

FRAMING THE WAR AGAINST TERRORISM

US Newspaper Editorials and Military Action in Afghanistan

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Abstract / Editorial writers for the US' 10 largest newspapers created – during perhaps the most critical month in the war against terrorism – a singular symbolic narrative about possible military strikes in that 'new kind of war'. The period of study is 12 September 2001, the day following the terrorist attacks, to 8 October, the day the bombing of Kabul began. It was during this critical period that the US decided to use military strikes as part of its response. Editorial writers drew selectively on historical references, government sources and contextual statements in similar ways to frame the tragedy and the potential US response to it. No editorial suggested that military intervention would be inappropriate and none stated that military intervention would not ultimately succeed, although some urged caution.

Keywords / editorials / framing / media / terrorism / war

Americans struggled after 11 September 2001 to recapture or to create universal meanings within a symbolic system in which many traditional meanings and constants were shattered. Some codes (language) that Americans used before the attacks to help them to cope with and to understand (or to *frame*) reality did not serve them well after the attacks, partly because words are useful only to the extent that their meanings are relatively stable and widely accepted (de Saussure, 1983). After the attacks, Americans were no longer sure about the meaning of such codes (words) as 'safety', 'security', 'terrorism', 'peace', 'progress', 'war' and 'American'.

Political and religious leaders, citizens and the media seek during crises to create narratives, or stories, that explain and assign meaning to events or issues. Language is integral to the construction of social realities (Lind and Salo, 2002), for language is the foundation for the symbolic narratives that help individuals, groups and institutions comprehend and maintain the social order – and to restore balance (certainty) when the system falters. A television message that creates, attacks or supports a narrative, for example, 'takes the raw events of our world and places them in a unifying context, a translation that renders them comprehensible and safe to readers or viewers' (Koch, 1990: 23).

Frames and Narratives

The frames on which narratives are based are critical to the stories' ultimate acceptance or rejection. Framing means organizing strips of reality – which are

part of a constant flow of events, groups and individuals – in ways that help us understand the world (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974; Kuypers et al., 2001; Rachlin, 1988; Scheufele, 1999; Schutz, 1962). Frames ‘turn nonrecognizable happenings or amorphous talk into a discernible event. Without the frame, they would be . . . incomprehensible sounds’ (Tuchman, 1978: 192). A frame is important to story creation because, ‘Facts . . . take on their meaning by being embedded in a frame or story line that organizes them and gives them coherence, selecting certain ones to emphasize while ignoring others’ (Gamson, 1989: 157).

Human beings fit new bits of reality into frameworks that make sense to them. Personal prejudices, past experiences, religious feelings, values, educations – and those of the individuals who help us construct our frames – all contribute to the framing of social reality.

The Bush administration made a smart *political* decision in framing as ‘war’ the terrorist attacks and the American response to them, but the resulting ‘war’ narrative, which included military strikes, was not inevitable. The US, for example, framed as ‘criminal investigations’ the bombings of the World Trade Center (1993), Pan Am 103 (1988), the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania (1998) and the Alfred P. Murrah building (1995). Police agencies around the world cooperated to bring the culprits to justice, with some success.

Framing a terrorist attack as an act of war is always risky, for that is almost certainly what terrorists want. ‘The failure of terrorists to incite repressive countermeasures . . . makes terrorism an impotent means of attaining long-term objectives’ (Dowling, 1986: 12). Framing the US response to the September 11 attacks was particularly risky because war was not declared by Congress against a sovereign nation that: (1) had attacked the US or an ally first, and (2) declared war against the US. Even the administration found it difficult to cast the US response as ‘war’, so it changed the language to create a new frame: it became a ‘new kind of war’.

Other national leaders frame events in ways that help them achieve their political and ideological objectives. A study of the war in Kosovo, for example, suggested that ‘Serbian media have nationalised, mobilised and emotionalised the public sphere by the use of techniques of so called “patriotic journalism” and by making historical myths a topical subject’ (Hrvatín and Trampuz, 2000: 77).

Terrorists also frame their actions in the most favorable ways and they try to influence media and government frames. Terrorists depend on the media and government leaders to emphasize the spectacle of violence and the feelings of foreboding they elicit; to report the violence constantly (Lule, 2002); and to treat their grievances and demands seriously (Dowling, 1986). When the media and others refuse to create such frames, terrorists lose a great deal. In short, ‘Terrorists engage in recurrent rhetorical forms that force the media to provide the access without which terrorism could not fulfill its objectives’ (Bell, 1978: 50).

Those who frame issues must diagnose, evaluate and prescribe (Gamson, 1992).

'Frames, then, *define* problems – determine what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits, usually measured in terms of common cultural values; *diagnose causes* – identify the forces creating the problem; *make moral judgments* – evaluate causal agents and their effects; and *suggest remedies* – offer and justify treatments for the problems and predict their likely effects'. (Entman, 1993: 52; emphasis in original)

Each of us is engaged in this process as we develop the *individual frames* that help us understand the world (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999). The media also create frames, which are reflected in their symbolic narratives (Edelman, 1993; Lind and Salo, 2002). *Media frames* help individuals create *personal frames* as they provide pertinent bits of information, or news. They often create or stress the central ideas that assign meaning to events and they help determine which events are salient, thus 'making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences. An increase in salience enhances the probability that receivers will perceive the information, discern meaning and thus process it, and store it in memory' (Entman, 1993: 53).

