

CHAPTER 17

Counterterrorism in the News

IN DECEMBER 2003, FOUR DAYS BEFORE CHRISTMAS, THE BUSH administration raised the terrorism alert status to the second-highest level, “orange,” for “high.” Intelligence suggested that international terrorists planned another attack inside the United States. Appearing in droves on TV news programs, officials in Washington and throughout the country told the public to be both vigilant and calm. The media did not allow Americans to go about their normal lives; they unleashed a reporting frenzy as if an attack was imminent. Standing in airports, on street corners, or near the famous Times Square in New York, network reporters and their brethren from local stations assured their audiences that they would keep them informed of new developments—as if they expected to personally witness the terror attack.

To be sure, the news media should inform the public when government officials issue threat warnings and explain the security concerns of the intelligence community. But intensive coverage of this and previous threat-level alerts seemed designed to scare the hell out of the general public and keep people glued to their TV sets. Research revealed that between October 1, 2001, and December 31, 2004, the three television networks, ABC, CBS, and NBC, aired a total of eighteen news reports on the Bush administration’s decision to raise the nationwide terror alert and fifteen segments on the lowering of the color-coded alarm. In addition, the networks reported three times on raised terror alerts for New York and two times for other cities, while two newscasts mentioned the lowering of regional alerts. True to the media’s tendency to highlight shocking, sensational, disconcerting news, all twenty-three announcements of increases in the national or local terrorism alerts were reported on top of newscasts. Conversely, *ABC News*, *CBS News*, and *NBC News* reported decreases in the threat alert levels far less prominently, airing only 13% of such announcement as lead stories and 87% further down in their particular broadcasts. When the Bush administration raised nationwide terrorism alerts, the networks devoted on average 5 minutes and 20 seconds to such reports; when the national terror alert was lowered, the average news segment lasted only 1 minute and 34 seconds.

In some instances, the de-escalation of the official terrorism threat was not reported at all by one or the other network.¹

Terrorist strikes and threats are always the stuff of massive news coverage, while important information on antiterrorism and preparedness measures seems of little interest to most media organizations. The problem is that broadcasters prefer sound bites and the print media prefer short stories—coverage patterns that are ill-suited to explaining rather complex problems and remedies. Thus, the general threat of catastrophic terrorism, especially the danger of biological and chemical attacks, made the news before 9/11. On the one hand, in exceptional cases these stories were based on investigative work, interviews with experts in the field, and excellent reporting.² But on the other hand, there was little or no media attention paid to information about problems in the areas of prevention and preparedness, as the following examples demonstrate.

In 1999, the U.S. Congress appointed an expert commission to “review the laws, regulations, directives, policies, and practices for preventing and punishing terrorism directed against the United States, assess their effectiveness, and recommend changes.”³ About three months before the kamikaze attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the National Commission on Terrorism wrote in the executive summary of its report,

*Not all terrorists are the same, but the groups most dangerous to the United States share some characteristics not seen 10 or 20 years ago: They operate in the United States as well as abroad. Their funding and logistical networks cross borders, are less dependent on state sponsors, and are harder to disrupt with economic sanctions. They make use of widely available technologies to communicate quickly and securely. Their objectives are more deadly. This changing nature of the terrorist threat raises the stakes in getting American counterterrorist policies and practices right.*⁴

Instead of reporting on the eye-opening document and the deficiencies in America’s anti- and counterterrorist efforts, most news organizations did not deem the commission’s findings newsworthy. According to the LexisNexis archives, of the hundreds of U.S. newspapers across the country, only forty-three items mentioned the commission’s report—many of them reducing it to a few lines. The *Daily News* in New York, for example, devoted just two sentences to the commission report. Of the newspapers that did pay more attention, most focused on some details identified as most likely to cause controversies, namely, the commission’s recommendation to add Greece and Pakistan to the list of countries that were not fully cooperating in the battle against terrorism, to curb terrorist fund-raising in the United States, to monitor foreign students, and to use military forces in the event of a major terrorist attack on the United States. An editorial in the *Omaha World-Herald* suggested that the National Commission on Terrorism had “envisioned a level of evil more pervasive than common sense and experience suggest actually exists.”⁵

This editorial seemed to explain the media’s lack of interest: Most news organizations simply did not buy the premise that international terrorism was a major threat unless there were specific government alerts, as was the case with the Y2K predictions.⁶ Television and radio news organizations showed no interest either. ABC’s *World News Tonight* and CBS’s *Evening News* mentioned criticism of the commission’s recommendations once, as did the four stories aired by CNN. NBC’s *Today Show* and *Meet the Press* devoted more airtime to the report than their competitors. When another blue-ribbon panel, the U.S. Commission on National Security in the

