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# Barack Obama's Rhetorical Management of Public Opinion in the Context of Focusing Events

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## Abstract:

This article explores President Barack Obama's management of public opinion regarding his policy towards the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)<sup>1</sup> by analyzing the content of the address delivered on 10 September 2014 concerning the US strategy to defeat ISIL. Set in the context of the Obama administration's approach to American foreign policy and with particular reference to videos released by ISIL showing the execution of US journalists, James W. Foley and Steven Sotloff, the analysis offers insights into how external events affect presidential attention, agendas, and public opinion management.

## Key words:

Barack Obama, ISIL, presidential rhetoric, public opinion, focusing event

## Introduction

There is a growing body of literature that concentrates on the constructs of the rhetorical presidency and presidential rhetoric. Comprehensive reviews of these studies have been provided by Aune and Medhurst (2008), Dorsey (2002), Medhurst (1996), and Stuckey and Antczak (1998). They have established that much of the scholarly interest in presidential rhetoric commenced with the publication of the essay "The Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency" (Ceaser et al. 1981) where basic assumptions were then extended and given formal explanation in *Rhetoric and American Statesmanship* (Thurow & Wallin 1984) and *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Tulis 1987). Among works that have also played an important role in addressing the issue are *Going*

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<sup>1</sup> An acronym used by US and UK governments and media to describe the jihadist group which controls large territory of Iraq and Syria. ISIL stands for Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, where al-Sham can be translated as the Levant, which is understood to be comprising what is now Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, the Palestinian Territories and part of south-eastern Turkey, Greater Syria, Syria, or Damascus. Two other terms have been used to describe the group: IS, which stands for Islamic State group, and Daesh, a label that does not have any meaning as a word but sounds similar to an Arabic verb that means to tread, trample down, crush.

*Public* (Kernell 1997) and *The Sound of Leadership: Presidential Communication in the Modern Age* (Hart 1987). Views contrary to the one which promotes the power of presidential governance through popular leadership have been offered by George C. Edwards, III (1996; 2006) and responses to those views have been made by Medhurst (Aune and Medhurst 2008), Hart (Aune 2008), and Zarefsky (2004). During the past three decades, much information has become available on the genres of presidential discourse (Jamieson & Campbell 2008), presidential crisis rhetoric (Bostdorff et al. 2008; Kiewe 1994), presidential civil rights rhetoric (Aune and Rigsby 2005; Pauley 2001; Windt 1991), presidential relations with Congress (Villalobos et al. 2012; Stuckey et al. 2008; Edwards 1989), with the media (Jamieson 1988; Turner 1985), and with the American public (Beasley et al. 2008; Hogan et al. 2008; Hogan 1997).

To better understand the mechanisms of presidential rhetoric and policies, a point regarding presidential policy leadership of and responsiveness to public opinion needs to be addressed. Findings about the connection between policy and opinion are mixed. The first strand of research reflects the view that presidents tend to respond to the opinion of the masses. Among the most recent research, Canes-Wrone (2015) finds that public opinion preferences translate into policy, which suggests that shifts in opinion are important causes of policy change. At the same time, the author observes a departure of policymakers' views from those of constituents, which indicates a decline in presidential responsiveness to mass opinion. Likewise, Druckman and Jacobs (2011) show congruence between opinion and policy. The authors demonstrate, however, that in maneuvering for political advantage presidents shape their domestic policy statements and craft foreign policy positions to win over only strategic segments of the electorate. Consistent with these findings, Knecht (2010) reports that presidents are attentive and responsive to public opinion especially when it concerns groups whose interest in policy increases and when the impact of those groups on politics rises as elections near. Similarly, Rottinghaus (2010) indicates that presidents lead rather than follow public opinion, attributing the process to a deterioration of the climate of opinion for their actions and a decline in the use of certain communication strategies. In a discussion of resources which presidents use to follow public opinion, Tenpas and McCann (2007) report on unabatedly high presidential spending on polling. Rottinghaus (2007) contributes to findings on presidential use of opinion mail. Druckman and Jacobs (2006) investigate the use of specific and general ideology data.

