On the 17th of March, 2011, the UN Security Council voted to adopt Resolution 1973, authorising the implementation of a NATO enforced no-fly zone and military intervention in Libya. President Obama has been rhetorically supportive, though ambivalent, of the responsibility to protect (R2P), but remained highly sceptical of intervention until days before March 17. Realising an atrocity was immanent, Obama agreed to support the draft resolution, despite division within his administration, in the hope of avoiding a humanitarian atrocity and a collapse of the Libyan state. Five years on, Obama himself confessed publically that “Libya is a mess” and that the intervention did not succeed in accomplishing what it set out to do. Obama’s caution in engaging in military operations in the Middle East was understandable. In Libya, he supported the intervention as in enabled the US to take a backseat role. This approach was a significantly toned down in comparison with his predecessor’s escapades in the Middle East. This theme of restraint in foreign interventions has since been mimicked in US engagements in Syria.

Given Obama’s chance to see the policies of President Bush’s administration play out, there is little wonder he sort to reel-in these crusading excesses. But why have Obama’s dealings with R2P and foreign intervention been inefficient? What causes these inefficiencies? And how have US interests toward the R2P and the prevention of mass atrocities been constructed since 9/11? These are important questions in seeking to understand the US’s approach to the responsibility to protect. Since the end of the Cold War, the role of international human rights policy has been subject of ongoing debate within presidential administrations. Despite Obama’s capacity to learn from and avoid the mistakes of Bush’s policy overreaction to the attacks of September 11, 2001, the intervention in Libya, in 2011, was poorly executed.

In this paper, I provide an explanation for Obama’s ambivalent engagement with the R2P, and inefficient adjustment to Bush’s crusading foreign policy, in Libya. I argue that

2 Obama quoted in Goldberg, 2016.
3 Wendt, 1999, p.129 define interests as beliefs about how to meet needs.
Presidential leadership is important to the construction of crises, and the development of US interests towards the R2P. However, presidential interpretation is subject to historical learning, and tensions between principled ideas and strategic goals. The causal role of rhetoric has often been overlooked in constructivist theory. I suggest that this oversight has left a serious gap in our understanding of how interests are constructed and ideas initiate change. Empirically, I examine the Bush and Obama administrations to examine how presidential rhetoric shaped US interests towards constructing, institutionalising, and acting on a R2P over time.

The paper proceeds in three parts; first, I examine the shortcomings in constructivist theories regarding explanations of change through ideas; second, I propose discursive institutionalism, a theory capable of explaining change through the tensions between principled ideas and historical contingencies; finally, I apply this theory to the ideas used across the Bush and Obama administrations to demonstrate how their leadership played an important role in shaping US perceptions of international responsibility. I conclude that presidential leadership provides valuable tools of analysis and, in relations to US notions of a global norm of a responsibility to protect, should not be overlooked as it has the capacity to provide deeper insights than rationalist and idealist scholars.

Presidential leadership is at its most influential during times of crisis. At these moments of crisis, presidents employ principled rhetoric in order to communicate issues to the public, and shape understandings through coordinative discourse. During crises, presidents hold the power of interpretation, and have the capacity to shape the nations understanding of events. There exist fundamental tensions in the construction of US interests toward preventing mass atrocities, between principled ideas, and strategic goals in relation to the R2P. In particular, these tensions arise when crises arise that require foreign intervention. As such, presidential leadership plays a critical role in constructing and interpreting US interests, particularly at punctuated moments in time. Once interests are established, they take on self-reinforcing lives of their own. In the context of the R2P, this made adjustments in US interests toward upholding the R2P, particularly in matter that involved foreign intervention, difficult.

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5 Zarefsky (1986, p. 1) argues “The facts of an episode in political life are not ‘given’ or univocal; they are not present in the external world awaiting discovery by political actors”. Daily events need to be interpreted by social agents, subsequently; events develop meaning based on society’s understandings as they have been constructed. Krebs (2015, p. 136) goes on to emphasise the point that the presidency “calls upon and empowers its holder to serve as the nation’s storyteller-in-chief”. Meanwhile, Rossiter (1956, p. 103) argues that the presidency is “the one-man distillation of the American people”.