The bits of information that are not emphasized may be as important as those that are, and the consequences may be great when information is excluded. In his study of media coverage of the Gulf War, for instance, Entman reports that unpublicized views, or bits of information, 'could gain few adherents and generate little perceived or actual effect on public opinion, which meant elites felt no pressure to expand the frame so it included other treatments of Iraqi aggression, such as negotiation' (Entman, 1993: 55).

Individuals and institutions often engage in fierce political battles to influence media frames because 'the way issues are presented in the mass media has a significant impact on audience awareness and understanding of public problems and concerns' (Husselbee and Elliott, 2002: 835). In fact, 'The media ought to be seen as a site on which various social groups, institutions, and ideologies struggle over the definition and construction of social reality' (Gurevitch and Levy, 1985: 19). Thussu (2002: 203) argues, for example, that US broadcast media, with their global reach and their tendency to portray military actions as 'humanitarian interventions', can shape views of war.

Considerable research suggests that officials and professionals have an advantage in this struggle because the media often privilege their symbolic narratives, in part because journalists so frequently use them as sources. 'In the end, journalists thus function as a tool of legitimization for professionals and officials who are the media's attributive source and, through that affirmation, the whole enforces social rules' (Koch, 1990: 110).

Research Context and Questions

Editorial writers frame personalities, events and issues in the same ways that reporters and editors do, although they may feel largely free of the constraints of objective journalism (Ryan, 2001). This perceived freedom allows them greater latitude in framing their editorials, which may be more compelling since competing or contradictory symbolic narratives presumably need not be presented – unless the editorial writers choose to attack those stories.

This research focuses on the official positions, as reflected in their editorials, of the nation's 10 largest newspapers in the days between the terrorist attacks and the beginning of the air war against Afghanistan. The study does not focus on letters to editors or other commentary, but even a cursory examination suggests the 10 largest newspapers published at least a wide range of opinion, if they did not give equal space to divergent views.

The *Houston Chronicle*, for example, published a column by Robert Jensen that argued the terrorist acts were no more despicable than some US government acts ('US Just as Guilty of Committing Own Violent Acts', 14 September 2001: A-33). The *New York Daily News* published a column by Zev Chafets that demanded an invasion of Iran, Iraq and other Arab nations ('It's Really War Against the Islamic Axis', 17 September 2001: 18).

The focus here, however, is on each newspaper's *official* view, and on how writers framed statements or codes in their editorials. One overarching question centers on a possible war narrative:

Research question 1: Do the newspapers present symbolic narratives in support of or opposition to a potential war in which military intervention is proposed, and, if so, do they assume positive, neutral or negative outcomes of a potential war?

A second question explores the role of sources in creating or countering any narratives about possible military strikes in the war against terrorism:

Research question 2: To what extent do editorial writers cite, support, question or oppose sources, official or unofficial, in the war against terrorism?

A third question explores the nature of a 'permissible' war against terrorism (e.g. who is the enemy, who may be at risk and what are the components of a potential war?). A war in which civilians are killed may not be consistent with a symbolic narrative created to support a war:

Research question 3: What are the 'acceptable' components of a war against terrorism, and who is the enemy?

Method

The 10 largest newspapers were *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *New York Daily News*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Newsday*, *Houston Chronicle* and *The Dallas Morning News* (*Editor and Publisher International Year Book*, 2000). The editorial page of each issue was searched for editorials about the war against terrorism. The criteria were that (1) the editorial mention possible military strikes in the war and (2) the editorial indicate support for, opposition to or neutrality toward military strikes. Editorials had to mention 'military strikes' or 'intervention' or 'bombing' or 'armed forces' to be included.

The items listed on the coding instrument were identified in prior research and through analyses of newspapers that were not part of this study. Most words and phrases needed no definition (e.g. 'the enemy', 'you're with us or with the terrorists', 'terrorists'), although some terms did need definition.

'Assumes war' meant an editorial specifically suggested that military intervention was possible or likely, but did not necessarily take a position. 'Assumes

war will stop some terrorism' meant the editorial said the war against terrorism (including military strikes) would stop some terrorism or did not question the possible impact of strikes. 'Assumes justification' meant writers did not give a reason why military intervention was justified; they assumed everyone knew and accepted the reason why. An individual cited in an editorial did not need to be named, but the identity had to be obvious (e.g. the US secretary of state, the leader of Pakistan).

The time period was 12 September 2001, the day after the terrorist attacks in New York City, Pennsylvania and Washington, DC, through 8 October 2001, the day the bombings of Afghanistan began. Two coders searched each editorial for the phrases reported in Figure 1. An 'other' category was included for some variables (i.e. mentions of prior wars and leaders, descriptors of President Bush, mentions of other officials and the list of states that sponsor or allow terrorism). The 'other' responses were not included in the computation of the inter-coder reliability figure, which was 97.6 percent.