It is in the second strand of research that the view that presidents do not tend to respond to mass public opinion is placed. For example, Mueller and Stewart (2016a; 2016b) observe that politicians do not tailor policy to opinion. On issues of national security (Goldberg 2016), presidents are likely to counter public perception of what poses a threat to national security than seek to serve it. As another example, Miles (2016) finds that on issues in which the partisan public is divided, such as minimum wage, gender equality, or medical care, presidents are able to lead by policy agenda if they frame their policies consistent with cross-partisan moral foundations. The view that presidents do not yield to public opinion is also represented in the work of Druckman and Jacobs (2015) who argue that presidents make policy by largely manipulating broad public opinion in favor of narrow constituencies. Shapiro (2011) concurs that presidents are more likely to lead by manipulation, persuasion, and deception, responding to the opinions of small segments of voters (wealthy, political elites, insiders, and activists) at the expense of the larger electorate. In an analysis of institutional and political changes in American politics, Jacobs and Shapiro (2002) report that government does not respond to public preferences but creates the appearance of responsiveness. It uses polls and focus groups as resources of information about the language, symbols, and arguments needed to adapt the public's perceptions, understandings, and assessments to pursued policies. Cohen (1999) offers similar findings. His quantitative and qualitative analysis shows that presidents lead opinion on substantive policy issue and follow public preferences on symbolic decisions and actions. They lead when a position needs to be taken and a policy needs to be formulated and legitimated and respond when a problem needs to be identified or when a policy and policymaking process get beyond their interest or control.

The view that circumstances condition presidential responsiveness is reflected in the third strand of research. These studies suggest that responsiveness and leadership vary according to issue type, congressional agenda setting, presidential standing, and electoral cycle. For instance, the results of Asher's (2015) study of public opinion polls indicate that while presidents make themselves responsive to public will on some issues, they refuse to subject their performance to compliance with public wishes about others. More specifically, Canes-Wrone and Shotts (2004) point out that presidential responsiveness is high on issues that are close to citizens' everyday lives, such as crime, health, education, and social security, and low on issues that citizens are less familiar with, such as defense, foreign aid, and space. In a debate over responsiveness, Canes-

Wrone and Kelly (2013) consider the role of the partisan composition of Congress. The authors note that presidents are more likely to lead public opinion under conditions of divided government, placing policies on the agenda which do not correspond to public preferences, and follow public opinion under conditions of unified government, offering policy proposals which are aligned with public position-taking. Also of importance to the degree of responsiveness is presidential popularity. Canes-Wrone et al. (2001) find that average presidential approval ratings create the most favorable conditions for presidents to follow opinion. Distinctly high or low popularity discourages following. The level of responsiveness is also reported to be shaped by electoral dynamics. Zaller (2003) observes that sufficient policy levers at reelection time cause presidents to ignore the opinion expressed in the polls and follow the opinion which might be formed in the future in response to presidential decisions and actions. Canes-Wrone et al. (2001) offer similar observations. While reelections incline presidents to enact popular policies, low standing of the challenger with the electorate encourages incumbents to introduce unpopular policy initiatives.

The present analysis falls within the third strand of research, addressing the issue of presidential responsiveness and leadership in the context of tragic events. It attends to President Obama's rhetoric to gain insight into his political performance. This study contributes to the research on the president's discourse and policies to date primarily focused on the analysis of Obama's first-term presidential rhetoric (Murphy 2015; Terrill 2015; Vaughn & Mercieca 2014; Abraham & Smith 2013; Ferrara 2013; Danisch 2012; Leeman 2012; Garvey 2011) and the treatment of his first-term speeches, including the inaugural address (Medhurst 2012; Frank 2011), the State of the Union addresses (Mosley-Jensen 2015; Cox 2012), speeches responding to national tragedies (Amsden 2014; Stuckey & O'Rourke 2014; Frank 2014), dealing with the questions of war and peace (Rhodes & Hlavacik 2015; Reeves & May 2013; Bostdorff 2012; Ivie 2011; Mohammed & Zarefsky 2011; Terrill 2011), facing racial conflicts and race (Dyson 2016; McPhail & McPhail 2011), and tackling health care reform (Rowland 2011). There are three primary goals of the article: 1. To determine whether the president managed public opinion using substantive or symbolic rhetoric. 2. To decide whether the president assumed the role of a leader and a visionary, showing initiative and taking action, or that of a follower, reflecting and reacting to the views of the populace. 3. To ascertain the potential effect of external events on the president's agenda setting. The discussion attempts to provide answers to the following

questions: What accounted for the substantiveness or symbolism of the address? Was the address a demonstration of the president's responsiveness to public expectations or was it an expression of the president's will to maintain responsibility for leadership? Were external events potential triggers for the president's increased attention and agenda setting? This analysis enhances the understanding of the president's political choices with data on his foreign policy rhetoric using Cohen's (1999) study of the content of sentences in the State of the Union Addresses and Ragsdale's (1982) examination of the types of statements in major presidential speeches. This analysis finds that Obama attempted to take a position and lead opinion on US counterterrorism policy. It provides evidence in favor of the assumption that he did not respond to opinion but created the appearance of responsiveness and adapted the public's perceptions and assessments to pursued policies.