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In developing an explanation of the US’s evolving interests in acting to uphold the R2P and prevent mass atrocities; I argue that Bush’s rhetoric, in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, legitimated policy overreaction in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, by constructing al-Qaeda as enemies of freedom and democracy. The Obama administration would subsequently attempt to reel-in these crusading excesses by approaching the concept of foreign intervention with policy restraint. This would assimilate in the form of ambivalence towards the R2P, and dysfunctional attempts to operationalize it in Libya and Syria.

**Understanding Change and Interests:**

Constructivist scholars have tended to provide a greater causal account of the impact of ideas on states interests and foreign policy than rationalists. As Ruggie argues “[s]ocial constructivism rests on an irreducibly intersubjective dimension of human action.”

Constructivist theories have had a greater capacity to explain changing interests in the absence of structural shifts, as they view social facts, as outlined above, as intersubjective social constructions. As previously mentioned, Wendt defines interests as “beliefs about how to meet needs.” He argues that “[i]dentities are the basis of interests. Actors do not have a ‘portfolio’ of interests that they carry around independent of social context; instead, they define their interests in the process of defining situations.” In this way, identities and interests are mutually constitutive. As ideas develop, state’s perception of their own identity, and indeed their identity as seen by others, alters resulting in a gradual change in interests. “State interests do not exist to be ‘discovered’ by self-interested, rational actors. Interests are constructed through a process of social interaction.” A major problem with constructivism has been the inability of constructivists to explain why some ideas are successfully institutionalised while others are not. Finnemore outlined a fundamental weakness in constructivist theory of the 1990s. Specifically, she argued that constructivists have not outlined the mechanisms through which norms are changed, created, and exercise their influence.

To provide a better insight into the conditions under which ideas emerge, stabilize, and take on a self-reinforcing momentum, Finnemore and Sikkink developed the ‘norm life-cycle

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7 Wendt, 1999, p. 129.
theory\textsuperscript{11} in order to explain how norms are created and internalised. However, this approach does not offer an explanation as to why some norms are internalized and why others are not. Whilst Finnemore and Sikkink acknowledge the role norm entrepreneurs have in institutionalising norms, their theory does not take into account context, the audience, or the position of the entrepreneur in society. Understanding how these norms and ideas take hold is important. Of equal importance is the need to understand why some ideas take hold while others do not is critical. Constructivist scholars have tended to fall short in this area. Their ability to explain why some ideas take hold in international society, and why others do not has, in general, been lacking. I suggest that one reason for this is that constructivists have rarely turned to discourse and rhetoric as a method of understanding how and why ideas develop. Whilst their acknowledgement of the roles of ideas is important, there capacity to explain change is, in many ways, incomplete.

Acknowledging the shortcomings in much of the prevailing constructivist literature, scholars of the new institutionalism have attempted to provide a more detailed explanation of institutional change. Historical institutionalist approaches are based on the assumptions that history, and the sequence of events, matter. According to Fioretos, “The distinguishing mark of historical institutionalism is the primacy it accords to temporality – the notion that the timing and sequence of events shape political processes.”\textsuperscript{12} Specifically, historical institutionalists put less emphasis on drawing lessons from the past then it does on “identifying the conditions under which and mechanisms by which the past affects the present and the future.”\textsuperscript{13} In particular, historical institutionalist scholars, including Pierson, emphasise ‘critical junctures’ as the major causal mechanism of change. According to Pierson, these critical junctures constitute the beginning of path-dependent processes which are “very difficult to alter.”\textsuperscript{14} Adding to this, Capoccia and Kelemen point to a ‘dualist’ model of institutional development, characterized by extended periods of path-dependent institutional stability, punctuated by critical junctures, making institutional change possible.\textsuperscript{15} However, this provides a very black and white approach to change, and suggests that historical institutionalism is better suited to explaining stasis than change.