The data were subdivided into three periods: 12–20 September, 21–29 September and 30 September–8 October, as shown in Figure 1. The significance of these dates is as follows: 12 September was the day following the terrorist attacks; 21 September was the day President Bush outlined more completely than previously his plan for the war against terrorism. It was during this period that he warned the Taliban to 'turn over' leaders of al-Qaida, seriously discussed details of an international coalition, suggested that countries needed to be 'with the United States or with the terrorists', suggested that states would not be allowed to shelter terrorists, pledged the war would succeed and emphasized that the war was not against all Muslims, Afghans and Arabs, while 30 September was the day the Taliban rejected the Bush administration's demand that Afghanistan extradite Osama bin Laden.

Results

Question 1: The short answer is that editorial writers for America's 10 largest newspapers presented a singular narrative that supported military intervention in the war against terrorism, and they assumed positive outcomes. The frame for that narrative was as follows.

Military intervention is inevitable and necessary and it will be an effective deterrent to terrorism, if Americans are patient during a long and difficult campaign. The world, at least as far as the war against terrorism is concerned, is a place of binary signs in which 'good' Arabs, Afghans, Muslims, Americans and 'the allies', led by the righteous George W. Bush and government leaders from throughout the world, line up against the evil Taliban, al-Qaida and assorted terrorists, led by the demon Osama bin Laden.

Neither US soldiers nor innocent Afghans will die in the morally justifiable military strikes against the evil doers, and 'the allies' will liberate the good Afghans, as well as feed and medicate them, as 'the allies' have done previously for other oppressed peoples. Americans know the right thing to do because they have learned from the past, in which the US responded badly to most terrorist

FIGURE 1**Statements about Potential Military Intervention**

Category	12–20 Sept.	21–29 Sept.	30 Sept.– 8 Oct.	Total
Views of military intervention				
• Assumes military intervention	42	33	29	104
Counsels patience	10	10	10	30
Assumes intervention will stop terrorism	5	5	5	15
Suggests caution	7	4	1	12
Refutes alternatives to military intervention	1	1	0	2
Suggests urgency of action	1	0	1	2
Counsels sacrifice	3	2	2	7
Opposes military intervention	0	0	0	0
Suggests alternatives to military intervention	0	0	0	0
• Must accept US casualties	5	3	1	9
• Disadvantages of military intervention				
Destabilize Pakistan	3	2	1	6
Could elicit more terrorist strikes	1	0	3	4
Strengthen terrorists	1	3	0	4
Create more refugees	0	2	1	3
Create new wave of anti-Americanism	1	2	0	3
Destabilize moderate or Islamic states	2	0	0	2
• Innocent Afghans could be hurt or killed				
Avoid harm to the extent possible	0	3	6	9
Harm may be necessary	1	1	5	7
Mentioned	0	1	0	1
Must not harm innocents	0	1	0	1
• Nature of the military intervention				
Long	12	14	13	39
Difficult, large, painful, complex	7	6	5	18
US won't know when it's won	4	3	4	11
• Objectives				
Eliminate terrorism	42	32	28	102
Make governments stop sheltering terrorists	21	10	10	41
'Get' Osama bin Laden	7	10	10	27
Depose Taliban	1	4	9	14
Not retaliation, vengeance	2	2	4	8
Retaliation, vengeance	4	0	3	7
Depose Saddam Hussein	2	1	0	3
Return US to pre-attacks calm	2	1	0	3
• Justification for military intervention				
Assumed	31	25	20	76
Terrorists attacked US civilians	3	2	5	10
Terrorists declared war	7	1	1	9
Legitimate act of self-defense	1	3	3	7

FIGURE 1

Continued

Category	12-20 Sept.	21-29 Sept.	30 Sept.- 8 Oct.	Total
Historical references				
• Mentions prior terrorist acts against				
Kenyan, Tanzanian embassies	7	2	2	11
USS Cole	4	2	1	7
Khobar Towers	3	2	1	6
World Trade Center	2	1	1	4
Oklahoma City	2	0	0	2
• Cites success of responses to prior terrorist acts	1	1	0	2
• Cites failure of responses to prior terrorist acts	15	3	3	21
• Mentions prior wars				
Gulf War	14	10	4	28
Cold War	14	6	5	25
Second World War	3	7	3	13
Pearl Harbor	11	2	0	13
Kosovo/Balkans	4	5	2	11
First World War	5	3	2	10
Vietnam War	2	4	2	8
Civil War	1	0	2	3
Revolutionary War	3	0	0	3
Korea	0	1	2	3
• Mentions leaders of prior wars				
George H.W. Bush	7	4	1	12
Franklin Roosevelt	2	3	0	5
Adolf Hitler	0	3	1	4
Winston Churchill	1	1	0	2
Woodrow Wilson	0	2	0	2
Sources cited				
• President Bush				
Right	19	19	20	58
Cited	12	6	5	23
Urged to be cautious	8	8	4	20
Positive descriptors used				
Wise	0	2	4	6
Decisive	0	3	1	4
Forceful	0	3	1	4
Deliberate	0	1	2	3
Strong	0	3	0	3