21st Century, released its comprehensive report in early 2001, its terrorism warnings and response proposals received, according to the *Financial Times*, “scant attention.”⁷ While the cochairs of the bipartisan panel, ex-Senators Gary Hart and Warren Rudman, as well as former U.S. Representative Newt Gingrich, a commission member, gave testimony before several congressional committees, most news organizations ignored the report completely. CNN’s *The Point with Greta van Susteren* was the only program on the major TV broadcast and cable networks that reported the commission’s findings at length.⁸

It was only after the events of 9/11 that a few members of the fourth estate recognized the media’s lack of vigilance. In a column titled “The Terrorism Story—and How We Blew It” Richard Cohen wrote, “We [in the media]—and I mean most of us—were asleep.”⁹ He acknowledged that he and his colleagues had clues and should have reported about the terrorist threat and the weaknesses in the government’s counterterrorist approaches. The media showed even less interest in the state of preparedness in the event of a terrorist attack inside the United States. In the five years from January 1996 through December 2000, the major TV networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN) and National Public Radio combined aired a total of forty-eight stories on preparedness. Most of these reports were triggered by drills that simulated worst-case scenarios in order to test the readiness of emergency response specialists. Whether on television, on radio, or in print, the news was grim. Thus, *NBC News* anchor Tom Brokaw said in one newscast, “There is a quiet fear among many of the nation’s highest ranking law enforcement officers that this country is grossly unprepared for what could be the greatest terrorist threat of the times, that’s biological warfare.”¹⁰ In the *New York Times* Judith Miller reported, “At a time of growing fear of terrorism within America’s borders, senior state and local officials say the Federal Government still has no coherent system for deterring or responding to it.”¹¹ With few exceptions, however, these stories in the mainstream media focused on specific problems that surfaced during these drills but not on the underlying problems and issues in the politics of preparedness policies.

In the spring of 2001, a small political magazine, the *Washington Monthly*, published a revealing article under the headline “Weapons of Mass Confusion: How Pork Trumps Preparedness in the Fight against Terrorism.” Writer Joshua Green reported that “the billions of dollars spent to prepare for an attack has only created an expensive and uncoordinated mess.”¹² According to Green,

*A bidding war in Congress quickly ensued. “There was a rush on Capitol Hill,” says a senior researcher in a nonpartisan national security think tank. “There were literally dozens of agencies whispering in lawmakers’ ears that their organizations could do the job and, in turn, make that congressman look good for choosing them.”*¹³

The article did not alarm the large news organizations into following Green’s lead. While always interested in controversy and wrongdoing, especially when public officials are involved, the mass media are far more likely to delve into questionable practices and outright missteps, when the facts—or rumors—are simple and easily told. The cumbersome politics surrounding highly technical and multiagency programs are not easily told in a few seconds by organizations that strive to entertain news consumers rather than fully inform citizens about important public affairs.

It is equally instructive to examine the news coverage of the antiterrorism legislation adopted within weeks of 9/11. Although the USA PATRIOT Act of 2001 in particular and other enacted laws curbed individual liberties, there was no intensive coverage

of the difficult balancing act between the need for security and the protection of civil liberties. Television newscasts often did not provide any coverage at all on the important provisions of the proposed legislation. Somewhat longer broadcast segments and print stories focused typically on the political infighting between the backers and opponents of such measures. In other words, to the extent that the news reported on these at all, the stories were predominantly strategic in that they dwelt on the political calculations of supporters and opponents at the expense of explaining the substance of the proposed and eventually adopted measures.

Reasonable people can and do disagree on the trade-offs between civil liberties and national and personal security. But only if a free and responsible press reports fully on important public issues can citizens understand the pros and cons of important policy decisions and make educated judgments. In this case, most news organizations did not discharge their responsibility to the public.

The Media and Military Responses to Terrorism

While overcovering even minor terrorist incidents and terrorist threats, the news media undercover anti- and counterterrorist measures—unless the latter involve military action or at least the threat of military reprisal or preemption. Military reprisal and preemption in response to international terrorism have been rare. There have been only five such instances thus far that involved the United States: the bombing of Libya in 1986 in retaliation for Libya's role in the bombing of the La Belle disco bar in Berlin that was heavily frequented by American GIs, the 1993 bombing of Iraq's intelligence headquarters as punishment for an Iraqi plot to assassinate former President George H. W. Bush during his visit to Kuwait earlier that year, the 1998 missile strikes against targets in Afghanistan and Sudan following the bombing of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, the massive military action against Al Qaeda and Taliban targets in Afghanistan in response to 9/11, and the invasion of Iraq in the spring of 2003. How did the news media cover these military measures?