\textsuperscript{11} Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998 created the norm life-cycle describing the three phases of normative development: norm emergence, norm cascade, and internalization.
\textsuperscript{12} Fioretos, 2008, p. 371.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, p. 383.
\textsuperscript{14} Pierson, 2004, p. 135.
\textsuperscript{15} Capoccia and Kelemen, 2007.
Providing a more nuanced approach to change in historical institutionalist theory, Mahoney and Thelen suggest that ambiguity is a permanent feature of institutional rules and, as such, there is scope for the meaning of rules to be interpreted as agents “contest the openings this ambiguity provides because matters of interpretation and implementation can have profound consequences for resource allocations and substantive outcomes… rules can never be precise enough to cover the complexities of all possible real-world situations.”

Mahoney and Thelen provide an approach to historical institutionalism capable of explaining incremental change, during periods of so-called relative institutional stability, through several ‘modes’ of change, including; drift, layering, conversion, and displacement. Drift refers to “the changed impact of existing rules due to shifts in the environment”; layering is “the introduction of new rules on top of or alongside existing ones”; conversion is “the changed enactment of existing rules due to their strategic redeployment”; finally, displacement refers to “the removal of existing rules and the introduction of new ones.” However, according to Schmidt, the split between crisis-driven and incremental change, historical institutionalists struggle to explain the dynamics of change due to their focus on historical rules and regularities. The historical institutionalist approach to change assumes efficiency, thereby obscuring the potential for dysfunctional change. On this basis, it cannot explain why Obama’s adjustment to the US’s interventionist policy has had dysfunctional results in the 2011 R2P intervention in Libya, and in response to ongoing threats of violence, and the rise of ISIS in Syria.

In an attempt to provide a more comprehensive, and nuanced explanation of change, Schmidt argues that discursive institutionalism, and discursive processes, can explain why certain ideas succeed where others do not. Discursive institutionalism, as Schmidt describes it, “is an umbrella concept for the vast range of works in political science that take account of the substantive content of ideas and the interactive processes by which ideas are conveyed and exchanged through discourse.” Significantly, discursive institutionalists do not see that discourse is just about the way in which ideas and ‘texts’ are communicated, it is specifically concerned with the context in which and through ideas are communicated. According to

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16 Mahoney and Thelen, 2010, p. 11.
17 Ibid, pp. 15-16.
18 Ibid.
19 Schmidt, 2011, p. 108.
21 Schmidt, 2010, p. 3.
22 Ibid, p. 4.
Schmidt, with regards to the interactive processes of discourse, discursive institutionalism builds upon the approaches that emphasize ‘coordinative discourse’ of policy construction.\(^{23}\) While discursive institutionalists argue that change can occur at critical moments, rather than suggesting that these moments are unexplainable, discursive institutionalist see them occurring through ideas and discourse.\(^{24}\) Furthermore, discursive institutionalists argue that institutions are “sentient agents, serving both as structures (of thinking and acting) that constrain action, and as constructs (of thinking and acting) created and changed by those actors.”\(^{25}\) Critically, unlike like scholars who focus on historical institutionalism, discursive institutionalists have a greater capacity to explain inefficient institutional adjustment.

Theory

In developing a framework to understand how presidential leadership shapes US interests towards intervention and atrocity prevention I employ a discursive institutionalist approach to change. Discursive institutionalism builds on approaches to policy construction and interests that emphasise ‘coordinative discourse’ through discourse coalitions.\(^{26}\) First, I address the punctuated construction of interests at critical moments in time.\(^{27}\) I suggest that during these critical moments, interpretive leaders – specifically, presidents – interpret events through coordinative discourse, constructing principled orders. Discourses are formed by ‘discourse coalitions’ that then provide the tools with which problems are constructed, and form the contexts in which the phenomena are understood.\(^{28}\) In particular, I emphasise a ‘discourse coalitions’\(^{29}\) approach to the construction of policy. As Hajer explains, there are three advantages to using a discourse coalition approach; first, it provides a capacity to examine issues in their wider political context; second, it enables explanation beyond a mere reference to interests, analysing how interests are played out in a given context; finally, it can be used to examine how “different actors and organizational practices help to reproduce or fight a

\(^{23}\) For details on ‘coordinative’ and ‘communicative’ discourse, see Schmidt, 2014, p. 190.

