

THE PRESIDENTIAL POWER OF PERSUASION, PERCEPTION, AND POPULARITY:
AN EXAMINATION OF PRESIDENT BUSH'S DECISION TO INVADE IRAQ

President George Walker Bush: My job is to rally the world and win the Iraqi War. I am convinced that it is both 100 percent correct and moral (Woodward 260,272)

Richard Neustadt: The essence of a President's persuasive task with congressmen and everybody else is to induce them to believe that what he wants of them is what their own appraisal of their own responsibilities requires them to do in their interest, not his (35).

By Happy Johnson

President Bush's capacity to achieve his goals through the technique of persuasion was greatly enhanced after the national crisis caused by the events of 9/11. The promotion of strong national security especially his decisive response to the threat of terrorism forever changed the reputation of Bush's presidency. He went from being perceived as a 'one term illegitimate President' to having "even his most ardent critics laude his decisive leadership."¹ To compel a regime change in Iraq, President Bush was effectively persuasive in convincing his cabinet, Congress, and other world leaders to execute his plan.

Woodward's *Plan of Attack* provides an illustrative account of how Bush effectively persuades Secretary of State Colin Powell, congressional Democrats, and foreign leaders to carry out his decision to remove Saddam Hussein and promote democracy and freedom for Iraq's 25 million people from Hussein's dictatorship. Examples of Bush's persuasive power will be examined within the framework of three concepts as outlined in Richard Neustadt's *Presidential Power*: First, the influence of President Bush on Powell to 'get in line' with his goal for Iraq are measured by Neustadt's concept of 'persuasive presidential power.' Secondly, the Neustadtian concept of 'presidential reputations' grounds my study of Bush's ability to convince Democrats in Congress that voting in favor of a resolution authorizing military force is in their best interest. The last Neustadt concept to be explored is termed 'presidential prestige' or popularity. With this concept, this paper will evaluate President Bush's decision to invade Iraq, especially in light of the

subsequent intelligence falsehoods, developments of democracy and 2004 U.S. presidential election results. Essentially, Neustadt's themes of *persuasion*, *perception*, and *popularity* are used to measure, ground, and evaluate President Bush's decision to change the regime in Iraq.

PRESIDENT BUSH'S PERSUASIVE POWER

Neustadt notes that the President of the United States is sometimes considered the "chief-of this-and-that,"² but constitutionally, the President primarily enforces the law, has the right of appointment, can submit federal budget proposals to Congress, can veto bills that are ratified in a bicameral fashion, and has the authority to defend and protect the homeland as Commander-in-Chief. However, unlike former dictator of the police state of Iraq who "personally ordered several members of his Ba'ath Party to be executed,"³ our democratically-elected president does not have the power to force or order administrative officials, the legislature, or foreign leaders what to do: a presidential "command is but a method of persuasion, not a substitute."⁴ In fact, the U.S. president derives his power or influence from his ability to "persuade"⁵ and/or "bargain with others... [which] becomes give-and-take."⁶ Presidents can employ such persuasive tactics as projecting an image of confidence and leadership, building up a strong and forthright reputation, and by using one's popularity to push an agenda. And the granting of private meetings can also convince others that what the president desires of them "is what they ought to do for their own sake."⁷ Basically, President Bush convinced Powell to conform to his agenda.

I For example, Bush, cognizant of Powell's pacifism, knew that an explicit command from the White House would not warrant a favorable reaction from Powell. First, Bush sought to reassure and persuade the Secretary of State that he respected his nearly three decades of public service. The President, in order to avoid the embarrassing perception that his chief diplomat was not in line with his agenda for Iraq, sought to bargain and barter with Powell, who became angered by reports that strategist Karl Rove had become more influential than Powell. In reaction to the

newspaper leak, Woodward writes that Powell filled three departmental vacancies with Democrats. These appointments “circumvented the system,”⁸ yet Bush did not contest the appointments and instead asked a favor in return. “What are you going to do for us?”⁹ asked an aid of Bush to Powell. This incident exemplifies an execution of presidential persuasion because Bush’s actions ensured that Powell would return the favor by being more receptive to Bush’s plan for Iraq. Bush needed Powell’s backing because the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff held a considerable amount of credibility with the American people; if Bush could convince Powell then perhaps he could also convince the public and our global community.

