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Reputation: An Analysis of How Reputation Influenced United States Presidents in Foreign

Policy

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### Abstract

How did the United States' president's perception of the US's reputation influence that administration's foreign policy? Using empirical evidence to demonstrate how the president's perception of the country's reputation influences that leader's foreign policy, this paper will examine the presidencies of President Jimmy Carter, President Ronald Reagan, President George W. Bush, and President Barack Obama. This paper will also investigate how these presidents attempted to build upon the American reputation. The research suggests that the perception of the US's reputation has influenced these presidents to become more insistent in their attempts to out-manuever their predecessors. Presidents have done so through policy measures used to ensure that the international community would see the US in a credible and positive light.

*Keywords:* Reputation, United States Foreign Policy, President Jimmy Carter, President Ronald Reagan, President George W. Bush, President Barack Obama

Reputation: An Analysis of How Reputation Influenced United States Presidents in Foreign Policy

*Reputation* is an idea built by others based on the action and rhetoric a nation uses when making decisions. The United States has a significant and well-known reputation as the leader of the free World and defender of democracy, to name a few. When the U.S. reputation is discussed, many reference the Vietnam war as an event that significantly impacted the U.S. reputation. In 1964 President Lyndon B. Johnson involved the U.S. in Vietnam to defend democracy and fight communism (Lupton, 2020). Many suggested pulling out as the U.S. realized it would not get the expected outcome. At the same time, President Johnson decided against it, to not appear weak, so the U.S. poured more resources into it (Lupton, 2020). This led the U.S. to make decisions and stick with them despite the outcome or cost in many pivotal situations. As we can see, reputation can be a heavy burden, especially for a country as powerful as the United States. It raises the question of how U.S. leaders' concerns over reputation have shaped their approaches to foreign policy. U.S. Leaders can use their reputation or the nation's reputation as a reason to use the resources of the U.S. in certain situations. In situations such as the Cold War, U.S. leaders used their reputation to flex their military strength or intelligence to continue the reputation of defenders of the Free World. Reputation can create expectations that drastically influence a nation's understanding of handling the situation. This paper will attempt to discuss reputation during the Cold War, where reputation significantly influenced U.S. leaders' foreign policy, mainly focusing on President Jimmy Carter and President Ronald Reagan, as they both had very different reputational approaches. It will also attempt to address, more recently, President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama and how their foreign policies were affected by reputation.

### **President Jimmy Carter**

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR; Soviet) posed a threat to the United States (U.S.) after World War II, which led to the Cold War. While there was no direct war between USSR and the U.S., it led to one of the most significant incidents of flexing a nation's reputation and strength. This led many U.S. leaders to base their strategy/policies around the USSR and fight against the communist agenda they posed. President Carter focused more effort on humanitarian and diplomatic foreign policy, which was controversial, as President Carter ignored the nation's relationship with the U.S., holding every nation accountable and causing some rift with the allies as he would withhold military or economic aid due to the human rights violations. (Strong, 2023). President Carter focused not on the military and aggressive approach to the Cold War but on a diplomatic approach that many of his advisors worried would affect the U.S.'s reputation negatively. He introduced the SALT II treaty, limiting the U.S. and USSR nuclear weapons. Many did not approve of this because it was viewed as limiting U.S. capabilities (Strong, 2023). This caused President Carter to butt heads with some of his advisors as they worried his strategy during the Cold War made the U.S. look weak and ruined the reputation of allied nations. His National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski was one of his primary advisors he butted heads with as President Carter's actions and policies were not keeping up with the reputation that was built for the U.S. in some people's opinions.

President Carter cut the military budget, relying on neighboring nations or nations within the conflicts to work it out themselves, with little help from the U.S., unless it posed a national threat (Yarhi-Milo, 2018). Furthering his approach to a less assertive approach then, when the USSR invaded Afghanistan, Zbigniew Brzezinski relayed to President that this was the USSR challenging the U.S. reputation. President Carter decided to provide funding to Afghanistan to

oppose the USSR, which frustrated many. President Carter stated, "young Americans should never again be sent to die in battle unless our own nation is endangered" (Yarhi-Milo, 2018, p. 129). He focused more on the American people's well-being than the nation's reputation, relying on surrounding nations to handle conflict instead of the U.S. inserting itself into it. President Carter decided not to put the U.S.'s total weight into the conflict, using the cut-off grain sales to the USSR and boycotting the 1980 Moscow Summer Olympics, but this came off as weak (Strong, 2023). This played into his ability to be reelected, as many Americans felt he did not do enough to combat the USSR and showcase the U.S. strength.