Continued

FIGURE 1**Continued**

Category	12-20 Sept.	21-29 Sept.	30 Sept.- 8 Oct.	Total
Sources cited				
Positive descriptors used (<i>continued</i>)				
Tough	0	3	0	3
Comforting	0	2	0	2
Determined	0	2	0	2
Eloquent	1	1	0	2
Patient	0	1	1	2
Purposeful	0	2	0	2
Negative descriptors				
Finally joining international community	2	2	0	4
• Secretary of State Colin Powell				
Right	6	1	2	9
Mentioned	4	1	1	6
• Other US government officials				
Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld	1	2	6	9
President Bill Clinton	4	2	1	7
President Ronald Reagan	2	3	1	6
President John F. Kennedy	1	2	-	3
Deputy Secretary of Defense Wolfowitz	1	2	-	3
Mayor Rudy Giuliani	-	1	1	2
Homeland Security Chief Tom Ridge	-	2	-	2
Vice President Cheney	1	1	-	2
• European government officials				
British Prime Minister Tony Blair	2	2	7	11
British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain	1	1	-	2
French President Jacques Chirac	2	-	-	2
NATO Sec. Gen. Lord Robertson	-	-	2	2
• Middle Eastern Leaders				
Saddam Hussein	5	7	1	13
Yasser Arafat	4	2	-	6
Parvez Musharref, Pakistan	2	1	2	5
Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon	2	2	1	5
Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres	2	1	-	3
• Saudi royals	-	5	-	5
• Other world leaders				
Russian President Vladimir Putin	-	2	-	2
Indonesian President M. Sukarnoputri	2	-	-	2
• Alleged terrorists	5	3	1	9
• Scholars, journalists	4	2	2	8
• Religious people	-	-	3	3

FIGURE 1

Continued

Category	12-20 Sept.	21-29 Sept.	30 Sept.- 8 Oct.	Total
Components of war				
• War against terrorism must include				
Military intervention	40	31	28	99
Use indigenous ground troops	2	2	5	9
Use American, coalition troops	2	2	0	4
Coalition building	30	22	21	73
Deal cautiously with Arab states	6	7	3	16
Mentions Northern Alliance	1	2	3	6
Some allies are unsavory	1	3	2	6
Diplomacy	11	13	11	35
Intelligence, covert activity	14	12	7	33
Humanitarian aid	1	6	12	19
Banks, finance, computer trails	2	9	5	16
Economic sanctions	6	7	3	16
Evidence of complicity	5	6	4	15
Law enforcement	5	5	3	13
Protection of US civil liberties	11	1	0	12
Moves to eliminate conditions, policies that				
breed terrorism	3	1	2	6
Battle for hearts and minds	0	2	3	5
Nation building	0	1	2	3
Spread US values, ideals abroad	0	2	1	3
• The enemy is <i>not</i>				
Muslims	5	9	12	26
The Afghan people	1	3	9	13
Arabs	3	5	0	8
• The enemy <i>is</i>				
Terrorism	39	33	28	100
Osama bin Laden	10	20	20	50
Osama bin Laden is prime suspect	14	9	1	24
Al-Qaida	0	10	14	24
States that sponsor or allow terrorism	23	9	11	43
Iraq	7	4	4	15
Syria	6	1	2	9
Sudan	4	2	2	8
Iran	6	0	1	7
Libya	3	0	1	4
North Korea	3	0	1	4
Yemen	1	1	0	2
Algeria	1	1	0	2
Egypt	1	1	0	2

Continued

FIGURE 1**Continued**

Category	12-20 Sept.	21-29 Sept.	30 Sept.- 8 Oct.	Total
• The enemy <i>is</i> (<i>continued</i>)				
The Taliban				
They are the enemy	7	9	20	36
They harbor the terrorists	9	7	10	26
They support the terrorists	1	1	2	4
Repressive regime	1	1	2	4
Merely mentioned	3	4	2	9
They are warned	2	9	1	12

Note: Some writers mentioned more than one theme (e.g. alternatives to war), and the different themes were coded. However, the same theme (President Bush is decisive) was coded only one time, even if he was described more than once (in the same editorial) as decisive.

acts (not this time) but won most wars. Americans will not have to sacrifice their own liberties in a war against terrorism.

Much is left out of this frame, which theory suggests is not uncommon. None of the 104 editorials, for instance, argued against or suggested alternatives to military intervention, as shown in Figure 1, although two did *refute* arguments against a military response. Twelve editorials counseled caution, but few detailed potential risks of military intervention.

Ninety-five editorials did not mention potential casualties among Afghan civilians. The nine editorials that did address the issue were published primarily in the third time period, when military strikes were imminent. The editorials said any civilian casualties must be minimized, but the intent was not always clear. *Newsday* wrote, for example, that ‘To be effective, the war against terrorism will have to carefully target the real culprits and not punish thousands of innocent people in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the Mideast’ (‘Aiming at Assets: The US Is Pursuing a Sophisticated, Nuanced Type of Retaliation Against Terrorist Attacks’, 25 September 2001: A-36).

The *Houston Chronicle* found a unique (to this group) way around the problem when it said, ‘For the majority of Afghanistan’s people, attacks against and destabilization of the Taliban rulers can only lead to improved living conditions’ (‘At War: Battle Against Terrorism Is Now Fully Joined’, 25 September 2001: A-26). This implies no Afghans would be hurt, of course, and it suggests that military strikes would be good for Afghan civilians.

