

Global Media

The International Influencer

In the 1990s, the rapid growth of CNN in countries around the world gave rise to hopes that the network's technologically revolutionary ability to provide simultaneous, live news coverage would lead to democratization, increasing the forces for democracy by shining a light on citizens' efforts to overthrow repressive regimes and leading nations to respond with humanitarian aid in the face of natural disasters and human rights crises. The term *CNN effect* was coined to describe how real-time media coverage of humanitarian crises at the time was playing a role in the U.S. government's decision to intervene militarily in conflicts that otherwise might have been ignored.

Christiane Amanpour's CNN coverage of war and genocide through "ethnic cleansing" in the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the Balkans in the 1990s is credited with helping to push the Bill Clinton administration and NATO to take action that led to NATO air strikes and a peace agreement signed in 1995 in the war in the former Yugoslavia.¹ (Also influential was *Newsday* journalist Roy Gutman's exposure of modern-day concentration camps in the war.)

At one point, Amanpour confronted President Bill Clinton about his flip-flops in U.S. policy in a headline-making global interview from Sarajevo.² "Bill Clinton was basically referring to the war as a humanitarian disaster—that's how the whole world was referring to it back then—and saying what a great job the United States was doing," Amanpour recalled in an interview with the author.³ "We refused to play that game. It wasn't an earthquake or famine. It was evil. It was genocide, racial and ethnic cleansing based on racial purity."⁴

In 1989 CNN's footage of the "man with the tank" standing unarmed before a tank became an indelible worldwide image of the Chinese government's assault on pro-democracy demonstrators in Beijing's Tiananmen Square.⁵ In 1992 American viewers' reaction to seeing photos of a dead U.S. soldier being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu, Somalia, on a humanitarian food mission, led President Clinton to abruptly cancel the U.S.-United Nations mission.⁶

In 2011 and 2012, Al Jazeera TV's coverage of the revolts by citizens against repressive regimes that became known as "Arab Spring" spread the news of uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia, and other countries to

viewers throughout the Middle East. The Qatari-based Al Jazeera—which began during the war in Iraq and was accused of anti-West bias with its beginnings—today is considered a major force in public opinion throughout the Middle East.⁷

The CNN effect has never been uniform—or universal. Foreign policy is set by presidents and their advisers as well as Congress and is more dependent also on the input of political elites than is domestic policy.⁸ At the same time, presidents and their advisers have noted that international media coverage is an important factor in their decision-making. The outpouring of public support and international aid in the face of several widely covered natural disasters abroad is another barometer of the role extensive media coverage can play.

Among the impacts of the CNN effect are political agenda-setting and a shortening of the time officials believe they have between a widely covered event and reporters' and others' questions about the country's response.⁹ There is some evidence that international media coverage and, more recently, social media posts to the outside world, contributes to a "boomerang effect," where regimes may show restraint in the face of attention.¹⁰

Although it can be difficult to measure the precise impact of media coverage on foreign policy, a number of studies have found priming effects for both domestic and foreign policy issues in how presidents are viewed.¹¹ In humanitarian crises, political scientist Matthew Baum wrote, "When an issue involves contested cultural norms—such as the moral value of alleviating suffering through humanitarian intervention, weighed against the risk of casualties in a conflict lacking clear national security interest—this leaves an opening for the media to challenge the government's preferred frame. In such circumstances, the media may independently influence citizens' interpretations of a leader's foreign policy actions."¹²

In 2017 President Trump cited terrible pictures of women and children in a poison gas attack in a rebel-held village in Syria for his decision to launch a single U.S. air strike against a Syrian airfield and the regime of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. "I tell you, the attack on children had a big impact on me—big impact," the president said about what he had been "watching and seeing" on U.S. cable TV.¹³

In 2013 President Obama had been criticized by proponents of military action in Syria for not acting militarily against al-Assad after declaring that he was drawing "a red line" over the use of chemical warfare in Syria in 2013.¹⁴ Obama was said to believe that such strikes would not be effective despite the urgings of the then-secretary of state Hillary Clinton and others in his administration to respond to chemical weapons attacks by al-Assad, who is backed by Russia in this proxy war.¹⁵ We will discuss policy and media coverage in the Syrian civil war, which has led to an international refugee crisis with six million Syrian refugees, later in this chapter.

In her book *Lights, Camera, War* about the role of media technology in international politics, Johanna Neuman concluded that, as in Somalia, pictures could drive diplomacy only in the absence of a clearly stated foreign policy or political leadership. “In the end, in war or peace, leadership tells,” she wrote.¹⁶

In this chapter we will examine the interplay of media and politics in some of the most consequential events in recent times, from wars and terrorist attacks to climate change and the coronavirus pandemic. We will examine how the media’s overreliance on officialdom and pressures to be patriotic in the post-9/11 environment led to insufficient questioning of the case for war in Iraq, with both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* issuing extraordinary mea culpas for their reporting on the administration and the existence of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) under Saddam Hussein.

Many Americans have traditionally been uninterested in international news in general, and international news coverage on U.S. television has been Americentric.¹⁷ Cutbacks in foreign bureaus at the broadcast TV networks diminished the “news hole” for international news on the nightly evening newscasts, where it usually represents a percentage of total coverage, according to Andrew Tyndall, who has calculated the relative minutes to topics on NBC News, CBS News, and ABC News for his *Tyndall Report* for thirty years.¹⁸

At the same time, however, ratings for network and cable TV news have been up in recent years, and viewership and readership have increased dramatically with the coronavirus crisis. The Internet and social media have allowed for online distribution of stories from the BBC and Al Jazeera English, while social media postings of photographs and witness videos posted online and on television have added new viewers and venues for international news.

As we noted in Chapter 4, American media have been criticized for false objectivity in giving equal weight time to scientists and phony “climate skeptics,” experts funded by the fossil fuel industry in coverage that misinformed the American public and helped keep climate change off the political and news agenda for many years. While there is still criticism of insufficient coverage of climate change and insufficient attention by politicians in the U.S., the issue has moved up on the news and political agenda, and more Americans of both major political parties today see climate change as a pressing national and international concern.¹⁹ In 2020 several U.S. and international news organizations joined forces to report more globally on climate change, in the U.S. and abroad; and the issue is receiving significant international attention.

There is some evidence that the coronavirus pandemic has forced changes in how Americans and TV news organizations view global health

crises. The coronavirus crisis was the top-rated story of 2020.²⁰ In 2014 the outbreak of the Ebola virus in East Africa was the second most covered story on the three broadcast evening newscasts (after winter weather). But, as Tyndall noted in an interview with the author in 2014, the Ebola outbreak was largely covered for its ramifications for the U.S. and other countries. “Ebola should have been an international story,” Tyndall said, “but only 9 percent [of the TV stories] had a foreign dateline, so it became a domestic scare instead.”²¹

In an increasingly interconnected world that is paradoxically both more global and more tribal in many ways, it’s important to study the interplay of media, politics, and policy in international news.

In this chapter we’ll talk about what gets covered—and why. We will look first at the concept of American exceptionalism, how it has impact, and how American public opinion on that concept may be changing. We’ll examine the war in Iraq as an important case study, and we’ll look also at the media-military relationship and the future of war reporting. We’ll study the importance of framing in media coverage and policy of terrorism. Finally, you’ll hear from interviews with government officials and academic experts as well as CNN anchors Anderson Cooper and Christiane Amanpour on their experiences and why they think it’s important to cover international news. At the end of this chapter you’ll have an assignment to sample and compare coverage of international news on American broadcast TV newscasts to the BBC and Al Jazeera English TV networks.

American Exceptionalism and Global Public Opinion

The concept of American exceptionalism—the idea that America is an elect nation and an example for the world—can be traced to the founding of the U.S. In 1630, John Winthrop, the future governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, said this in a sermon to his fellow New England settlers before they arrived: “We shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.”²² Puritan leaders described New England in religious terms, as a “new Eden” with a preordained destiny of greatness, fostering “a tendency to view America in religious terms,” as historian Donald E. Pease wrote.²³ But, Pease added, “American exceptionalism was more decisively shaped by the ideals of the European Enlightenment. The founders imagined the United States as an unprecedentedly free, new nation based on founding documents—the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution—that announced its unique destiny to become the champion of the universal rights of all humankind.”²⁴ In *Rights of Man* (1792), Thomas Paine asserted that the “revolution of America presented in politics what was only theory in mechanics.”²⁵

As we know today, this view of America as an egalitarian ideal was flawed from the beginning, in terms of slavery, the treatment of Native Americans, and the disenfranchisement of women. In his book *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*, Seymour Martin Lipset argued that the concept embodies contradictory values²⁶ leading, for example, to the magnanimity of the U.S. in the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe after World War II and a stated, moralizing foreign policy of “nation-building” in the war in Iraq.

Richard Hofstadter said that “America is an ideology,” and he argued that the founding of the country led to “an unswerving faith in national superiority and uniqueness that is deeply ingrained in the American mind.”²⁷ More recently, British author Geoffrey Hodgson provocatively labeled American exceptionalism a dangerous myth.²⁸ And, yet at the same time, the declaration of human rights and individual liberty—and individual agency—expressed in the Bill of Rights and the Constitution have inspired generations, in the U.S. and internationally, in views of the U.S. and America’s obligations and role in the world.

The end of the Cold War and the breakup of the former Soviet Union led to the diminishing of what is called the Cold War frame in media and in politics, with the U.S. and the democracy in an ideological battle against communism and authoritarianism and a single, powerful foe.

As a vast, prosperous country removed from the Old World of Europe, the U.S. has also had a tradition of isolationism and periods of anti-immigrant nativism. Donald Trump’s stated foreign policy—“America First”—marked a return to a phrase that has been used by some politicians in several previous periods in American history.²⁹ President Trump’s criticism of China and international trade agreements that he said had cost American jobs resonated with his supporters and other Americans, as did his campaign promise to disengage U.S. soldiers from “endless wars” after the long wars for U.S. troops in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Several months before the 2016 election, Americans were concerned about terrorism and global economic insecurity as threats to the U.S., but many Americans were focused on problems within the U.S. and wary of global engagement. In a Pew poll, 57 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that the U.S. should “deal with its own problems and let other countries deal with their own problems as best they can.”³⁰

In office, Trump’s criticism of the post-World War II NATO military alliance was criticized by his own defense secretary, former Marine general James Mattis.³¹ The president’s embrace of what he described as the strengths of Soviet president Vladimir Putin and other autocratic leaders was an about-face from Ronald Reagan’s policies against “the evil empire” of the Soviet Union.

Global Public Opinion on the Role of the U.S.