### **President Ronald Reagan**

When Ronald Reagan was elected President in 1980, he had a vastly different strategy than his predecessor Jimmy Carter. He was more assertive and used his policies to impress foreign leaders, following more of the Brzezinski ideology that was not used in the previous administration. "First, Reagan thought Carter had damaged the United States' reputation, as evidenced by his choice of the word "rebuild" instead of a word like "strengthen" to describe the administration's policy objective" (Yarhi-Milo, 2018, p. 188). President Reagan prided himself on the U.S. reputation and used it as an excuse to flex military strength, and he even increased the military budget. He also disagreed with the Salt II treaty as he felt it weakened the U.S. ability and the USSR would become the dominant country in nuclear capability (Cannon, 2023).

In contrast, the U.S. public at the time felt that Carter was too soft on the USSR and agreed with Reagan to intervene in Afghanistan. President Reagan used the conflict in Afghanistan to rebuild the U.S. creditability and show that President Reagan would focus on "Third world states" and the Middle East (Yarhi-Milo, 2018). Showing the World and the

American people that his strategy was different, as President Carter did very little in Afghanistan compared to President Reagan. President Reagan began funding and increasing the military weapons sent to the mujahedeen forces in Afghanistan (Yarhi-Milo, 2018). To show the World that the U.S. does not back down from communism and supports the fight against the USSR and its allies. President Reagan used the Afghanistan conflict to show the USSR the U.S. military strength compared to the prudent decisions President Carter opted for in Afghanistan. President Reagan even stated, "Withdrawal of that support for the Afghan resistance would send a signal to the Soviets and to anti-Soviet insurgencies in Central America, Africa, and Asia that our purpose in standing up to Soviet imperialism was not firm" (Yarhi-Milo, 2018, p. 190). The Afghanistan conflict was a show of reputation between the USSR and the U.S., as most of the rhetoric from President Reagan surrounding the conflict used phrasing that was backed by the ideology of reputation that the US is the defender of freedom. President Reagan hit a slight bump during his first term as President. The conflict in Lebanon, as Syria tried to take control over Lebanon (Yarhi-Milo, 2018).

President Reagan saw this as an opportunity to showcase the U.S. strength again, support the U.S. allies, and attempt to create an environment of peace. The public had a different opinion regarding the conflict in Lebanon than in Afghanistan. Public opinion changed with Reagan's increased marines in Lebanon to broker peace and combat Soviet-backed Syria in Lebanon (Yarhi-Milo, 2018). While some policymakers felt there were other ways to broker peace, President Reagan tried the negation strategy, but since it did not work, he sent Troops to assist (The Historian of the U.S. Department of State, 2017). The Lebanon situation differed from other military conflicts Reagan handled; it had a low approval. It caused disagreements with his Vice President George W. H. Bush, Secretary of State Alexander Haig, Secretary of Defense Caspar

Weinberger, and National Security Advisor William Clark about sending and maintaining troops in the area, but that did not dissuade President Reagan (The Historian of the U.S. Department of State, 2017).

President Reagan felt that not helping Lebanon would show the world that the U.S. was unreliable when fighting communism and terrorism and would ignore a nation and allies in need, which forced President Reagan to take a more assertive military approach instead of a diplomatic one in fear he would tarnish the U.S. reputation. President Reagan stated in one of his speeches, "the situation in Lebanon is difficult, frustrating, and dangerous. But that is no reason to turn our backs on friends and to cut and run. If we do, we will be sending a signal to terrorists everywhere: They can gain by waging war against innocent people" (Yarhi-Milo, 2018, p. 208). During this, Reagan faced a similar situation as President Carter, with his advisors disagreeing with his actions, but compared to President Carter, President Reagan wanted to keep face during the dispute. That removing the U.S. from the situation would significantly harm the reputation of the U.S. that he was working hard on rebuilding until Congress stepped in, finally making him set a date to remove the troops (Yarhi-Milo, 2018). Many Americans and Congress were apprehensive about the war in Lebanon due to the Vietnam War backlash, which was not perceived well and ended in a negative hit to the U.S. credibility and reputation. Then when a bombing in Lebanon that injured American soldiers, for a brief moment, had the backing Reagan wanted, it was short-lived as the situation as a whole was deteriorating and was harming the U.S. reputation leading to a lower approval rating for Reagan (Yarhi-Milo, 2018). The bombing had President Reagan implement the National Security Decision Directive 111, which states that international pressure should increase to lessen Syria's control. The report later states, "Above all else, we need to reassert American leadership in the wide range of challenges we face in the



Middle East." (Reagan, 1983). This showcased President Reagan's want to prove that the U.S. was a strong leader of the free world, upholding the reputation. President Reagan regained his approval rating when Soviet-backed Cuba invaded Grenada, and the U.S. sent soldiers to defend Grenada, boosting the reputation of the U.S. (Yarhi-Milo, 2018). President Reagan is a prime example of how reputation can influence foreign policy; he was so driven by his will to showcase and rebuild the U.S. reputation that no matter the cost, he would continue. Even his advisors could not dissuade him when it came to showcasing the power the U.S. had.