II Another way in which Presidents can persuasively garner power is by publicly praising people from whom they will eventually need a favor. This persuasive tactic is executed under the assumption that others will be more likely to carry out the requests of the president because it boosts a person’s ego and allows for a public appearance. For example, Woodward writes about how President Bush continued to persuade, placate, and court Powell by praising him for his “leadership, his good work and his determination [in securing a unanimous U.N. resolution condemning Hussein].”¹⁰ Presenting Powell as an American hero on the White House’s Rose Garden is a decision President Bush saw as essential to gaining credibility for invading Iraq. Powell was widely seen as opposing the war and therefore his support for war gave the administration’s goal legitimacy. This decision could also have been used to gain further influence with the Secretary of State. Playing to the ego of Powell, who was widely known to enjoy being lauded¹¹ in the spotlight and bragging about his “stratospheric poll ratings,”¹² helped to get Powell on the same page as the administration’s pro-war agenda. In fact, Powell, in response to Bush’s question of loyalty said, “Yes, sir, I will support you. I’m with you, Mr. President.”¹³

III President Bush finessed Powell into presenting the U.S.’s public case for the war, after he told the Secretary of State that he personally wanted him to do it.¹⁴ The President knew that

Powell would be “flattered to be asked to do what no one could do.”¹⁵ Therefore, one could argue that President Bush’s ability to persuade Powell to give the presentation led to Powell’s enthusiastic adoption of the plan to militarily remove Hussein. Woodward notes that Powell even went as far to say that “more inspections – sorry. It’s not the answer.”¹⁶ That latter statement exemplifies the influence of Bush and how persuasive tactics can manipulate the way others think. In actuality, Powell went from saying that this war was “lunacy,”¹⁷ to supporting the war and presenting the case for war to the public. Even though Powell seemed to always be “skeptical”¹⁸ of Gulf War II, he was nevertheless persuaded to carry the public torch of the administration’s case for the liberation of 25 million people.

THE PERCEPTION OF PRESIDENT BUSH’S PROFESSIONAL REPUTATION

Foreign leaders, Democrats in Congress, as well as the President’s Cabinet will forge varying perceptions about the “professional reputation”¹⁹ of Bush based on their relationship with him. Anyone who the president seeks to persuade “must be convinced in their own minds that he has the skill and will enough to [arrive at the best decision].”²⁰ Therefore, how the President is perceived can increase or mitigate the amount of influence he has with others. Neustadt writes that whomever the president is trying to convince ostensibly become the “objects of his influence.”²¹ These ‘objects’ of his persuasion shape their perception of him based on “what they see [him do]; therefore the [President] must show tenacity and skill.”²² Presidential reputations are most often changed in times of controversy and partisan deadlock. He can also improve how he perceived by doing small things such as sending a political opponent special invitations to the White House for one-on-one private meetings. Essentially, everything the president “personally says and does”²³ is calculated into how others evaluate and gauge the worth of his reputation.

For example, Bush’s presidential decision to seek a congressional resolution²⁴ against the advice of his General Counsel improved his reputation, because it sent two clear messages to those

who were lukewarm about supporting military conflict: (1) President Bush was not going to make a decision to commence hostilities without a united home front and (2) President Bush was willing to seek a wide range of opinions about the Iraq situation, even from partisan liberal Democrats in Congress. Bush wanted to project an image of inclusiveness and said that that Congress should “be part of any decision...and wanted to hear their suggestions and thoughts.”²⁵ Essentially, Bush was changing his reputation of being labeled as a ‘my-way-or-the-highway kind of leader’ in order to gain bipartisan support for regime change.²⁶ For instance, the president succeeded in persuading House Minority Leader Dick Gephardt to fully recognize the danger of not removing Hussein from power. Gephardt said that he appreciated the President’s report and added that he agreed with his “concern about Saddam... It’s about weapons of mass destruction getting in the wrong hands.”²⁷

