to and cover for U.S. inaction in Bosnia.[36]

Since Vietnam, scholars have been generally unable to identify cases in which high credibility helped the United States achieve its goals. The short-term aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis, for example, did not include a string of Soviet reversals, or the kind of benign bandwagoning with the West that deterrence theorists would have expected. In fact, the perceived reversal in Cuba seemed to harden Soviet resolve. As the crisis was drawing to a close, Soviet diplomat Vasily Kuznetsov angrily told his counterpart, "You Americans will never be able to do this to us again."[37] Kissinger commented in his memoirs that "the Soviet Union thereupon launched itself on a determined, systematic, and long-term program of expanding *all* categories of its military power .... The 1962 Cuban crisis was thus a historic turning point—but not for the reason some Americans complacently supposed."[38] The reassertion of the credibility of the United States, which was done at the brink of nuclear war, had few long-lasting benefits. The Soviets seemed to learn the wrong lesson.

[35] Christopher Jon Lamb, *Belief Systems and Decision Making in the Mayaguez Crisis* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1989), 68, 72, 73, 81, 149.

[36] David Halberstam, *War in a Time of Peace: Bush, Clinton, and the Generals* (New York: Scribner, 2001), 250–252.

[37] Michael R. Beschloss, *The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960-1963* (New York: Edward Burlingame Books, 1991), 563; and Charles E. Bohlen, *Witness to History 1929-1969* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1973), 495–496.

[38] Kissinger, *White House Years*, 197 (emphasis in original).

There is actually scant evidence that other states ever learn the *right* lessons. Cold War history contains little reason to believe that the credibility of the superpowers had very much effect on their ability to influence others. Over the last decade, a series of major scholarly studies have cast further doubt upon the fundamental assumption of interdependence across foreign policy actions. Employing methods borrowed from social psychology rather than the economics-based models commonly employed by deterrence theorists, Jonathan Mercer argued that threats are far more *independent* than is commonly believed and, therefore, that reputations are not likely to be formed on the basis of individual actions.[39] While policymakers may feel that their decisions send messages about their basic *dispositions* to others, most of the evidence from social psychology suggests otherwise. Groups tend to interpret the actions of their rivals as *situational*, dependent upon the constraints of place and time. Therefore, they are not likely to form lasting impressions of irresolution from single, independent events. Mercer argued that the interdependence assumption had been accepted on faith, and rarely put to a coherent test; when it was, it almost inevitably failed.[40]

Mercer's larger conclusions were that states cannot control their reputations or level of credibility, and that target adversaries and allies will ultimately form their own perceptions. Sending messages for their consideration in future crises, therefore, is all but futile. These arguments echoed some of the broader critiques of the credibility imperative that had emerged in response to the war in Vietnam, both by realists like Morgenthau and Waltz and by so-called area specialists, who took issue with the interdependence beliefs of the generalists. As Jervis observed, a common axis of disagreement in American foreign policy has been between those who focus on the specific situation and the particular nations involved (often State Department officials or area experts), and those who take a global geopolitical perspective (often in the White House or outside foreign policy generalists). The former usually believe that states in a region are strongly driven by domestic concerns and local rivalries; the latter are predisposed to think that these states look to the major powers for their cues and have little control over their own fates.[41]

Throughout most of the Cold War, since those who argued that events are interdependent won most of the policy debates, U.S. foreign policy was obsessed with credibility.

A series of other studies have followed those of Hopf and Mercer, yielding similar results. The empirical record seems to suggest that there have been few instances of a setback in one arena influencing state behavior in a second arena.[42]

[39] Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics.*

[40] Ibid., 28–42.

[41] Jervis, "Domino Beliefs and Strategic Behavior," 26.

[42] Paul Huth and Bruce Russett, "What Makes Deterrence Work? Cases from 1900 to 1980," *World Politics* 36 (July 1984): 496–526. Also James D. Fearon, "Signaling versus the Balance of Power and

Daryl Press began his recent study expecting to find that perceptions of the opponent's credibility would be an important variable affecting state behavior.[43] He chose three cases in which reputation would presumably have been vital to the outcome—the outbreak of the First World War, the Berlin Crisis of the late 1950s, and the Cuban Missile Crisis—and found, to his surprise, that in all three cases, leaders did not appear to be influenced at all by prior actions of their rivals, for better or for worse. Crisis behavior appeared to be entirely independent; credibility, therefore, was all but irrelevant. Mercer's conclusions about reputation seem to have amassed a good deal more supporting evidence in the time since he wrote.

Today the credibility imperative's academic defenders are small in number and influence.[44] In the policy world, however, the obsession with credibility lives on undiminished, and doubters are clearly in the minority. Shiping Tang considers the continued existence of the credibility imperative in spite of the overwhelming evidence to the contrary to be evidence of almost cultish behavior among policymakers.[45] The longevity of this cult seems to derive from a couple of foundations. First, since foreign policy is by necessity a worst-case-scenario business, prudence often counsels leaders to hedge against the most negative potential outcomes.[46] Since a loss of credibility offers a presumably plausible route to national ruin, the sagacious policymaker will often be very wary of damage to the reputation of the state, no matter what logic and the empirical evidence suggest. After all, while incorrect academics face virtually no consequences, missteps by leaders can be catastrophic.