President Trump's withdrawal from international agreements on climate change and the Iran nuclear weapons agreement signed under President Obama were unpopular globally, as were Trump's policies on immigration. In its annual global opinion polling, the Pew Research Center found in 2017 that international confidence in the U.S. president had "plummeted" under President Trump, while favorable ratings for the United States also declined.³²

In a survey across thirty-seven nations, researchers in 2017 found broad opposition to President Trump and his key policies, with a median of just 22 percent of respondents saying they had confidence in Trump to do the right thing in international affairs, compared to a median of 64 percent for President Obama at the end of his presidency, with concerns about President Trump and his policies strongest among traditional American allies.³³

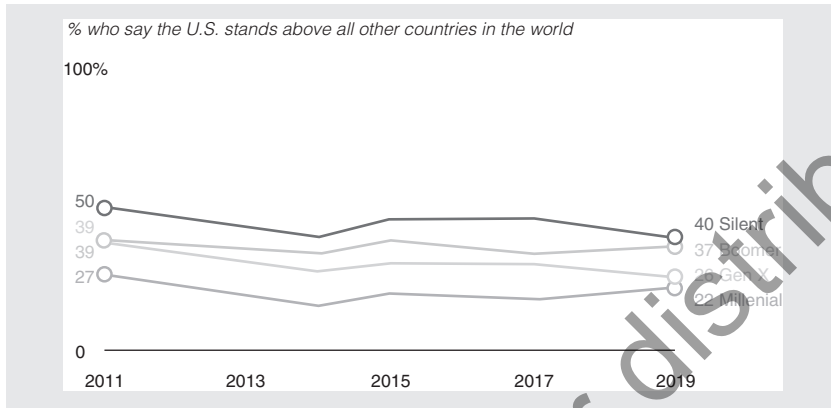
Subsequent surveys found similar results. In the Pew survey released in January 2020, a median of 64 percent across thirty-two countries said they did not have confidence in Trump to do the right thing when it comes to international affairs, while 29 percent expressed confidence in the president. Fifty-four percent expressed a favorable opinion about the U.S., while 38 percent were negative.³⁴

In the U.S., millennials have more positive views both of other countries and international institutions than older generations in the U.S.—and it appears that those attitudes are persisting as younger Americans grow older. Pew research released in July 2020 found majorities of Americans across generations in favor of the United Nations—but U.S. millennials (defined as twenty-four to thirty-nine years old in 2020) were ten points higher in their favorable opinion of the UN than Gen X (forty-to-fifty-five-year-olds) or Boomers (fifty-six-to-seventy-four-year-olds.) The same was true for views of NATO and the European Union.

Analyzing results over time, the researchers found that "even as they grow older, younger generations [among Americans] tend to be more internationally oriented, more favorably disposed to groups, leaders and countries beyond their border, and less likely to see the U.S. as exceptional."³⁵

As Figure 7.1 indicates, about four out of ten Boomers or Silent-Generation members (seventy-six-to-ninety-two-year-olds) agreed that "America stands above all other countries in the world."³⁶ Only about one in four Gen Xers and millennials agreed with that statement.³⁷ Although governments and elected officials make policy, these generational trends could have impact on public opinion and policy in the future.

Figure 7.1 Older Generations Are More Likely to Say the U.S. “Stands above” Other Nations



Sources: Pew Research Center, “Older Generations More Likely to Say the U.S. ‘Stands above’ Other Nations,” July 8, 2020. Survey of U.S. adults conducted September 5-16, 2019.

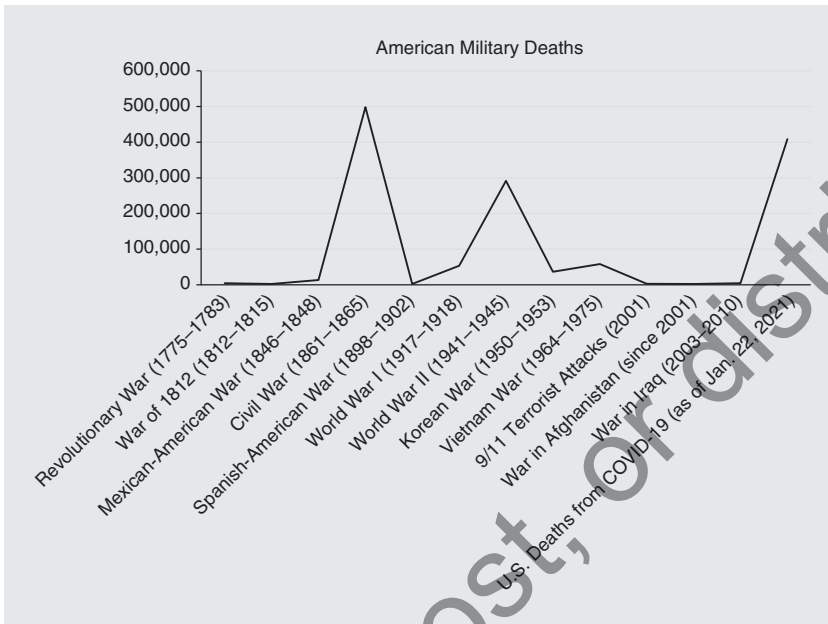
The Coronavirus Pandemic

International versus Domestic

As we noted in Chapter 1, the U.S. under Donald Trump was ill prepared for the coronavirus pandemic—and disproportionately affected in the number of cases and deaths. By the spring of 2020, the pandemic had devastated world economies and left 3.8 million people ill and 267,000 dead worldwide, from the time the virus emerged in China in late December³⁸ until the beginning of May.³⁹ The images of hospitals in New York City overrun with the dead and dying, multiple deaths in nursing homes, and nurses in need of protective masks shocked Americans—and the rest of the world.

Among the 3.8 million cases reported between January and May of 2020, the U.S. alone accounted for 1.7 million cases of COVID-19.⁴⁰ More than seventy-five thousand people in the U.S. had died. Government health officials were projecting nearly a doubling of that total by August at the same time that President Trump was pressing states to reopen.⁴¹ As the following chart indicates (see Figure 7.2), the death toll by the spring of 2020 had surpassed U.S. military deaths in the Vietnam War and other wars and conflicts. By the end of January of 2021, the U.S. death toll had reached a grim milestone: 408,697.⁴²

Figure 7.2 U.S. Coronavirus Deaths in Relation to Major Historical Events



Sources: Data from the CDC, Department of Veterans Affairs, Johns Hopkins University, and National Geographic.

*War figures include military deaths in battle and in-theater deaths available.

**U.S. deaths from COVID-19 include states and territories.

With businesses and the U.S. economy shut down in measures to curb the spread of the disease, unemployment soared. With 20.5 million Americans suddenly losing their jobs in April of 2020, the Labor Department reported an unemployment rate that was the highest since the Great Depression.⁴³ “The United States is facing a political and economic challenge like nothing it has seen in nearly 100 years,” Heather Long and Andrew Van Dam wrote with the release of the statistics.⁴⁴

With even the recommended wearing of masks politicized, divergent responses among governors and between President Trump and his own medical advisers and no unified federal plan for testing and distributing vaccines once they could be created and made available, the U.S. response to the pandemic under Donald Trump was marred by partisanship and politicization. Fox News Channel and

conservative talk radio echoed and reinforced the president's denials and downplaying of the crisis to a degree that whether viewers listened to Fox News Channel or other news sources affected perceptions—and views of the need to act, politically and personally. The economic and partisan divides that were revealed and *amplified* by the pandemic also have had significant impact on how the pandemic has been perceived—and experienced.

First is the economic divide: Although COVID-19 struck younger people as well, older people were more at risk of dying, as were people with serious underlying health conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, and lung disease.⁴⁵ Some groups, including African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans, have a higher prevalence of these conditions⁴⁶ while poverty, segregation, lack of health insurance and medical care, and other social conditions also contribute to health disparities, even under normal circumstances. Joe Pinsker, a writer for *Atlantic* magazine who interviewed public health researchers about the impact going forward, concluded, “While no one will be wholly untouched by the pain of the present pandemic . . . there will be stark disparities in how certain segments of the American population experience this crisis.”⁴⁷

Data reported from major cities and several states and analyzed by news organizations confirmed these startling disparities. Black Americans were bearing the brunt of the crisis, as the *New York Times* termed it, being infected and dying from the coronavirus at strikingly disproportionate rates and “highlighting what public health researchers say are entrenched inequalities in resources, health and access to care.”⁴⁸

The *Los Angeles Times* found in a separate analysis of public health data in California that older and younger Black people and Latinos aged eighteen to sixty-four were dying at higher rates relative to their percentage of the population than white people and Asian Americans.⁴⁹ In Chicago, African Americans in spring 2020 represented more than half of those who had tested positive for coronavirus and 72 percent of virus-related deaths, although African Americans were slightly less than one-third of Chicago's overall population. “This is a call-to-action moment,” Chicago mayor Lori Lightfoot said. “These statistics take your breath away, they really do,” said Lightfoot, who recently had been elected as the city's first Black female mayor.⁵⁰

As the virus moved through the country, workers at meatpacking plants, nursing home residents, and prison inmates were showing high rates of infection.

Top health officials testifying warned of a second wave of cases if states moved too quickly in moves to open businesses and the economy.⁵¹

President Trump's Response

President Trump faced intense criticism for his handling of the crisis. As the crisis was mounting, the president repeatedly denied and downplayed the severity of the illness and the crisis for months. He variously said that the illness was “no worse than the flu,”⁵² that there were just a handful of cases now recovering,⁵³ and that coronavirus would disappear “like a miracle” with warmer weather.⁵⁴ He reassured Americans that the situation was “totally under control”⁵⁵ even as officials from the Centers for Disease Control were warning of more cases.⁵⁶ Economically, as the stock market tumbled, Trump’s economic adviser Larry Kudlow, a former Fox financial news host, said on the CNBC business network, “We have contained this. I won’t say [it’s] air-tight, but it’s pretty close to air-tight.”⁵⁷ Kudlow added that while the virus was a “human tragedy,” it would not be an “economic tragedy.”⁵⁸

Although there were severe shortages of medical supplies and testing that government public health experts said were needed to treat patients and know who was infected, President Trump expressed doubt about the need for forty thousand ventilators in New York and erroneously said that the testing was “all perfect” and that anyone who wanted a test could get one.⁵⁹ In fact, the Trump administration had disbanded a White House office charged with planning for a pandemic or bioterrorism attack in 2018,⁶⁰ and the federal government had let maintenance contracts for respirators lapse, among other moves. The Centers for Disease Control did not begin sending testing kits until February; and Dr. Anthony Fauci, the country’s top infectious disease expert and a member of Trump’s task force, contradicted Trump, saying that the administration’s early testing levels were “failing.”⁶¹

