

## Cascading Activation: Contesting the White House's Frame After 9/11

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*President Bush's initial frame for the attacks of September 11, 2001, overwhelmingly dominated the news. Using that frame as a springboard, this article advances a coherent conception of framing within a new model of the relationship between government and the media in U.S. foreign policy making. The cascading activation model supplements research using the hegemony or indexing approaches. The model explains how interpretive frames activate and spread from the top level of a stratified system (the White House) to the network of nonadministration elites, and on to news organizations, their texts, and the public—and how interpretations feed back from lower to higher levels. To illustrate the model's potential, the article explores the frame challenge mounted by two journalists, Seymour Hersh and Thomas Friedman, who attempted to shift the focus from Afghanistan to Saudi Arabia. As hegemony theory predicts, 9/11 revealed yet again that media patrol the boundaries of culture and keep discord within conventional bounds. But inside those borders, even when government is promoting "war" against terrorism, media are not entirely passive receptacles for government propaganda, and the cascade model illuminates deviations from the preferred frame. As index theorists suggest, elite discord is a necessary condition for politically influential frame challenges. Among other things, the cascade model helps explain whether that condition arises, and how journalists can hinder or advance it.*

**Keywords** framing, indexing, hegemony, media and foreign policy, media and war, September 11

On the morning after the terrorist assaults of September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush spoke. "The deliberate and deadly attacks which were carried out yesterday against our country were more than acts of terror, they were acts of war," he said. "This will require our country to unite in steadfast determination and resolve. . . . This will be a monumental struggle of good versus evil, but good will prevail."<sup>1</sup> In these remarks and many others, Bush defined a problem in simple and emotional terms as an "act of war" and identified its clear cause as an "enemy" that was "evil." Bush, Vice President Richard Cheney, Secretary of State Colin Powell, and other officials used these same words

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This article draws on material published in the forthcoming *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Copyright 2004 by the University of Chicago) and is used with permission of the University of Chicago Press.

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many times in the days and months following September 11; George W. Bush invoked *evil* fully five times and *war* twelve times in his State of the Union speech on January 29, 2002.

Repeating these terms was part of the Bush administration's strategy of *framing* September 11 to "unite" the country behind its solution: a *war* against terrorism and, initially, military intervention to topple the Taliban government of Afghanistan. The administration might have identified other enemies, chosen other ways of interpreting and responding to the attacks than a global war on terror, but the president sought immediately to close them off. Before the first stage of war commenced, it was vital to convey an unambiguous and emotionally compelling frame to the public. Then, when combat in Afghanistan began, it could receive virtually unanimous assent from Congress and the media—and overwhelming public approval. Reminding the public of the "evil" helped to maintain their support; merely mentioning the word could cue a whole series of conscious and unconscious thoughts and feelings about September 11—and promote the deference to presidential authority that typically occurs during wartime.

Calling the post-9/11 policy a "war" on terrorism was a contestable but effective framing choice, contestable among other reasons because Bush did *not* do what virtually every president before had done to certify the country was truly at war. Rather than calling for sacrifices from the civilian population, proposing tax increases to cover costs, or bolstering the Veterans Administration, he did the very opposite, urging Americans to consume more, asking Congress to cut taxes and VA services. In essence, Bush's framing strategy sought the best of both worlds politically: the advantages of heightened deference, without the disadvantages of having to alter his domestic agenda or of imposing politically unpopular costs on the average American.

President Bush's initial frame for September 11 overwhelmingly dominated the news. Using that frame as a springboard, this article attempts to develop a coherent conception of framing within a new model of the relationship between government and the media in the foreign policy process. Because it summarizes a portion of a much larger study (Entman, 2004), it cannot offer a full elaboration of the model. Instead, it illustrates the model's potential by exploring aspects of policy debate in the U.S. after 9/11.

Two journalists, Seymour Hersh and Thomas Friedman, mounted a challenge, attempting to shift or at least supplement the focus to include not just Afghanistan but also Saudi Arabia. Even in a time of one-sided domination by the White House line, the post-9/11 period provides an intriguing opportunity to see how journalists working against the White House line can influence news coverage and elite and public thinking. Before discussing the frame contest itself, though, it is necessary to explain the concept of framing and detail the new model.

## Frames and Cascading Activation

The major schools of thought on media and foreign policy cluster around hegemony (e.g., Augelli & Murphy, 1988; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Rachlin, 1988) and indexing (Bennett, 1989, 1990; Mermin, 1999; cf. Robinson, 2002). Although offering many insights that help to guide the present study, these approaches are based mostly on events before 1991. Not surprisingly, they cannot account fully for changes in international politics and media behavior since the end of the Cold War. Neither describes the precise mechanisms by which government's preferred interpretations of new foreign events and issues get translated into specific choices of politically consequential words and images in the news. And although indexing quite convincingly emphasizes elite

opposition as a vital determinant of whether the news will deviate from the White House line, it does not explain fully why leaders sometimes choose to contest the White House frame and other times keep quiet, or just how *much* elite opposition will arise. Nor do previous models delineate comprehensively the public's role in the larger system of communication linking presidents, elites outside the administration, journalists, news texts, and citizens. Building particularly upon the work of Hallin (1986), Bennett (1989, 1990), and Mermin (1999), this article introduces the *cascading activation* model.

### ***Framing and Frame Contests***

Framing is the central process by which government officials and journalists exercise political influence over each other and over the public (cf. Riker, 1986). Successful political communication requires the framing of events, issues, and actors in ways that promote perceptions and interpretations that benefit one side while hindering the other. Understanding how frames work allows us to measure the distance between the White House's preferred versions of foreign affairs and the ways the media actually report them.