\(^{24}\) Schmidt, 2008, p. 316.

\(^{25}\) Schmidt, 2010, p. 56.

\(^{26}\) Schmidt, 2014, p. 190.

\(^{27}\) Unlike scholars of historical institutionalism who emphasise these critical moments as unexplainable shifts, I adopt Schmidt’s (2008, p. 316) approach that suggests that “these moments are the objects of explanation through ideas and discourse, which lend insight into how the historically transmitted, path-dependant structures are reconstructed.”

\(^{28}\) Hajer, 1993, pp. 45-46.

\(^{29}\) See Hajer, 1993, pp. 44-48 for discussion of the importance of analysing the turn to discursive constructions of policy.
given bias without necessarily orchestrating or coordinating their actions or without necessarily sharing deep values.”

Second, during periods of relative institutional stability, I share with Mahoney and Thelen the precepts that due to inherent ambiguities within institutional rules, and the inability of rules to cover all events in the real-world, there is scope for a degree of interpretation and incremental change. However, I diverge from their assumption that institutional adjustments are efficient, as they are unable to explain dysfunction. Mahoney and Thelen tend to take the view that these modes of incremental change lead to increased institutional efficacy. I contest this assumption, and argue – in-line with Vivian Schmidt - that institutional adjustments are not always efficient. Adjustments can be dysfunctional and inefficient. I argue that these changes are made possible by presidential attempts to reinterpret interests in the aftermath of punctuated overreactions in an effort to correct these policy excesses.

So how does this apply to US interests in upholding the R2P and preventing mass atrocities? I argue that, despite both Presidents Bush and Obama being rhetorically supportive of the R2P, Bush’s post-9/11 crusading imperatives to spread democracy and eliminate al-Qaeda took precedence throughout his administration’s tenure. Significantly, Bush’s policy overreaction in the 2003 Iraq war and war in Afghanistan left Obama to exercise policy restraint, which ultimately led to inefficient adjustments in Libya and Syria. That is to say, because Bush’s war on terror constructed US interests to focus on direct threats to the US, and defined an ‘us’ verses ‘them, Obama’s capacity to construct crises and alter US interest, particularly in relation to Libya, have been constrained. However, this is not to say that the R2P and the prevention of mass atrocities have not entered US policy considerations. However, since Bush’s crusading excesses in Iraq, and Obama has exercised extreme caution not to repeat past mistakes which, in turn, has resulted in inefficient and dysfunctional policy adjustment.

**R2P On the Sidelines - Constructing, Converting, and Layering Crises After 9/11**

In this section, I trace the construction, conversion and crises of the post-9/11 world, as the Bush administration sort to construct US interests in the War on Terror, and the Obama administration’s layering of inefficient policy in Libya and Syria. First, Bush would reconstruct US interests through communicative action and rhetorical appeal, spurring

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31 Mahoney and Thelen, 2010.
32 Ibid.
support for policy overreaction, culminating in the 2003 War in Iraq, justified by the rhetorical construction of the War on Terror. Second, Obama, in contrast, would seek to pullback from the liberal crusading style foreign policy practiced by the Bush administration in an attempt to provide a nuanced form of policy restraint.