At daily press briefings that he instituted and cable TV networks carried live, President Trump said that a vaccine would soon be available, although his own experts said it would be twelve to eighteen months. At one point during the daily press briefings he had begun, the president turned to one of his top public health experts, Dr. Deborah Birx, and mused about injecting disinfectant as a possible cure, prompting alarmed warnings from manufacturers and medical doctors about the dangers of doing so. “For months, the president has downplayed the severity of the pandemic, overstated the impact of his policies and potential treatments, blamed others and tried to rewrite the history of his response,” Linda Qiu wrote in an analysis of the president’s remarks.⁶² David Frum, a political commentator and former speechwriter for George W. Bush, bluntly concluded, “Trump failed. He is failing. He will continue to fail. And Americans are paying for his failures.”⁶³

The president himself later portrayed the pandemic as a problem that “came out of nowhere.” But internal documents and conversations within

his administration, revealed in reports from the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, the Associated Press, and *Axios*, all showed that the president had been warned repeatedly and personally, by top economic, health, and intelligence officials, about the growing crisis as early as mid-January, although he continued to give false reassurances to the public.⁶⁴

In September of 2020, journalist Bob Woodward's book *Rage* revealed—with audiotapes of the president talking in multiple interviews to Woodward—that Trump knew as far back as February that the coronavirus was more “deadly” than he had previously thought but that he had deliberately downplayed the severity to the public. “I wanted to always play it down. . . . I still like playing it down because I don't want to create a panic,” Trump said in a call with Woodward, according to an audio clip posted on the *Washington Post* website and quoted in Woodward's book.⁶⁵

Biden and Harris made Trump's handling of the crisis, along with health care, the centerpiece of their campaign, with Biden calling Trump's words to Woodward “a life-and-death betrayal of the American people.”⁶⁶

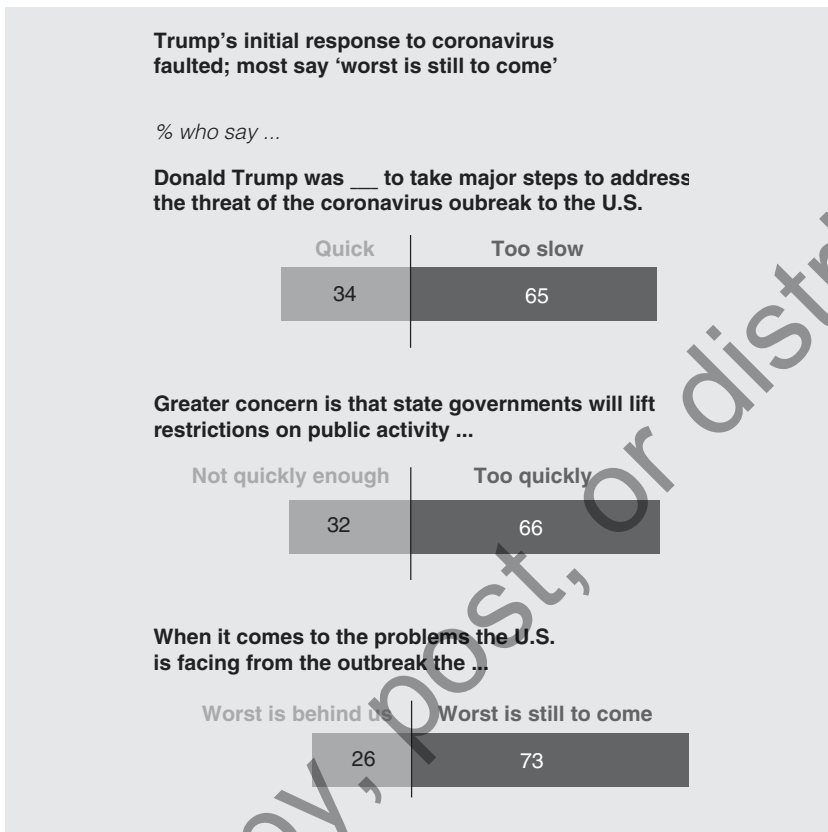
In the Pew Research Center poll below (see Figure 7.3) in April of 2020,⁶⁷ 65 percent of Americans said that the president was too slow to take major steps to address the crisis. In that same poll, two-thirds of Americans said they were more concerned about states lifting restrictions too quickly than not quickly enough, while 73 percent said the worst was still to come.⁶⁸

Role of Fox News Channel and Conservative Media

For weeks before the country was shut down, President Trump repeatedly told his supporters—at rallies and on Twitter—that the Democrats, in league with the news media, were perpetrating a “hoax” about coronavirus designed to do political damage to the president in the 2020 presidential election.⁶⁹ Many people thought that Trump had called the disease itself a hoax—and, in what writer Nick Bolton called “the first true epidemic of a polarized, plugged-in era,” many conspiracy theorists on YouTube and social media propagated that idea, along with the idea that the virus originated in a lab in China.⁷⁰ But when Democrats released a 2020 campaign ad to that effect, Trump tweeted this: “I never said the pandemic was a Hoax! Who would say such a thing? I said that the Do Nothing Democrats, together with their Mainstream Media partners, are the Hoax. They have been called out & embarrassed on this, even admitting they were wrong, but continue to spread the lie!”⁷¹

The fact-checking website *PolitiFact* backed Trump on the strict distinction while noting that the comments were confusing.⁷² The remarks definitely continued the president's conflating the media with the Democrats. As *PolitiFact* noted, the president had used the word *hoax* to

Figure 7.3 Trump's Initial Response to Coronavirus Faulted



Source: "Most Americans Say Trump Was Too Slow in Initial Response to Coronavirus Threat," Pew Research Center, April 16, 2020, https://www.people-press.org/2020/04/16/most-americans-say-trump-was-too-slow-in-initial-response-to-coronavirus-threat/pp_2020-04-16_trump-and-covid-19_0-01/.

Note: No answer responses not shown.

establish his own credibility with his supporters many times before, including regarding the investigation of Russian interference in the 2016 election, global warming and the impeachment inquiry.

Matthew Kavanagh, assistant professor of global health at Georgetown University, said Trump's use of the word *hoax* regarding the coronavirus was "very dangerous" given his history of challenging the trustworthiness of the media and government officials. "Success against the pandemic depends on people believing and complying with the advice of public health officials as seen through the media," Kavanagh said.⁷³

Sean Hannity, Laura Ingraham, and other prime-time hosts on Fox News Channel, along with Trish Regan on Fox Business Channel and Rush Limbaugh on talk radio, supported and amplified Trump's narrative—that coronavirus was a hoax with exaggerated claims of danger being hyped by news organizations and the Democrats.

They told this to millions of loyal viewers and listeners, many of whom are older and thus more vulnerable to COVID-19.⁷⁴ Limbaugh floated the conspiracy theory that the virus had been created in a Chinese lab. As late as March, Hannity talked about “coronavirus hysteria” and “lies, hysteria, and the media” on his highly rated prime-time Fox News Channel show. “This scaring the living hell out of people—I see it, again, as like, let's bludgeon Trump with this new hoax.” During this same segment, Hannity, who had begun to take the virus more seriously, downplayed the risks except for people with compromised immune systems and older people.⁷⁵

Public opinion polling from Gallup, Pew Research Center, and YouGov indicates that the dismissive coverage had real-world impact. As media reporter Oliver Darcy wrote, “Polls from both Gallup and Pew Research revealed that Republicans—who are largely distrustful of mainstream news organizations and primarily turn to Fox News and other right-wing sources for information on current events—were much less likely to take the coronavirus as seriously as their Democratic counterparts.”⁷⁶ Gallup's poll in March found 42 percent of Republicans “very worried” or “somewhat worried” about coronavirus exposure, compared to 73 percent of Democrats.⁷⁷ A YouGov/*Economist* poll found a strong correlation between worry and media diet among Fox News Channel, CNN, and MSNBC. And Pew found at the same time that while 70 percent of the public said the news media were doing well or fairly well at covering the crisis, a majority said the news media were exaggerating the risks.⁷⁸ Within that overall figure were 76 percent of Republicans—and 79 percent of Fox News Channel viewers—who said the news media were exaggerating the risks.⁷⁹

Commentary on Fox News Channel about the disease itself eventually turned more sober as the virus spread and the president convened a medical task force and began holding press briefings. In fact, prime-time host Tucker Carlson's news-making departure from Hannity and others to say that this crisis was real and should be taken seriously reportedly influenced the president's own approach.⁸⁰ But months had passed—and disbelief and disinformation remained. While Republicans and Democrats in Congress worked with the Trump administration to pass a massive relief bill, there was a blue state/red state divide among some Republican and Democratic governors in their safety restrictions and their plans for reopening. In demonstrations that Trump tweeted approvingly about, groups came to several state capitals in states with Democratic governors to demonstrate for “liberating” their states from quarantining measures.

Noting Fox News Channel commentary and the median age of Fox viewers at sixty-five years old, a group of seventy-four prominent journalism and communications professors in April published an open letter to Rupert Murdoch and Fox CEO Lachlan Murdoch.

They asserted that Fox News Channel coverage by Hannity and others “violated basic journalistic canons,” had misinformed the public, encouraged the president’s dismissiveness, “and was dangerous.”⁸¹

“The misinformation that reaches the Fox News audience is a danger to public health,” the authors wrote. “Indeed, it is not an overstatement to say that your misreporting endangers your own viewers—and not only them, for in a pandemic, individual behavior affects significant numbers of other people as well. Yet by commission as well as omission—direct, uncontested misinformation as well as failure to report the true dimensions of the crisis—Fox News has been derelict in its duty to provide clear and accurate information about COVID-19.” The letter called on the network “to help protect the lives of all Americans—including your elderly viewers—by ensuring that the information you deliver is based on scientific facts.”⁸² Hannity, in response, told *Newsweek* magazine that he had taken the coronavirus crisis seriously.⁸³ Fox reportedly was preparing for numerous public interest lawsuits alleging harm from its coronavirus coverage, according to several news organizations.⁸⁴

Several academic studies in 2020 found a direct correlation between a media diet and misinformation, with Fox News Channel viewers, who tend to be loyal to watching Fox News Channel solely, misinformed.⁸⁵

Coronavirus and the 2020 Campaign

President Trump’s approval ratings declined from March to mid-May, according to several polls. One Navigator poll in May found a majority of Americans—53 percent—approving of his handling of the coronavirus crisis, with declines in support from independents, older voters, and African American voters.⁸⁶ Numerous reports from inside Trump’s reelection campaign indicated that Trump had planned to run for reelection on a booming economy along with the us-versus-them message to his base of supporters on immigration and race that helped him win in 2016.⁸⁷ By May the president had amassed a huge war chest of money—\$212 million—raised by the Trump campaign and the Republican National Committee,⁸⁸ ten times more than the \$20 million raised by the Democratic National Committee and Joe Biden, the presumptive nominee, who would have to raise more money virtually.⁸⁹ (These numbers were later reversed, with Biden spending nearly \$500 million on advertising in the closing months of the campaign.⁹⁰)

Trump characterized himself as a “wartime president.” And he blamed China, which initially had suppressed warnings from local doctors about the deadly new virus emerging there,⁹¹ for the pandemic, repeatedly calling COVID-19 the “Chinese virus.”⁹²

A pro-Trump PAC for the Trump campaign, which was planning a targeted social media messaging campaign as well as regular TV, began releasing ads in several states calling the nominee Biden “Beijing Biden” and reportedly planning to link the former vice president to China, saying that his previous relationship with China was too cozy.⁹³ Biden disputed the attack, saying that Trump had endangered the American people by “believing the Chinese” and that he was much more capable than Trump in dealing with the Chinese and the crisis in the U.S. and abroad.⁹⁴ Trump dramatically removed his mask from the White House balcony after being treated for COVID-19 himself, further identifying not wearing a mask with being strong and dismaying public-health officials over the politicizing of mask-wearing.