Framing entails *selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution*. The words and images that make up the frame can be distinguished from the rest of the news by their capacity to stimulate support of or opposition to the sides in a political conflict. We can measure this capacity by *cultural resonance* and *magnitude* (cf. on resonance Miller & Riechert, 2001; Snow & Benford, 1988). Those frames that employ more culturally resonant terms have the greatest potential for influence. They use words and images highly salient in the culture, which is to say *noticeable, understandable, memorable, and emotionally charged*.<sup>2</sup> Magnitude taps the *prominence* and *repetition* of the framing words and images. The more resonance and magnitude, the more likely the framing is to evoke similar thoughts and feelings in large portions of the audience. The Bush administration's recurring use of words such as *evil* and *war* in framing September 11, paired in many media reports with searing images of the burning and collapsing World Trade towers, provide a textbook example of high magnitude, high resonance framing. Resonance can sometimes overcome the need for magnitude. Some words and images possess sufficient resonance to impress themselves on public consciousness without requiring a significant number of exposures: airliners flying into the World Trade Center on September 11, for instance.<sup>3</sup>

Substantive news frames<sup>4</sup> perform at least two of the following basic functions in covering events, issues, and political actors:

- Defining effects or conditions as problematic
- Identifying causes
- Conveying a moral judgment of those involved in the framed matter
- Endorsing remedies or improvements to the problematic situation

For September 11, the problematic effect was of course the death of thousands of civilians in an act of war against America; the cause was terrorists; the moral judgment condemned the agents of this assault as evil; and the remedy quickly became war against the perpetrators. All four of these framing functions hold together in a kind of cultural logic, serving each other, with the connections cemented more by custom and convention than by the principles of valid reasoning or syllogistic logic. The two most important of these functions are the problem definition, since defining the problem often

virtually predetermines the rest of the frame, and the remedy, because it promotes support of (or opposition to) actual government action.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Frame Dominance and Contestation***

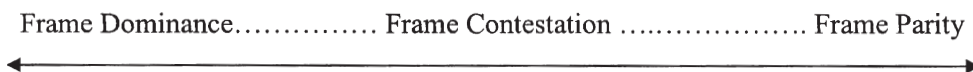
The framing of a given actor, issue, or event during a defined time period can be arrayed along a continuum from total dominance by one frame to a completely even-handed standoff between competing frames. Sometimes, one among the potential frames of a situation so thoroughly dominates the media that alternative readings become virtually irrelevant to politics. In these cases, the dominant frame produces extraordinarily one-sided survey results, and these in turn discourage dissenting politicians from speaking out, thus cementing the hold of the one frame. Complacent views of America's free press notwithstanding, especially in covering foreign policy it is not uncommon to find overwhelmingly dominant frames in the news. Such is the case with the initial framing of 9/11.

Figure 1 diagrams the continuum of frame contestation. Frame parity describes the condition that free press theories prefer: two (or more) interpretations receiving something like equal play. Parity requires not merely that the news provide bits of unrelated information critical of the administration's frame scattered throughout the coverage. To reach frame parity, the news must offer a *counterframe* that puts together a complete alternative narrative, a tale of problem, cause, remedy, and moral judgment possessing as much magnitude and resonance as the administration's. Availing themselves of such diverse, clashing, and equally well-developed understandings, a democratic citizenry can in theory freely and intelligently choose. As already suggested, frame parity is the exception, not the rule. More frequently, frame contests occupy the left sector of the continuum, falling somewhere between complete frame dominance and a degree of contestation.

This discussion does not pretend to capture the eternal and fixed essence of political framing but is instead itself a heuristic, a shortcut guide to dealing with what might otherwise be the unmanageable complexity of news texts. The concepts and terminology proposed here constitute one attempt to reduce confusion and imprecision in the scholarly literature about the nature and functions of framing. It is not the only way to, as it were, frame framing.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Cascading Activation***

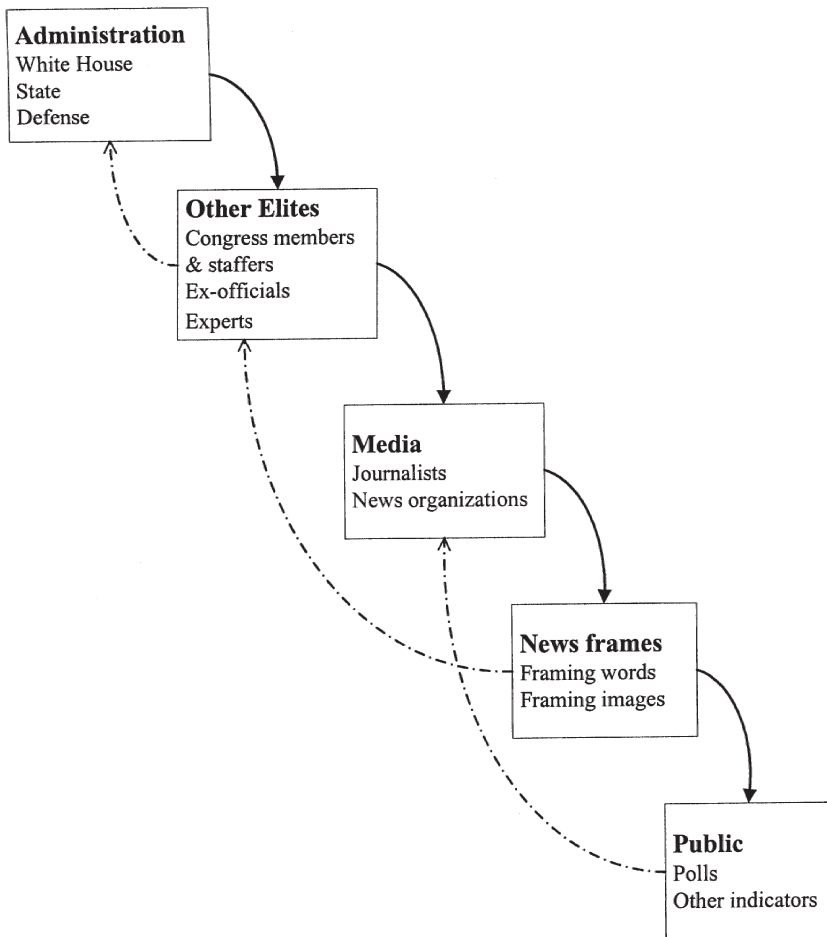
Lodge and Stroh (1993, p. 248, emphasis added) observe that the process of bringing thoughts and feelings to mind works "through the mechanism of *spreading activation*." This idea of spreading activation plays a central part in the cascade model. Thus, a new report showing a picture of Osama bin Laden has great cultural resonance, and will likely reactivate an American's negative feelings, bringing to mind conscious or unconscious memories of the burning World Trade Center, the heroes of the fire department, and so forth. The spreading activation of thoughts or "nodes" within an individual's mind (whether a Congress member, a reporter, or a citizen)<sup>7</sup> has parallels in the way