The Bombing of Libya (1986)

In early 1986, after years of anti-American terrorism abroad, the Reagan administration was poised to respond. In the 1980s, Libya's Muammar Qaddafi was for President Reagan what Osama bin Laden became for President George W. Bush in 2001: the world's number-one terrorist and the United States' number-one enemy. The opportunity to demonstrate Washington's determination to set an instructive counterterrorist example arose in April 1986 when a bomb went off in Berlin's La Belle disco, killing two U.S. servicemen. Once intelligence sources abroad confirmed that Libyan agents were involved in the Berlin bombing, the Reagan administration claimed to have the smoking gun that justified the "swift retaliation" the president had promised when he entered the White House.

As the rhetoric in Washington heated up amidst leaks that military strikes were imminent, American media organizations beefed up their presence in the Libyan capital. As a result, Americans learned of the bombing raids against targets in Tripoli and Benghazi from media reports immediately after the attacks began and well before the administration informed the public. In the middle of the *CBS Evening News* broadcast on April 14, for example, correspondents Jeffrey Fager and Allen

Pizzey reported over the telephone from Tripoli that the bombing raids had commenced. “Dan—Dan,” Fager said, “if you can hear that in the background, there’s a little bit of—a few blasts going off right now. The attack—the actual attack has been going on for ten minutes now.”¹⁴

Although the media images and descriptions of innocent victims and massive damage to civilian areas were disturbing to many viewers, readers, and listeners, the overwhelming majority of Americans supported the strikes—including those in the news media. The sentiments were summed up when the *New York Times* wrote in an editorial that “even the most scrupulous citizen can only approve and applaud the American attack on Libya.”¹⁵

Bombing of Iraq’s Intelligence Headquarters (1993)

On June 26, 1993, the U.S. military launched a missile attack on Baghdad targeting the Iraqi intelligence headquarters. Shortly after dozens of Tomahawk missiles had hit Iraq’s capital in what was a surprise attack, President Bill Clinton explained in a televised address to the nation that the actions had been taken in response to an Iraqi plot to assassinate former President George H. W. Bush during his visit to Kuwait in April 1993. According to the president, there was “compelling evidence” that “this plot—which included the use of a powerful bomb made in Iraq—was directed and pursued by the Iraqi intelligence service.”¹⁶ But Clinton did not enjoy the solid press support that Reagan received after the bombing of Libya. Tom Jerrol of *ABC News* wondered about political motives behind the decision to hit Baghdad, asking, “Should this enhance his political image here at home? That’s always a consideration that we have to think of when action like this is taken.”¹⁷ Although approving the missile attack, the *Washington Times* did not consider the response strong enough. According to one of the newspaper’s editorials, “The principle behind the choice of target was, Mr. Clinton stated, proportional. But is destroying an empty building proportionate to the attempted murder of an American leader?”¹⁸ While recognizing the very limited effect of the missile strikes, the *Washington Post* supported Clinton in that he “did what a chief executive had to do in retaliating against Iraq’s failed effort to assassinate former president Bush last spring.”¹⁹ But the same editorial suggested that Clinton’s unilateral decision countered criticism of his preference for “multilateralism” in his foreign policy. In an editorial, the *New York Times* posed the question, “Was this strike necessary?”²⁰ According to the editorial page, there was not enough evidence to answer in the affirmative. Instead, the newspaper’s editorial suggested that “the American people need more information about the reasons for and propriety of Mr. Clinton’s action.”²¹ Finally, the *Times* questioned the president’s motive, stating, “Any time a chief executive who is in political difficulty at home undertakes a dramatic military action, he or she must be prepared to face questions whether that action is intended to divert public attention and bolster support for the President.”²²

Missile Strikes in Afghanistan and Sudan (1998)

On August 7, 1998, terrorists drove car bombs into the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, killing nearly 300 people, 12 of them Americans, and injuring several thousands. About two weeks later, on August 20, the U.S. military launched some seventy-nine Tomahawk missiles against Al Qaeda training grounds in Afghanistan and against what President Clinton called a “chemical weapons-related facility.”²³ The

counterterrorist strikes came only three days after the president had publicly acknowledged that he had had an affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky. Not surprisingly, some staunch Clinton critics as well as reporters, editorial writers, and TV anchors questioned whether the president had ordered the attacks for selfish political reasons. During a Pentagon press briefing following President Clinton's short announcement of the counterterrorist actions, Secretary of Defense William Cohen was asked whether he was familiar with *Wag the Dog*, a movie in which a U.S. president cooks up an imaginary war for the purpose of deflecting interest away from his sexual encounter with a teenage girl. This exchange occurred during the briefing:

Question: Some Americans are going to say this bears a striking resemblance to "Wag the Dog." Two questions: Have you seen the movie? And second, how do you respond to people who think that?