Ten editorials asserted that military strikes could create more refugees, strengthen terrorists or create a new wave of anti-Americanism, while six said strikes could destabilize Pakistan. The concern about strengthening terrorists was highest during the third time period, when the Bush administration was warning against new terrorist strikes.

Patience, Sacrifice

Thirty editorials recommended patience and seven called for sacrifice in the war against terrorism. Thirty-nine editorials said the war would be long and 18 said it would be difficult, complex, large or painful. Most editorials were vague about the objectives of the military strikes; 102 said they should be used to eliminate terrorism; 27 suggested they should be used to ‘get’ Osama bin Laden; and 14 argued the Taliban should be deposed, as shown in Figure 1.

Most of the 27 demands to ‘get’ Osama bin Laden came in the second and third time periods, after evidence allegedly linked him to the terrorist attacks. Similarly, most of the 14 demands to depose the Taliban came in the third period, after the Taliban had rejected Mr Bush’s demand to ‘turn over’ Osama bin Laden. The Taliban and Mr bin Laden were essentially outside the frame in period one.

Forty-one editorials said (primarily in the first time period) an objective should be to make governments stop sheltering terrorists. Editorials mentioned that objective less frequently after it was clear the administration would need at least some of those countries to contribute to the war against terrorism. Three editorials said one objective should be to eliminate Saddam Hussein. *The Washington Post* said, for example: ‘It is impossible to imagine the United States “winning” this war in any meaningful sense while Saddam Hussein remains in power in Iraq’ (‘Afghanistan’, 15 September 2001: A-26).

The justification for military strikes was assumed by 76 editorials, while 10 noted the terrorists attacked US civilians; nine said they declared war; and seven said strikes would be legitimate acts of self-defense. The *New York Daily News* stated another justification when it said: ‘Make no mistake. The enemy will use all means to obtain those weapons [of mass destruction] and will use those weapons against us. Unless we destroy the enemy first’ (‘Total Barbarism Demands Total War,’ 15 September 2001: 40).

Most editorial writers tried to establish historical foundations for their frames by citing prior wars. For example, 15 prior wars were cited, nine of which are listed in Figure 1, to remind readers of prior success (e.g. in the Second World War) or to remind them of prior failure (e.g. the Vietnam War). Three editorials cited the Civil War, Korea and the American Revolution; two cited the wars in Somalia and Grenada, and the War of 1812; and one cited wars in Tripoli and Panama, and the Texas Revolution.

Virtually all wars were used to illustrate the triumph of US military might, although there were a few exceptions. *The New York Times* noted, for instance, that ‘The country has not forgotten the lessons they learned in Vietnam about the limits of a superpower’s ability to wage war against guerrilla troops in distant lands’ (‘Mr. Bush’s Most Important Speech’, 21 September 2001: A-34).

Eight previous attacks against US targets were mentioned, five of which are listed in Figure 1. Three editorials reminded readers of a successful US response (e.g. to the 1998 bombings of the embassies in Kenya and Tanzania), and 21 reminded them of an unsuccessful response (e.g. to the 2000 attack against the USS Cole). Most endorsed *Newsday*’s sentiment:

The only way to prevent such carnage is to root out terrorist organizations that could plan and execute it. Anything else would just be the kind of ineffective, half-hearted, stop-start operations US security forces have undertaken for the past two decades with abysmal results. ('The War Against Terrorism: US Must Push for Global Alliance Against Terrorism', 16 September 2001: B-1)

Editorials did not always interpret events in the same ways. For example, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* said the Gulf War was a success, but *The Wall Street Journal* said it was not. 'George H.W. Bush stopped American tanks in the desert, leaving Saddam to pursue his evil designs in Baghdad. Little wonder that the fanatics conclude that America can be intimidated by a terrorist spectacle' ('A Terrorist Pearl Harbor', 12 September 2001: A-18).

In both cases, the Gulf War was used to create a war frame. On the one hand, writers argued that the US must not lose its nerve, as it did in the Gulf War. On the other, writers said the US must achieve victory in the war against terrorism, as it did in the Gulf War. The facts are interpreted, or bent, to fit the frame.

Clearly, most mentions of prior wars and terrorist attacks appeared in editorials published during the first time period, as shown in Figure 1. The numbers of mentions dropped off dramatically in the third time period, when editorials focused more directly on building support for the imminent military strikes.

Official Sources

Question 2: Editorial writers relied heavily on official government sources as they constructed their frames. Ninety individuals, some of whom are cited in Figure 1, were named in the 104 editorials. Sixty-six of all persons mentioned were government leaders, some elected and some not, and virtually all expressed support for military strikes. Thirty-two of the 66 individuals served at one time in the US government; 18 served in Middle Eastern governments; nine served in European governments; and eight served in other governments. A negligible number of leaders (e.g. Saddam Hussein, Moammar Gadhafi, Slobodan Milosovic) were viewed with disfavor. Nine alleged and convicted terrorists, eight scholars and journalists and three religious leaders were mentioned, each by only one editorial.