Improving his reputation was vital for President Bush, especially as he attempted to gain support from Democrats. What kind of persuasive tactics did Bush employ to gain favorability for his ‘resolution of force’ from Congress? First, President Bush invited representatives from both parties to the White House for private briefings on numerous occasions. His effective efforts to persuade Congress garnered the foundation of a bipartisan coalition of representatives who were in favor of regime change. Appearing on national television in the Rose Garden, the same noteworthy venue that boosted the ego of Powell, Bush ‘battered up’ Democratic Congressmen who work to pass authorization and highlighted “dozens of lawmakers, including Gephardt [and Democrat Senator Joe Lieberman]... to announce agreement on a bipartisan resolution.”²⁸ Decisive leadership on behalf of House Democrats led Senators Daschle, Feinstein, and Kerry to vote in favor of authorizing force. It was easier for President Bush to convince them to vote in favor because he turned the debate into being about protecting America’s homeland, and no Democrat wanted to be perceived as soft on terrorism. President Bush persuaded Kerry, a leading

Democrat with a leftist Senate voting record, to note that a “deadly arsenal of weapons of mass destruction in his hands is a threat to our security.”²⁹

I Neustadt also writes that a Cabinet level advisor or political opponent’s “personal attachment”³⁰ to a president is often manipulated to create influence. For example, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice’s close relationship with President Bush was used by him as a way to convince her to carry out his requests. Woodward notes that “she was on call for the President 24 hours a day...tending to the President and his priorities were her primary goal.”³¹ The closeness of their relationship, due to her consistent contact with him, made it far easier for her to be persuaded by Bush than others with less interaction. In one instance, Bush told Rice to “get out there and reiterate [my message of regime change and silence the dissenting voice of Powell].”³² Rice’s high regard for Bush’s reputation as being a fair and strong leader, significantly contributed to the way she proactively responded to the president’s request.³³ It is important to note that Bush is the President and she serves at his discretion.

II Moreover, Bush improved his reputation, in light of reports that ‘Vice President Dick Cheney actually controlled the White House’ when he notably disagreed with Cheney regarding the necessity of weapon inspections. Cheney stated that the “weapons inspections would be useless.”³⁴ President Bush, on the other hand, made it clear that a resolution mandating further weapon inspections would be advantageous for the U.S.’s global perception. His decision to oppose Cheney signaled that President Bush was cognizant of his need to change his perception in the eyes of Powell, not only his most ‘credible’ Cabinet member on national security policy, but also the person who thought Bush did not fully understand the complexities of the war in Iraq. Attempting to build his reputation, President Bush decided to facilitate several meetings of “private time”³⁵ with Powell in the White House. By fostering a sense of ‘personal attachment’ between the men, Bush hoped that those ‘one-on-one meetings’ helped change and improve the

way Powell perceived and judged Bush. Those private meetings gave the president a chance to “genuinely” communicate with Powell, and were opportunities where the President could convince and persuade Powell the most; because it is seemingly more difficult to say no to a president in the Oval Office. After all, Powell wanted the administration “not [go] to war without first trying a diplomatic solution.”³⁶ In light of Powell’s known objections, President Bush presented himself as a “patient man.”³⁷ Through these private meetings, Bush was able to prove his prudence and understanding of the magnitude of his actions in Iraq to Powell, thereby gaining additional confidence from Powell.

III Did President Bush have an initial reputation of being an imperialist head of government? Absolutely. Assumptions about his ‘go-it-alone’ foreign policy doctrine caused Bush to be negatively perceived abroad. How did President Bush mitigate this negative perception, all while persuading the international community that it was in their best to remove Hussein from power? First, President Bush acknowledged the absolute necessity of bargaining with his biggest ally, Britain. The support of British Prime Minister Tony Blair would silence the scream of unilateralism by opponents, because it meant that the U.S. had a major partner in Gulf War II. President Bush then decided to concede to the wishes of Blair and sought a U.N. resolution to (1) mitigate the political impact of war on Blair’s approval ratings³⁸ and (2) appease the wishes of Powell, whom Bush had not yet completely convinced. Essentially, President Bush’s reputation “had improved his position immeasurably”³⁹ in respect to Powell and Blair. This enhancement would, once again provide the president with the necessary leverage to achieve his goals.