Second, the current academic conventional wisdom is counterintuitive, and in some senses contradictory to normal daily experience. Individuals certainly develop reputations in their daily lives that influence the way that others treat them. Parents understand that they must carry through on their threats and promises if they want their children to take their future instructions seriously, and we all have friends whose repeated failures to deliver on past promises make us skeptical of their future assur-

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Interests: An Empirical Test of a Crisis Bargaining Model," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 38 (June 1994): 236–269.

[43] Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), vii–viii.

[44] Recent defenders include Vaughn P. Shannon and Michael Dennis, "Militant Islam and the Futile Fight for Reputation," *Security Studies* 16 (April–June 2007): 287–317; Michael Lind, *Vietnam. The Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America's Most Disastrous Military Conflict* (New York: Free Press, 1999); Dale C. Copeland, "Do Reputations Matter?" *Security Studies* 7 (Autumn 1997): 33–71; and Paul K. Huth, "Reputations and Deterrence: A Theoretical and Empirical Assessment," *Security Studies* 7 (Autumn 1997): 72–99.

[45] Tang, "Reputation, the Cult of Reputation, and International Conflict."

[46] Jack Snyder, "Introduction," in Jervis and Snyder, eds., *Dominoes and Bandwagons*, 9–12.

ances.[47] However, international relations differ drastically from interpersonal. As Press explains,

> Children use past actions when they evaluate their parents' credibility to punish them, and perhaps we all use past actions to assess whether a friend will show up at the movies. But there is no logical basis to generalize from these mundane situations to the most critical decisions made by national leaders during crises. In fact it would be odd—even irrational—if people relied on the same mental shortcuts that they use to make unimportant split-second decisions of daily life when they confront the most important decisions of their lives—decisions on which their country's survival depends.[48]

Press argues that national capabilities and interests—not past behavior—provide the foundation for the formation of perceptions. However, the credibility imperative has a powerful intuitive logic behind it, based upon lifetimes of interpersonal experience. There are therefore significant impediments in front of those who would challenge the wisdom of the policymaker's obsession with reputation.

This divergence in conventional wisdom between policy and scholarship would not be a major issue for twenty-first-century international politics if policies that are primarily based upon the need to appear credible were not often counterproductive, costly, and dangerous. The imperative has clear effects upon policy, and is employed in debates in predictable, measurable, and uniformly unhelpful ways.

The Post-Cold War Credibility Imperative

Today there is no competing superpower poised to take advantage of perceived U.S. irresolution, no revisionist state probing the "new world order" for weaknesses. Presumably, the credibility imperative should have waned in importance with the collapse of the Soviet Union, as neutrals were robbed of bandwagoning alternatives and as allies were relieved of any lingering fears that the United States might fail to come to their rescue in a crisis. But concerns for reputation have lingered throughout the post-Cold War period, and have returned with renewed vigor to misguide policymakers waging the war on terror.

The Soviet Union collapsed; the national obsession with credibility lived on, in defiance of logic and evidence. It has been difficult for the imperative's defenders to identify an instance in which a post-Cold War state (or independent actor) was either encouraged by a discredited United States or discouraged by its apparent resolution. Of course, one can always respond that such counterfactual argument is impossible. Successful deterrence is hard to

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[47] Press, *Calculating Credibility*, 12.
[48] Ibid., 23.

measure, since the analyst can never be sure that the aggressor was deterred from attacking or simply never planned to attack in the first place.[49] But the evidence thus far suggests that there is little reason to believe that post-Cold War international events are any more interdependent than were their predecessors.

Although many observers have argued that the administration of Bill Clinton damaged U.S. credibility in a number of ways, it is hard to identify a rival (or an opportunistic local leader) who took advantage of such an impression. When a semi-organized mob prevented the disembarkation of U.S. troops in Haiti in October of 1993, for example, critics like James Baker predictably accused the Clinton administration of "debas[ing] the currency of U.S. credibility."[50] Senator Tom Harkin worried that "if we can't stand up for democracy and human rights in our own hemisphere, then what do the Serbs have to fear? What do the Chinese have to fear?"[51] Less than a year later, however, a multinational force led by U.S. marines enforced a negotiated and peaceful resolution to the crisis without losing a single American life. No perceptible change in the behavior of any other state occurred, despite what Dick Cheney labeled the "abject national embarrassment" at the docks of Port-au-Prince.[52]

Kosovo proved to be an equally independent event. Administration officials routinely defended their actions there in terms of the risks to global order that a damaged credibility would entail. NATO's "fundamental strategic objectives" in Kosovo, as identified by a classified strategy report that was leaked to the *Washington Post*, were to "promote regional stability and protect our investment in Bosnia; prevent resumption of hostilities in Kosovo and renewed humanitarian crisis; [and] preserve U.S. and NATO credibility."[53] Senator McCain worried that "Pyongyang and Baghdad and Tripoli," were paying "close attention" to NATO actions, and that "if a military establishment that was defeated by the Croatian Army prevails, one led by a Balkan thug prevails, then we will be vulnerable to many challenges in many places."[54] It is, however, hard to sustain the argument that NATO's display of resolution in defense of its credibility affected the calculations of any other state. Just as no enemy stood waiting to take advantage of low U.S. credibility, none was cowed into acquiescence when Washington was resolute.

[49] George and Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy*, 516–517.