Cohen: The only motivation driving this action today was our absolute obligation to protect the American people from terrorist activities.²⁴

Washington Post staff writers faulted officials in the Clinton administration for not providing "information to substantiate their assertion that the exiled Saudi millionaire [Osama bin Laden] masterminded the recent bomb attacks on two U.S. embassies in Africa,"²⁵ but the newspaper's editorial page did not question the actions or Clinton's motive.²⁶ In stark contrast, the *New York Times* mentioned the Lewinsky case and called on the president to "dispel any lingering doubts about his motivation by providing the House and Senate intelligence committees with a complete briefing on the bin Laden information and instructing his aides to fill out the partial accounts they have given about the raids."²⁷ On NBC's *Nightly News*, anchor Brian Williams pointed to Clinton's "dual dilemmas, one a national security matter this week, one a domestic crisis that couldn't be more personal."²⁸ CNN's *Late Edition with Wolf Blitzer* took a "look at the presidency with attention split between the sex scandal in the White House and the military strikes aimed at the terrorists responsible for the U.S. embassy bombings."²⁹

Most news organizations and their sources accepted the strikes against bin Laden's bases in Afghanistan, but many expressed doubts that the Al Shifa plant struck in Sudan had, as the administration claimed, produced chemicals for use in weapons of mass destruction. Although administration officials provided reporters with some sensitive intelligence to prove their case, journalists seemed more inclined to believe the claims by Sudanese officials, who denied any sinister purpose of the plant. Journalists do not like to revisit their earlier reporting and judgments when new information becomes available. In this particular case, a key witness in the trial against participants in the East African bombings corroborated the Clinton administration's claims about chemical weapon production in a Khartoum facility a few miles away from the Al Shifa plant and at the time of Clinton's counterterrorist strikes. But the news media all but ignored the revelation while reporting on other aspects of the testimony; only two newspaper articles mentioned the testimony in passing.³⁰

The Post-9/11 War Against Terrorism

Soon after television and computer screens showed the first images of the totally destroyed World Trade Center and the partially destroyed Pentagon, TV anchors and correspondents compared the attacks to Pearl Harbor and explained them as the

beginning of a new war. Less than an hour after the last of the hijacked planes crashed, ABC News anchor Peter Jennings commented on the pictures on the screen and told his audience, "As you look at these scenes, you can feel absolutely clear that you are looking at the results of the United States at war."³¹ Over at NBC News, Tom Brokaw said, "we are at war, in effect, here." And CBS News anchor Dan Rather called the attacks "the Pearl Harbor of terrorism" and spoke of the new "world terrorism war." These associations were made over and over again by anchors, correspondents, public officials, experts, and members of the general public. Indeed, in the first fourteen hours or so after the strikes, television news seemed obsessed with the war metaphor, comparisons to Pearl Harbor, a narrative of evil versus good, and, last but not least, the identification of likely targets for military retaliation.

On 9/11, in the hours following the attacks through midnight, news anchors and correspondents at the three TV networks combined used the word *war* fifty-seven times and the term *war on terrorism* or *war against terrorism* four times. In addition, other sources appearing on the three networks spoke of "war" twenty-one times. Comparisons to Pearl Harbor were nearly as numerous; anchors, correspondents, and those they interviewed used the term fifty-eight times. Paul Bremer, Ambassador-at-Large for Counter Terrorism during the Reagan administration, expressed on NBC News a few hours after the attacks what many others said on the air,

In—in many ways it's worse than Pearl Harbor. I think we will probably find the casualties will be higher than they were at Pearl Harbor. In Pearl Harbor, we knew immediately who had done it and therefore knew what the return address was. It was Japan. Here, we have higher casualties, less certainty as to where the attack came from, and, therefore a more difficult response. But there must be a very strong military response to this act of war.

The attacks and the perpetrators were repeatedly (sixteen times altogether on the three networks) characterized as "evil" and repeatedly contrasted to the courageous, unified, good nation wronged by evildoers. House Speaker Dennis Hastert, for example, said, "Senators and House members, Democrats and Republicans will stand shoulder to shoulder to fight this evil that's perpe—perpetrated on this nation. We will stand together to make sure that those who have brought forth this evil deed will pay the price."

Also, in the first hours after the attacks, Afghanistan was mentioned fifty-one times on the three networks. In several cases, the need for military retaliation was discussed. On ABC News, former Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger said,

[T]onight I think, we will hold those who have mothered, who have—have husbanded these terrorists at least as much responsible as the terrorists. I suppose it is important, and it is important, that we try now to establish as clearly as we can who did this. And if it's Osama bin Laden, so be it. That leads me immediately to say that Afghanistan and the Afghani government have a responsibility that is at least as great as Osama bin Laden's.

And that means I think we must take military action against them. And we must do this, I think, against those states that we understand and have—and see are responsible for these terrorist as much as the terrorists themselves, and that means going—taking military action against a number of states if, in fact, we dis—we have any solid evidence. Not that they necessarily did this attack, but that they are—they are those who husband and—and mother and support terrorist activities in general.