**The Bush Administration**

The R2P was a peripheral issue in US interests before it ever came out of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS). The events of September the 11th, 2001, resulted in a significant shift in US interests on the back of powerful rhetoric from the Bush administration. Prior to the events of September 11, the Bush administration prided itself on embracing a realist foreign policy of pragmatism and restraint that was sceptical of nation building and humanitarian intervention. Significantly, Bush remarked that that his foreign policy would be reflective of America’s character. However, the events of September 11 resulted in a complete shift in the Bush administrations worldview, and a significant lowering of the risk threshold for the legitimate use of force. It is at times of crisis that rhetoric from national leaders can be particularly powerful in asserting ideas and evoking support for the mobilization of power. On the evening of the 9/11 attacks, Bush addressed the nation using powerful and emotive rhetoric as his construction of the day’s events began. Perhaps the clearest demonstration of the Bush administrations drastic shift in worldview, came during President Bush’s reinterpretation of US interests in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, came in his Address to a joint sitting of Congress on September 20, 2001. In the face of significant uncertainty, Bush developed a principled construction of the War on Terror, casting Al Qaeda as the embodiment of “all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century.” However, Bush went further than to just cast Al Qaeda as an enemy of America. He left no middle ground, stating “Every nation in the world now has a decision to make: Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.” Though his rhetoric, Bush cast the US as a blameless victim, and the perpetuators as evils doers forming the basis of legitimation for a crusading foreign policy to spread democratic values and rid the world of terrorists. Such powerful and definitive rhetoric drew clear lines in US interests in ways reminiscent of Truman’s construction of the Cold War In many ways; the Bush doctrine cast

33 Leffler, 2004, p. 26
34 Ibid, p. 27.
principled ideas to the periphery to make way for strategic objectives. However, it soon became evident that this policy overreaction was not sustainable.

In his 2002 State of the Union Address, Bush widened the scope of his crusade in the War on Terror outlining an “axis of evil” in 2002 State of the Union address. [S]ome governments will be timid in the face of terror. And make no mistake about it: If they do not act, America will…Iraq continues to flaunt its hostility toward America and to support terror. The Iraqi regime has plotted to develop anthrax and nerve gas and nuclear weapons for over a decade…States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil.

After the failure of intelligence agencies to pre-empt the attacks of 9/11, the Bush administration developed a tendency to be more aggressive in the face of uncertainty. This led to former CIA director George Tenet famously offered President Bush a “slam dunk” on WMD’s in Iraq with limited intelligence. When it became clear that no WMD’s where present in Iraq, the Bush administration would emphasise rhetorical appeals to liberal values, thus toning down the divisive “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” style-rhetoric. In Bush’s second inaugural address, it was clear that the administration was attempting to reframe, and tone down its crusading policy.

…it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movement and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world…America will not impose our own style of government on the unwilling. Our goal instead is to help others find their own voice, attain their own freedom, and make their own way.

The Bush administration created contentious precedents in their reconstructions of US interests after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The Bush doctrine, emphasising a right to pre-emptive war, was particularly significant in terms of overreaction. This punctuated moment swung the pendulum toward strategic concerns, through principled rhetorical appeals, in the form of displaying US supremacy in lieu of ensuring ongoing commitment. The Iraq war, in 2003, was a major overreaction in terms of establishing US interests. More significantly, Bush’s overreaction in Iraq significantly altered US interests.

38 Goldberg, 2016.  
39 Bush, 2005. (second inaugural address)
defining a distinct and assertive divide between what is good, and what is evil. Ultimately, the policy overreaction and crusading excesses of the administration would be unsustainable.

**The Obama Administration**

In an effort to understand why President Obama’s construction of the R2P in US interests has been inefficient, it is critical to recognise the competing tensions with which he was dealing. In particular, the Clinton and Bush administrations international engagements shaped Obama’s policy regarding US interventions, and the R2P. Not least of which, the UNSC sanctioned R2P intervention in Libya. The intervention in Libya, in 2011, came as a landmark precedent for the Security Council. Significantly, it was the first time that the Security Council had authorised intervention in a state without the consent of that state’s governing authority. Obama was himself sceptical of the draft resolution before the Security Council - which went onto become resolution 1973 - and the possibility of another US intervention in the Middle East.