**Figure 1.** Frame contestation continuum.

ideas travel along interpersonal networks and in the spread of framing words and images across the different media. The model is designed to help explain how thoroughly the thoughts and feelings that support a frame extend down from the White House through the rest of the system—and who thus wins the framing contest and gains the upper hand politically.<sup>8</sup> Figure 2 illustrates the cascading flow of influence linking each level of the system: the administration, nonadministration elites, news organizations, the texts they produce, and the public.

Using the metaphor of spreading activation does not assume precisely analogous processes at every level of the cascading system. Spreading activation of interpretations within individuals' knowledge networks is a largely automatic and unconscious psychological process, whereas the spread of interpretative schemas within and across other levels of the system is rarely automatic or unconscious.<sup>9</sup> What is analogous across the levels is the existence of *networks of association*: among ideas, among people, and among the communicating symbols (words and images). The usefulness of the metaphor thus rests in its highlighting of the similarities in the ways ideas activate and spread from one location on the network to others, often quickly and with little trouble, but other



**Figure 2.** Cascading network activation.

times with considerable conflict (internal/mental, interpersonal, interorganizational, or rhetorical).

Just as with real-world cascading waterfalls, each level in the metaphorical cascade makes its own contribution to the mix and flow (of ideas), but the ability to promote the spread of frames is also highly stratified, both across and within each level. As is true of actual waterfalls also, moving downward in a cascade is relatively easy, but spreading ideas higher, from lower levels to upper, requires extra energy—a pumping mechanism, so to speak. Ideas that start at the top level, the *administration*, possess the greatest strength. The president and top advisors enjoy the most independent ability to decide which mental associations to activate and the highest probability of moving their own thoughts into general circulation. The administration is distinguished from the *other elite network* that joins Washington insiders who do not work in the executive branch: members of Congress and their staffs, and sources from the community of Washington policy experts and lobbyists (former government officials, think tank denizens, university sages, interest groups, and public relations firms).<sup>10</sup> The network of *journalists* consists of reporters, columnists, producers, editors, and publishers who work for the important national media. They communicate regularly with colleagues inside and beyond their own organizations. Informal networks of association among news organizations also set up a cueing system that runs roughly from the pinnacle occupied by the *New York Times* and a few other elite outlets to other national media, to regional newspapers, and to local papers and television stations. Administration figures and other elites maintain social and professional contact with upper-tier journalists, exchanging information off the record and on, at receptions, conferences, and elsewhere. This interface between journalists and elites is a key transmission point for spreading activation of frames, and it is not always easy to determine where the line between “elite” and “journalist” should be drawn, or who influences whom. Arguably, a few top editors, correspondents, and editorialists exercise more sway over the spread of ideas than all but the most powerful public officials.

Representation of the public in this process flows in both directions. The cascade model clarifies the hierarchy: Public opinion is typically a dependent variable, although it sometimes feeds back to influence elites. In spreading ideas from the public up to where they affect thinking of elites and the president, the main road is through the media. If the news creates impressions that the idea is held widely and intensely by large swaths of the public, it can affect leaders’ strategic calculations and activities. However, this perception of where the public stands itself becomes a matter of framing, an object of political power and strategy. If, say, elites are contending over an administration decision and the White House can disseminate the notion that public opinion favors the president, that perception can help delegitimize and silence the opposition. This helps explain why, in so many cases, nonadministration elites fail to contest the White House frame—but also why, when conditions permit, elite opposition does sometimes arise and spread down the cascade to news texts and the public and perhaps upward to alter the calculations of the administration.

All parties to this process operate under uncertainty and pressure, with mixed motives and varying levels of competence and understanding. All are “cognitive misers” (Iyengar & McGuire, 1993; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991) who work in accordance with established mental maps and habits (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000) and rarely undertake a comprehensive review of all relevant facts and options before responding. Few political leaders or journalists have the time to do that, and even fewer members of the public have the inclination.<sup>11</sup> The implication of



these cognitive limitations is that what passes between levels of the cascade is not comprehensive understanding but highlights packaged into selective, framed communications. As we go down the levels, the flow of information becomes less and less thorough, and increasingly limited to the selected highlights, processed through schemas, and then passed on in ever-cruder form. The farther an idea travels between levels on the cascade, the fainter the traces of the “real” situation are—whether the actual perceptions, goals, and calculations of the president way at the top, or the true mix of public sentiments moving from the bottom back up to policymakers.