### ***Background***

Because presidential management of public opinion is mediated by political conditions, the analysis is embedded within a more general discussion of the president's policy and discourse on foreign affairs. Obama entered office with the conviction that terrorism was the greatest threat to US security and with determination to center the administration's efforts on pursuing an effective counterterrorism policy (Stern 2015; McCrisken 2011). The president's comments from the Inaugural Address of 20 January 2009 (Obama 2009b) suggesting that America was "at war against a far-reaching network of violence and hatred" and followed by the pledge to defeat "those who seek to advance their aims by inducing terror and slaughtering innocents" reflect the president's thinking and assert his core imperative. The preferred approach to achieve this goal was to move away from the overuse of and overreliance on force (Stern 2015). "A campaign against extremism," Obama (2009f) argued in a speech on US strategies for Afghanistan and Pakistan on 27 March 2009 delivered in Washington, D.C., "will not succeed with bullets or bombs alone." He called for a broader range of tools. In a commencement address delivered on 28 May 2014 at the United States Military Academy in West Point, New York, the president (Obama 2014b) upheld Americas' right to use military force unilaterally if issues of global concern posed a direct threat to its interests, but, he cautioned that they "still need to ask tough questions about whether our actions are proportional and effective and just."

The preferred means of reaching the goal were targeted killing, electronic surveillance, and partnering with countries around the world (Lynch 2015; Stern 2015). Strikes of unmanned aerial vehicles armed with guided missiles to kill terrorist operatives have been ordered under two programs: the Pentagon's program which operates in the recognized war zones of Afghanistan and Iraq under congressional and judicial oversight and the C.I.A.'s program which strikes targets around the world and is classified as covert. Pressed for justification and explanation of how drone strikes were conducted, the president acknowledged in an appearance on 18 October 2012 of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* on Comedy Central that "one of the things we've got to do is put a legal architecture in place, and we need Congressional help in order to do that, to make sure that not only am I reined in, but any president's reined in terms of some of the decisions that we're making" (Stewart 2012). Obama (2013a) made his first major comment on the legality of strikes under US and international law in a State of the Union address on 12 February 2013, when he expressed his intention to engage with Congress "to ensure not only that our targeting, detention, and prosecution of terrorists remains consistent with our laws and system of checks and balances, but that our efforts are even more transparent to the American people and to the world." On 22 May 2013, he signed Policy Guidance that provided the framework for governing the use of force in counterterrorism operations outside the United States and made counterterrorism policy standards and procedures clear (Obama 2013e). When referring to the document in remarks delivered a day later at the National Defense University at Fort McNair in Washington, D.C., Obama (2013b) ensured that his "administration has worked vigorously to establish a framework that governs our use of force against terrorists – insisting upon clear guidelines, oversight, and accountability."

The second element of Obama's counterterrorism policy was reliance on electronic surveillance. When on 26 May 2011 Obama signed a four-year extension of the Patriot Act, which expanded the Federal Bureau of Investigation's counterterrorism and surveillance powers, he renewed the provisions for allowing roving wiretaps, government searches of business records, and conducting surveillance on individuals suspected of terrorist-related activities. Commenting on expanded surveillance in the National Defense University speech, Obama (2013b) stressed that there was a need to "keep working hard to strike the appropriate balance between our need for security and preserving those freedoms that make us who we are." In his first comments after reports of government surveillance and collection of information were

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revealed, he stated in an exchange with reporters on 7 June 2013 in San Jose, California, that the surveillance programs were overseen by Congress and the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance (FISA) Court (Obama 2013c). He assured that the government “is not abusing [the program] and that it’s being carried out consistent with the Constitution and rule of law.” To reassure the public about the legality of the programs, the president announced a public review of US surveillance programs. At a 9 August 2013 news conference in Washington, D.C., he promised to work with Congress to pursue appropriate reforms to the program that collects telephone records and improve the public’s confidence in the oversight conducted by the FISA Court (Obama 2013d). He said nothing, however, that suggested that he would radically change collection of phone data and surveillance of Internet activities. In a 17 January 2014 speech delivered in Washington, D.C., dedicated to intelligence and electronic surveillance programs, the president (Obama 2014f) restated his case, announcing a new directive for US intelligence activities, greater transparency of American surveillance activities, additional protection for the interception of the communications of foreign targets overseas, amendments to the use of national security letters, and a replacement of the existing bulk telephone collection program. Again, no mention of any major alterations to the mass surveillance was made.