[50] Ann Devroy and Daniel Williams, "GOP Attacks Clinton, Claims Incompetence in Foreign Relations," *The Washington Post*, 28 July 1994.

[51] Williams and Devroy, "U.S. Policy Lacks Focus."

[52] Devroy and Williams, "GOP Attacks Clinton."

[53] Barton Gellman, "The Path to Crisis: How the United States and Its Allies Went to War," *The Washington Post*, 18 April 1999.

[54] Alison Mitchell, "McCain Keeps Pressing Case for Troops," *The New York Times*, 4 April 1999.

Credibility in Practice

The evidence seems to fall heavily on one side of the divide between scholars and practitioners over the importance of credibility. This division is not merely of academic interest. The credibility imperative has distinct and profound effects upon policymaking, all of which are apparent during the current war on terror. In order to assess more accurately the true value of a healthy reputation for resolve, policymakers ought to be aware of the following general rules about how the credibility imperative shapes national debate. Three such effects are presented below, more as arguments rather than testable hypotheses, owing to the nature of the subject. Although the supporting evidence is by necessity somewhat anecdotal, the arguments themselves should not be very controversial.

First, the credibility imperative is almost always employed to bolster the most hawkish position in a foreign policy debate. Cries of appeasement (and of the need to maintain credibility) arise almost every time the use of force is debated in the United States. Critics warned that U.S. credibility would be irreparably harmed if Washington failed to get involved in Vietnam, and then if it did not stay until the war was won; if it did not use air strikes against the Soviet missiles in Cuba; if it did not respond to Bosnian Serb provocations with sufficient force; if failed to attack the leaders of the military coup in Haiti in 1994; and, of course, if it does not "stay the course" today in Iraq. At other times, hawks have employed the credibility imperative to urge two presidents to use military force to prevent nuclear proliferation in North Korea and to punish the recalcitrant Saddam Hussein.[55] The reputation of the United States is always endangered by inaction, not by action, no matter how peripheral the proposed war might be to tangible national interests. The reputation for good policy judgment never seems to be as important as the reputation for belligerence.

The credibility imperative not only urges the use of military force, but it encourages hawkish behavior at the negotiating table as well, supporting rigidity and decrying all compromise as demonstrations of weakness. Only victory can legitimate diplomacy; compromised settlements only encourage further challenges, and are synonymous with appeasement. Madeleine Albright reported a typical example in her memoirs, explaining that during Bosnia negotiations "the ordinarily hawkish Jamie Rubin urged me to compromise on a particular measure. I glared and said, 'Jamie, do you think we're in Munich?'"[56] After Jimmy Carter's now-famous mission helped find common

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[55] On the former, see the floor speeches of Senator John McCain, such as "The Nuclear Ambitions of North Korea," 7 October 1994, accessed at http://www.fas.org/spp/starwars/congress/1994/s941007-dprk.htm, 22 May 2006; on the latter, see Eliot A. Cohen, "Sound and Fury," *The Washington Post*, 19 December 1998; and Charles Krauthammer, "Saddam: Round 3," *The Washington Post*, 13 November 1998.

[56] Madeleine Albright, *Madame Secretary* (New York: Miramax, 2003), 382.

ground between Pyongyang and Washington in 1994, McCain worried that the deal "will have changed the balance of power in Europe and the Middle East. That it will have changed for the worse is obvious."[57] *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer labeled the compromise on the same peninsula in 2003 "an abject cave-in," which would prove to be a "threat to American credibility everywhere."[58]

This is not meant to suggest, of course, that individual cases of belligerence or intervention were not warranted; however, it is important to recognize that, for better or for worse, the credibility imperative is the rhetorical instrument of the hawk. The actors employing the imperative are not always the same, but their prescription never waivers. Many of the doves of the 1980s had become hawks by the 1990s, warning of the potential loss of credibility if strong action were not taken in Bosnia, Rwanda, Kosovo, and Haiti. For example, the *New York Times* cited "United States diplomats" warning President Clinton that a failure to act in Bosnia in 1993 would "badly damage U.S. credibility abroad."[59] Anthony Lake told the Council on Foreign Relations that among the reasons to act in Haiti was the need to defend American credibility in world affairs.[60] In general, the more a policymaker or strategist saw the credibility of the United States in peril, the more willing he or she was to use force to prevent its erosion.

The second observation on the use of the credibility imperative in policy debate is perhaps related to the first: the imperative often produces astonishing hyperbole, even in otherwise sober analysts. If the United States were to lose credibility, the floodgates would open to a variety of catastrophes, setting off dominoes that would eventually not only threaten vital interests and make war necessary, but perhaps even lead to the end of the Republic itself. The credibility imperative warns that momentum toward disaster can begin with the smallest demonstration of irresolution, thus sustaining the vision of an interdependent system in which there are no inconsequential events. In the words of Dale Copeland, "It is easier to stop a snowball before it begins to roll downhill than to intervene only after it has started to gain momentum."[61] Therefore, even the smallest of slips can lead to large-scale disaster.