In summary, let us consider exactly how the cascade model builds upon and supplements previous approaches. First, it acknowledges variation and stratification within the levels of the system. By no means always a unified actor, the administration includes a variety of players, and disunity has significant implications for media coverage.<sup>12</sup> Different administrations act differently, and that too affects media responses. Sometimes a congressional party puts up a unified front (most often, the Republicans), other times it is all over the map (typically, Democrats), and disunity here also affects the news and, particularly, the ability to carry out strategies of frame contestation. Moreover, all elites are not equal: Some individuals in Congress or the media, for instance, can get attention for their ideas far more easily than others. Second, the cascade model helps explain whether elite dissent emerges. As indexing theorists have shown, open discord among American leaders usually breaks out before the news deviates significantly from the White House line. But we need to understand better why such disagreements arise in some cases and not others, and the role the media play in triggering or suppressing them. Third, the cascade model provides guidance on exactly what information in the news is critical to politics and policy-making. Applying the concept of framing within the cascade model helps identify and separate the important information from all of the other data and noise that flow among policymakers, journalists, and citizens. In its full application, the model allows us to avoid treating every assertion of assent or disagreement in the news as equivalent, and to see in more detail exactly which aspects of the White House line attract dissent and which earn acceptance. It also provides a means of systematically analyzing visual, not just verbal, information (see especially Entman, 2004, chap. 3). Finally, the model illuminates the way news feeds back information about the public to officials, and thereby influences their actions.<sup>13</sup>

Elites heavily influence media, which in turn significantly shape public opinion—that is why the public occupies the bottom level of the cascade, after all. But this model also offers insight into the significant potential influence of perceived and anticipated public reactions on what leaders say and do. And here again, it turns out to be crucial that the information about public opinion that moves back up the cascade to leaders travels in the form of frames (Entman, 2004, chap. 6).

What, then, explains just how thoroughly the White House's preferred version actually flows down and dominates thinking and communication at each level? A full discussion is beyond the scope of this article, but in brief compass, the cascade model identifies four variables that, acting together, can explain the emergence and outcomes of frame contests. These are *motivations*; *power* and *strategy* (deployed by the administration and other elites); and *cultural congruence*.

Motivations shape all participants' responses to foreign affairs—those of leaders, journalists, and the public—in predictable ways. Consider as one example the motivations that drive journalists. To control the news message, the White House must package frames in ways that comport with the motivations of media personnel and organizations (see, e.g., Bennett, 2001; Cook, 1998; Entman, 1989). News organizations and personnel

are driven by economic pressure and incentives; professional customs, norms, and principles; and normative values. The latter include self-images as guardians of democracy, and they may at times modify or overcome the restraining force of the economic pressures and professional norms.

Whereas motivations pull mental associations into the minds of elites, journalists, and citizens, power and strategy are the external forces that may push the activation of a particular set of mental connections. Presidents' power to influence other elites and the media arises above all from their control over the government apparatus and especially their authority over the military, which allows them to control "facts on the ground" that shape policy. Nonetheless, presidential power varies among different administrations and at different times, depending particularly on the president's perceived popularity and effectiveness (Edwards, 1990; Entman, 1989). Congressional elites also possess power, rooted in their legislative prerogatives. Sooner or later all presidents contend with the fact that Congress members and staffers (and, to a lesser degree, experts and former officials) have a capacity to push opposing frames because they can influence policy and thus enjoy a (smaller) degree of legitimate access to news organizations. Although journalists possess less ability to shape news frames than members of the administration or elite networks, they do have some independent power, arising from their capacity to ask questions and to decide precisely which words and images to assemble and transmit.

As for strategies, deliberate, planned activation of mental associations is the province mainly of elites. Word choice, information distribution and withholding, and timing are among the strategic resources that help lend the White House and executive branch greater control over framing than congressional or other elites, although they too engage in strategic manipulation. Strategically maladroit administrations, such as the Carter and Clinton White Houses, often found news frames spinning out of their control. Poor strategy creates a power vacuum that opposing elites and journalists may enter with their own interpretations. On the other hand, inventive presidential strategy can endow frames with extra energy needed to penetrate down the levels.

Journalists do go through some strategic thinking in deciding how to frame their stories, though their goal is rarely to exert power over outcomes. Rather, they seek to produce "good stories" that protect and advance their careers and that accord with their self-images as independent watchdogs who must provide a degree of balance to stories (see Althaus et al., 1996, and Althaus, 2003). An important if partial exception involves investigative journalists, pundits, and editorial writers, who may strategize in hopes of shaping policy, as indeed was true in the case discussed here. Members of the public do little if any strategizing in deciding what positions to adopt on foreign policy (cf. Sears, 2001, on citizens' general disregard of self-interest in taking policy positions).

Finally, the substance of a news event or issue matters. How well its interpretation comports with the political culture helps to determine whether the White House will face a frame fight. Cultural congruence measures the ease with which—all else equal—a news frame can cascade through the different levels of the framing process and stimulate similar reactions at each step. The more congruent the frame with schemas that dominate the political culture, the more success it will enjoy. This is where the cascade model most importantly supplements earlier theoretical approaches.

The most inherently powerful frames are those fully congruent with schemas *habitually* used by most members of society. Such frames have the greatest intrinsic capacity to arouse similar responses among most Americans. On the other hand, for many events or issues, culturally dominant schemas suggest conflicting or unclear interpretations. Framing of such *ambiguous* matters depends more heavily on motivation, power,



and strategy. Finally, when it comes to news of matters *incongruent* with dominant schemas, common culture blocks the spread of many mental associations and may discourage thinking altogether.<sup>14</sup> Figure 3 illustrates how these distinctions can be arrayed along a continuum, with an imaginary “tipping point” where contradictions among dominant schemas start to become dissonant or perhaps too complex for most people to handle and therefore call forth a blocking response. September 11 was a case of congruence, with the 9/11 terrorists quickly assimilated to the common schema of Islamic terrorism. Ambiguity, however, has become far more common than it was during the Cold War. Such military involvements as those in Somalia, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia offer examples where dominant cultural schemas yielded contradictory understandings and impulses. An example of an incongruent matter, one highly dissonant with common culture, would be the 1988 incident in which a U.S. naval vessel shot down an Iranian civilian airliner, killing 290 people. Research shows the media frame discouraged any dissonant interpretation—one holding the U.S. as morally culpable, as wantonly murderous, for example. That was how the American media had depicted the Soviet Union when its forces similarly and mistakenly destroyed a Korean passenger jet five years earlier (Entman, 2004, Chap. 2).