Forming a coalition with countries around the world for the purpose of combating terrorism was the third element of Obama’s counterterrorism policy. In the 2009 State of the Union address the president (Obama 2009a) said that “a new era of engagement has begun.” While promising that the US would not “ignore the foes or forces that could do . . . harm,” he stressed that “America cannot meet the threats of this century alone.” The belief was that working in a coalition with other countries was the means to deal with the danger. In the 27 March 2009 speech, Obama (2009f) made it clear: “Security demands a new sense of shared responsibility.” “This is not simply an American problem.” “As America does more,” he stated, “we will ask others to join us in doing their part.” In a series of speeches delivered in 2009 during his international presidential trips Obama reflected on the theme. In Prague, he insisted that “We must strengthen our cooperation with one another and with other nations and institutions around the world to confront dangers that recognize no borders” (Obama 2009e). In Cairo, he maintained that “we have a responsibility to join together on behalf of . . . a world where extremists no longer threaten our people” (Obama 2009d). In Moscow, he repeated that security from extremism demanded “global partnership.” Much stress was also placed on

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partnering with states where terrorist networks operated (Obama 2009c). Explaining the purpose of US missions in the region, Obama denied in his Cairo remarks that Americans “want to keep . . . troops in Afghanistan” and made it clear that Americans would “leave Iraq to Iraqis.” In remarks on the Middle East and North Africa on 19 May 2011 made in Washington, D.C., he expressed the will to partner with Pakistanis, Afghans, and Iraqis to rebuild their economies and promised to show support “based on ensuring financial stability, promoting reform, and integrating competitive markets” (Obama 2011).

When the president (Obama 2014d) announced the return of US forces to Iraq on 13 June 2014 in Washington, D.C., he argued that it was in response to the call of the Iraqi government for assistance in assessing and advising the Iraqi forces as they confronted ISIL. He contended that after considering the gains made by ISIL and the nature of the terrorist organization, there was a need to protect US interests in the region. He emphasized, however, that it was not “a military challenge” and repeated that the United States was not going to involve itself in a military action. “The United States will do our part,” he indicated, but ultimately, “it’s up to the Iraqis, as a sovereign nation, to solve their problems.” In what was claimed to be revenge for US airstrikes, ISIL beheaded two American journalists, James W. Foley and Steven Sotloff. Execution videos were released by ISIL on 19 August 2014 and 2 September 2014, respectively. They were shot at an unknown desert location and lasted a few minutes each. They opened with a blurred shot of Obama speaking about US airstrikes against ISIL. They then cut to Foley and Sotloff dressed in orange jumpsuits kneeling next to a masked, black-clad ISIL fighter where they made their statements. After they stopped, the executioner spoke and started to cut at the hostage’s neck, yet the actual moment of decapitation was not shown. The next shot showed the beheaded corpses and the executioner revealing that ISIL was holding another hostage and warned of his execution.

In the statements made on 7 August 2014 and 28 August 2014 in Washington, D.C., the president (Obama 2014e; 2014c) justified “why we must act and act now.” He contended that targeted airstrikes were authorized to protect US citizens, help Iraqi civilians, and stop ISIL advances in the region. He denied that they were ordered to involve the United States into fighting another war in Iraq. Even as US airstrikes were conducted, he argued, “reconciliation among Iraqi communities and stronger Iraqi security forces” were the only lasting solutions to the problems in the region. Making it clear that any successful strategy needed strong regional

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partners, he urged Iraqi leaders to form a government that would be “unified and inclusive” and therefore “more effective in taking the fight to ISIL.” The president adjusted the statements during a national televised address delivered on 10 September 2014, which revised the administration’s objective in its dealing with the threat posed by ISIL in Iraq and Syria and reviewed the steps to achieve it (Obama 2014a).

Gallup polls administered between 7 and 10 August 2014 and between 4 and 7 September 2014 reflect the political environment in which the 10 September 2014 speech was made. Data was collected from Gallup polls on Americans’ satisfaction (*Satisfaction With the United States*; Jones 2014c; Saad 2014), top US problems (McCarthy 2014; Riffkin 2014a; 2014b), and presidential job approval (*Presidential Approval Rating*; *Presidential Ratings – Issues Approval*; Jones 2014b). Their results indicate that over the course of two months, Americans’ satisfaction with the way things were going in the country was relatively stable, measuring 22 percent in August and 23 percent in September. Mentions of foreign policy and war as the most important problems facing the US remained stable too, between six and seven percent mention foreign policy and three percent mention war. Mentions of terrorism and Iraq recorded an increase, from a half percentage point to four percentage points regarding terrorism and from one percentage point to three percentage points regarding Iraq. Presidential job approval ratings did not show major shifts in opinion. Satisfaction with the president’s job performance was within 42 percent in August and 41 in September. When focusing on specifics – the president’s handling of foreign affairs – approval ratings were 36 percent in August and the level of trust in the federal government’s ability to deal with international problems was at a record-low 43 percent in September.