A possible involvement of Iraq's government was also discussed within hours of the attacks. Taken together, on the three networks anchors, correspondents, and other sources mentioned Iraq twenty-two times. On *CBS News*, Middle East expert Fouad Ajami said, "We will have to go to the source. Either we go to the source in Afghanistan, if it's the—if it's bin Laden and the Taliban, or we will have to go to the source in Baghdad, if it's indeed Saddam Hussein who got himself involved in this." As it happened, United States began its war in Afghanistan against Al Qaeda and the Taliban less than two months after the 9/11 attacks; the invasion of Iraq followed eighteen months after the events of 9/11.

The point here is that television coverage in the immediate hours following the 9/11 strikes foretold American counterterrorism policies of the next months and years—including the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Just as important, these broadcasts that emphasized national unity and support for the president in the wake of the shocking attacks foreshadowed the solid elite and public support for literally all U.S. counterterrorism measures taken in the post-9/11 months and years. Former Energy Secretary Bill Richardson, a Democrat, told Dan Rather, "I think the most important step here, Dan, is—is we've got to rally around the president, rally around as a country." And Senator John McCain, a Republican, said in a conversation with Tom Brokaw, "I believe the American people will support, rally behind and support the president of the United States. And I believe that we will find out who did this, and I think we will respond."³²

Military Action Against Al Qaeda and the Taliban (2001)

On October 7, 2001, President George W. Bush told the nation in a live TV broadcast from the White House that the U.S. military had "begun strikes against Al Qaeda terrorist training camps and military installations of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan." The president mentioned "war" only once in this speech, explaining that the military action was "part of our campaign against terrorism."³³ There was no need to define the actions against Al Qaeda and the Taliban as war, because the news media had invoked this metaphor endlessly since the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington, D.C. Television, especially the all-news networks, had shown day in, day out on-screen banners with slogans like "America's New War" or "War against Terrorism." From 9/11 to the day of the Afghanistan invasion, *ABC News* had broadcast 86 stories that contained the terms *war* and *terrorism*, *CBS News* aired 96 such segments, *NBC News* 133, *CNN* 316, and National Public Radio 166. The U.S. print press available in the LexisNexis archive published a total of 5,814 articles that mentioned both "terrorism" and "war."

In response to the bombing of targets in Afghanistan, angry antiwar protests—some accompanied by violence—erupted in several Arab and Muslim countries. The American news media reported about these demonstrations, and they should have. But by excessively replaying the images of these protests, television in particular conveyed the impression that these regions of the world were in constant uproar against the United States. This was not the case, as one Middle East expert, Martin Indyk, established by keeping track of these demonstrations in twenty-one Arab countries, beginning with the first attack on Afghan targets. According to this survey, there were altogether nine anti-American demonstrations in week one, three in week two, one in week three, two in week four, zero in week five, and one in week six.³⁴ But while over-covering the protests abroad, domestic protests against military retaliation were

largely ignored or criticized in the mainstream media. National Public Radio was among the few news organizations that reported at some length on a “burgeoning” or “fledgling” antiwar movement and the intolerant reaction it met inside and outside university campuses.³⁵

Initially, the American media covered the war in Afghanistan mostly from a distance because the Taliban granted the Western media only selected access to whatever they wanted to showcase of the damage caused by real or alleged U.S. attacks. But the Arab TV network Al Jazeera reported extensively from Afghanistan and provided the U.S. media with reports American reporters could not provide. Based on some of these reports, American journalists were able to ask questions during Pentagon briefings. But given the broad media and public support for the actions in Afghanistan, there were few persistent inquiries by reporters. For many months, the media portrayed Afghanistan as a clear victory for the U.S.-led coalition—although neither bin Laden nor the leading Taliban figures had been captured and significant parts of the country remained under the control of warlords. The myth of the victory in Afghanistan remained alive and well throughout the Bush presidency. It was only after President Obama refocused America’s war on terrorism on Afghanistan and ordered a troop surge there (see Chapter 10). By that time, most news organizations had drastically reduced their reporting from Afghanistan. Reporting from there became increasingly dangerous and was expensive. The war in Afghanistan became for the media and the public a “forgotten war.”