Thus, although Quemoy and Matsu might have seemed like irrelevant, uninhabitable rocky atolls, if they fell to the Chinese without action from the United States, the resulting loss of credibility for the United States would enable the communists "to begin their objective of driving us out of the western Pacific, right back to Hawaii and even to the United States," according to John

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[57] McCain, "Nuclear Ambitions."
[58] Charles Krauthammer, "Korea Follies," *The Washington Post*, 17 January 2003.
[59] R.W. Apple, Jr., "Testing a Commitment," *TheNew York Times*, 19 September 1993.
[60] Paraphrased by Jim Hoagland in "Don't Do It," *The Washington Post*, 15 September 1994.
[61] Copeland, "Do Reputations Matter," 43.

Foster Dulles.[62] Ten years later, Dean Rusk wrote that if U.S. commitments became discredited because of a defeat in Vietnam, "the communist world would draw conclusions that would lead to our ruin and almost certainly to a catastrophic war."[63] Ronald Reagan told Congress that if the United States failed in Central America, "our credibility would collapse, our alliances would crumble, and the safety of our homeland would be put at jeopardy."[64] The examples are legion—indeed, the tendency toward hyperbole seems almost irresistible. In a world where threats are interdependent, the loss of credibility in one area threatens U.S. goals everywhere. The fall of Vietnam, thought Nixon, "would spark violence wherever our commitments help maintain the peace—in the Middle East, in Berlin, eventually even in the Western Hemisphere."[65] Credibility is apparently the glue holding together the international system of dominoes.

Audiences often seem distressingly willing to accept such statements at face value. Rarely are policymakers or analysts asked to justify these visions, or pressed to examine the logic connecting the present decisions to such catastrophic future consequences. Could interdependence alone set off such enormous strings of disasters? Why should anyone believe that the loss of credibility would result in an unprecedented string of disasters? For those under the spell of the credibility imperative, the logic behind these statements seemed less relevant than establishing the potential, however slim, for catastrophe. Since foreign policy is a worst-case-scenario business, the sagacious policymaker hedges against disaster, no matter how absurdly remote the risk may seem. Who would oppose the defense of Quemoy and Matsu, if that defense might prevent a "catastrophic war"? Similarly, it was difficult to argue that aid to the Contras was not in the national interest once it became linked to the survival of NATO and the safety of "our homeland." Once policymakers accept the imperative to remain credible, logic and reason can become casualties of fear.

The third and final observation is that there is a loose inverse relationship between the rhetorical employment of the credibility imperative and the presence of vital, more tangible national interests. Franklin D. Roosevelt did not make reference to the reputation of the United States when he asked Congress for a declaration of war against Japan in 1941. Similarly, Winston Churchill's stirring speeches rallying his countrymen at their darkest hour did not mention the importance of maintaining the credibility of the realm. When a clear national interest is at stake, policymakers have no need to defend (or sell) their actions with reference to the national reputation or credibility. Simply

[62] Quoted by Gaddis in *Strategies of Containment*, 144.

[63] Ibid., 240.

[64] Steven R. Wiesman, "President Appeals before Congress for Aid to Latins," *The New York Times*, 28 April 1993.

[65] McMahon, "Credibility and World Power," 467.

put, the more tangible the national interest, the smaller the role that intangible factors will play in either decisions or justifications for policy. The United States was willing to use force to ensure that Korea, Lebanon, Vietnam, Grenada, El Salvador, and Nicaragua stayed in the camp of free nations despite the fact that none had any measurable impact upon the global balance of power. "El Salvador doesn't really matter," one of Ronald Reagan's foreign policy advisers admitted in 1981, but "we have to establish credibility because we are in very serious trouble."[66]

When credibility is the primary justification for action, the interest is usually not vital to the United States. Since Washington had no strategic interests at stake in the Balkans in the 1990s, for example, it was forced to invent some. Rather than sell the policy based solely on what it was— predominantly a humanitarian intervention—the Clinton administration repeatedly linked the fate of the Muslims of southeastern Europe to the credibility of the United States and NATO. By doing so, according to Owen Harries, the administration "managed to create a serious national interest in Bosnia where none before existed: an interest, that is, in the preservation of this country's prestige and credibility."[67] The credibility imperative rose to prominence precisely because no tangible U.S. interest in Bosnia existed.

In sum, when the credibility imperative drives policy, states fearful of hyperbolic future consequences are likely to follow hawkish recommendations in order to send messages that other states are unlikely to receive. Policymakers are thus wise to beware of the credibility imperative when devising policy, questioning the assumptions that it contains and remaining skeptical of the catastrophes of which it warns. They must recognize that the imperative is typically employed when no tangible national interest exists, used as a rhetorical smoke screen to win over otherwise-peaceful masses. Most importantly, it should perhaps give them pause that scholars can supply virtually no evidence supporting the conventional wisdom about its importance.

It might seem blasphemous, or at least dangerously naïve, to suggest that the blood and treasure spilled over the past six decades to preserve the credibility of the United States has been in vain. However, history offers little evidence to support one of the most deeply held beliefs of the makers of U.S. foreign policy. States cannot control their reputations or their credibility, since target adversaries and allies will ultimately form their own perceptions, often learning incorrect lessons. Even the best efforts to bolster the credibility of the United States ultimately serve little purpose.

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[66] Quoted by William M. LeoGrande, "A Splendid Little War: Drawing the Line in El Salvador," *International Security* 6 (Summer 1981): 27.

[67] Owen Harries, "An Anti-Interventionist No More: America's Credibility is Now at Stake," *The Washington Post*, 21 April 1994.