THE POLITICAL IMPACT OF PRESIDENT BUSH’S POPULARITY

Neustadt wrote that a president’s “prestige [or popularity] sets a tone and may persuade the limits of response to his appeals.”⁴⁰ Unlike reputation, prestige deals primarily with the popularity of a president⁴¹. Neustadt notes that the public popularity of president can greatly dictate his influence

while meeting with people in private.⁴² Therefore, Neustadt might suggest that high profiled events like 9/11 and the successful military campaign in Afghanistan played a “dynamic factor”⁴³ in how popular the President was in public, but added that high approval ratings did not always equate persuasive success. Success in convincing a cabinet member did not always matter upon how much he was liked by the public, because sometimes unreliable polls are used to gauge a president’s prestige.⁴⁴ And, no matter how prestigious a president may appear to be, polarizing events can cause congressional representatives, foreign leaders, and even certain cabinet members to develop an “inability to grasp [or join the cause of the President’s agenda].”⁴⁵

I For example, though Bush enjoyed high poll numbers for being a strong leader,⁴⁶ he nevertheless confronted a bundle of challenges while attempting to persuade those who were less likely to promote his decision of regime change. President Bush enjoyed high popularity ratings during the middle of March and beginning part of April 2003, the dates that started Gulf War II. Basically, about 80% of Americans gave a positive response to the question of whether or not they “approve or disprove of the way George W. Bush is handling his job as president.”⁴⁷ Then April 10th brought news reports that suggested the War was going over like a “cakewalk,” and that President Bush could be vindicated for liberating 25 million people.⁴⁸ However, those news reports also highlighted the fact that no weapons of mass destruction (WMD) were being found. The lack of WMD stockpiles was important because Bush conceded that he “expected there to be stockpiles of weapons... we thought he had weapons.”⁴⁹ Negative media reports about a war waged on fabricated pretenses decimated Bush’s popularity and also contributed to an inability to persuade Powell about his decision to invade Iraq. The highly publicized David Kay, U.N. weapons inspector, reports of an intelligence failure seemed to continuously put Powell on the defense: “I have ‘not mislead anyone,’” the Secretary of State told reporters.⁵⁰

II It is safe to suggest that Rice's personal attachment to President Bush contributed to why she remained hopeful that more time inside Iraq would yield results of WMD.⁵¹ Rice's sentiment angered Powell because he felt that no one was willing to do a "realistic assessment"⁵² of the Iraq decision. Powell was aware of the opinion of some which held that Bush had "manipulated and hyped [up]"⁵³ questionable CIA intelligence. This served as the impetus for the rift between the Powell and the administration in the fall of 2003. Those incidents led Powell to publicly state that the lack of "actual stockpiles... created a big problem and could not be dismissed."⁵⁴ But Powell did not remain upset for long and even retracted his initial remarks stating that Bush had made the right decision.⁵⁵ Was Powell's reverse course motivated by an effort to save face or was he persuaded to correct a public rift, something this administration does not appreciate? Certainly he did so to prevent a major uproar, which meant that Powell was ostensibly persuaded to promote or not object to regime change.