### Contesting the Frame: The Villains of 9/11

For the purposes of this article, just one implication of the cascade model will be assessed: Even where habitual schemas mark an easy path for spreading activation of familiar mental associations, there is some room for contesting the administration’s frame. To be sure, motivations, culture, power, and strategy converge to drastically reduce impulses to challenge during large scale combat operations in which U.S. forces appear to be winning a speedy, relatively low-cost (to America) victory in pursuit of culturally congruent objectives, such as the two wars in Iraq (1991 and 2003) and in Afghanistan. Popular wars aside, however, journalistic motivations embodied in independent, watchdog self-images and ideals often encourage a move toward questioning government authority more than was the habit during the Cold War. Indeed, even during popular and seemingly successful wars, the media now pounce upon any signs of failure or “quagmire” and in doing so may be applying their own evaluative criteria as much as indexing elite opposition (Entman, 2004, chap. 5). This move parallels a general fall in institutional authority and prestige and a rise in public cynicism, sentiments that the media both reflect and help to spread (Jamieson & Cappella, 1997; Patterson, 1993). In this epoch, arguably, it is good (or at least acceptable) business and professional practice for journalists to challenge the government line, at least to a point.

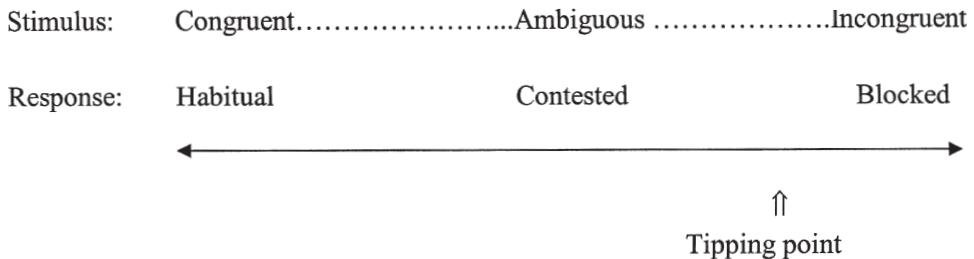


Figure 3. Cultural congruence and elite, media, and public responses.

These forces were clearly evident during the Clinton administration, whose defense policies the media consistently challenged and at times vociferously condemned, sometimes for undertaking military interventions, sometimes for *not* intervening—and sometimes for both. Unfortunately for Clinton, his administration coincided with the period of particular confusion and ideological drift after the Cold War. Add ineffective use of power and strategy on the part of the administration and disunified congressional Democrats confronting relentlessly aggressive and mostly unified Republican elites, and media motivations to include foreign elites' critiques. The result: unsupportive coverage during the Clinton years, even of successful interventions (Entman, 2004, chap. 5)—little evidence indeed of hegemonic control.

The attacks of September 11, 2001, gave the second President Bush an opportunity to propound a line designed to revive habits of patriotic deference, to dampen elite dissent, dominate media texts, and reduce the threat of negative public reaction—to work just as the Cold War paradigm once did. In his 2002 State of the Union address, George W. Bush defined terrorism as a global threat requiring a unified front of “civilized” nations making war against an adversarial “axis of evil” that sponsors terrorism. Like the communists of yore, the terrorists, driven by irrational ideology and opposed to freedom and capitalism, conspire in secret and brutalize their own people and therefore have no compunction about assaulting perceived enemies such as the United States. If events seem to support this Manichean division of the world into enemy and friend, evil and good, U.S. elites might together once again sustain an anchoring paradigm comparable to the Cold War—particularly if the United States remains “at war” against terrorism indefinitely (cf. Livingston, 1994).

The general cooperation—interrupted by spells of skepticism—that did characterize media responses to the Bush administration after 9/11 is instructive in this regard. In the aftermath of September 11, Democrats took great care to publicly support the president's problem definitions and remedies in Afghanistan. That meant the media themselves had to take the initiative in challenging the administration, albeit in limited ways (cf. Carr, 2003). The relative weakness of news organizations' resistance to the Bush frame as compared with their defiance of Clinton reflected in part the unifying impact of September 11, but it also illustrated the difference in potential media influence when a strategically skilled Republican rather than a less adroit Democrat holds the White House. The discussion of what to do after Afghanistan traces the growing effectiveness of George W. Bush's effort to tame the media by building a new paradigm around a war on terrorism demanding patriotic deference, while also revealing how media occasionally push against these efforts. Although at first, claims about the need to target the Saudi regime in the war on terror sank beneath the waves of celebration over Afghanistan, leaving little trace on the news or public discourse, the challenge to the dominant frame did not die entirely. It picked up steam to become more a part of mainstream news discourse a few months after Hersh and Friedman first activated the link between terrorism and the Saudi elite.

### ***The Frame Contest***

Seymour Hersh's (2002) article described the extensive support—financial, cultural, and otherwise—that the Saudi leadership had given to Islamic extremism and terrorism. Hersh suggested that it was no coincidence Osama bin Laden and 15 of the 19 hijackers of 9/11 were Saudis, and pointed toward the need to recognize that this putative ally was quite possibly a more critical target for American attention and perhaps wrath than

Afghanistan. Thomas Friedman, probably the most influential foreign affairs columnist in American journalism, published two essays (2001a, 2001b) in the *New York Times* that in much briefer terms raised serious questions about Saudi Arabia and included assertions that the royal family itself had links to terrorism.