President Trump’s rhetoric was echoed on Fox News Channel, by Rush Limbaugh, and conspiracy theorists in social media and online. Trump blamed the Chinese for creating the crisis and perhaps even the virus itself while creating false, anti-Asian, racist associations between the coronavirus and the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community. President Trump repeatedly called the coronavirus the “kung flu” and the “Asian” flu, although experts warned that such characterizations were inciting and dangerous. According to the Asian American Journalists Association, from spring 2020 to one year later, “violence against AAPI communities continue[d] to rise, with a 150 percent increase in reported hate crimes, according to the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, and 3,795 reports of anti-Asian discrimination to the Stop AAPI Hate reporting center.” The journalists site added, “There is evidence to suggest that these numbers are underestimations of the surge of violence in the AAPI community.”⁹⁵

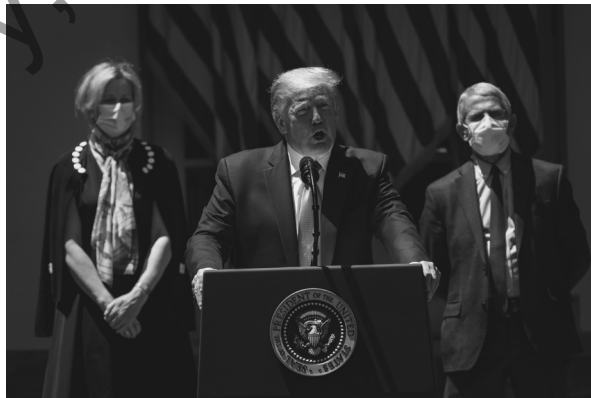


Photo 7.1 Dr. Anthony Fauci and Dr. Deborah Birx participate in a White House coronavirus press conference with President Trump in 2020.

Jabin Botsford/*The Washington Post* via Getty Images

Climate Change

Trends in Public Opinion and Coverage

In the midst of the pandemic in 2020, researchers at Yale University and George Mason University were surprised to find that Americans' acceptance of the existence of climate change—and concern about the issue—were at their highest levels ever in some categories. These findings came at a time when the health and economic crises within the pandemic had swamped the news agenda, and the researchers said that they had been concerned also about the importance of climate change in light of what psychologists call the “*finite pool of worry*” theory, which shows that when people are very concerned about one issue, their concern about others tends to diminish.⁹⁶

In their 2020 annual report, “Climate Change in the American Mind,” researchers found significant agreement that climate change is happening—and significant concern about its effects. Overall, the researchers found that two in three Americans (66 percent) say the issue of global warming is either “extremely,” “very,” or “somewhat” important to them personally, while one in three (33 percent) say it is either “not too” or “not at all” personally important.⁹⁷ Here are some of the report's other findings:

- Seventy-three percent of Americans believe that global warming is happening. Sixty-two percent of Americans understand that global warming is mostly caused by humans. But only 21 percent understand “how strong the level of consensus among scientists is (i.e., that more than 90% of climate scientists think human-caused global warming is happening).”
- Forty-six percent believe that their family will be harmed by global warming. Sixty-two percent believe that global warming will harm Americans overall, while 66 percent believe that people in developing countries will be harmed.
- Seventy-three percent believe that future generations will be harmed—the same percentage who believe that plant and animal species will be harmed.

Finally, the authors of the report wrote, “Many Americans think a variety of health harms, both physical and psychological, will become more common in their community as a result of global warming over the next 10 years, if nothing is done to address it.”⁹⁸

These findings suggest that climate change has “matured as an issue” and become a “durable worry” in Americans' minds, Anthony Leiserowitz, director of the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, told the

New York Times.⁹⁹ Edward Maibach, director of the George Mason Center for Climate Change Communication, added that while Americans have accepted the reality of climate change, until recently they had seen it as a problem distant from the U.S. These latest results, Maibach said, demonstrate that “the majority of Americans see climate change as a clear and present threat to the health of their community.”¹⁰⁰

As we discussed in Chapter 2, for many years major media felt obliged to get “the other side” on the existence of man-made climate change from “climate skeptics” who turned out to be funded by the fossil fuel industry when, in fact, almost all scientists—more than 90 percent—believed in the existence of climate change and said that it was made by man.

The fossil fuel industry hid its own damning research, as investigative journalists later discovered, and scientists were attacked while opponents in Congress, Fox News Channel, and radio hosts such as Rush Limbaugh, operating from the same talking-points playbook, denied the existence of climate change and framed further regulation as “job-killing.” Climate change became more of a partisan issue over the years: It is striking to know that Richard Nixon created the Environmental Protection Agency and that other Republicans have championed the state of the environment as an important issue. In 2013, only 42 percent of Americans believed that climate change existed and was man-made, according to the Yale survey, reflecting what Leiserowitz called a systematic “disinformation campaign” by corporations and organizations opposed to government action to reduce carbon emissions.¹⁰¹

The Environment in the 2020 Presidential Campaign

In the 2016 presidential election, according to one study, there was not a single question about global warming to Donald Trump from debate moderators.¹⁰² The conventional wisdom among many political strategists for many years in the U.S. has been that the environment isn’t a top voting issue compared to jobs and the economy. Politicians and corporations opposed to environmental regulations have often successfully framed the debate as jobs *versus* the environment, while ambitious visions of millions of jobs in a new green economy have been portrayed as gauzy futurism that threatens jobs in fossil fuels. Today, although there is still a partisan split between Republicans and Democrats on environmental issues, younger Republicans as well as young Democrats today see climate change and the environment as important issues facing their generation. While Donald Trump withdrew the U.S. from the international Paris Agreement signed by President Obama and rolled back environmental regulations that he said hurt business and the economy, Joe Biden in 2020 moved to win Democratic voters with an ambitious, \$2 trillion plan to tackle climate change and rebuild infrastructure.¹⁰³ He rejoined the Paris accord as president.



Photo 7.2 Demonstrators called for international action on climate change at a rally in Italy in 2020.

Stefano Guidi/Getty Images

fracking, and Republicans seized on his comment in the second presidential debate that a Biden administration would transition from fossil fuels. “When I think about climate change, the word I think of is ‘jobs,’” Biden said, introducing his climate plans, “good-paying union jobs that will put Americans to work, making the air cleaner for our kids to breathe, restoring our crumbling roads, and bridges and ports.”¹⁰⁵

President Trump, who had called climate change a “hoax,” had said that Biden’s plans were extreme and would “kill” businesses and the energy sector on a day when he announced a “top to bottom overhaul” of a long-standing environmental policy act.¹⁰⁴

Biden framed his plans as job-creating, although he walked a fine line with progressive Democrats with his continued support for

Humanitarian Crises

What Gets Covered and Why

As the following chart indicates, American broadcast TV networks traditionally have tended to focus on U.S.-based stories, although the global nature and U.S. effects of the coronavirus pandemic and climate change have moved these stories up in the U.S. news agenda. Wars and conflicts in which the U.S. has had troops also receive significant coverage, as have major stories in European capitals and some areas of Asia where the U.S. has economic and foreign policy interests. There are notable—and admirable—exceptions and commitment to covering important international stories, including conflicts, natural disasters, and humanitarian crises that do not directly involve Americans, on the major broadcast TV networks’ newscasts and early morning programs. The nature of cable news has allowed for ongoing coverage of natural disasters and some humanitarian crises, although many stories remain uncovered and unseen on television. The media spotlight of natural disasters has led to U.S. relief efforts by the government and privately—for example, with the earthquake in Haiti in 2010 and the earthquake and tsunami in Japan in 2011.

Table 7.1 Top Twenty Stories of 2019

Mins	Total	ABC	CBS	NBC
President Trump impeachment	493	171	168	154
Ukraine-US: Zelensky-Trump call	325	112	118	95
Russia-US: election interference	298	100	100	98
Winter weather	249	118	68	63
Boeing 737 MAX fleet grounded	209	47	78	84
Hurricane Dorian in Bahamas	204	69	72	64
Syria civil war: Kurds zone, Idlib	185	49	90	46
Border controls on Mexico line	170	49	65	56
Jeffrey Epstein sex scandal	152	50	43	60
Federal budget, deficit, shutdown	149	47	55	47
College applications bribe scandal	142	48	38	56
Iran-US frictions in Persian Gulf	128	40	42	45
Tornado season	127	51	41	34
Smoking: e-cigarette vaping risks	126	23	52	50
Wild forest fires in western states	124	49	36	39
2020: Joe Biden campaign	120	41	46	34
School safety, violence prevention	110	33	28	49
TV's Jussie Smollett fake attack	109	43	31	35
Christmas holiday season	108	30	38	40
Measles outbreak: skipped shots	106	19	41	47
Total Top Twenty Stories	3634	1188	1250	1195
Total Campaign 2020 Coverage	398	129	139	130

Source: Andrew Tyndall, "Year in Review 2019," *Tyndall Report*, <http://tyndallreport.com/yearinreview2019/>.

In his many years of tracking news coverage on the ABC, NBC, and CBS evening newscasts, Andrew Tyndall has seen their ratings decline with the expansion of the news and entertainment universe—and then regain an

audience over the past ten years, during a decade of major news. Today, the three nightly newscasts combined draw a large audience of about twenty-four-million viewers per night.