### **President George W. Bush.**

President George W. Bush entered his presidency in unfavorable terms as he did not win the popular vote in the 2000 presidential election. He was not a full year into his presidency when September 11, 2001, events changed the United States and its policies. President Bush announced that this began the War on Terror and "...It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated" (Pressman, 2009, p. 153). President Bush was more decisive than his predecessor, President Clinton, who preferred to analyze every detail before making a final decision. After 9/11, President Bush focused on defeating the terrorist groups, advocating for democracy and Weapons of Mass destruction proliferation (Pressman, 2009). President Bush wanted to show the true strength of the U.S. and continue the reputation as a defender of the free world, no matter what. He first began this by taking a more aggressive stance towards Afghanistan, which increased President Bush's popularity and reputation, as it was identified as the headquarters for Al-Qaeda, which implemented the attacks on 9/11—showcasing that the U.S. would follow through with defeating terrorist groups, boosting the U.S. reputation.

It was a year after 9/11 that President Bush made a decision that affected the U.S. reputation negatively by defying the suggestions from the military, the UN Security Council, and the world by advancing into Iraq on the rumor that they had weapons of mass destruction. In an attempt to spread democracy, prevent terrorist attacks, and prevent/stop weapons of mass destruction, President Bush acted against the recommendations of many institutions. While nations such as Australia, Japan, and South Korea supported President Bush's attack on Iraq, it addressed the region's critical insecurity about the U.S. willingness "to take casualties in combat" (Cha, 2010). When a few world leaders spoke out against President Bush's actions, he stated, ". . . If you want to hear resentment, just listen to the word unilateralism. I mean, that's resentment. . . . which I find amusing (Pfiffner, 2004, p. 170)". President Bush was harming the reputation but using it as an excuse, as one of the U.S. reputations is its creditability and ability to work with other nations. "As evidenced by Afghanistan and Iraq, we have shifted from a strategy of diplomacy backed by force to force backed by diplomacy, seeking to build democracy from the top down rather than from the bottom up" (Koh, 2007, p. 637). President Bush's view that the United States as the unipolar power of the world caused many issues with the multilateral corporation with other nations, the rejection of conventions or treaties such as "Small-arms Control Agreement (2001), UN Conference Against Racism (2001) (U.S. refused to participate), Rights of Woman (CEDAW: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of, Discrimination Against Women (2002), International Criminal Court (2002), The "Agreed Framework" with North Korea, negotiated by the Clinton administration" (Pfiffner, 2004, p. 169). This led to the idea that the United States was building a pattern that the Bush administration was unwilling to follow and building contempt for international agreements with mutual international issues (Pfiffner, 2004). Many of the actions and rhetoric used by President

Bush created the U.S. versus anyone who disagreed with the mentality, which many of the ally nations did not appreciate. Instead of improving the relationship with nations, President Bush's rhetoric's arrogance created resentment and hostility. In pursuit of President Bush's doctrine, the U.S. faced repercussions as some nations felt the decision being made by the Bush administration could be considered preemptive war and unjust. The U.S. reputation was slowly decreasing as more aggressive military decisions were made. However, one aspect that heavily impacted the U.S. reputation was its human rights violations during this time.

In efforts to fight the War on Terror, the U.S. opened Guantanamo Bay, and many of its practices went against the U.S. reputation as a leader in Human Rights. Many countries, including the U.S., underreported violations, such as arbitrary arrest and unlawful transfers to the U.S. for detention in Guantanamo Bay (Koh, 2007). Many of those brought to Guantanamo Bay were held without trial or counsel and held indefinitely, and President Bush set an official order allowing these actions (Pearlman, 2015). The U.S. used unlawful ways to interrogate and eventually discovered to be forms of torture and inhumane, which significantly impacted the U.S. reputation as a leader in Human Rights. The Bush administration found ways to skirt international laws and formed memorandums stating that the Geneva Conventions could not pertain to Al-Qaeda or Taliban, allowing for torture or even death to be acceptable in Guantanamo Bay (Pearlman, 2015). President Bush, throughout his presidency, defended and supported these types of interrogation techniques (Pearlman, 2015). As more information surfaced about the unlawful and wrongful actions within Guantanamo Bay, more and more international institutions and nations called for it to be closed. When this information became available, the U.S. took a major hit to its reputation and caused a significant amount of backlash.