The fate of the Hersh/Friedman challenge was explored by looking for all mentions of the word "Saudi" within five words of "terror(ism, ist)" in the Nexis "Major Papers" library. This search, for the period October 1 through November 30, 2001, yielded 682 hits. Stories appearing in non-U.S. media, letters to the editor, and passing references that did not clearly refer to the topic were excluded. That reduced the total number of codeable items to 110. The vast majority of hits fell under the passing reference exclusion. An example of a passing reference would be "Al-Qaeda, Saudi-born Osama bin Laden's terrorist network. . . ." Such a reference simply conveys that bin Laden was born in Saudi Arabia, and without implying anything larger about Saudi Arabia's responsibility for terrorism. A similar search was conducted on Nexis transcripts of the ABC, CBS, and NBC news programs (including such shows as *Prime Time Thursday* and *Nightline*). This search yielded only 1 hit, so it was expanded by looking for all appearances of the word "Saudi" within 25 words of "terror(ism, ist)," which yielded 20 codeable items.

Only 25 of the 110 items explicitly linked the Saudi royals or government with terrorism and thus might have activated a counterframing mental association. None appeared before the first Friedman column on October 5. Interestingly, most (19) appeared on editorial rather than news pages. It seems that news routines were not particularly compatible with the counterframing problem definition. Of the nation's most influential papers, only the *Washington Post* mentioned the matter on page 1. Tracking journalists' response specifically to the lengthy Hersh piece in the *New Yorker* also reveals that this attempt to spread a new, counterframing idea fizzled. Searching Nexis's Major Papers library for "Hersh" and "Saudi" during the same two-month period yielded just three items, op-ed pieces by three local writers in regional papers, that went into any detail on Hersh's findings. Arguably, these were the only U.S. newspapers (out of 27 U.S. papers in the Major Papers file) offering readers a genuine opportunity to ponder and make sense of the Hersh counterframe. As for television, four of the 20 stories explicitly connected Saudi officialdom and terrorism. The rest of the television coverage skirted the issue. *Nightline*, for instance, devoted an entire show to the role of the Saudis in the war on terror (November 8) without mentioning the Saudis' own link to terrorism, focusing instead on whether Saudi leaders were doing enough to help the U.S. war effort.

It is safe to conclude that the counterframe did not spread across America's news texts. The editorial pages of newspapers, freer of the constraints of standard newsbeats and news definitions that render journalists dependent on official discourse, paid a bit more attention to Saudi officials' link with terrorism and offered more complete and more resonant discussions of the counterframe. But editorials do not spread new thoughts on their own. The counterframing themes need to activate and diffuse on the news pages and in television news, where the majority of Americans might see them—and where elites *perceive* that the public will learn about them and possibly change their views. Such diffusion would have required not merely the push of journalists themselves but also political elites interested in contesting the dominant problem definition, causal analysis, moral judgment, and remedy. In the early months of the war on terrorism, few such elites spoke up. Instead, in the aftermath of military victory in Afghanistan, the Bush administration began focusing attention on Iraq as the next problem to be remedied in the war on terrorism.

The cascade model suggests some explanations for elites' quiescence on Saudi Arabia, though they have to be speculative given the absence of data on elites' and journalists' thinking and motives. On substantive grounds, one might have expected the Saudi connection to be an inherently potent basis of elite opposition. Even after the 2003 war and occupation, no persuasive evidence emerged that Saddam Hussein's regime gave significant aid to al-Qaeda, or that it transferred weapons of mass destruction to terrorist groups. In the meantime, as Hersh (2002) and others (e.g., Baer, 2003) have discussed, the Saudi elite and vast royal family tolerated and funded not just terrorist organizations but a worldwide network of schools and mosques preaching hatred of the West and modernity, and helping recruit new members for al-Qaeda and its ilk. Iraq's contributions to anti-American terrorism were paltry by comparison, as the CIA's own analysts, among others, concluded (see, e.g., Hersh, 2003). But Iraq was an easier sell, and Saudi contributions a tough one, in major part because cultural congruence favored attention to Iraq and Hussein. They were already familiar enemies and conjured resonant memories readily linked to the terrorist threat. Indeed, despite the complete absence of evidence, polls showed that majorities of Americans came to believe Saddam Hussein was personally involved in the 9/11 attacks.<sup>15</sup> Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, had long been constructed as a "moderate" Arab regime and an ally of the U.S. Elites, especially Congress members, lacked incentive to pursue the Saudi connection, because it was perilously close to the tipping point between ambiguity and dissonant incongruity. As many of the editorials noted, treating Saudi Arabia as an enemy would threaten oil supplies and raise the cost to Americans of their beloved gas-guzzling cars and SUVs. The Bush administration deployed its power over the policy-making machinery, and its public relations strategic skills, to magnify the threat posed by Iraq, and tilting against that particular windmill would have been foolhardy for Democrats in Congress. Lacking elite sponsors to create newsworthy actions that might have enhanced the magnitude and resonance of the notion, the Saudi connection remained obscure.

Three things happened to raise the visibility of the Saudi issue by promoting elite dissent and media attention in the summer of 2002. First, the *Washington Post* broke a story on August 7, 2002 (Ricks, 2002), that an expert who briefed the U.S. Defense Policy Board the previous month essentially made the Hersh-Friedman argument to this secretive and powerful advisory group. The membership consists of experts and former officials at the highest level, including former secretaries of State and Defense (the likes of Henry Kissinger, Harold Brown, and James Schlesinger). This piece resulted in a flurry of news referring to allegations that Saudi Arabia supported terrorism.