III President Bush's popularity and its impact on how people reacted to his Iraq decision, force us to grapple with whether or not his success sustains the test of credibility, especially when – according to Woodward, the information Bush presented was predicated on questionable intelligence. In the aftermath of the alleged faulty intelligence, one way to measure the credibility of President Bush's power is to look at the 2004 Presidential election results. The re-election campaign of an incumbent president is either an up or down vote of confidence on his tenure. Bush beat Kerry by more than 3.5 million popular votes,⁵⁶ providing his administration with a vote of affirmation. Furthermore, some evidence showed that "Saddam had used chemical weapons extensively in the Iran-Iraq War... he probably had them now, but [there was no] rock-solid evidence."⁵⁷ Nevertheless, Americans re-elected Bush for a whole host of reasons, and primarily in spite of failure to locate WMDs

FINAL ANALYSIS

President Bush effectively persuaded others to promote his agenda by improving his reputation and using his popularity to gain political leverage. His administration's ability to convince people like Gephardt, Daschle, Lieberman, Kerry, and Pelosi to vote in favor of his congressional resolution, Powell to present the U.S.'s case for regime change to the U.N.,⁵⁸ and more than 30 countries to join his coalition is a testament to his effective persuasiveness. However, it is vital to note that Bush's productive ability to persuade others because is credible because (1) he did not intentionally mislead people: "make sure no one stretche[s] [the intelligence] to make our case,"⁵⁹ said Bush to his advisors; and (2) because Kay actually reported a more objective assessment of the search for WMD than was provided by Woodward's book. In my opinion, Woodward's conclusion does not adequately address the need to reform the way our intelligence is gathered. Instead, he chose to skew statements and solely highlight remarks from Kay's report in order to tilt the debate in favor of anti-war pundits. After all, Kay also stated that his team of inspectors discovered "dozens of WMD-related program activities and significant amounts of equipment"⁶⁰ that Iraq concealed from the U.N. He also added that Hussein was "intent on resuming nuclear programs development... [which] shows that Iraq was a very dangerous place."⁶¹ Therefore, the decision to invade Iraq demonstrated Bush's effective ability to persuade. Gulf War II was fought on the right premise irregardless of there being no WMD stockpiles to date, because the verdict is still out.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Sammon 23
- ² Neustadt, Preface viii
- ³ Kessler 290
- ⁴ Neustadt 25
- ⁵ Neustadt, 10
- ⁶ Neustadt 28–9
- ⁷ Neustadt 27
- ⁸ Woodward 127
- ⁹ *ibid*
- ¹⁰ Woodward 226
- ¹¹ Woodward 411
- ¹² Woodward 79
- ¹³ Woodward 217
- ¹⁴ Woodward 291
- ¹⁵ Woodward 291
- ¹⁶ Woodward 318
- ¹⁷ Woodward 22
- ¹⁸ Woodward 15
- ¹⁹ Neustadt 58
- ²⁰ *ibid*
- ²¹ *ibid*
- ²² Neustadt 48
- ²³ Neustadt, 80
- ²⁴ Woodward 167
- ²⁵ Woodward 169
- ²⁶ Woodward 169
- ²⁷ Woodward 170
- ²⁸ Woodward 201
- ²⁹ Woodward 203 - 4
- ³⁰ Neustadt 31
- ³¹ Woodward 23
- ³² Woodward 94
- ³³ Woodward 94
- ³⁴ Woodward 181
- ³⁵ Woodward 149
- ³⁶ Woodward 156
- ³⁷ Woodward 163
- ³⁸ Woodward 183
- ³⁹ Woodward 179
- ⁴⁰ Neustadt 92
- ⁴¹ Neustadt 93
- ⁴² Neustadt 87
- ⁴³ Neustadt 95
- ⁴⁴ Neustadt 98
- ⁴⁵ Neustadt 106
- ⁴⁶ Sammon 200
- ⁴⁷ Greenstein 200
- ⁴⁸ Woodward 409
- ⁴⁹ Woodward 424
- ⁵⁰ Woodward 413
- ⁵¹ Woodward 418
- ⁵² Woodward 415
- ⁵³ Woodward 428
- ⁵⁴ Woodward 435

⁵⁵ Woodward 436

⁵⁶ <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2004/pages/results/>

⁵⁷ Woodward 299

⁵⁸ Woodward 245

⁵⁹ Woodward 250

⁶⁰ Kessler 331

⁶¹ Kessler 332-3

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