In the first six months of 2020, Tyndall said in an interview with the author, the three broadcast networks devoted about a quarter of their total news minutes to the coronavirus story, with a total of 2,289 minutes to the coronavirus story out of a “news hole” of 7,059.¹⁰⁶ The three networks gave 72 minutes to coverage of the implications of the crisis for U.S. foreign policy—with a separate total of 406 minutes to strictly international coverage—i.e., not U.S.-based—coverage of the pandemic. “The networks certainly geared up to cover the story from Europe and China,” Tyndall said. “But the coverage accelerated and intensified once Americans started dying.”¹⁰⁷

The coronavirus story was overwhelmingly the most-covered story of 2020, followed by Campaign 2020 and then George Floyd as the second-most covered individual story. “Up until this year, it looked as if CNN domestically was turning in to an all-politics channel [with the Trump presidency],” Tyndall observed. “In my view, they’ve re-established their reputation this year as an international news channel.”¹⁰⁸

Major print news organizations, including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Wall Street Journal*, regularly cover international news with their foreign news bureaus. Today, courageous freelance correspondents also report at great personal risk from wars in the Middle East and other countries. But, on TV news, despite trends in international news in 2020, when it comes to ongoing coverage, many countries and even whole continents—Africa, South America, and virtually all of East Asia—go largely uncovered on a continuing basis unless the president pays a visit or there is a dramatic event or conflict.

Even then even a conflict that is viewed as internal may not get much coverage. “The TV networks’ bureaus and coverage reflect the perceived foreign-policy interests of the U.S., and we’ve seen much more coverage of China in recent years,” Tyndall said. “But there’s very little ongoing coverage from India, and Mexico to me is the most egregious example of a lack of ongoing coverage.”¹⁰⁹ When it comes to coverage of a natural disaster abroad, dramatic and compelling video is an important determinant of how much TV coverage the story receives.

Shining a Light: The Importance of International News

As data from the independent Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) show every year,¹¹⁰ journalists and press freedom are under attack around the world today, from repressive regimes to corrupt officials as well as in wars where journalists themselves increasingly are targets. The work of

jailed and murdered journalists takes place not only in wars but also under regimes in countries that often go largely uncovered on a regular basis in the U.S. Americans have been presumed to be most interested or even perhaps only interested in conflicts in which the U.S. has a direct interest—cynically described by some as “boots on the ground.”

Recent surveys, as we have discussed, have found increased disengagement and skepticism about American action abroad in the face of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and economic problems at home. “Getting the public’s attention, let alone commitment to deal with international issues is as challenging as it has ever been in the modern era,” Andrew Kohut, founding director of the Pew Research Center, wrote in a 2013 report tracking American public opinion on global engagement.¹¹¹

Christiane Amanpour and Anderson Cooper have both argued for the importance of shining a light abroad. “Some news executives say that the American public doesn’t care about international coverage, but my experience has been that viewers do care about stories that are important and well told,” Amanpour said in her interview with the author. “Besides, news isn’t a commodity like soda or wine—it’s a public service.”¹¹²

As Amanpour and UN officials have noted, the civil wars and conflicts today are humanitarian crises. “The civil wars that have taken over,” she said, “are not soldier against soldier, but soldiers against civilians and vulnerable people.”¹¹³

Anderson Cooper—who reported from many wars and disasters as a freelance correspondent before joining CNN—has said that he feels a responsibility as a journalist to witness and report. “Anybody who has been to places where things are happening, whether it’s the earthquake in Haiti, the tsunami in South Asia, or any war—you feel a responsibility to get it right and to bear witness to what people are going through,” Cooper said in an interview with the author. “You know, there’s nothing sadder than being in Somalia and coming upon a family who has died on the side of the road and, watching over the course of weeks as they disintegrate into nothing, literally into nothing. You know, a patch of hair is usually all that remains after several weeks in the sun. To me, you can’t necessarily stop somebody from dying or being killed; you can’t stop horrible things from happening.

But to know their names, to try to honor the lives they lived—I believe that is important.”¹¹⁴

The Syrian Civil War

Having campaigned as an anti-war candidate who would end the wars begun under President Bush, Barack Obama ended his presidency with some American troops still in Iraq and Afghanistan eight years later.¹¹⁵ President Obama was reluctant to engage in a third war in the Middle East

in Syria, and 60 percent of Americans in 2012 said the U.S. did not have a responsibility to act in Syria.¹¹⁶ Obama relied more heavily on drone attacks and covert operations during his presidency, and he was reluctant to back Syrian rebels in the war against Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, even in the face of evidence that he had used chemical weapons against his own people and hundreds of thousands of civilian casualties in the Syrian civil war. The president was criticized for not mobilizing public opinion in the U.S. toward taking action in Syria. “He has not tried to mobilize the country . . . to explain to the country what the stakes are, why these wars have gone the way they have,” Eliot Cohen, a military historian who backed the war in Iraq, told the *New York Times* at the end of Obama’s presidency in 2016. “For all his faults, with Bush, there was this visceral desire to win.”¹¹⁷

The Syrian civil war and the humanitarian and refugee crisis caused by what has been called a “proxy war” is a case where media coverage appears not to have influenced U.S. foreign policy. International concern over whether Bashar al-Assad used chemical warfare against his own people and the Obama administration’s consideration of what to do after Syria had crossed the “bright line” President Obama had set over chemical warfare made the Syrian conflict the most-covered international story on the American broadcast evening newscasts in 2013—and the fourth most-covered story overall.

By 2015 the war in Syria had dropped to the twelfth-most covered story in a year when winter weather and Donald Trump were the two most-covered stories. Syria became the most dangerous place in the world for journalists from 2012 to 2014, according to figures from CPJ,¹¹⁸ with American foreign correspondent Marie Colvin and others killed in shelling, James Foley and journalists from the U.S. and other nations beheaded, and many local citizen journalists dead or silenced. Journalists who remained and advocates for greater intervention by the U.S. and other countries were frustrated by the lack of global action in the war, which had killed more than 250,000 people and displaced twelve million, according to UN estimates,¹¹⁹ by 2015.

The flood of refugees fleeing the Syrian war in rafts and small boats—and the migration crisis and response in Europe and other nations—was widely covered by American and international media in 2015 and 2016, with images and interviews of families with their children. But the war in Syria—with video of children in villages where starvation was being used as a tool of war, smuggled out by citizen journalists and played on TV news—became even more perilous to report as the war dragged on. Ban Ki-moon, secretary-general of the UN, lamented the lack of global action. “The horrific war in Syria continues to worsen and bleed beyond its borders. A cold calculation seems to be taking hold: that little can be done except to arm the parties and watch the conflict rage. The international community must not abandon the people of Syria and the region to never-ending waves of cruelty and crisis.”¹²⁰

Terrorism

Before the coronavirus pandemic dominated the world's attention, terrorist attacks were the national and international story of the decade—in media and politics. One of the most widely covered attacks came in Paris in 2015. A small team of suicide bombers carried out a series of coordinated terrorist attacks and mass shootings in Paris—in a concert hall, a sports stadium, and cafes and restaurants—that seemed designed to strike at symbols of European culture and enjoyment. Eighty-nine people who were attending a rock concert were shot and killed inside the concert hall, and the death toll reached 130, with 400 wounded.¹²¹ The Islamic State terrorist group known as ISIS, or ISIL, claimed responsibility for the attacks, which the group said were in retaliation for French participation in U.S.-led bombings of ISIS strongholds in Syria and Iraq.¹²² The president of France, Francois Hollande, declared the Paris attacks an act of war and ordered further French air strikes on suspected ISIS targets in Syria.¹²³

Revelations that the terrorists were Belgian- and French-born men who apparently had been trained by ISIS in Syria led to fears of further terrorist attacks and calls by right-wing populist leaders like France's Marine Le Pen to close the tide of Syrian refugees flooding into Europe.¹²⁴ Two of the terrorists had apparently gained reentry to Europe through Greece by posing as Syrian refugees.¹²⁵ There were questions about policing and lack of intelligence-sharing in the European Union, along with calls for understanding and combating alienation and radicalization to terrorism.

Extensive news coverage, including horrifying video of a pregnant woman hanging from a ledge trying to escape the concert hall, shattered wine glasses, and bodies in the street,¹²⁶ brought the Paris attacks vividly home to millions of viewers and readers.

Less than three weeks later, Syed Rizwan Farook, an American health department inspector, and Tashfeen Malik, his Pakistani-born wife, pledging loyalty to ISIS and martyrdom, killed fourteen people and seriously injured twenty-two people at a Christmas party with Farook's coworkers in Redlands, California.¹²⁷

In a White House address, President Obama—who had been criticized by Republicans and conservative media for what they maintained was the president's unwillingness to call terrorism terrorism—defined the mass shootings as an act of terrorism as well as “a perverted interpretation of Islam.”¹²⁸ The attacks were praised by ISIS, and FBI officials said that the couple appeared to have been self-radicalized over several years of consuming “poison on the Internet.”¹²⁹

American Muslim groups condemned the attacks, which they reported were leading to an increase in anti-Muslim hate crimes in the U.S.¹³⁰ Then-Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump ramped up his

anti-Muslim rhetoric after these attacks, calling for a “total and complete” ban on Muslims entering the U.S. “until our country’s representatives can figure out what is going on.”¹³¹ Trump’s statement was widely condemned, including by the White House, Hillary Clinton, and the Pentagon, which said in a statement that “anything that bolsters ISII’s narrative and pits the United States against the Muslim faith is certainly not only contrary to our values, but contrary to our national security.”¹³²

The Center for Strategic and International Studies, a security think tank, has defined *terrorism* as “the deliberate use—or threat—of violence by non-state actors in order to achieve political goals and create a broad psychological impact.”¹³³ The Paris and San Bernardino attacks and other terrorist attacks in recent years illustrate the ability of terrorists to strike fear through random violence and to recruit through sophisticated propaganda on social media. Several polls taken by the Gallup polling organization in 2015 prior to the Paris attacks found Americans increasingly worried about the possibility of attacks in the U.S., with 51 percent of respondents in 2015 expressing a great deal of concern about attacks in the U.S., an increase of 12 percentage points over 2014 measures.¹³⁴

Terrorism in 2015 became the third-highest issue on the public’s list of concerns, exceeded only by worry about health care and the economy. “Worry that oneself or a member of one’s family will be a victim of terrorism has drifted up this year to the point where 49% of Americans say they are very or somewhat worried, the highest rating on this measure since 2001,” the year of the 9/11 attacks in the U.S., wrote Frank Newport, Gallup’s editor in chief.¹³⁵

The Fear Frame

In several books published since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, sociologist and media scholar David Altheide found that “the use of the word *fear* is widespread in American life and, increasingly, throughout much of Europe as well.”¹³⁶ Altheide, who has tracked references to fear in newspapers since the 1980s, blamed “the entertainment format, use of visuals, emerging icons of fear, slogans and especially the emphasis on the fear frame and ‘evil’ in the media”¹³⁷ for what he called an emerging discourse of fear that, he maintains, allows the media and politicians to play on people’s innate fears of harm to themselves and their loved ones.