On the question of US military action in Iraq and Syria against ISIL the Gallup poll (Dugan 2014; Jones 2014a; Jones & Newport 2014; Newport 2014) taken between 20 and 21 June 2014 found that 54 percent of respondents disapproved of potential US military actions in Iraq, showing a majority approval for the US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, 61 percent, and a disapproving majority for the US decision to send troops to Iraq in 2003, 57 percent. Ranked among the highest level of disapproval for a new military action Gallup had measured, the lack of approval may have indicated that US citizens were wary of the country’s long engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan. A Wall Street Journal (WSJ)/NBC poll (Hook & Lee 2014) conducted between 3 and 7 September, just after the beheading of a second American journalist, showed a

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major shift in opinion, finding that 61 percent of respondents considered military action against ISIL to be in the national interest. When asked what military action should be taken against ISIL, 40 percent of those polled said action should be limited to airstrikes only and 34 percent said that it should include both airstrikes and US ground troops. The poll also found that 47 percent thought that the country was less safe than it was before the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and 43 percent believed that the US had a national interest in responding to ISIL. A poll conducted by Washington Post and ABC News on 9 September 2014 showed similar findings (Balz & Craighill 2014). It revealed that 91 percent saw ISIL as a threat to the vital interests of the United States. When it came to airstrikes against ISIL in Iraq and Syria, 71 percent supported airstrikes to target the Sunni insurgents in Iraq, and 65 percent supported expanding airstrikes into Syria.

### *Analysis and Discussion*

The speech entitled “United States Strategy to Combat the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant Terrorist Organization (ISIL)” delivered by President Barack Obama from the State Floor in the White House on 10 September 2014, the eve of the 13th anniversary of the September 11 attacks, is a major presidential address. Coe and Neuman (2011: 731) define a major presidential address as “a president’s spoken communication that is addressed to the American people, broadcast to the nation, and controlled by the president.” Obama’s 10 September 2014 speech meets these criteria. It is a spoken message delivered on the eve of the 13th anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks and only weeks after the release of videos showing the execution of American citizens. It is addressed to the American people, and opens with the familiar phrase “my fellow Americans,” which makes the speaker’s intentions to address a wide audience and make a broad impact explicit. According to 10 September 2014 Nielsen (2014) estimates, the speech was carried live on 14 networks and attracted over 34 million viewers, with a combined household rating of 21.8. Additionally, 4.2 million people saw one or more of the 234,000 Tweets sent about the speech, which increased its potential for the desired outcome. The speech assured message control, that is to say that the organization of the address and the choice of words were carefully planned and rehearsed in advance.

The speech outlined the United States’ plan to “lead a broad coalition to roll back the terrorist threat” with a clear objective to “degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL through a

comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy.” The president (Obama 2014a) described the campaign as “different from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan,” assuring that it would not “involve American combat troops fighting on foreign soil” but would “be waged through a steady, relentless effort to take out ISIL wherever they exist, using [US] air power and [US] support for partners’ forces on the ground.” The strategy had four core elements: systematic airstrikes against ISIL, increased support to forces fighting the terrorist organization on the ground, the use of substantial counterterrorism capabilities to prevent ISIL attacks, and humanitarian assistance to the civilians displaced by the terrorist organization. As part of the strategy, Obama asked Congress for “additional authorities and resources” to support the Syrian opposition and advised the American public that the effort “to eradicate a cancer like ISIL” would take time. “And any time we take military action,” he continued, “there are risks involved, especially to the service men and women who carry out these missions.” The speech closed with an emphasis on the leading position that the United States presented in the areas of technology, industry, education, energy, and employment and on the leadership role that it played in helping Ukraine defend itself from Russian aggression, helping to fight the outbreak of Ebola, helping to eliminate Syria’s chemical weapons, preventing the massacre of the Yazidis, and helping Muslim communities fight against terrorism. “Our endless blessings bestow an enduring burden,” Obama said, but “we welcome our responsibility to lead. . . . That is the difference we make in the world.”