Upon assuming the Presidency in 2009, Obama sort to distinguish his administration from his predecessor, whom he felt had tragically overreacted and overextended itself in the Middle East.\(^{40}\) The US was recovering from the worst recession since the Great depression, and struggling to exit costly wars in the Middle East. A legacy that Obama himself was keen to avoid. In many ways, Obama’s will to avoid interventionism, when the US’s vital interests were not at stake, explains the administrations rather ambivalent engagement with the R2P. For Obama, avoiding the missteps of his predecessor was critical, and he would often emphasise this point privately stating that the president’s job is to “not do stupid [stuff].”\(^{41}\)

In this light, Obama’s early international engagement focussed on putting distance between his worldview, and that of President Bush. This quest for a different approach can be summed up by his remarks made in a speech delivered at Cairo University, in June 2009, and his address at the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize.\(^{42}\) In each of these addresses, Obama advocated for a modest form of US policy that supported the spread of democratic values, through a gradual change. In his address to Cairo University in June of 2009, Obama talked of a “new beginning” in US relations with the Muslim world. And, while he stood firm in stating America’s support for democracy, he offered a policy of encouragement in place of

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\(^{40}\) Goldberg, 2016 (emphasis added).
\(^{41}\) Ibid.
\(^{42}\) Refer to Obama, 2009a; Obama, 2009b.
coercion. This platform stood in stark contrast to the crusading excesses of the Bush administration.

It was not until days before the vote, and a Gaddafi-led atrocity in Benghazi appeared imminent, that Obama made the decision to back the resolution in the Security Council. Chesterman suggested that the Obama administration remained sceptical of intervention until just twenty-four hours before the vote. The US was wary of intervention in Libya; however, Obama still displayed concern over the deteriorating situation, but was more akin to the idea of finding a political solution. This remained the case until it became apparent that Gaddafi’s forces would not back down.

This ongoing reluctance to intervene demonstrates that Obama was highly cautious of entangling the US in another ongoing conflict in the Middle East. That being said, his overall agreement, that intervention was the necessary course of action, suggests a willingness to act when preventing an atrocity appeared to be a feasible outcome. Significantly, Obama’s decision to intervene in Libya clearly showed tensions between principled ideas and strategic objectives in US interests.

In an address to the nation on March 28, 2011, regarding the Libyan intervention, President Obama stated;

…we must always measure our interests against the need for action. But that cannot be an argument for never acting on behalf of what’s right. In this particular country—Libya—at this particular moment, we were faced with the prospect of violence on a horrific scale. We had a unique ability to stop that violence: an international mandate for action, a broad coalition prepared to join us, the support of Arab countries, and a plea for help from the Libyan people themselves. We also had the ability to stop Qaddafi’s forces in their tracks without putting American troops on the ground.

Whilst advancing the case for intervention in Libya, Obama clarified his position, stating that the US “should not be afraid to act” however, “the burden of action should not be America’s alone.” In an address on the Middle East and North Africa on May 19, 2011, Obama outlined the US’s key regional interests, “countering terrorism and stopping the spread of

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43 Obama, 2009a.
45 Obama, 2011a.
46 Obama, 2011a.
nuclear weapons; securing the free flow of commerce and safe-guarding the security of the region; standing up for Israel’s security and pursuing Arab-Israeli peace.”

Though US intervention with NATO allies in Libya was a departure from core US interests Obama reiterated:

As I said when the United States joined an international coalition to intervene, we cannot prevent every injustice perpetuated by a regime against its people, and we have learned from our experience in Iraq just how costly and difficult it is to try to impose regime change by force – no matter how well intentioned it may be. But in Libya, we saw the prospect of imminent massacre, we had a mandate for action, and heard the Libyan people’s call for help … And when Qaddafi inevitably leaves or is forced from power, decades of provocation will come to an end, and the transition to a democratic Libya can proceed.

Obama maintained a strong rhetorical position upon assuming a positive stance toward the Libyan intervention. However, his ambivalence to take on and maintain a leading role in the intervention brought about the unfortunate assumption that the US was ‘leading from behind’. In many ways, this position is understandable in the context of past unilateral overreactions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Obama wanted to ensure that past crusading excesses were curtailed in Libya however; this muted approach to intervention in Libya failed to stabilize the state resulting in years of civil unrest and, eventually, ISIS gaining a foothold in the current power vacuum. Five year on from the intervention, Libya remains unstable and Obama has publically stated “It didn’t work”. Obama’s intervention in Libya demonstrates the institutional inefficiencies that can occur with incremental change. Libya was an attempt to prevent a replica of Rwanda, and it failed. Obama has himself, confessed that Libya “is a mess” and that the intervention was a failure.