THE CREDIBILITY IMPERATIVE AND THE WAR ON TERROR

Does the preceding discussion remain relevant for the "war on terror"? Some observers have argued that concerns for credibility are justified in this post–September 11 era, since the United States faces an enemy that repeatedly refers to American irresolution as inspiration for its actions.[68] The current administration clearly believes in the importance of credibility, and often repeats that importance mantra-like in its talking points. Even a brief examination of the current challenges facing the United States, however, should be sufficient to demonstrate that there is no reason to believe that the credibility imperative will provide guidance to current policymakers any more sage than it gave to those of eras past.

Credibility and Terrorism

The leadership of al Qaeda has repeatedly cited a lack of resolution in Washington as inspiration for its actions. Bin Laden has accused America of being a "paper tiger," a state that will back away at the slightest use of force. "We have seen in the last decade," he has argued, "the decline of the American government and the weakness of the American soldier who is ready to wage Cold Wars and unprepared to fight long wars. This was proven in Beirut when the Marines fled after two explosions. It also proves they can run in less than 24 hours, and this was also repeated in Somalia."[69]

Some scholars have argued that if al Qaeda has drawn inspiration from perceptions of American irresolution, then the conclusions of Mercer and others regarding the ultimate unimportance of reputation and credibility are demonstrably false.[70] If decreased U.S. credibility has altered the calculations of militant fundamentalist groups, then indeed, states combating terrorism would be justified in worrying about the messages that their actions send, and should consider the probable impact that current decisions will have on future crises.

However, there are good reasons to doubt this conclusion. First of all, it is not clear that the United States can control the perceptions of non-state actors in the current era any more easily than it could those of states during the Cold War. It is quite a stretch to believe that if U.S. troops had not been pulled out of Lebanon or Somalia, al Qaeda would have acted any differently throughout the 1990s. Did the U.S. withdrawals really embolden al Qaeda? In order for the policymaker's conventional wisdom about the importance of credibility to be correct, al Qaeda's behavior would have to have been different if the United

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[68] Shannon and Dennis, "Militant Islam."

[69] Osama bin Laden, in an interview with John Miller, in Laura Egendorf, ed., *Terrorism: Opposing Viewpoints* (San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 1999), 125.

[70] Shannon and Dennis, "Militant Islam."

States had not pulled out of Somalia when it did. If the terrorists would have attacked either way—and it is certainly plausible to think that they would have—then concerns for reputation are still irrelevant, and it remains unwise for policymakers to look beyond the current crisis.

Second, there are good reasons to believe that al Qaeda's perceptions will remain unaffected by Washington's attempt to control them. In fact, it may well be that a strategy like that pursued by Islamic fundamentalists is almost necessary for the smaller participant in a case of extreme power asymmetry. Since they lacked the power to force a retreat, the *mujahadeen* in Afghanistan needed to preach that the Soviet Union would prove irresolute in order to convince its fighters that resistance was not utterly pointless; likewise, Bin Laden must paint the United States as a paper tiger or no one will rally to his cause. The strategy of a weak actor in extreme asymmetry must be based on the premise that although it may not be able to employ tangible assets to win the war, intangible, moral elements will prove decisive. Therefore, no matter what the behavior of the strong actually is, the weak are likely to accuse it of being irresolute. Since *jihadists* have no hope of success without a certain degree of superpower irresolution, it is unlikely that any amount of credibility will cause them to abandon that belief (or hope). Once again, Washington will probably not be able to control its reputation in the eyes of others. The future actions of these groups will probably remain unaffected by their perceptions of U.S. credibility.

Finally, it is quite possible that Bin Laden's pronouncements of American irresolution are less explanations for his behavior than tools for attracting new recruits. Although al Qaeda took credit for the Somalia adventure, for example, it disavowed any participation in the embassy bombings, perhaps since those incidents did not cause any change in U.S. behavior and therefore would not serve as well in recruitment.[71] Their preposterous exaggeration of both their involvement in and the scale of the battles in Somalia lend credence to the argument that the true importance of the event was for propaganda rather than for the actual formulation of strategy. Although there is little evidence that the battle in Mogadishu was fought by anyone other than Somalis, to listen to Bin Laden, one would think that the *mujahadeen* from all over the region had converged to oust the imperialists. He has repeatedly claimed that 300,000 Americans turned tail and fled after the battle, which is more than 10 times the number that were ever in the country and almost 100 times the number that actually left after Mogadishu. No matter what the United States did in Somalia, al Qaeda would probably have continued its tangible and intangible assaults, which even in extreme exaggeration, would have found eager ears among the disaffected, angry masses.

[71] Ibid., 36.

Might resolute, credible superpowers be able to prevent *jihadists* from recruiting new generations of terrorists? Probably not, since al Qaeda and its allies have shown no particular interest in the accuracy of their statements. No matter what the United States and its allies do, Bin Laden is likely to twist the truth and argue that each succeeding action is further proof of his claims. Many regions of the world have populations quite sympathetic to the argument that despite its apparent strength, the United States is actually a weak, feminized, immoral, corrupt paper tiger. The Middle East, where conspiracy theories often find wide audiences, is seemingly fertile ground for Bin Laden's interpretation of U.S. irresolution. In other words, U.S. actions are not likely to have direct bearing on the interpretation of U.S. credibility in the region, or on the outcome of the war on terror, for better or for worse.