Evidence for when the president spoke substantively and symbolically and therefore when he led and followed the public was collected using Cohen’s (1999) study of the content of presidential sentences in the State of the Union Addresses. Distinction was made between two types of presidential sentences: substantive sentences in which the president took a position on the issue and symbolic sentences in which the president only mentioned a policy. Raising ideological debate or offering details concerning a policy were considered to be forms of substantiveness as they informed about the policy direction that the president planned to take, while mere references to a policy were regarded as symbolic actions. An analysis by Ragsdale (1982) of the types of statements in major addresses provided additional information. Ragsdale distinguishes three types of presidential statements: policy actions, which include promises and achievements; policy discussions, which include descriptions of national facts, situations, and backgrounds; and non-policy remarks. Substantive tone was found in sentences which offered a

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specific position on an issue or a policy detail, while symbolic emphasis was captured in sentences which merely referred to a policy area. The proportion of policy to non-policy sentences determined the overall sense of the emphasis of the president's address.

To capture the tone of the speech, each sentence was aligned against both its substantive and symbolic dimensions. Sentences in which symbol overrode substance were coded symbolic, while sentences in which the substantive aspect was more important were coded substantive. For example, the sentence "I have made it clear that we will hunt down terrorists who threaten our country, wherever they are" was coded symbolic because it mentioned the president's general policy goal, while the sentence "That means I will not hesitate to take action against ISIL in Syria, as well as Iraq" was coded substantive because it specified what form the policy was planned to take and where it was planned to be implemented. Sentences which presented an achievement, as exemplified in the sentence "We took out Usama bin Laden and much of Al Qaida's leadership in Afghanistan and Pakistan," or a promise, as illustrated by the sentence "This is a core principle of my Presidency: If you threaten America, you will find no safe haven," were categorized as policy actions. Sentences which referred to facts, as seen in the sentence "Last month, I ordered our military to take targeted action against ISIL to stop its advances," or described backgrounds, as evident in the sentence "Over the last several years, we have consistently taken the fight to terrorists who threaten our country," were classified as policy discussions.

The speech was coded by the author and two additional coders to establish inter-coder reliability. Each coder examined the speech and was required to mark the sentences as either substantive or symbolic. Additionally, for substantive sentences two categories were provided: policy action and policy discussion. Inter-coder reliability for the substantive-symbolic category was high, with 97 percent of the sentences coded consistently across the three coders. For the policy action-policy discussion category, inter-coder reliability was also high, with 98 percent of the sentences coded consistently across the three coders. The percentage of the substantive-symbolic category was calculated by dividing the number of sentences meeting the criteria for substantive or symbolic sentences by the total number of sentences in the speech. The percentage of the policy action-policy discussion category was calculated by dividing the number of sentences meeting the criteria for policy action or policy discussion sentences by the total number of substantive sentences in the speech.

The results of the analysis suggest that Obama was considerably substantive in his address. 85 percent of the sentences were found to be substantive and 15 percent symbolic. 43 percent of the sentences in the speech that were substantive addressed policy discussion, and 42 percent targeted policy action. These figures are close to ones that Ragsdale (1982) reports in a study that uses the State of the Union addresses and other major speeches. Ragsdale's study finds that 62 percent of statements are of policy discussion, 24 percent are of policy action, and 14 percent are non-policy statements. The findings regarding policy action are also similar to ones that Cohen (1999) presents in a study that uses the State of the Union address. The results show that 31 percent of sentences are policy action, though the percentage ranges from 13 to 58 percent.

These results allow for a consideration of the questions behind presidential management of public opinion. Did the president respond to public opinion or did he provide policy leadership? Did he follow public demand or did he offer to lead? The idea suggested in this article hypothesises that Obama attempted to take a position and lead opinion. He did not respond but created the appearance of responsiveness and adapted the public's perceptions and assessments to pursued policies (Jacobs & Shapiro 2002).

The president attempted to take a position when he announced that the US "will lead a broad coalition to roll back this terrorist threat" and "will degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy." Given that the process of building the case for an international coalition against ISIL was initiated at the onset of Obama's presidency, the announcement to lead a global partnership against terrorism appeared to mark the culmination of the campaign rather than its launch.

The president also offered to lead when he stated that "we will expand our efforts beyond protecting our own people and humanitarian missions" and "will not hesitate to take action against ISIL in Syria, as well as Iraq;" "we will increase our support to forces fighting these terrorists on the ground" and "will send an additional 475 service members to Iraq;" "we will continue to draw on our substantial counterterrorism capabilities to prevent ISIL attacks" and "will redouble our efforts to cut off [ISIL] funding, improve our intelligence, strengthen our defenses, counter [ISIL] warped ideology, and stem the flow of foreign fighters into and out of the Middle East." Framed in terms of expansion, increase, and continuation, the policy proposals seemed more of a demonstration of a gradually developed foreign policy leadership than a

sudden reaction to public expectations of following. The president's decisions to deploy several hundred American service members to Iraq and conduct several hundred airstrikes in Iraq in June 2014 – a month before the execution videos were released – suggest that Obama pursued a course set to lead and shape public policy judgment rather than follow public opinion concerns.