Sociologist Barry Glassner, in his book *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things*, wrote that media coverage of crime, “the war on drugs,” and hyped reports, primarily on TV, about atypical threats, all treat isolated incidents as trends and misdirect attention from an ongoing situation to an alarming exception, leaving audiences fearful but not empowered to act.¹³⁸ As Sissela Bok, Brigitte Nacos, and others have noted, images of violence on TV and the Internet, including

terrorist violence, are not simply reported once but rebroadcast “over and over again until they become burned in the mind’s eye.”¹³⁹

The widely used phrase “war on terror”—which was first employed by the George W. Bush administration to indicate the need for a warlike response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11—is, when you think about it, an odd phrasing: It’s not a war on terrorism; it’s a war on terror that seems to speak to battling an unending fear. “The little secret here is that the vagueness of the phrase was deliberately (or instinctively) calculated by its sponsors,” Zbigniew Brzezinski, a former national security adviser to President Jimmy Carter, later contended in an article criticizing the phrase. “Constant reference to a ‘war on terror’ did accomplish one major objective: It stimulated the emergence of a culture of fear. Fear obscures reason, intensifies emotions and makes it easier for . . . politicians to mobilize the public on behalf of the policies they want to pursue.”¹⁴⁰

The reluctance of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton to use phrases such as “Islamic extremism” in describing terrorist attacks was characterized by Republicans as the Democrats being “soft on terrorism.” That was a prominent phrase used by Republican candidates in the 2016 presidential election, and it also has been a prominent story line repeated over the years by Sean Hannity, Laura Ingraham, and other hosts on Fox News Channel as well as on conservative talk radio. In the 2014 congressional elections, several ads for Republican candidates visually linked frightening footage from ISIS videos with Democratic candidates for Congress, blaming the growth of terrorism on Obama, Clinton, and the Democrats.¹⁴¹

More than a decade after the terrorists attacks of September 11, 2001, that killed more than three thousand people on U.S. soil, 9/11 continued to have a powerful hold on the American public’s collective consciousness. At the same time, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in response to 9/11 have made Americans more skeptical about engaging in war and “nation-building,” more distressed about the government’s handling of terrorism, and more divided about how to fight terrorism in the U.S. and abroad.

On the tenth anniversary of 9/11, the Pew Research Center found in polling that “virtually all adults said they remembered exactly where they were or what they were doing the moment they heard” of the stunning, tragic attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C.¹⁴² Ninety-seven percent of Americans who were alive in 2001 could recall where they were on 9/11 ten years later—and the recall was as high among Americans younger than thirty, who would have been eight to nineteen years old, as among older Americans.

Only the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963 and, for older Americans, the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor in 1941 that led to U.S. entry into World War II, had such high rates of recall.¹⁴³ Perceptions of the emotional and political impact of 9/11 were high ten years later, according

to the 2011 survey, with 75 percent of respondents saying the attacks had affected them “a great deal” and 67 percent agreeing with the statement that “the country has changed in a major way” since 9/11.¹⁴⁴

Before the coronavirus pandemic, analysts of foreign policy and world history noted that, compared to World War II, the Cuban missile crisis and other threats of nuclear war during the Cold War, the contemporary world, particularly the U.S., was a far less dangerous place. But, as the Pew researchers found after terrorist attacks, many people *felt* fearful. Seeking to explain the difference between perceived threat and real threat, Jonathan Rauch, quoting experts on terrorism and psychology, wrote, “People are biased to overestimate the likelihood of the sorts of events that stand out in our memory, as violence and mayhem do, and as peace and quiet do not.”¹⁴⁵

Islamophobia in Media Coverage and Politics

Many studies over the years have found that media coverage of Muslims in U.S. and international media is overwhelmingly negative.¹⁴⁶ Several recent studies have found that the word *Muslim* continues to be linked to the word *terrorism* in media coverage and political debate. Fox News Channel, in particular, has featured many commentators lambasting Democrats and the American government for what they call dangerous “political correctness” (echoing Donald Trump) in not labeling terrorist attacks “Islamic jihad,” while blaming Hillary Clinton, Obama, and the Democrats for the rise of ISIS and terrorist attacks. Cable news panels convened after a terrorist attack often ask a question that implies an answer: “Does Islam Promote Violence?” as one CNN segment asked in an on-air headline. The Muslim guest on the program then is usually asked to disavow terrorism and to seemingly speak on behalf of the world’s 1.6 billion Muslims.¹⁴⁷

“We still see this expectation that Muslim institutions have to come out and condemn things that you wouldn’t expect other groups have to condemn,” maintained Corey Saylor, legislative director for the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), a Muslim advocacy group. “There’s the assumption of collective responsibility. The number one victims of ISIS are Muslims; the notion that somehow we’re not fully committed to combating that twisted ideology is difficult to wrap your mind around.”¹⁴⁸

In a 2015 study, Media Tenor International, the Swiss research group that analyzes media coverage, found that, with the rise of ISIS and other terrorist groups claiming to act in the name of Islam, media coverage of Islam had become more negative than at any time since 9/11.¹⁴⁹ Coding and examining 2.6 million Western news stories from ten American, British, and German news outlets from 2001 to 2014, the researchers found that most coverage depicted Islam, Muslims, and Muslim organizations as a source of violence and a security risk while seldom dealing with the lives of ordinary Muslims.¹⁵⁰

In the days following the 9/11 attacks, President Bush made a point of visiting a Washington, D.C., mosque and emphasizing that jihadism and Al Qaeda were a perversion of a peaceful religion.

“Muslims [in America] are doctors, lawyers, law professors, members of the military, entrepreneurs, shopkeepers, moms and dads,” Bush said. “And they need to be treated with respect. In our anger and emotion, our fellow Americans must treat each other with respect.”¹⁵¹ But as media coverage of Muslim Americans receded, the Media Tenor researchers found, terrorist attacks and extremist leaders had supplanted coverage of ordinary Americans who were Muslims. Looking at the “religious protagonists” in news stories on international evening news programs from 2013 to 2015, Media Tenor’s research found a lack of the voices of Muslim religious leaders and very little positive coverage of Islam, compared to coverage of the leaders of other religions.¹⁵²

When researchers Erik Bleich and A. Maurits van der Veen coded articles from 1996 to 2015 in national newspapers from the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal* to the *Denver Post* for how they portrayed Muslims, Jews, and Catholics, they found that stories that referenced Muslims were overwhelmingly negative.¹⁵³ “Given the prominence of violent Islamist terrorism and extremism since September 2001, negative stories about Muslims may simply be a result of journalists reporting the news,” they wrote in 2018. “We examined this and found that U.S. newspapers associate Muslims with far more negativity than terrorism or extremism would explain. Further, articles about Muslims that have nothing to do with terrorism are substantially more negative than articles about Catholics, Jews or Hindus.”¹⁵⁴

In an interview with the author, Akbar Ahmed, the author of several books on contemporary Islam, decried what he saw as a “dehumanization of Muslims, a reductionism in Islam” after 9/11, “so that 19 terrorists in 9/11 became equated to the entire Muslim world.” He added, “This is very counterproductive to the government’s goal of winning hearts and minds in the Muslim world.”¹⁵⁵ More recently, Ahmed, who is the former ambassador of Pakistan to Great Britain, has called for more reporting on Muslims in the U.S. and around the world.

Far-Right Domestic Terrorism

In recent years there has been an increase in far-right terrorist attacks and plots in the U.S. “Over the past decade, attackers motivated by right-wing political ideologies have committed dozens of shootings, bombings and other acts of violence, far more than any other category of domestic extremist,” Wesley Lowery, Kimberly Kindy, and Andrew Ba Tran reported in 2018, analyzing data from the Global Terrorism Database, a federally

funded operation that has tracked terrorist attacks in the U.S. and globally since 1970. “While the data show a decades-long drop-off in violence by left-wing groups, violence by white supremacists and other far-right attackers has been on the rise since Barack Obama’s presidency—and has surged since President Trump took office.”¹⁵⁶

Trump was widely condemned across the political spectrum for saying that there were “some very fine people” among the far-right demonstrators chanting racist, anti-Semitic slogans in Charlottesville and for failing to disavow white supremacists in the 2020 presidential debates. He consistently denied that there was any connection between his rhetoric and the rise in hate crimes and far-right attacks such as the mass shooting by a white supremacist who gunned down Latino shoppers at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, in 2019.¹⁵⁷ “If you have politicians saying things like our nation is under attack, that there are these marauding bands of immigrants coming in to this country, that plays into this right-wing narrative,” said Gary LaFree, criminology professor and founding director of the organization that maintains the Global Terrorism Database. “They begin to think it’s ok to use violence.”¹⁵⁸

In 2020 a report from the nonpartisan Center for Strategic and International Studies concluded, “Far-right terrorism has significantly outpaced terrorism from other types of perpetrators, including from far-left networks and individuals inspired by the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. Right-wing attacks and plots account for the majority of all terrorist incidents in the United States since 1994, and the total number of right-wing attacks and plots has grown significantly during the past six years.”¹⁵⁹ The report found that “right-wing extremists perpetrated two thirds of the attacks and plots in the United States in 2019 and over 90 percent between January 1 and May 8, 2020.”¹⁶⁰ In its annual assessment of threats to the U.S., the Department of Homeland Security said in the fall of 2020 that violent white supremacy was “the most persistent and lethal threat to the United States.”¹⁶¹ The agency had reached a similar conclusion in 2021. “I am particularly concerned about white supremacist violent extremists who have been exceptionally lethal in their abhorrent, targeted attacks in recent years,” the acting secretary of DHS, Chad Wolf, wrote in the report, which an intelligence official had accused DHS of withholding for several weeks.¹⁶²

Some online discussion groups and anonymous forums today have helped spread far-right extremist views—and have created a terrible sense of community in the minds of lone terrorists. The man charged in the El Paso shooting published a 2,500-word, hate-filled rant on the 8chan (now 8kun) anonymous online message board that has been frequented by white supremacists.¹⁶³ The man who allegedly murdered eleven people and injured others during a ceremony at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh in 2018 had regularly posted anti-Semitic rants on Gab, a small

social media network that, with fewer restrictions than Facebook and Twitter, has been described as “a gathering spot for white supremacists and others in the extreme alt-right.”¹⁶⁴ The Australian-born white supremacist who was convicted of murdering fifty-one worshippers in the mosque shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand, had posted a manifesto on his Facebook and Twitter accounts as 8chan—and even showed part of the attacks on Facebook Live.¹⁶⁵

Case Study: The War in Iraq

The Iraq War—which continues to cast a long shadow over American foreign policy and American public opinion about engaging in other wars and conflicts—is a case study in how elite media, in the post-9/11 patriotic climate, failed to independently verify an administration’s case for war, including reports by United Nations inspectors and debate within the U.S. intelligence community over how data were being interpreted.