Credibility and the Post–September 11 Wars

The credibility imperative has affected debates about the response to the attacks of September 11 exactly as the preceding analysis would have predicted. It was almost entirely absent in the discussion leading up to the war in Afghanistan, since few disputed the belief that the terrorist leadership and training camps that were given sanctuary by the Taliban represented a clear and present danger to international security. It is hard to imagine that any president (or any leader of any country, for that matter) would have failed to use military force to address these tangible interests once negotiations proved ineffective.

The war that followed 17 months later, however, was different. Although regime change in Iraq was sold to the American public in terms of very tangible, vital national interests, the war was fought to send messages and influence the future behavior of other states at least as much as it was to address any threat posed by Saddam. Although Condoleezza Rice was fond of saying, "The smoking gun could be a mushroom cloud," many observers and scholars of U.S. foreign policy felt that the real reasons for the war were much less tangible, and in some ways much more ambitious.[72] In fact, it is hard to find a serious analyst who believed Saddam to be on the verge of using weapons of mass destruction in an assault on the United States or its allies. Some of the President's advisers had, of course, long supported the removal of Saddam for other, less-tangible reasons. Saddam's very existence seemed to some to be indicative of a failure of U.S. foreign policy, one that sent the wrong messages to the vague "others" that were biding their time, waiting for signs of U.S. irresolution to begin their own anti–status quo machinations. Neoconservatives like Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, and William Kristol ardently believed in a benign version of domino dynamics, in which a display of American resolve

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[72] Todd S. Purdum, "Bush Administration Officials Say the Time has Come for Action on Iraq," *The New York Times*, 9 September 2002.

and commitment would encourage regional liberalization and democratization, and would demonstrate that the United States would not allow further weapons proliferation. The crisis of the present was managed (or, in this case, created) primarily to address those of the future; it was fought for intangible interests but sold with reference to the tangible. Positive credibility would be the engine to drive desirable changes across the region, and indeed throughout the world.

Krauthammer argued that continuing the containment of Saddam would "shatter the credibility of post-9/11 American resolve that was achieved by the demonstration of American power and will in Afghanistan." He then went on to repeat the basic outlines of the credibility imperative, which has been passed down unchanged from the Cold War generation.

> Credibility matters deeply in a world of enemies—and of fence-sitters who must decide which side to choose. Particularly after the collapse of our position on North Korea, which can only be explained away as a temporary necessity while we gird ourselves for Iraq, the entire Bush Doctrine, which sees the conjunction of rogue states, terrorists and weapons of mass destruction as the great existential challenge of our age, would collapse. You cannot march up this hill and then march back down empty-handed without undermining American deterrence everywhere.[73]

Once again, foreign policy generalists rather than regional specialists were most concerned with the impact of Iraq on U.S. reputation. By punishing the recalcitrant Saddam, the United States would demonstrate to other states that the pursuit of weapons of mass destruction in particular, and opposition to U.S. policies in general, would be self-defeating. Future challengers then would be deterred from challenging U.S. interests.

As scholars of credibility would have predicted, once again an operation fought mostly for psychological reasons has not met its objectives. Like petulant children, target states (and non-state actors) have stubbornly refused to learn the lessons they were taught. As argued above, the precedent the United States hoped to set in proliferation matters has not seemed to change the behavior of Iran or North Korea, both of whom continue along the road to weapons development. The only success that the administration can point to, although it is surely not without controversy, is in Libya, where Muammar al-Qaddafi has declared his days as an international pariah to be over and has apparently put an end to his research into the development of weapons of mass destruction. "Our diplomacy with Libya was successful only because our word was credible," argued Vice President Cheney in January of 2004. "That kind of credibility can be earned in only one way—by keeping commitments, even when they bring difficulty and sacrifice; by leaving potential adversaries with no doubt that dangerous conduct will invite certain

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[73] Charles Krauthammer, "No Turning Back Now," *The Washington Post*, 24 January 2003.

consequences."[74] Skeptics have been quick to point out that negotiations with Qaddafi were in progress for two years before the invasion of Iraq, however, and that the two events were unrelated.[75] Presumably Qaddafi had little reason to fear a U.S. invasion. The credibility imperative, however, has no requirement for veracity.

Perhaps even more important than nonproliferation messages was the commitment to democracy and freedom that neoconservatives felt would be more credible after the invasion of Iraq. It will be some time before the results of this wager are in, for it still may be possible for Iraq to become a beacon of democracy and freedom for the region and begin a fundamental erosion of anti-American sentiment. Following that, perhaps within a few years, dominoes of democracy may fall, and the region may be fundamentally changed for the better. The terrorist swamp may yet be drained by the destruction of the Iraqi dike. But the early evidence is not encouraging. As Shibley Telhami and others have pointed out, thus far, the invasion has had quite the opposite effect—regional governments have been even more oppressive to their people than before, and levels of anti-Americanism have skyrocketed.[76] Both early reports and the recently declassified National Intelligence Estimate indicate that the war in Iraq has proved to be an aid to al Qaeda recruiting.[77] Through their attempts to distance themselves from (or find scapegoats for) a war they supported, it is clear that some leading neoconservatives share the pessimistic forecasts of the war's progress.[78] Since target audiences have once again failed to learn the right lessons, thus far, the war in Iraq seems to provide more support for the dangers in looking beyond the crisis at hand.