### **President Barack Obama.**

President Barack Obama was elected in 2008, during a financial crisis and wars in the Middle East, with the U.S. reputation in a significantly negative light than some had seen in a while. The biggest hit to the U.S. Reputation is in Europe, with only 36% of Europeans viewing U.S. leadership as desirable (Cha, 2010). As President Obama entered office, the world questioned the U.S.'s power and Leadership as President Bush's strategy was heavily criticized (Lasher & Rinehart, 2016). The Iraq war raised questions about the U.S. engaging in "torture and illegal renditions," negatively impacting the reputation of the U.S. (Lasher & Rinehart, 2016). President Obama increased his trips to 21 different countries and made promises to strive for peace and mend the relationship with the Muslim community (Lasher & Rinehart, 2016). While most of the world embraced President Obama's rebuilding of the U.S. reputation, many communities were still hurt by the Bush administration as President Obama recognized the heavy criticism the world voiced about the U.S. and decided to work with the United Nations in the hope of creating spaces to solve problems and embrace the new U.S. era (Lasher & Rinehart, 2016). President Obama wanted to combat the reputation President Bush built during his presidency, focusing on more humanitarian and diplomatic efforts while trying to showcase the U.S.'s strength in the right situations. While he signed an Executive Order to close Guantanamo Bay due to all the human rights violations, congress disagreed and caused many nations to continue to question the U.S. stance on Human Rights (Miller Center, 2023). President Obama contacted Russia to build relations, leading to a new arms control agreement (Lasher & Rinehart, 2016). President Obama created an environment where the U.S. could have fewer adversaries and lead a more peaceful era. President Obama attempted to build stronger relationships and more robust security initiatives and increase the U.S. reputation in a positive light. President

Obama was working on building up the reputation in many nations, especially in Europe and the Middle East, where the reputation took the most brutal hit. As the Middle East became the target of the War on Terror, many European countries opposed the aggressive strategies and human rights violations the U.S. used to enact the War on Terror.

President Obama then faced a situation that hurt the U.S. reputation when he did not intervene in Syria. Syria had used chemical weapons against its people, which President Obama had voiced the U.S. condemning any who use them, and many believed the U.S. was going to act. While the U.S. Congress did not authorize military strikes, this forced the U.S. to back down, forcing Russia to step in for a last-minute rescue (Lasher & Rinehart, 2016). At the same time, President Obama had a strong stance on chemical weapons; not stepping in caused the U.S. to face harsh criticism for his failure and indecision. It hurts the U.S. reputation regarding having a solid stance against certain weapons or strategies used. Even at the beginning of his Presidency, he vowed for a new beginning in the Muslim community, which was drastically affected by the event causing the reputation and trust to decrease. While President Obama was not one to use the total weight of the military to showcase their strength, he opted for more diplomatic and relationship-building to increase the U.S. reputation.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout this research, it is shown how reputation can affect decisions made by U.S. leaders. It is shown that each President tried to combat their predecessor's effect on the U.S. reputation and increase the U.S. reputation positively. President Carter and President Obama focused on diplomatic and humanitarian foreign policies. In contrast, President Bush and President Reagan tried to showcase the strength of the U.S. President Carter knew of the

reputation of the U.S. and attempted to build back the trust by increasing humanitarian efforts and supporting others without the military. President Reagan was the most obvious of how heavily the U.S. reputation played into his foreign policy by showcasing the military strength to assist other democracies and the U.S. during the cold war. President Bush faced a challenging situation but relied heavily on military/aggressive force leading to a significant decrease in the U.S. reputation. In comparison, President Obama knew the reputation of the U.S. at the time and strived to enhance it by building back community and a sense of trust on the international stage. While each of these Presidents attempted to increase the U.S. reputation, each one made decisions that both positively and negatively affect it. Reputation will always be prevalent in policies, as it is difficult to escape from, especially for a nation as powerful as the United States. Through this research, one quote assists with summing up reputation; "Reputation only matters when it is needed, and the source of that need lies in the problems of private information and commitment" (Crescenzi M. , 2018, p. 80). This paper was to show how reputation affects the U.S. leader's decision, but reputation only matters when it can be used to either help a policy or an alliance. Situations such as the Cold War required the use and need for reputation, as it gave an excuse for Presidents such as Reagan to increase military strength or LBJ to intervene in the Vietnam conflict. Reputation creates an excuse for extremes or the ability for the U.S. to flex its power to further its goals, as in the War on Terror. It can positively comfort allies and their nation's people as they will be protected and secure. At the same time, it can also be a negative as it can cause distrust among nations who feel the brute force of its strength. The thing about reputation is that it is flexible; as a nation or society changes, reputation can change along with it.

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