President Bush was mentioned in 81 editorials. No editorial suggested he was wrong about an aspect of the war against terrorism; 31 said he was right in his approach and decisions; and 23 tacitly endorsed his views by citing them without comment. Editorials applied 34 positive descriptors (e.g. able, bold) to the president, although only six were used more than twice.

Almost all of the positive descriptors were applied to Mr Bush in periods two and three, following his speech on 20 September, a speech that essentially all editorials applauded. The editorial writers shared *Newsday's* view of the speech:

For Bush, who has often had trouble articulating his thoughts, this was a rousing, clear and confident address. He was poised and assured. It will, no doubt, go a long way to defining

his persona as president: tough and determined. (*The Right Words: Bush Rouses the Public and the World to Settle in for a Long, Fierce Fight Against Terrorism*, 21 September 2001: A-52)

The editorial writers did not seriously challenge Mr Bush. Sixteen editorials applied negative descriptors (e.g. inconsistent, overly bellicose) to the president, but only one was applied more than once, and essentially all the rest were described as unimportant. Twenty editorials were mildly critical when they urged that he be cautious, and only four seriously criticized Mr Bush – for his *earlier* foreign policy initiatives. Negative information bits clearly were outside the media frame.

The potential for casualties makes the framing of the military strikes critical. If the US is not at ‘war’, and if the world does not accept this narrative, then the killing of innocents might be seen as ‘murder’, or as ‘terrorist acts’. No writer questioned this narrative. Indeed, 17 writers – and Mr Bush – tried to add legitimacy to the ‘war’ frame by asserting this is a ‘new kind of war’; nine called the terrorist attacks acts of war.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was mentioned nine times, essentially without evaluation or comment, and Secretary of State Colin Powell, mentioned 15 times, was described positively in six editorials. Two editorials said he was wrong in some of his Gulf War policies, but supported him anyway, and two said he was wrong about the war against terrorism. Tony Blair, favorably mentioned 11 times, was viewed as ‘eloquent’ and ‘strong’. Blair was cited primarily to legitimize the evidence implicating Osama bin Laden in the terrorist attacks, evidence that was not made widely available.

The only unofficial voice cited more than twice was that of Osama bin Laden, who tried to frame on 24 September an alternative narrative – that ‘the allies’ were attacking all of Islam and all of the Arabic world – but that story was stillborn, at least among the 10 newspapers studied here. While five writers did report his view, they ridiculed it and asserted the war was not against ‘good’ Arabs and Muslims, which the *Chicago Tribune* said is the ‘vast, vast majority’, but against the bad ones – like Mr bin Laden.

The writers did not cite sources who would contest the official views, so they virtually ignored some reasons behind the attacks. Only five suggested that US foreign policy might be culpable – either because it treated terrorists too gingerly or because it ignored real grievances in the Arab world.

Nature of War

Question 3: Editorial writers clearly created a ‘war’ frame, but some actions were seen as ‘acceptable’ and some were not. Seventy-three editorials, for instance, suggested coalition building, and 16 urged caution in dealing with some Arab states. Four recommended using US or allied ground troops and 11 recommended using indigenous troops.

The editorials called for a multifaceted war against terrorism. Thirty-three called for better intelligence; 35 recommended increased diplomatic efforts; 19 endorsed humanitarian aid; 16 recommended bank and financial sanctions; 16

called for economic sanctions; 15 demanded evidence of complicity; and 13 argued for better use of law enforcement capabilities. *The Wall Street Journal* expressed concern that legal considerations might interfere with the war: 'But if the country is really at war, it must fight by wartime rules. That means killing your enemy without the demands of due process or a permission slip from the World Court' ('Getting Serious', 13 September 2001: A-20).

Twelve agreed with *The New York Times*' 'Week in Review' that US civil liberties must be protected:

To get there, we must be careful to protect the core of our national culture, to remember that we are fighting not for a flag but for a system of beliefs that includes our basic civil liberties and an unyielding tolerance. ('In for the Long Haul', 16 September 2001: 10)

Interestingly, four aspects of the war (i.e. humanitarian aid, nation building, battling for hearts and minds and using indigenous troops) were mentioned more frequently in the third time period than in the first two. This coincides with the recognition that indigenous troops might be used to fight a ground war, and that bombing innocents might be more acceptable if other civilians were seen being helped.

USA Today recommended a risky way to demonstrate good faith when it said:

If Special Forces troops could carve out safe havens near where the refugees are fleeing, US planes could fly in low and deliver the food fully intact. Then troops could help distribute the food – in full view of the Muslim world. Dangerous, yes. But the payoff is the chance to show the world that protecting the fate of the Afghan people is an important component of the war on terrorism. ('Feed Hungry Afghans, Starve Terrorists of Support', 5 October 2001: A-17)

It is important in any war to know who is on which side. The editorial writers used binary terms to draw the lines between 'us' and 'them'. Eighteen asserted that 'you're either with us or with the terrorists', with 10 of those citing Mr Bush.