[74] "Remarks by the Vice President to the World Economic Forum," Davos, Switzerland, 24 January, 2004, accessed at http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/01/20040124-1.html, 22 May 2006.

[75] Flynt Leverett, "Why Libya Gave Up the Bomb," The New York Times, 23 January 2004.

[76] Shibley Telhami, The Stakes: America in the Middle East (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002). See also Shibley Telhami, "A Growing Muslim Identity," Los Angeles Times, 11 July 2004; and Shibley Telhami, "Double Blow to Mideast Democracy," The Washington Post, 1 May 2004.

[77] Neil MacFarquhar, "Rising Tide of Islamic Militants See Iraq as the Ultimate Battlefield," The New York Times, 13 August 2003; International Institute for Strategic Studies, Strategic Survey 2004/05 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, May 2005); Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "Declassified Key Judgments of the National Intelligence Estimate 'Trends in Global Terrorism: Implications for the United States,'" Washington DC, April 2006, accessed at http://www.dni.gov/press_releases/Declassified_NIE_Key_Judgments.pdf, 18 October 2006.

[78] Robert Kagan and William Kristol, "Democracy Now," The Weekly Standard, 17 May 2004, accessed at http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/004/056mvrqy.asp, 4 October 2007. ; Kenneth M. Pollack, "Mourning After: How They Screwed it Up," The New Republic, 28 June 2004, accessed at http://www.brookings.edu/views/articles/pollack/20040628.htm, 4 October 2007.

Credibility and Withdrawal from Iraq

The Nixon administration made it clear that extrication from the Vietnam quagmire would proceed if and only if it could be done without damage to the national honor. The South Vietnamese had to be capable of defending themselves before a pullout would be acceptable to Washington. Were the United States to withdraw its troops from Vietnam amidst defeat, it would suffer serious harm to its credibility, and global calamity would probably follow. Kissinger had long held that the United States could not pull its troops out of Vietnam without threatening "the political stability of Europe and Japan and the future evolution of the developing countries of Latin America, Africa, and Asia," which depend on the perception of a United States "able to defend its interests and those of its friends. If the war in Vietnam eroded our willingness to back the security of free peoples with our military strength, untold millions would be in jeopardy."[79] The credibility imperative, as usual, counseled continued belligerence and warned of apocalyptic consequences that would follow a failure to pursue this course. As discussed above, however, the South Vietnamese house of cards collapsed soon after the American withdrawal, and although few policymakers seemed to notice at the time, the anticipated string of catastrophes failed to occur.

Today, the United States once again finds itself faced with decisions about how and when to withdraw from an ill-advised, increasingly unpopular, and probably unwinnable war. The credibility imperative has predictably been playing a key role in formulating those decisions regarding the endgame in Iraq. While the United States may well have tangible national interests in ensuring the successful transition to democratic governance in Iraq—surely no one stands to benefit if fundamentalists come to power in Baghdad, for instance—intangible factors will probably prove to be just as important. The "messages" that a pullout would send to future belligerents are playing an enormous role in current decision making, counseling hawkish, uncompromising behavior and threatening hyperbolic potential consequences for failure.

Once again, those in the policy community apparently believe that a string of unprecedented catastrophes would soon follow the loss of U.S. credibility. Kissinger has predictably warned that a premature pullout would be "disastrous" for "America's position in the world."

> Defeat would shrivel U.S. credibility around the world. Our leadership and the respect accorded to our views on other regional issues from Palestine to Iran would be weakened; the confidence of other major countries—China, Russia, Europe, Japan—in America's potential contribution would be diminished. The respite from military efforts would be brief before even greater crises descended upon us.[80]

[79] Kissinger, *White House Years*, 196.
[80] Henry Kissinger, "How to Exit Iraq," *The Washington Post*, 19 December 2005.

Kissinger, who is apparently a close adviser to the Bush administration, is certainly not alone in this belief.[81] Rumsfeld, as discussed above, warned the Senate Armed Services Committee that a premature withdrawal would result in a string of catastrophes that would soon force the United States to make a stand nearer to home.[82] The editor of the *National Review* warns that "the consequences of that defeat would be remarkably similar to those in the wake of Vietnam. The prestige of the U.S. government would sink around the world, emboldening our enemies and creating a period of American doubt and retreat."[83] As was the case with Vietnam, global stability appears to be at stake; bigger wars, regional chaos, the end of unipolarity, and even the collapse of democracy in the United States would soon follow a withdrawal from Iraq. Former Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird has even warned that "the stakes could not be higher for the continued existence of our own democracy."[84] Thus, despite its historical underperformance, the credibility imperative is once again having an enormous, and poisonous, influence on a vitally important national debate. When credibility takes center stage in the discussion, rationality quickly recedes.

If the history of the U.S. experience with the credibility imperative is any guide, at the very least, one must conclude that no string of catastrophes is likely to follow a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq. The credibility of U.S. commitments is not the glue that holds the world together, nor is it the bulwark preventing the fall of various harmful dominoes. The U.S. presence is also not the only force preventing a region-wide war. Presumably, the other states of the region, who have little interest in becoming embroiled in a self-defeating, self-immolating war, can imagine what specific consequences would follow. In fact, there is a case to be made that the U.S. presence is more accurately thought of as a destabilizing presence, making the spread of violence more likely.

