Moments of Truth

By Mel Lavine

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It probably will not be compared to moments when Lyndon Johnson suffered a “credibility gap” between promise and performance in the Vietnam War. Or when Richard Nixon denied any wrongdoing in Watergate. Nor was it anything like the outrage and frustration that contributed to Jimmy Carter’s defeat in 1980 when 52 Americans were held captive for more than a year in Iran.

But for Barack Obama it was a critical moment in his presidency when he made his case to wage a limited war in partnership with allies against Muammar el-Quaddafi, the Libyan dictator. Before his nationally televised address Obama‘s critics complained for more than a week that he’d not explained the plan and goal of the war. The move was all the more surprising since Obama ran for president and in part won election because of his outspoken opposition to the invasion of Iraq eight years ago.

(The morning after the speech, after praising Obama for delivering “a clear, compelling rationale for his decision to use military force to prevent mass slaughter in Libya,” the San Francisco Chronicle nonetheless noted “this mission retains an unsettlingly open-ended feel.”)

In his address the president ruled out overthrowing Qaddafi by force, but defended the air strikes on Qaddafi’s military and artillery to prevent atrocities in the rebel city of Benghazi. “I refused to wait for the images of slaughter and mass graves before taking action,” he said. In other words, sometimes a man has to go with his gut feelings. Given Qaddafi’s well-deserved image as one of the world’s Most Wanted, Obama may be given the benefit of the doubt.

Before the president spoke, he faced skeptics of all political stripes. Richard Haass, who worked in both Bush administrations and is now president of the Council on Foreign Relations, was quoted in the New York Times as saying, “It should not be assumed that a massacre or genocide was about to happen.” Qaddafi, he said, may have been seeking merely to intimidate potential foes. Nor is it clear that the Libyan rebels are more kindhearted and democratic and pro-American.

While Obama was speaking I was reminded of the years when I lived in New York and presidents Johnson, Nixon and Carter had their moments of truth. A neighbor and I used to compare notes. As I remember, in all three cases the presidents failed to measure up. But with Monday night’s forceful presentation Obama succeeded, at least in the short run. He bought himself time.

But he implied (as his secretary of defense had said outright) that Libya was not a vital interest of the United States. For starters, I submit, what is in our vital interest is the protection of ordinary Americans from being dispossessed by big business and Wall Street.

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