Further, they tried to parcel out the 'good' Muslims/Afghans/Arabs from the 'bad' ones by asserting that most Muslims/Afghans/Arabs had no real grievances against the US. As shown in Figure 1, 26 writers said Muslims were *not* the enemy, and 13 asserted that the Afghan people were *not* the enemy. *USA Today* used President Bush's visit to an Islamic center to make the point:

... President Bush took time out of his day Monday to meet with Islamic leaders on their sacred ground. At a dramatic mosque 2 miles from the White House, Bush exhorted those who would intimidate and harass American Muslims, saying they 'represent the worst of humankind'. ('Another Kind of War', 18 September 2001: A-23)

Creating Demons

The enemy clearly was terrorism in general and Osama bin Laden in particular. Demonized in 71 editorials, Mr bin Laden was corrupt, murderous, ruthless, cowardly and hated, and Mr Bush was brave and beloved. Terms such as 'patriotic', 'heroic', 'tolerant' and 'generous' were used to describe Americans and

their allies (adding somewhat later the ‘good’ Arabs). Such codes as ‘cowardly’, ‘vicious’, ‘jealous’ and ‘extremist’ were used to describe everyone else.

Mr bin Laden was identified most frequently in the first time period as the ‘prime suspect’ in the terrorist attacks. During the second time period, however, editorial writers decided he was the culprit and then identified him as such. Al-Qaida was mentioned only in the second and third periods.

The Taliban, cited as villains in 59 percent of the editorials, were mentioned far more frequently in the third time period as ‘the enemy’ than they were in the first two, when they were unknown or were pondering Mr Bush’s ultimatum. The *Chicago Tribune* said, for example, the Taliban had ‘imposed Draconian laws on its people. It has not been given to bouts of reason’ (‘All Eyes on Afghanistan’, 17 September 2001: 9–16). The *Houston Chronicle* said, ‘The Taliban never met a civil liberty they did not hate, and Afghans suffer in fearful silence for it’ (‘Misguided: Hate Points bin Laden to Terror Instead of Afghan Aid’, 22 September 2001: A-38).

Writers also encountered difficulty when they endorsed President Bush’s pledge to make governments stop sheltering or sponsoring terrorism. Forty-three editorials approved that goal. But the president was, at the same time, trying to put together an international coalition that would have to include some of the states previously described as terrorist supporters, and whose dominant political and economic ideologies were unlike those of the United States.

Six editorials addressed the issue, but it was difficult to argue one position without undermining the other. The *Chicago Tribune*, for example, noted that ‘President Bush is courting some highly unusual nations for help, including a rogues’ gallery of often-hostile states such as Iran, Sudan and Syria’ (‘Courting State Sponsors of Terrorism’, 6 October 2001: 1–24). The editorial writers essentially ignored the problem. Very few identified the troublesome states or mentioned the quandary. They demonized Osama bin Laden and the Taliban, but they ignored the enemy hiding in other nations.

Conclusions

The codes that comprise a symbolic system seldom are challenged in such a dramatic and violent way as were those of the US on 11 September 2001. Americans were placed under great strain by terrorist attacks that touched every citizen and challenged many previously unassailable beliefs (e.g. that the US is safe from a major terrorist assault).

The horrific scope of the assault elicited a massive effort to re-establish the meanings (codes) that were challenged, and the frames created by the government and the official voices of the nation’s 10 largest newspapers were singular, clear, consistent – and constantly disseminated, which is critical if a story is to have power (Bird and Dardenne, 1988; Nabi, 2003). A singular frame is unusual. Researchers typically can identify several frames, which are reflected in competing and contradictory narratives within a symbolic system. That is not the case here.

Even emotion, which can have an important impact on framing (Nabi, 2003), was evoked in similar ways by these writers. Many, for instance, evoked

the emotion surrounding prior wars. Eleven writers recalled the attack at Pearl Harbor to elicit an emotional response and to suggest how the war against terrorism might be won. This finding is consistent with that of Brennan and Duffy (2003), who studied British and US newspaper coverage of the terrorist attacks.

Frames define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments and suggest remedies (Gamson, 1993). The media and government frames created following the September 11 attacks did these things, but in remarkably narrow ways. The *problem* was that America (not the world) was attacked (Kellner, 2002; Uricchio, 2001); that the *cause* was evil, misguided, religious zealots who had no real goals; the *moral judgment* was that the zealots were immoral and Americans were righteous; and that military strikes were the *remedy*. The causes for the attacks and the alternative remedies, at least in the editorials analyzed here, were not addressed meaningfully. Even the scope of the problem was not well defined, for government and media frame-makers defined the problem exclusively in terms of military retaliation and US interests.

Exercise of Power

The creation of the war narrative clearly was an exercise of power. The symbolic codes were interpreted to suggest the terrorist attacks were acts of war, and the American response must include military intervention. This war frame was not seriously challenged in the 104 editorials. Within the context of these editorials, no alternative interpretations or views were permitted. Kellner (2002), who reports similar results in his study of television coverage of the terrorist attacks, suggests:

In an analysis of the dominant discourses, frames, and representations that informed the media and public debate in the days following the September 11 terrorist attacks, I will show how the mainstream media privileged the 'clash of civilizations' model, established a binary dualism between Islamic terrorism and civilization, and largely circulated war fever and retaliatory feelings and discourses that called for and supported a form of military intervention. (Kellner, 2002: 143)

Editorial writers reflect the official views of their newspapers, and newspapers certainly are free to voice whatever opinions they choose. But the failure to present in their editorials an important, opposing side of a critical issue (e.g. the moral and practical consequences of military strikes) is troubling. To pretend alternatives do not exist, even when those alternatives are enumerated elsewhere on the opinion page, may not serve readers best, even during times of terrible crisis.