Second, on August 15, 2002, families of 9/11 victims filed a lawsuit naming Saudi Arabian royals among the defendants, alleging their culpability in the terrorist attacks. The lawsuit generated some coverage, most briefly mentioning the Saudi-terrorism link, but some using the text of the lawsuit to provide far more detail on the connection than had previously appeared. Moreover, in a bit of intertextual networking, the lawsuit was cited in stories that mentioned the Defense Board briefing, and vice versa.

Third, in part because of Saudi Arabia's adamant opposition to U.S. military action against Iraq (unlike its support for the first Gulf War in 1990–1991), the Saudi problem became entangled with this increasingly controversial follow-up remedy for terrorism. This led to such coverage as "I'm With Dick! Let's Make War!"—a sarcastic *Times* column by Maureen Dowd, which began as follows:

I was dubious at first. But now I think Dick Cheney has it right. Making the case for going to war in the Middle East to veterans on Monday, the vice

president said that “our goal would be . . . a government that is democratic and pluralistic, a nation where the human rights of every ethnic and religious group are recognized and protected.” O.K., I’m on board. Let’s declare war on Saudi Arabia! Let’s do “regime change” in a kingdom that gives medieval a bad name. (August 28, 2002, p. 19A)

Just prior to this column’s appearance, leading Republicans outside the administration, including former national security advisor Brent Scowcroft and former Secretaries of State Lawrence Eagleburger and James Baker, had launched a seemingly coordinated attack on the Iraq war option. In so doing, they apparently echoed sentiments voiced within a divided administration by Secretary of State Colin Powell and others (Woodward, 2002). Even House Majority Leader Dick Armey and Senator Chuck Hagel, conservative Republicans, also voiced skepticism. Republican stalwarts wrote opinion columns and appeared on talk shows urging that Bush reconsider the policy. All in all, for a couple of months during the summer of 2002, Republicans behaved more like the typically fractious Democrats (Purdum, 2002). Some of the news and editorial reaction used the GOP wrangling to bring up not only the Saudis’ failure to support the Iraq option, but also the perhaps more direct peril to America posed by Saudi support of terrorist groups and ideologies.

A Nexis search of major U.S. newspapers came up with 40 items from August 1–31, 2002, that explicitly linked Saudi Arabia and terrorism. Of these, just 12 appeared on editorial pages, compared with 28 news stories. This contrasts with the 25 items published during two full months (October and November) after Hersh and Friedman’s lonely campaigns to raise the Saudi connection’s salience, most (19) editorial opinion rather than news. It seemed that the Saudi-terrorism link had finally become newsworthy enough to spread down to the public. In fact, a poll taken by a Republican firm found the unfavorable rating for Saudi Arabia increased from 50% in May to 63% in August 2002 (Marquis, 2002; Fabrizio et al., 2002), suggesting that the negative publicity was attracting more public attention. Television news did not respond much to these developments.<sup>16</sup> Of the three major broadcast networks, only NBC (on the *Today Show* and *Dateline*) mentioned the Saudi-terrorism link during August 2002, and none of the nightly news shows even referred to the trillion-dollar lawsuit by the 9/11 families.<sup>17</sup> But *Dateline* (August 25) did feature a long story detailing Saudi support of terrorism. With an audience far exceeding that of any newspaper, *Dateline* offered millions of American households vivid detail about the connection.

## Conclusion

Although the lineage of the frame challenge appears traceable to Hersh’s and Friedman’s own enterprise, the belief that Saudi Arabia contributed to the problem of terrorism attained enough energy to spread across the news only after some leaders began echoing that linkage back to the media. Among others, senators from both parties, including the Democratic candidate for vice president in 2000, Joseph Lieberman, publicly attacked Saudi Arabia. When in the summer of 2002 the extraordinary public debate pitting Republican leaders against each other erupted over Iraq, Saudi refusal to provide vital access to military bases for use as staging areas, and their general uncooperativeness, brought into relief the frame challenge that Hersh and Friedman had started.

It was the Iraq war debate, though, that occupied center stage in the coverage. The Saudi problem was probably never destined to be more than a sidelight, albeit a nagging

one from the Bush administration's perspective, but the intense opposition to Iraq did for a time gain significant media attention. Although pressing for a focus on Saudi Arabia would have been too great an ideological and political leap for most Republican leaders, arguing against Bush's concentration on Iraq was not. The media may actually have overrepresented elite skepticism about Bush's Iraq war plans in the summer of 2002, although it later moved to celebrating the war itself (Entman, 2004, chap. 5). According to the Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA, 2002), a conservative media research organization, during the period July 1–August 25, 2002, 73% of sources quoted on ABC, CBS, and NBC news programs criticized the administration's "Iraq strategy," as did 71% of the sources quoted in the *New York Times*. Tellingly, 53% even of Republican sources quoted were critical. Judging by the CMPA findings, far from serving as an administration mouthpiece, the leading media lent credence to the opposition by conveying, or perhaps even exaggerating, the scope of elite unrest over Bush's plans.

Since the CMPA study did not measure magnitude or resonance, or look at other media, this conclusion must be regarded as tentative, but if it is valid, the cascade model would offer some insight. Despite the Bush administration's general strategic skill and ultimate success in turning media coverage toward acceptance of its "war on terrorism" frame and, in particular, its definition of the problem after Afghanistan as Iraq rather than Saudi Arabia, something like frame parity over going to war unilaterally against Iraq did arise during summer 2002. The unusual spectacle of open internecine warfare within the Republican elite made it happen, but the media's apparent tilt did *not* reflect open dissent from Democratic elites, who remained largely mum, or even from a majority of Republican foreign policymakers, but rather journalists' own professional motivations to seize on administration discord and to balance White House frame dominance—when cultural ambiguity permits, as it did that summer. For during that time, the link between the policy of war on Iraq and unchallengeable cultural precepts such as patriotism and national interests remained murky.