The Invasion of Iraq (2003)

In 2002, when President Bush and others in his administration shifted their attention from bin Laden (who was alive and well and hiding somewhere) to Saddam Hussein, the news media followed suit. Whereas Bush and other Washington officials mentioned bin Laden far more frequently than Saddam Hussein in the six months from October 1, 2001, to May 1, 2001, they referred to Iraq’s dictator far more frequently in the six months from May 1, 2002, to October 31, 2002. During these periods, the leading news organizations followed the president’s lead in that they reported far more often on bin Laden in the first time period and far more often on Saddam Hussein in the second time period. Of course, this coverage pattern speaks to the news media’s practice of facilitating presidents when they use the bully pulpit during acute and even lingering foreign crises. But far from simply providing the chief executive with the stage for communicating with the American people, as one would expect, the media allowed President Bush to set the news agenda so that it changed drastically from first focusing on bin Laden as the number-one “evildoer” to shifting attention to Saddam Hussein as the United States’ greatest threat. Just as terrorists use the media to further their propaganda goals (see Chapters 14 and 15), presidents and other leaders in targeted societies also take advantage of the mass media to push their agenda.

In the run-up to the Iraq war, the media, and television in particular, stirred the war sentiment. On-screen banners reminded audiences most of the time of the United States’ “Showdown with Iraq” or “Showdown with Saddam.” Reports described military preparations and the heartbreaking stories of soldiers getting ready to leave their families to fight the war against terrorism. Popular TV personalities traveled to the Persian Gulf region and anchored their programs from Kuwait and other countries in the—although such changes of venue did absolutely nothing to enhance their

audiences' understanding of the anticipated invasion. But the close-to-the-action backdrops offered media celebrities the opportunity to appear without jacket and tie and tell their audience the same stories as they had earlier from their studios back in the United States. When Washington increased the terrorism alert at home to "high," CNN's Aaron Brown seemed exasperated as he stood in Kuwait to dramatize the coming war and realized that the "breaking news" was right then back home. In addition to tricks of the trade such as hyping venues close to the prospective theater of war, conducting instant "polls," and imposing countdowns to more or less important dates and deadlines, newscasters were preoccupied with stories about the movement of troops and their equipment into the neighborhood of Iraq and with quizzing an army of retired generals as experts on real or imagined developments. Taken together, this sort of news, especially on the all-news networks, conditioned the public to perceive the war against Iraq as inevitable.

Unlike the protests against the Afghan intervention, the antiwar demonstrations of early 2003 in the United States and abroad were massive. This time around, the American news media did pay a good deal of attention to these events, with front-page stories in print and lead stories on TV network news. Although always eager to invoke the First Amendment when defending the press's constitutional right of free expression, many commentators and columnists were quick to condemn antiwar protesters as supporting Saddam Hussein. Michael Kelly, for example, wrote in his column in the *Washington Post*, "It is a march for the furtherance of evil instead of the vanquishing of evil."³⁶ Hosts and guests on cable television characterized demonstrators frequently as communists, traitors, crazies, un-American, and not patriotic. Ex-President Jimmy Carter, a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, was singled out for harsh criticism after he spoke out against the invasion. Typically, these critics described Carter's presidency as a "failure" and condemned him for violating the unwritten rule whereby ex-presidents do not disagree publicly with an incumbent president. Few voices in the media defended the fundamental right of free speech and assembly in the United States for antiwar protesters also.

For the television networks and especially cable, the prospect of a conflict with Iraq was a two-edged sword. On the one hand, they saw an opportunity to increase their audiences—just as CNN had done during the buildup to and throughout the Gulf War in 1990–1991. But on the other hand, these organizations spent large amounts of money to prepare for the Iraq war, and they feared the loss of advertising revenue during their coverage of the war, when advertisers were expected to refrain from plugging their products. In the end, the investments in the anticipated war coverage were so substantial that television needed the war to attract larger audiences.

Once hostilities began, the "embedded media" model was put into place: Reporters, photographers, and TV crews were attached to specific military units as they invaded Iraq and won a quick victory. Beginning with the invasion of Grenada in 1983 and during the invasion of Panama in 1987 and the Gulf War in 1991, the U.S. military had directly or indirectly denied reporters access to witness the initial military deployments. By embedding correspondents within units, the Pentagon came up with and the media embraced a solution that made for often dramatic war coverage. The other side of the coin was that "embedded" correspondents got only a glimpse of the full theater of war and bonded with the men and women of "their" units. To identify with the soldiers who protected them meant also that many members of the fourth estate were reluctant to report on all aspects of this war—especially when it meant criticizing the U.S. military.