One of the intriguing questions here is: whose framework is this, anyway? If one looks only at the 10 newspapers' editorials, one concludes that it is their frame. But the Bush administration (with the help of many world leaders) was framing its own narrative, and that narrative was virtually identical to that of the editorial writers.

Mr Bush successfully framed the world as polar opposites. He seemed to assume from the outset that military intervention would be required; he did not

focus on the disadvantages of military responses or their consequences; he seemed to ignore or discount the possibility of major Afghan casualties. Information that did not support the approved frame was not used.

Some data suggest that the media followed Mr Bush's lead in some instances. For example, the 10 newspapers said little about potential civilian casualties (and the need to accept casualties) until after Mr Bush stressed the point in the second and third periods. Similarly, humanitarian aid and the definition of 'enemy' (i.e. the enemy is *not* Muslims or the Afghan people) were not part of the editorial writers' frames in the first period. The issues were stressed after Mr Bush began to emphasize the point.

Mr bin Laden was identified in period one primarily as the 'prime suspect' in the terrorist attacks; in periods two and three, editorials assumed he was responsible. This change occurred after the administration (primarily through Tony Blair) said the evidence against him was compelling. Finally, 34 editorials named, in period one, the countries that allegedly sponsor or allow terrorism, a number that dropped to only 11 editorials in period three, after Mr Bush announced plans for an international coalition.

Sanitized War

Regardless of whom it 'belonged' to, the narrative framed by the president and the media called for yet another sanitized war, one of those 'gnostic wars, neoplatonist wars of the pure spirit against the corrupt flesh, extropian wars of the Digital against the Meat' (Catmur, 2000: 68). In his analysis of the war in Kosovo as theater, or entertainment, Catmur noted that 'Only for the people whose homes, lives and deaths serve as the raw material for this production have the actions any meaning beyond the Spectacle' (Catmur, 2000: 67).

Wars can be sanitized in part because victims are anonymous or 'undeserving'. The confusion about who was on which side in the war in Afghanistan may have made the victims even more anonymous than might otherwise be the case. Further, the US media have for decades portrayed Arabs as uncivilized, religious zealots, who are ignorant, stupid, brutal, heartless and violent (Shaheen, 2001). These stereotypes may also have been related to the kind of frame created.

Both story-making institutions may have simply reflected the mood of the country, which tolerated little opposition to military strikes. During the period of this study, more than 90 percent of Americans, on average, said they supported military action (Berke and Elder, 2001), and dissent was severely criticized (Martin and Neal, 2001; 'Uniting the World Against Terror: Crazy Talk', *Daily News*, 5 October 2001: editorial, 42). Such consensus is rare in the US; the climate for creating a singular frame is seldom so favorable.

Alternative Frames

Could the editorial writers have framed the potential US response differently? And, importantly, would the American people have permitted it? This is one of many alternative, though not necessarily better, frames.

The terrorists must be investigated, identified and tracked down by international law enforcement agencies, and every nation – whether Arab, American, European, African, Asian – must cooperate or face consequences (e.g. economic sanctions). Evidence against specific individuals must be presented to the World Court and the terrorists and their supporters must be indicted and handed over for trial.

Military strikes are out of the question because it is impossible to target a small number of terrorists who are hidden among large numbers of civilians; because military action would produce more terrorists; because the cycle of violence must be interrupted; and because terrorists ‘win’ if there is a military response.

The world need not be viewed in binary terms. Americans are not innocent and all ‘good’, and Arabs are not all ‘bad’. The US will re-evaluate its foreign policy and the behavior of its corporations and representatives abroad, and review the history of its relations with nations of the Middle East.

This research supports the view that text can be framed ‘in such a way that “preferred” or “dominant” meanings are difficult to resist, and the likelihood of aberrant reading is reduced’ (Knight and Dean, 1982: 146). Clearly, the 10 newspapers’ editorials were framed ‘in ways that limit the scope of possible outcomes while organizing support for the government and reinforcing particular images of polity and society’ (Bennett, 1980: 178).

Official government leaders were cited almost exclusively and unofficial sources either were not cited, or their views were attacked. Editorial writers not only failed to challenge official views, they endorsed and legitimized them. The editorials did ‘promulgate the social myth of a functioning, effective and progressive democracy in which each member is safeguarded by the vigilance of a potent and omniscient bureaucracy’ (Koch, 1990: 175).

The ultimate question, of course, is: did the US news media serve Americans well during the critical period 12 September–8 October 2001? This study suggests the answer is no for those who think the media should explore, analyze, evaluate and publicize alternative strategies and ideas. The editorials of America’s 10 largest newspapers certainly did not do that when they addressed potential US responses in the war against terrorism.

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