The White House did not stand still for this situation. It deployed not just public relations skills but its power over the government apparatus to reassert frame control. For instance, it created a Pentagon unit to produce intelligence findings more supportive of the Iraq-terrorism link than the CIA had offered (Hersh, 2003). The Bush administration was ultimately successful, yet the pressure of media, internal dissent, and foreign dissent forced it to alter its plans for unilateral and quick military intervention (Woodward, 2002). Bush had to wait during a long round of U.N. inspections, which embarrassingly found no evidence to support his claims about Iraq's intentions and capabilities, followed by a failure to obtain U.N. approval for invasion. This failure in turn imposed real diplomatic and economic costs on the U.S. The media alone certainly did not cause this setback for the Bush administration, but they did contribute to the cascade of thoughts and events, constraints and choices, with which the White House had to contend.

This article does not argue that the period after September 11, 2001, or the particular case of the frame challenge over Saudi Arabia "prove" the validity of the cascade model. Rather, it asserts that the new model can supplement well-established findings and insights of research using the hegemony or indexing approaches. As hegemony theorists would predict, 9/11 revealed yet again that media patrol the boundaries of culture and keep discord within conventional bounds. But inside those borders, even when government is promoting "war," media are not entirely passive receptacles for government propaganda, at least not always, and the cascade model illuminates deviations



from the preferred frame. As index theorists suggest, elite discord is a necessary condition for politically influential frame challenges. The cascade model helps explain whether those conditions arise and how journalists can hinder or advance them.

## Notes

1. September 12, 2001.

2. This is not to imply that all effective frames must stimulate emotion, only that words or images for which the culture's common schemas evoke strong emotional responses have a greater probability of influencing more people than other words or images, if only because emotional stimuli typically receive more attention from otherwise distracted, apolitical citizens (Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000). Scholars have shown that the cognitive and affective realms are thoroughly intertwined (e.g., Graber, 2001; Kuklinski, 2001; Lodge & Taber, 2000, pp. 212–213; Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000); emotion is not the opposite of rational thought but its frequent companion.

3. See Kuklinski (2001); experimental work (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000; Mendelberg, 2001) confirms the power potentially exerted by a single exposure to a racialized visual stimulus, for instance. Yet, research on media effects typically relates amount of exposure directly to opinions, neglecting that a single experience with the right kind of message can yield strong impacts (cf. Shrum, 1996). By the same token, media content studies typically only measure magnitude by counting the repetitions of a message, often without including prominence (for example, page 1 or page 22), let alone cultural resonance.

4. Procedural framing also pervades foreign news (see Entman, 2004).

5. Often the same set of news stories simultaneously frame related events, issues, and actors. Coverage of September 11 framed an event as an “act of war,” an issue (war against terrorism), and actors (the Taliban, al-Qaeda, bin Laden).

6. For more on framing theory, see Entman (2004), Gamson (1992), and Reese, Gandy, and Grant (2001).

7. This portrayal represents my synthesis of Lodge and Stroh (1993) with Taber, Lodge, and Glathar (2001); Kintsch (1998); Kuklinski (2001); Lodge and Taber (2000); Sears (1993); Jervis (1993); and Fiske and Taylor (1991); cf. Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock (1991). Lodge and Stroh's (1993, pp. 247–248) theory of schemas and long-term memory applies nicely to the impacts of news frames: “The basic characteristics of long-term memory are 1) node strength, the inherent strength or accessibility of a node that determines the ease with which it is brought to mind; 2) belief strength, the strength of association between connected nodes; 3) affective tags, the evaluative weight of each node; and 4) the implicational relation believed to exist between connected nodes.”

8. See Wolfsfeld (1997, 2003) for related discussions of frame contests.

9. Scott Althaus (personal communication) pointed out the importance of this distinction.

10. See Manheim (1997) on strategic public relations and media coverage of foreign nations and events; see Coleman and Perl (1999) on international policy networks; cf. Cook (1998).

11. As Sobel (2001) and others suggest, perhaps 5%–10% of the general public follows world politics with some care. This segment's opinions may exert more influence on government officials than the public as a whole, but discerning the actual state of informed opinion is difficult, as surveys rarely focus on that group.

12. Robinson (2002) emphasizes “policy certainty”—or what might be termed “unity”—within the administration as a key variable. If an administration is internally debating a policy, it opens the way for mediated dissent to influence its actions, according to Robinson. But once the administration has come together, media criticism or elite disputation rarely make much difference. Robinson provides a useful synthesis of the hegemony and indexing models, one compatible with much of the discussion here.

13. Studies in the subfield of public opinion and foreign policy typically take only brief glances at the media. Exceptions include Page and Shapiro (1992) and Sobel (2001).

14. These categories of congruent, ambiguous, and incongruent can be compared to Hallin's (1986) formulation of three spheres in public discourse: consensus, legitimate controversy, and deviance.

15. *Los Angeles Times* poll, April 2–3, 2003, accessed May 17, 2003, at [www.pollingreport.com/iraq.htm](http://www.pollingreport.com/iraq.htm).

16. On the other hand, the popular fictional television drama about the White House, *The West Wing*, did feature a subplot in which the United States had to deal with Qumar, a two-faced Middle Eastern country, putatively allied with America, that oppresses its citizens and supports anti-American activities. On the show, the United States stood up to Qumar, demanding a change in its policies. Baum (2003) explores the possibility that entertainment television significantly affects American public opinion on foreign affairs.

17. CNN does not appear to deviate markedly from the three broadcast networks. According to a Nexis search for "September 11" and "lawsuit," only twice did CNN's around-the-clock news mention the families' suits and the Saudi defendants during July or August 2002 (Fox News gave the matter a total of one mention).

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