The president exercised statesmanship when he spoke substantively – 85 percent of the sentences in the address were found to be substantive and previous research has established that speaking substantively to the public signals presidential leadership (Cohen 1999). When Obama explained that the proposed campaign was “consistent with the approach I outlined earlier this year: to use force against anyone who threatens America’s core interests” and “mobilize partners wherever possible to address broader challenges to international order,” he rationalized and justified the proposed course of action, which reinforces the message that his conduct and performance of public policy were in response to a political plan pursued with firmness and not a response to public will.

Account should also be taken of the Gallup trends in opinions that the American public was not then expressing a sustained desire for military action in the region. While the president assured that “American forces will not have a combat mission” and “will not get dragged into another ground war,” creating the appearance of responsiveness to public sentiment against the United States getting involved in Iraq again, he declared that the US would continue to wage the counterterrorism campaign “through a steady, relentless effort to take out ISIL wherever they exist, using our air power and our support for partners’ forces on the ground” – a declaration which was much in line with what he had set out to do than with what public opinion had expected him to do.

Two more considerations set the stage for leadership. First, halfway into his second term, the president was on the point in the electoral cycle in which he did not seem to be driven by the incentives to win votes, though his standing was likely to affect his party in the 2014 midterm elections. As the pressure of re-election receded, creating conditions conducive to raising issues that do not gather votes, his motivation and goal seemed to be public support which could be realized in the long term, unlike support that comes from responding to the public and is realized in the short term. Given the nature of Obama’s decisions and actions, it can be assumed that he considered them in relation to the implications they had for future public support and securing historic reputation (Cohen 1999).

Second, Obama faced low job performance ratings and recorded low confidence in the government's ability to handle international issues. While some research shows that low job ratings encourage presidents to respond to public demand (Stimson et al. 1995), other studies demonstrate that public opinion has little impact on presidential foreign policy activity and no impact on the use of force (Brace & Hinckley 1992). This analysis tends towards the latter view, considering that Obama announced decisions to take action against ISIL in Iraq and Syria and to increase US presence in Iraq against the then public sentiment. As Gallup polls show, there was no major shifts in opinion reported after the delivery of the speech. Satisfaction with the president's job performance was within 42 percent in August to 41 percent in September and October, approval of the president's handling of foreign affairs was within 36 percent in August to 31 percent in November, and support for the president's dealing with terrorism was within 42 percent in August 2014 to 41 percent in August 2015. Were the speech a direct response to the president's low poll ratings regarding his job performance, handling of foreign affairs, and/or dealing with terrorism and was designed to increase his popularity, it would stir a change in opinion towards an increase in public support for the proposed policies. Relatively stable approval ratings, however, run counter to the view that the president was more interested in popularity than actual leadership and support the assumption that the address was that of a leader, taking initiative, rather than of a follower, seeking approval.

Past research shows that foreign policy is a policy area with which citizens are less familiar, in which they expect presidential initiative, and for which they place responsibility on the president (Erikson et al. 1991). It is an area in which presidents have been most able to restructure public opinion (Cohen 1999). Moreover, foreign policy events create conditions that encourage presidents to demonstrate themselves as strong leaders and to persuade the public to follow them (Welch 2003b). International situations that threaten the mass public alongside matters that engage the public's interests and affect its well-being increase receptivity to presidential decisions and actions (Ostrom & Simon 1989; Edelman 1964, 1974). This research suggests that the ISIL video executions should have triggered the president's increased attention and affected his agenda. The assumption made in this article is that the ISIL beheadings worked as a focusing event, defined by Birkland (1997: 22) as a "sudden, relatively rare" event, which "can be reasonably defined as harmful or revealing the possibility of potentially greater future harms, inflicts harms or suggests potential harms that are or could be concentrated on a definable

geographical area or community of interest, and is known to policy makers and the public virtually simultaneously.” The ISIL beheadings had these characteristics because they were rare and unexpected. They manifested harm and showed potential for greater future harm. They were revealed to the public and policy makers at the same time. The proposition is that the beheadings provided the reinforcement for the announcement of a broad US campaign against ISIL targets.