Since Libya, the Obama Administration has come under much criticism for insufficient and ineffective action in Syria. Despite the numerous complexities of the conflict, Obama took a strong rhetorical stand against the Assad regime. At a White House Press Conference on August 20, 2012, Obama stated;

47 Obama, 2011b.
48 Obama, 2011b.
49 Obama quoted in Goldberg, 2016.
50 Obama quoted in Goldberg, 2016.
I have indicated repeatedly that President al-Assad has lost legitimacy, the he needs to step down. So far, he hasn’t gotten the message and instead has doubled down in violence on his own people…I have, at this point, not ordered military engagement in the situation…We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilised… That would change my equation.  

This position took a number of Obama’s advisors by surprise. In particular, Vice President Biden repeatedly warned against drawing a red line, fearing that its enforcement would be imminent. However, when Assad did employ the chemical weapons in an attack on Ghouta in August, 2013, it appeared that the so-called “red line” disappeared. It was only that Secretary of State John Kerry in an interview on August 20, 2013, suggested that it was important that Syria be punished for these chemical attacks. And that failure to do so would result in a loss of US credibility in the region, and around the world.  

Obama was quick to reiterate Secretary Kerry’s concerns stating:  

[I]t’s important for us to recognize that when over a thousand people are killed, including hundreds of innocent children, through the use of a weapon that 98 or 99 percent of humanity says should not be used even in war, and there is not action, then we’re sending a signal that that international norm doesn’t mean much. And that is a danger to our national security.  

Despite his initial assertive stance, Obama quickly became uneasy at the thought of using force. This sense of unease likely emerge shortly after a briefing from chief of the intelligence community, James Clapper, said that while the intelligence regarding the use of sarin gas was robust, it was not a “slam dunk”. This slight waiver of doubt cast Obama’s mind with uncertainty and fear of repeating mistakes of the past. Dropping bombs for the sake of dropping bombs was not on the Presidents list of goals whilst in office. As this uncertainty boiled up memories of Bush’s policy over reaction in Iraq, and other world  

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51 Obama, 2012.  
52 Goldberg, 2016.  
54 Goldberg, 2016.  
55 Obama, 2013.  
56 Goldberg, 2016.
leaders, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and British Prime Minister David Cameron, recoiled from the idea of a Syrian intervention, Obama’s initial enthusiasm fizzled.

Despite Obama’s efforts to fight overreaction and policy excesses with policy restraint, the administration’s efforts at managing the intervention in Libya failed to produce an effective outcome. Furthermore, efforts to curb human rights abuses in Syria have been muted, and largely ineffective. In both cases, Obama sort a pragmatic approach, cautious not to repeat the mistakes of the past. However, this caution resulted in a form of policy under reaction, and a failure to fill the power vacuums in an effort to avoid forcing democratic transitions.

**Conclusion**

Understanding the shifting nature of US interests toward the R2P has been difficult. However, by turning our attention to presidential leadership, we can develop an understanding of historical tensions that limit president’s ability to initiate effective adjustment. Presidential leadership, from both the Bush and Obama administrations, has been a critical factor in shaping interests through the construction of crises however; Bush’s liberal crusading in the early 2000s, in the aftermath of 9/11, resulted in policy overreach in Iraq and Afghanistan that, in the long run, proved unsustainable. While Obama tried to reel in crusading excesses from the Bush Administration by withdrawing from Afghanistan and Iraq, and adopting a more consultative, hands off approach to foreign intervention, his efforts have been inefficient. This was evident through his misguided attempt balance restraint with crusading in relation to Libya, and Syria. Libya turned out to be a trying case for an Obama administration plagued by fear of repeating historical over reactions in wars in the Middle East. Despite cautious engagement, the Obama administration’s attempt to stabilise Libya, with a hands off approach to intervention, failed.
Reference List