News reporting was far more critical of the difficulties in the U.S.-led efforts to restore law and order in Iraq and install a democratic system in place of Saddam Hussein's reign of terror. In the fall of 2003, administration officials embarked on a public relations campaign to counter what they described as biased news from Iraq. Critics inside and outside the Bush administration charged that the media did not report at all, or did not report enough, on the significant progress made in returning life to normal in Iraq. President Bush told an interviewer, "There's a sense that people in America aren't getting the truth. We're making great progress about improving the lives of the people there in Iraq."³⁷ There is no doubt that the media during this period reported far more prominently about the daily attacks on members of the U.S.-led military coalition, on gas pipelines, and on soft targets such as hotels, embassies, the United Nations headquarters, and other civilian facilities in Iraq than on restored electrical power lines, reopened schools, and well-functioning hospitals. Critics were right at the time to complain that the news about Iraq overemphasized the violence and paid little attention to improvements in various areas, but such criticism was no longer justified once lethal attacks by homegrown insurgents and mostly foreign terrorists increased dramatically and pushed Iraq into a bloody civil war. As ever more Americans and Iraqis became day in and day out the victims of the violent clashes between Shi'ites and Sunnis, no one should have expected the news media to downplay the worsening conditions and the failure of American-led coalition forces and the Iraqi military and police units to take control and restore order. By late 2006, President Bush acknowledged that things were bad in Iraq, replaced Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and worked on a new strategy to turn things around. Yet First Lady Laura Bush blamed the news media's slanted Iraq coverage for her husband's low public approval ratings. As the *NBC Nightly News* reported,

BRIAN WILLIAMS, ANCHOR: First lady Laura Bush had something to say about Iraq today. It was during an appearance on MSNBC. Mrs. Bush was asked by Norah O'Donnell why she thinks only 2 out of 10 Americans in our latest *NBC News/Wall Street Journal* poll said they approved of the president's handling of the war in Iraq. Mrs. Bush placed the blame squarely on the news media.

MS. LAURA BUSH: I do know that there are a lot of good things that are happening that aren't covered, and I think the drumbeat in the country from the media, from the only way people know what's happening unless they happen to have a loved one deployed there, is discouraging.

WILLIAMS: Mrs. Bush went on to say she hopes for what she called more balanced coverage in the future. The recent report from the Iraq Study Group, however, specifically found that there has been significant under-reporting of the violence in Iraq.³⁸

By and large, however, the focus on the most shocking, sensational, and threatening incidents is symptomatic of the way the news media cover, overcover, and undercover the responses to terrorism at home and abroad. Often, these reporting tendencies prove helpful to presidents as they pursue anti- and counterterrorist policies, but at other times, these same coverage patterns ignore, weaken, and contradict the messages that presidents want to get across to the American people. Just as the news media overemphasize the episodic and most lethal, shocking, and spectacular aspects of terrorism, anti- and counterterrorism news, too, is tilted in favor of the most dramatic, deadly, and troubling events, developments, and messages.

The Iraq War: Different News Coverage Abroad

Whether because of the 9/11 experience or as a consequence of different traditions of the media in the United States and Western Europe, the news coverage before and during the 2003 Iraq War was markedly different in leading news organizations in the United States and in the United Kingdom, Germany, and other western European democracies. Ingrid Lehmann found, for example, that during the run-up to the Iraq invasion the German elite newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine* published “little to discredit or undermine the [United Nations arms] inspection process,” while the *New York Times* was “more critical of the inspections.”³⁹ Whereas the German news media may have been influenced by the German government’s criticism of U.S. Iraq policy and its refusal to join the American-led coalition, the situation was very different in the United Kingdom, where Tony Blair was from the outset a strong supporter of the Bush administration’s Iraq stance and British troops participated in the invasion and occupation of the country. A study of the web sites of news organizations in forty-eight countries around the world found that the news about the Iraq invasion was more positively framed in countries that officially supported the action than in those opposing the war.⁴⁰ Yet reporting in the British elite press was far less uniform than in the comparable U.S. media. One study found, for example, that “*The Independent* seemed more critical of the war, while *The Times* tended to support the British government position.”⁴¹ Similarly, the BBC broadcasts were “not patriotic in tone and style as many US networks were.”⁴² In short, even though British troops were fighting in Iraq, news consumers in the United Kingdom were not solely exposed to rally-round-the-flag coverage as were their American counterparts, but had access to more critical voices as well. As a result, public support for the Iraq war and for Prime Minister Tony Blair in the United Kingdom was never as high as for the invasion and President Bush in the United States.

Major American news media web sites gave different reasons for the war than their counterparts abroad: “U.S. media cited more often freedom for the Iraqi people as justification for the war, which was rarely mentioned in foreign sites.”⁴³ Communication research has established that news audiences pay special attention to pictures in television and in print and that visuals are more memorable than the spoken and written word. Thus, it is interesting that the American media differed in the selection of visuals from foreign news organizations. As one study established, American TV networks “rarely, if ever showed visuals of dead or wounded soldiers from the Allied forces but tended to mention such casualties verbally.”⁴⁴ The opposite was true for dead, wounded, or captured Iraqi soldiers.

One can only guess why the reporting and framing patterns of the American media were different from those of foreign media: Given the American lead role in the “coalition of the willing” and the fact that opponents of the war assigned the bulk of the blame to the American superpower and not to coalition partners, news organizations in the United States seemed more inclined to “rally round the flag” than the news media elsewhere.