The impact of rare and sudden events on individual attitudes and institutional behaviors has been studied by many social scientists. Cob and Elder (1983: 83) examined “circumstantial reactors” to see how issues are created. Kingdon (1984: 99) used the term “focusing events” to describe events which attract the attention of the public and bring about policy change. Stone (1989: 282) analyzed how “causal ideas” transform difficulties into political problems. Baumgartner and Jones (1993: 10) referred to “external force” to explain increased attention to a problem and change. Also, Sabatier and Weible (2007: 198-199) considered “external shocks” to be responsible for shifts in public attention and agendas. Birkland (1997: 29-35) identifies two kinds of reactions: extensive media coverage about the event and long-term policy reaction. Three elements determine media coverage: the scope of the event, the type of harm, and the rarity of the event. The long-term policy reaction is shaped by the scope and rarity of the event as well as by the amount of news coverage and the extent to which group attitudes and group mobilization influence attention to the problem. The present discussion focuses only on the first cycle of reaction. As Birkland (1997: 30-32) explains, news media have a greater ability to shape public attitudes. They affect people beyond those directly involved, have the capacity to manifest the harm inflicted by the event, and exploit the drama and symbolism that a given event can create.

A content analysis of media coverage indicates extensive reporting of the beheadings. The videos, which were initially uploaded to YouTube and Twitter, were widely circulated over other social media, including Facebook and Instagram. Breaking news about the executions appeared on all major television networks, including ABC News, CBS News, CNN, Fox News, and NBC. Top US newspapers, including *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, offered extensive coverage of the events. As an 11 September 2014 poll conducted by the NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* (Wemple 2014) revealed, ISIL beheadings got the highest penetration of any news event since 2009. 94 percent of Americans reported having seen or heard the news about the killings. In polls taken in September through November 2014, Gallup



(Jones & Newport 2014) found that 50 percent of Americans described ISIL as a critical threat to US interest, with an additional 31 percent saying ISIL was an important threat. 60 percent of Americans approved US military actions in Iraq and Syria and 40 percent supported sending US ground troops to the region. The polls (McCarthy 2014; Riffkin 2014a; 2014b) also found that mention of foreign policy issues as the most important problems facing the US fell from six percentage points to three percentage points and mention of terrorism fell from four percentage points to three percentage points, but mention of the situation in Iraq/ISIS continued to rise by another two percentage points to five percentage points.

### *Conclusion*

This article has explored President Obama's management of public opinion on his policy towards ISIL in the context of the president's approach to foreign policy and with particular reference to the videos showing the execution of two US journalists. It has argued that Obama took a position and led opinion on the US stand against ISIL, that he did not follow the public but created the appearance of responsiveness, and adapted the public's expectations and concerns to pursued policies. Using Cohen's study of the content of presidential sentences, the article has found that the president managed the public using predominantly substantive rhetoric. The substantiveness of the speech almost entirely accounted for presidential attention to policy discussion and policy action. External events have been found to trigger the president's increased attention and agenda setting. The content analyses of media coverage and polls suggest that the execution videos have created cause, determined public concern, and afforded the president an opportunity to follow his policy course. They have sustained the public fear of ISIL and support for US military actions in Iraq and Syria and have reinforced the president's commitment to announce comprehensive US counterterrorism policy, thus increasing US military involvement in the region. The findings of this investigation support those of earlier studies, in that presidents lead opinion on substantive policy issue, conduct and perform public policy in relation to the implications they have for public support in the long term, and take positions on issues which accommodate both their foreign policy objectives and public concerns. They provide an enhanced understanding of how Obama managed public opinion in his second-term when he was free of political constraints: he did not have to stand for reelection and could focus on actions that defined the legacy of his administration. Although the findings have been based on a single

case study and on limited qualitative and quantitative data, they still contribute evidence that suggests that second-term presidents face different incentives than polls and ratings regarding public opinion management. The results of this study also support the idea that external events affect public opinion and policy course through the media which have the potential to reflect and exploit the drama that tragic events create. They provide additional evidence with respect to the role tragic events play in promoting policy change and creating opportunities for new policy outcomes. An issue that was not addressed in this study concerned the long-term policy reaction. As Birkland (1997: 30) states, “the greater amount of activity in the two phases usually occur during a two-year post-event period.” While “the news media, because of news-gathering norms and imperatives, concentrate on immediate, sudden events and devote considerable attention to them for a very short time before turning to the next important news event,” institutions are “constrained by their rules, procedures, and folkways, and often cannot react as rapidly as the news media.” Following from this, questions about the effects of the policy were not addressed. A longer-term perspective is needed to explain and understand the many push and pull forces that impel institutions to act upon a problem.

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