Even if some states were to begin to doubt U.S. credibility, it is hard to believe that fundamentalism would sweep across the region somehow, or that our allies would become so disheartened that they would rethink their allegiance to the United States. During the Cold War, theoretically states had the option to "flip sides" and rely on the Soviets if they began to doubt the credibility of the United States (although none ever did so, of course). Today it is impossible to imagine that any state would flip sides in the war on terror. If anything, the perception that they could not rely on the United States would probably make other states intensify their effort to fight their local, anti-regime fundamentalists. Even if states of the region do begin to doubt the credibility of U.S. commitments, which is of course by no means inevitable,

[81] Bob Woodward, *State of Denial* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 406–410.
[82] "The Sound of One Domino Falling."
[83] Rich Lowry, "Bush's Vietnam," *National Review*, 15 August 2006.
[84] Melvin Laird, "Iraq: Learning the Lessons of Vietnam," *Foreign Affairs* 84 (November/ December 2005), 36.

Islamic fundamentalist victories are not likely. And while it is obviously pre-posterous to suggest that the United States would soon have to fight them "nearer home," or that the continued existence of U.S. democracy is at stake, such statements are predictable products of the credibility imperative.

The only plausible enemies positioned to benefit from a U.S. display of irresolution are fundamentalist terrorist groups. Al Qaeda and its allies were apparently encouraged to some degree by the Soviet failure in Afghanistan, and a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq might provide a similar boost to recruiting. This is probably a near-inevitable consequence of the war no matter when it ends. Since fundamentalists have shown no interest in the veracity of their statements, and since asymmetric actors need to appear indomitable, they will always claim to have been the cause of the U.S. withdrawal. Unless the United States wishes to remain in Iraq indefinitely, it will at some point have to run the risk of aiding fundamentalist recruiting. However, this risk must be weighed against the amount of inspiration that terrorists receive by the continued U.S. occupation of Arab lands.

Global stability is certainly not at stake in Iraq. The preceding analysis suggests that if the United States were to withdraw its forces, the rest of the world might well view it as a wounded animal, and be fearful of its need to regain credibility in the next crisis. The United States, after all, did not go on the offensive following the Cuban Missile Crisis, nor did the Soviets after the fall of Saigon. Despite the nearly ubiquitous warnings from policymakers, a withdrawal from Iraq would not be catastrophic for the Middle East, for U.S. foreign policy, or for international stability itself.

Actions during the war on terror that are inspired by the imperative to remain credible will probably not lead to any better outcomes than they did in previous eras. Policymakers would do well to listen to the emerging conven-tional wisdom of scholars, and avoid thinking beyond the current situation. The future will take care of itself. Even when facing enemies that may doubt the credibility of U.S. commitments, foreign policy actions designed to send mes-sages to third parties are unlikely to succeed. In the past, they have consistently marched the United States toward folly; there is little reason to doubt that they would do so again. Both logic and history suggest that the wise policymaker will disregard the worst-case, hyperbolic, belligerent advice from those under the spell of the credibility imperative.

CONCLUSION

The United States responded to the challenges of global communism and Islamic fundamentalism in many similar ways, despite obvious (if sometimes underappreciated) differences in the scale of the threats involved. Washington could once again find itself supporting a variety of unsavory regimes in the name of global competition. Fears of domestic infiltration by fifth columnists may cause domestic overreactions that restrict basic civil liberties; and a

Manichean, us-versus-them, with-us-or-against-us mentality has once again overtaken the White House. Perhaps most importantly, *ideas* lie at the center of both the Cold War and the war on terror, making "hearts and minds" of neutral parties as important as tangible national security interests. The reputation and credibility of the combatants today seem to be as central to policymakers as they were during the Cold War. As a consequence, the war on terror may also inspire ill-conceived, debilitating wars in the periphery in misguided attempts to control the perceptions of others. History never repeats itself, as Mark Twain may or may not have said, but at times it does rhyme.

Both logic and a preponderance of the evidence suggest that the current U.S. obsession with credibility is as insecure, misplaced, and malinformed as all that have preceded it. Whether it will result in the kind of counterproductive policies that accompanied the Cold War credibility imperative remains to be seen. What is more assured is that there is no clear way to control the perceptions of others, whether they are superpowers, small states, or loosely connected non-state groups. The impression that *their* thoughts can be controlled by *our* actions may be comforting, springing perhaps from basic human psychological needs, but in reality, their perception of us is largely outside of our influence. The messages we hope to send through our actions are unlikely to be successfully received. Washington would be well-advised to avoid the understandable and natural temptation to look beyond the current crisis when making decisions. As unsettling as it may be, the future is largely outside our control; the tangible interests of the present, therefore, must outweigh the intangible interests of the future.

The behavior of the United States is not driven by only tangible, material measures of power; however, perhaps it should be. When the credibility imperative drives policy, due to the inherently uncontrollable nature of this most intangible of assets, states march toward folly. "Many of the tenets underlying American security policy are held with strong but unwarranted conviction," Nancy Kanwisher sagaciously observed as the Cold War drew to a conclusion. "Further, these dubious beliefs often persist even after their flaws have been widely exposed."[85] Few dubious beliefs match the credibility imperative for both the extent of its acceptance and the depth of its flaws.

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[85] Nancy Kanwisher, "Cognitive Heuristics and American Security Policy," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 33 (December 1989): 652.