As Michael Massing recounted in his book *Now They Tell Us: The American Press and Iraq*, on September 8, 2002, the *New York Times* published a disturbing front-page headline: “U.S. Says Hussein Intensifies Quest for A-Bomb Parts.” “More than a decade after Saddam Hussein agreed to give up weapons of mass destruction, Iraq had stepped up its quest for nuclear weapons and has embarked on a worldwide hunt for materials to make an atomic bomb, Bush administration officials said today,” the 3,600-word article began.¹⁶⁶ “In the last 14 months,” *New York Times* reporters Michael R. Gordon and Judith Miller wrote, “Iraq has sought to buy thousands of specifically designed aluminum tubes, which American officials believe were intended as components of centrifuges to enrich uranium.”¹⁶⁷ The specifications of these tubes, the article stated, persuaded “American intelligence officials that they were meant for Iraq’s nuclear program.”¹⁶⁸

Quoting their own interviews with anonymous Iraqi defectors as well as information they attributed to unnamed American officials, Gordon and Miller wrote, “Iraqi defectors who once worked for the nuclear weapons establishment have told American officials that acquiring nuclear arms is again a top Iraqi priority.”¹⁶⁹

In an appearance that same morning on NBC’s *Meet the Press*, Vice President Dick Cheney said that the *New York Times* story was public evidence for his earlier speech that there is “no doubt” that Saddam Hussein

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had “weapons of mass destruction” and was preparing to use them against the U.S. In appearances that day on other network and cable TV programs, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Secretary of State Colin Powell referenced the *New York Times* story, as did national security adviser Condoleezza Rice.¹⁷⁰ Rice quoted directly from a story attributed to “administration hard-liners” in the *New York Times*. Rice raised the specter of what might happen if the U.S. did not act. “[W]e don’t want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud,” she said.¹⁷¹ Four days after the *New York Times* story was published, President Bush himself made the aluminum tubes story a key piece of evidence in the president’s case for war in an important speech before the UN General Assembly.¹⁷²

Coverage of Doubt about Weapons of Mass Destruction in Other Media

While administration officials were invoking the *New York Times* story to help make their case, Scott Ritter, a former U.S. Marine intelligence officer and chief weapons inspector in Iraq, was interviewed from Baghdad that same day on CNN’s website, CNN.com, expressing his view that the administration had not provided any evidence to substantiate its allegations about Saddam Hussein and WMDs.¹⁷³ Chuck Hagel, Republican senator from Nebraska, said at the time that “the CIA had ‘absolutely no evidence’ to prove Iraq possessed or would soon possess nuclear weapons.”¹⁷⁴ And—two days before the *New York Times* aluminum tubes story was published, Jonathan Landay, a Washington, D.C.-based reporter for the Knight Ridder newspaper chain, published the first of several articles that—in 2002—highlighted divisions within the U.S. intelligence community over evidence of WMDs months before the U.S. went to war against Iraq.

Headlined “Lack of Hard Evidence of Iraqi Weapons Worries Top U.S. Officials,” Landay’s article began with this: “Senior U.S. officials with access to top-secret intelligence on Iraq say they have detected no alarming increase in the threat that Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein poses to American security and Middle East stability.”¹⁷⁵ Landay’s stories were carried in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and other newspapers in the Knight Ridder chain—but they did not have the same impact on politicians, policy, or public opinion as the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*. The *Washington Post*, in fact, had run a story by reporter Joby Warrick about challenges by “independent

experts” to the claims about the tubes’ potential nuclear use (as opposed to conventional rockets) and also noted reports that the administration was “trying to quiet dissent among its own experts over how to interpret the evidence.”¹⁷⁶ But, as Michael Massing recounted in his groundbreaking account of media and the Iraq War,¹⁷⁷ the story was inside the newspaper, on page 18, and “caused little stir.”¹⁷⁸

In 2004 both the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* issued extraordinary mea culpas for their prewar reporting on the Iraq War. “We have found a number of instances of coverage that was not as rigorous as it should have been,” the editors of the *Times* wrote.¹⁷⁹ “Looking back, we wish we had been more aggressive in re-examining the claims as new evidence emerged—or failed to emerge,” they added. “Editors at several levels who should have been challenging reporters and pressing for more skepticism were perhaps too intent on rushing scoops in the paper” while the dire accounts of Iraqi defectors “were not always weighed” against their desire to have Saddam Hussein ousted.

The editors added that any misgivings about whether the aluminum tubes the Administration said were being sought were for nuclear use were “buried” as “hints” in the *Times*’ article in which “Administration officials were allowed to hold forth at length,” including the reference to fears that the first sign of proof that Iraq had WMDs would be a nuclear cloud.¹⁸⁰

There was congressional debate and misgiving among some Republicans as well as Democrats over the 2003 vote to authorize the use of force and invade Iraq following the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan by the U.S. and allies to fight Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda. But with strong public support, pressure to give the president what he needed, and strong insinuations from Republicans that opposition was dangerous, Congress voted for the Iraq War resolution by lopsided votes. Hillary Clinton’s vote later was used against her in the 2008 election by Barack Obama, who campaigned against the by-then unpopular war and President Bush, and then again in 2016 by Sen. Bernie Sanders, who pointed out that, unlike the then-senator Hillary Clinton, he had been one of a few senators to vote against the Iraq War resolution.

We know today that this aluminum tubes story was wrong, as was much of the reporting and analysis by some of the most respected and influential news media in the so-called walk-up to the war in Iraq. The intelligence used to justify the case for war against Iraq was deeply flawed, as many articles and books have since documented. Saddam Hussein did

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not have the WMDs that were feared—nor was he allied with Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda, although officials in the Bush administration conflated the two.¹⁸¹ And, in pursuit of the second goal stated by the Bush administration—liberating the Iraqi people from a dictator and “fighting the terrorists there so they don’t come here,” as President Bush put it—the U.S. instead was engaged for many years in a war of occupation, insurgency, and sectarian violence.

The war that led to many American and Iraqi casualties and that, as many military and civilian experts have since acknowledged, fanned anti-U.S. sentiment in the Muslim world and remains unresolved to today.

By 2013 the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were projected to cost American taxpayers \$4 to \$6 trillion, according to Harvard budget expert Linda Bilmes, taking into account the medical care of wounded veterans and expensive repairs to a force depleted by more than a decade of fighting. The two wars became the most expensive wars in U.S. history and placed “significant long-term” constraints on the federal budget, particularly the national security budget.¹⁸² The conflict divided the country and cost President Bush political capital for his domestic agenda as his popularity sank and both Republicans and Democrats questioned the administration’s handling of the war.

In the post-9/11 climate, amid patriotic rhetoric and genuine fears of terrorism, the news media and political leaders did not serve the president or the American people well in the months before the war began in 2003. Many TV news hosts and commentators wore American flag pins in their lapels in the aftermath of 9/11—and if you declined to do so, you could be criticized.¹⁸³

Cable TV—which had given the world its first live coverage of war with the Persian Gulf War in 1991—added to the drumbeat for war with unquestioning, flag-waving reporting that helped make the Bush administration’s case for war. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq both began on U.S. television with Super Bowl-style countdowns to the start of the war and TV miniseries-style titles from the military and on-air “branding” with graphics.¹⁸⁴ A study conducted in 2003 by Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) tracking the frequencies of pro-war and anti-war commentators on the major networks found that pro-war views were overwhelmingly more frequent.¹⁸⁵ Some corporate advertisers complained that CNN was being “un-patriotic” in showing civilian casualties and devastation in Afghanistan, the president of CNN later said.¹⁸⁶

In what Robert Entman has called the “*cascading activation model*,” the ideas and feelings that support a particular frame can cascade down from an administration’s expressions about an event to elites, including political leaders and journalists, who then canvas their networks of customary sources.¹⁸⁷ In the months preceding the war in Iraq, Entman wrote, with elite media not questioning sufficiently the administration’s case for war and the need to protect the American people from danger, in the battle for frame parity between two opposing frames, the choice *not* to go to war lost resoundingly to the choice to go to war, in the media *and* in Congress.¹⁸⁸ “People in the media are now saying, ‘We were all wrong,’” Knight Ridder reporter Jonathan Landay said in an interview with the author. “We were *not* all wrong.”¹⁸⁹

Wartime Coverage

Dissent and Wartime Propaganda

Dissent in wartime—in politics and in the media—has often been squelched, in the U.S. and other democracies, in what is called the “rally round the flag” phenomenon in which there is pressure on all citizens, including journalists, to be patriotic and support the country’s troops, often with the argument that dissent or critical reporting is not only unpatriotic but dangerous. At the same, the U.S., as a vast, seemingly self-sufficient country, historically has had a strong isolationist tradition, a reluctance to fight in “other people’s” far-off wars. This isolationist tradition has led to government propaganda efforts to *build* support for U.S. engagement and troops in both World War I and World War II.

During World War II, the U.S. government created an Office of War Information that operated from 1942 to 1945 to build support for the war effort at home and abroad. The government commissioned Hollywood filmmaker Frank Capra to produce a 1942 documentary film series, *Why We Fight*, about why it was necessary to fight the Nazis.¹⁹⁰ A popular song about “Rosie the Riveter,” along with government newsreels, successfully promoted the idea that it was patriotic—and feminine—for real-life women to work in welding and airplane factories during the war.¹⁹¹ The iconic illustration of Rosie the Riveter is still seen—and adapted—today.