Notes

1. Brigitte L. Nacos, Yaeli Bloch-Elkon, and Robert Y. Shapiro, “The Threat of International Terrorism after 9/11: News Coverage and Public Perceptions,” paper prepared for presentation at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association in Philadelphia, August 31, 2006.

2. Judith Miller of the *New York Times*, for example, wrote some excellent articles on the danger of biological weapons. She and two of her colleagues published a book about this threat. See Judith Miller, Stephen Engelberg, and William Broad, *Germs: Biological Weapons and America's Secret War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).
3. National Commission on Terrorism, "Countering the Changing Threat of Terrorism," report, pursuant to Public Law 277, 105th Congress, 49.
4. *Ibid.*, 6.
5. "Secure, Yes, but Also Free," *Omaha World-Herald*, June 12, 2000, 6.
6. Major acts of terrorism in the United States were feared for the New Year's celebrations marking the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries. The Y2K threats, which were believed to target the Internet and computer systems as well, were widely reported in the news.
7. Edward Alden, "Report Warned of Attack on American Soil," *Financial Times*, September 12, 2001, 5.
8. CNN, *The Point with Greta van Susteren*, January 31, 2001.
9. Richard Cohen, "The Terrorism Story—and How We Blew It," *Washington Post*, October 4, 2001, A31.
10. *NBC Nightly News*, December 8, 1997, according to transcript retrieved from the LexisNexis database.
11. Judith Miller, "Nation Lacks Plan to Deter Terrorism," *New York Times*, September 6, 1998, 30.
12. Joshua Green, "Weapons of Mass Confusion: How Pork Trumps Preparedness in the Fight against Terrorism," *Washington Monthly* (May 2001): 15–21.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Brigitte L. Nacos, *Terrorism and the Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 38.
15. "The Terrorist and His Sentence," *New York Times*, April 15, 1986, A30.
16. From the transcript of *ABC Breaking News*, "U.S. Strikes against Iraq for Bush Attack," June 26, 1993.
17. *Ibid.*
18. "A Message for Saddam," *Washington Times*, June 28, 1993, E2.
19. "Strike on Baghdad," *Washington Post*, June 28, 1993, A18.
20. "Was This Strike Necessary?" *New York Times*, June 28, 1993, A16.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*
23. Statement by President Bill Clinton, Federal News Service, August 20, 1998, retrieved from LexisNexis.
24. News briefing by William Cohen, secretary of defense, August 20, 1998, according to FDCH Political Transcripts.
25. Vernon Loeb and Michael Grunwald, "Officials Won't Detail Evidence on bin Laden," *Washington Post*, August 21, 1998, A19.
26. "In Self-Defense," *Washington Post*, August 21, 1998, A22.
27. "Striking against Terrorism," *New York Times*, August 21, 1998, A22.
28. *NBC Nightly News*, August 21, 1998.
29. *CNN Late Edition with Wolf Blitzer*, August 23, 1998.
30. Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, "A Failure of Intelligence," *New York Review of Books*, December 20, 2001, 77.
31. All citations from and the statistical data of TV network news aired in the fourteen hours after the 9/11 attacks are based on the transcripts available in the LexisNexis electronic archives.
32. For a comprehensive study of post-9/11 news coverage of various counterterrorist policies, see Brigitte L. Nacos, Yaeli Bloch-Elkon, and Robert Y. Shapiro, *Selling Fear: Counterterrorism, the Media, and Public Opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).
33. From a statement by President George W. Bush, October 7, 2001, according to the Federal News Service transcript.
34. These numbers are mentioned by Fareed Zakaria, "Let's Spread the Good Cheer," *Newsweek*, November 26, 2001, 50.
35. Linda Wertheimer spoke of a "burgeoning" antiwar movement in the *All Things Considered* program of September 14, 2001, and her colleague Neil Cohen of a "fledgling" antiwar movement on the *Talk of the Nation* program of September 28, 2001.

36. Michael Kelly, "Immorality of the March," *Washington Post*, February 19, 2003, A29.
37. "White House: Americans Aren't Getting 'Full Story' on Iraq," www.CNN.com, accessed October 13, 2003.
38. *NBC Nightly News*, December 14, 2006.
39. Ingrid A. Lehmann, "Exploring the Transatlantic Media Divide over Iraq," *Press/Politics* 10:1 (2005): 83.
40. Daniela V. Dimitrova et al., "War on the Web," *Press/Politics* 10:1 (2005): 38.
41. Kai Hafez, "The Iraq War 2003 in Western Media and Public Opinion," *Global Media Journal* 3:5 (Fall 2004), <http://lass.calumet.purdue.edu/cca/gmj/fao4/gmj-fao4-hafez.htm>.
42. Ibid.
43. Dimitrova et al., 33.
44. The study was done by the German company Media Tenor and mentioned in *ibid.*, 27.