During World War II, photographers from *Life* magazine, in particular, documented the battles and the lives of U.S. soldiers as well as civilians in compelling photographs that are still famous today. But, as George H. Roeder

noted in his book *The Censored War: American Visual Experience During World War II*, “censors strictly prohibited visual or written depictions of atrocities by American troops or their allies,” and even atrocities *against* U.S. and allied soldiers were censored in the war against Hitler’s Nazi Germany, Japan, and the Holocaust.¹⁹² At one point, however, the government released some photos of U.S. casualties to help continue support for the war.¹⁹³

During the war in Iraq, in a survey of 210 reporters and editors reporting from Iraq and editing stories about the war in its early years, MJ Bear and this author found that many media outlets self-censored graphic imagery and content, including the hanging of bodies of American contractors killed in Fallujah, out of concerns over public reaction to graphic content. These journalists said they often put online graphic content that they did not publish in print.¹⁹⁴

Media-Military Relationship

Before the Iraq War, according to interviews with several military journalists by this author, public-relations officials in the Department of Defense argued that the military should return to what had actually been common practice in the U.S. in World War II: “embedding” journalists with troops. The stated reason for keeping the media largely out of the brief Persian Gulf War in 1991 was fear over the inadvertent broadcasting of information to the enemy over the then-new twenty-four-hour satellite news channels. But another reason was the long-held belief among many in the military that the media had “lost” the Vietnam War by bringing that conflict—which was labeled the “living-room war”¹⁹⁵—into American homes. Increasingly skeptical reporting by *New York Times* correspondent David Halberstam, CBS News correspondent Morley Safer, and other print and TV correspondents questioned the U.S. accounts at the daily press briefings that reporters dubbed “the five-o-clock follies” and did their own independent reporting.¹⁹⁶

Daniel Hallin, in his book *The Uncensored War*, maintained that public opinion, along with an anti-war movement that attracted many young people, was shifting along with the coverage during the Vietnam War.¹⁹⁷ But Democratic president Lyndon Johnson, along with President John F. Kennedy before him, believed that negative reporting on Vietnam from the *New York Times* and CBS News, in particular, had affected public support. LBJ tried to get reporters from the *Times* and CBS News fired for their reporting, but their news organizations stuck by them and their reporting.¹⁹⁸ Following the surprising defeat of U.S.-backed South Vietnamese troops in Saigon in the Tet Offensive in 1968, CBS News anchor Walter Cronkite traveled to Vietnam to report.

In a headline-making statement, Cronkite told his audience that he believed that the U.S. was “mired in stalemate” in the long war.¹⁹⁹ Cronkite at the time was called “the most trusted man in America,” and the CBS

News, NBC News, and ABC News prime-time newscasts commanded huge audiences every night and played a major agenda-setting role. The pronouncement by Cronkite, a then-rare step to editorialize, is considered an important moment in the interplay of coverage and public opinion in Vietnam.²⁰⁰

It's surprising to think about today, but during the Vietnam War, TV correspondents traveled freely with U.S. troops, without handlers. "We would grab a ride with soldiers on a C-130 transport plane," former CBS Vietnam correspondent Jed Duvall recalled in an interview with the author, "and our stories were shipped to CBS in New York, on film."²⁰¹

The news media were largely excluded from the initial fighting in the war in Afghanistan against Al Qaeda in 2001, although a group of journalists from major print news organizations were allowed to cover some operations by U.S. Special Operations forces. The success of that operation, Bryan Whitman, then deputy assistant secretary of defense for media operations, said in interviews with the author in 2003 and 2004, led to the government's decision to embed six hundred journalists with troops in Iraq. "From the Defense Department's standpoint, whether countering disinformation from the enemy or giving the American people the opportunity to see their military at work, embedding seemed to work well," Whitman said. "The feedback from the large majority of journalists has been that they were able to work within the guidelines of embedding while maintaining their standards as journalists. One of our guiding principles going forward is that it's important for the American people to have a broad understanding of the U.S. military, and we have to look for ways to include journalists that don't compromise missions."²⁰²

"Embedding was a brilliant strategy based on a more sophisticated understanding of the role the media can play," Robert Hodierne, the former editor of *Army Times* and a veteran Vietnam War correspondent, said in an interview with the author.²⁰³ "An objective look at the military during war shows that there are good stories to be told, with people often behaving in skillful, courageous ways," Hodierne added. "One interesting aspect of embedding is that—in contrast to the post-Vietnam era—there are now hundreds of journalists in their late 20s who have had a formative and generally positive experience with the U.S. military."²⁰⁴

John Donovan, a correspondent for ABC's *Nightline*, was one of the "unilaterals," or unembedded, reporters who covered the Iraq combat for U.S. media. Donovan believes that some significant stories were missed in the American TV networks' focus on dramatic footage of U.S. troops rolling into Iraq live and on television. "The only thing I have against embedding is that the news media itself falls in love with the glitz and glamour and whiz-bang of embedded reporting and puts so much emphasis on embedding that it lets the public forget they're not seeing the war itself, but a tiny slice of the war," Donovan said in an interview with author. "Embedded reporters

were courageous and self-sacrificing, but you almost literally didn't have to breathe the air in Iraq when you traveled with U.S. troops."²⁰⁵

Donvan, whose small crew was adopted by a friendly U.S. military unit, encountered hostility from Iraqis when he came to the city of Safwan shortly after the world saw images of a just-liberated Iraqi there hitting a portrait of Saddam Hussein with his shoe. "I was surprised to find that everybody we met expressed suspicion about U.S. intentions and outrage over civilian casualties," said Donvan, who reported this and other stories about Iraqi concerns for *Nightline* during three weeks in Iraq. "The idea that Iraqis would simply greet us with dancing in the streets [as Vice President Cheney had said they would] was a skewed perception once the first soldiers came and left town."²⁰⁶

NBC's David Bloom and the *Atlantic* magazine's Michael Kelly died in the early days of the American invasion, apparently from the rigors encountered by U.S. troops. Early footage of American soldiers and tanks pouring into Iraq was dramatic and undoubtedly helped to tell the American side of the story, although such coverage was inevitably favorable to U.S. troops. But with the Pentagon initially not even keeping statistics on the numbers of Iraqi casualties, the U.S. became the subject of fiercely anti-American coverage in some other countries, and more American journalists and media critics began to question the role of the media and the war itself.

Future of War and War Reporting

An important issue facing war correspondents for the future is the changing nature of the battlefield itself. "The battlefield of the future will be much more fluid and much more rapid than ever before," Vago Muradian, editor in chief of *Defense & Aerospace Report*, an influential publication that covers worldwide defense issues, predicted in interviews with the author.²⁰⁷

"The goal of the U.S. military in a war like Iraq is to move as quickly as possible using overwhelming U.S. air superiority combined with land and sea forces to subdue the enemy as quickly and with as few casualties as possible," Muradian continued. "There is increased automation and speed in picking out targets and calling for them to be destroyed. And, at the same time, in such a war, it becomes more difficult to tell friend from foe. . . . It's possible that there may not be a safe alternative to embedding journalists" if there is another war like Iraq with U.S. ground troops in the future.²⁰⁸

Other journalists and experts say, with the nature of war itself changing, through Special Operations forces that led to the capture of Saddam Hussein and the capture and killing of Osama bin Laden, plus CIA covert operations and drone strikes, there increasingly will be action that goes largely uncovered by journalists. "We will be in a constant state of war in the future," Robert Hodieme correctly predicted in 2004, "and much of it will be secret operations that will go uncovered by the media. If six or eight Special-Ops forces are going behind enemy lines—perhaps from a landing base in a country that may not want its cooperation known—to look for Osama bin Laden or some other

terrorist, they're not going to take a journalist with them. Reporters are not trained to keep secrets; they don't carry guns; and there aren't a lot of people in a newsroom who could carry 70 to 80 pounds on their back the way soldiers on a mission would do."²⁰⁹

Other veterans of Vietnam War reporting believe that journalists may be giving up their independence if embedding becomes the norm. "If Iraq is an example, the media are not going to be part of how war coverage is done in the future," said Morley Safer, the *60 Minutes* correspondent who shocked Americans with his 1965 story showing a group of Marines casually torching huts in a South Vietnamese village with cigarette lighters. "The entire agenda is being set by the Pentagon; if the media shout themselves blue, nothing's going to happen. In the post September 11th climate, the media were so hunkered down before the war that there was very little questioning of the Administration's case for war. . . ." The next time, Safer added in this interview with the author, "If it's all live, all-the-time again, no reporter is good enough to—bang—turn on a camera and tell you anything meaningful about what just happened."²¹⁰

SUMMARY

In this chapter we have looked at U.S. media and politics in the context of international news and global events. American TV networks traditionally have reflected American exceptionalism with an Americentric approach to world affairs, with some exceptions; and cutbacks in the broadcast TV networks' international bureaus exacerbated that focus. The war in Iraq—which continues to cast a lengthy shadow over American foreign policy and public support for engaging in another long war—is an important case study for how elite media failed to independently report on and verify debate within the intelligence community about WMDs in Iraq and the administration's case for war. As in other countries, dissent and critical reporting often have been criticized as unpatriotic as the U.S. has prepared for war. News organizations in the post-9/11 climate and previously have been under pressure to support the country's troops versus fulfilling their important role in the democracy, as an independent watchdog and verifier of government claims and the truth.

Historically, during World War I and World War II, journalists, news organizations, and entertainment companies complied with government restrictions on images from combat and helped build support for America's role in World War II as American journalists were "embedded" with U.S. troops and Hollywood filmmakers helped popularize the war effort. The war in Vietnam, by contrast, divided the country, with a strong anti-war movement and ultimately independent reporting that the U.S. government had lied about the course of combat and the chances for success. The belief on the part of military officials that American media had "lost" the war in Vietnam through TV and

print reporting—coupled with the new realities of live war coverage on cable TV—have led the Pentagon to strongly restrict access to the battlefield and U.S. troops, including through limited embedding with U.S. troops.

The rise of terrorism and terrorist attacks have presented new challenges to news media and governments around the world. People remember violent imagery and chaos, and terrorists aim to strike fear through random violence. Terrorists pledging allegiance to Islamist extremism have led to Islamophobia in media and politics, while coverage of Muslims as ordinary Americans has been scarce.

American media coverage—and American public opinion—are reflecting an increased concern about climate change as a global crisis. The coronavirus pandemic that caused deaths and economic crises, in the U.S. and around the world, found the U.S. strongly unprepared. The crisis revealed both an economic and a political media divide, with racial and class disparities in cases and deaths and Asian Americans falsely demonized by President Trump for the “Asian flu.” The president’s downplaying of the risks of COVID-19 and the government’s response were strongly criticized, as was parallel coverage on Fox News Channel, for dangerously misinforming the public.

End-of-Chapter Assignment: Comparing U.S. and International Newscasts

For this assignment, sample newscasts and news clips from one American broadcast TV nightly newscast and news organization—NBC News, ABC News, or CBS News—and then sample news clips from the BBC and Al Jazeera. Take some notes on the choice of lead stories and what countries are included, the relative prominence of U.S.-based news stories to non-U.S.-based, the overall tone of the stories and how the U.S. is featured and portrayed relative to other countries. Come to class prepared to discuss.

Here’s how to sample clips: The ABC, CBS and NBC network newscasts are available on local TV stations, and some local TV stations in the U.S. also carry the BBC’s nightly newscast from the U.S. nightly. The *NBC Nightly News* newscast is available online at <https://www.nbcnews.com>, and clips of other newscasts can be found online at <https://abcnews.go.com>, <https://www.cbsnews.com>, and <https://www.bbc.com/news>. Al Jazeera has clips on its website at <https://www.aljazeera.com>.