Winning the Peace: Paradox and Propaganda after the War in Iraq

Prepared for delivery at the 2004 annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL.

Brian Anse Patrick
Department of Communication
University of Toledo
banse@umich.edu

A. Trevor Thrall
Department of Social Sciences
University of Michigan – Dearborn
atthrall@umich.edu

Propaganda is situational. This primary aspect of propaganda became apparent to American intellectuals in the aftermath of World War I, The Great War, which certainly lived up its original name when it came to standardizing the template of war propaganda in modern mass democratic societies. Walter Lippmann, often misremembered as a champion of mass public opinion, was a functionary in the Wilson administration when it created the famously influential Committee on Public Information. CPI is remembered not only as "America's first propaganda ministry" (Jackall & Hirota, 1995), but as an organization that incubated the public relations and propaganda practitioners who so efficaciously undertook private-sector mass "engineering of consent" (Bernays, 1928) after the war. Lippmann, the quintessential insider, describes propaganda, essentially, as resulting when a group controls or limits access to an event and releases information about it in such a way so as to maximally benefit themselves: "Every leader is to some degree a propagandist. Strategically placed, and compelled often to chose even at the best between equally cogent though conflicting ideals of safety for the institution, and candor to his public, the official finds himself deciding what facts, in what setting, in what guise he shall permit the public to know" (Lippmann, 1922, p. 247).

Generally during wartime, then and now, information is relatively easy to control. Concerns of secrecy and inherent danger limit media access and since Viet Nam White House officials have often been successful in further restricting access and increasing their control over informational flow (Thrall, 2000). Many will remember the superlatively staged 1991 Desert Storm media events, starring General Norman Schwarzkopf, that provide a vivid example of how informational

control can create a sanitized, high-tech mediated image of a war that might best be remembered, from the propaganda perspective, as the "Mother of All Press Conferences."

Propagandistically speaking, however, winning a war does not equate with winning the peace. Cessation of war proper compromises strict informational control, for media professionals can then act virtually at will, independent of the impositions of press pools, media events, censorship or embedding. Official balancing of "equally cogent though conflicting ideals" correspondingly becomes more difficult. Thus, after the invasion of Iraq, growing criticism tarnished the halo of domestic public support President Bush enjoyed in the immediate wake of the invasion; while internationally, there was continued opposition to US plans for rebuilding Iraq, ill will from Muslims and Muslim nations, and surging terrorism and protest within Iraq itself

We argue that the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq has presented the Bush Administration with a situational problem of balancing its own institutional safety against a number of "equally cogent" expectations by various publics, a situation that threatens its ability to maneuver politically. Complicating the situation, these public expectations, "psychological resistances" as Harold Lasswell called them (1927), are often paradoxical in nature: e.g., the desire for a safe and controlled homeland but with freedom for all; vengeance against terrorists without transgressions against civil rights; unilateral influence abroad without alienating allies or the international community; instantaneous military transformation of

despotic societies into modern democratic civil societies without significant costs in blood or money; and harmony and certainty in an uncertain, inharmonious world.

We further argue that unable, or perhaps sometimes unwilling, to resolve these paradoxes substantively, but concerned about maintaining public support, the Administration has maintained its preferred policy options while pursuing a classic propaganda strategy (i.e., public relations and public diplomacy) as a way to balance opinion disjuncture and paradox at home and abroad. This strategy relies on symbols, arguments, and rhetoric in an attempt to manage the debate over Iraq at home, conduct foreign policy and attempt to win the peace.

This use of propaganda and the rise and fall of public support during the postwar phase raises important questions about presidential communication behavior. First, why do administrations choose the methods they use? Propaganda has a long US history and has in fact been effective on many occasions (e.g., World War II mobilization) but the term still raises fears of anti-democratic manipulation. (Schlesinger, 1973, Lippmann, 1922; Lasswell, 1927: Sproule, 1989) Second, what impact does presidential propaganda have on publics and politics, on the marketplace of ideas? Previous research suggests that during time of war and crisis presidents enjoy a heightened ability to set news agendas, frame issues, and manage public opinion. Many have raised concerns about the implications for public discourse about war and other social problems (Smith 1992, MacArthur 1992, Bennett and Paletz 1994, Mermin 1999).

To respond to these questions we apply classical propaganda theory as initially developed in the first half of the 20th century by Lippmann, Lasswell, and others to

an analysis of the Bush administration's public relations efforts in the year after the invasion of Iraq. In short we argue that the presidential use of propaganda is largely situational and driven by contemporary pressures of events, news media, mass public opinion, and other political forces rather than by ideological calculation.

We begin by reviewing classical propaganda theory and its relevance to the case at hand. We then illustrate the central policy paradox facing the administration and the pressures it exerted during the post-invasion period. In section four we analyze all White House public addresses made from May 2003 through April 2004 to assess the administration's propaganda response to the paradox. We conclude with a discussion of the impacts and larger implications of paradox and propaganda in an open society.

Classical Situational Propaganda

Harold Lasswell quite literally wrote the book on propaganda, and in so doing launched the study of communication as a modern university subject. In *Propaganda Technique in the World War* he describes "inconvenient currents" that must be turned aside to successfully prosecute a war. Although these passages were published in 1927, they could just as well have been written about the current administration or about Operation Iraqi Freedom:

> So great are the psychological resistances to war in modern nations that every war must appear to be a war of defense against a menacing, murderous aggressor. There must be no ambiguity about whom the public is to hate. The war must not be due to a world system of conducting international affairs, nor to

the stupidity or malevolence of all governing classes, but to the rapacity of the enemy. Guilt and guilelessness must be assessed geographically, and all the guilt must be on the other side of the frontier. If the propagandist is to mobilize the hate of the people, he must see to it that everything is circulated which establishes the guilt of the enemy. Variations from this theme may be permitted under certain contingencies which we will undertake to specify, but it must continue to be the leading motif. (p. 47)

The above is all so eerily familiar that one wonders if scriptwriters for the media events of the more recent war (and its aftermath) did not use it as an outline. Analogies are considerable. As with the rapacious Kaiser, his Huns and the mad Prussians of the Great War—scripted in the Allied political rhetoric of that time, it should be noted, as Odin-worshipping pagans out to destroy Christianity (Lasswell, 1927; Sproule, 1997)—recent political rhetoric is able to make use of virtual designer enemies such as Osama Bin Ladin, Saddam Hussein and his rapacious sons, and a fundamentalist religious jihad, medieval in outlook and methods, all of whom are hell-bent to destroy the progressive western democratic way of life. Mirroring current social sensitivities, and Aristotle's caution that persuaders must appear fair for the sake of ethos, more recent rhetoric is qualified and softened in regards to racial and cultural stereotypes—but the basic outline persists.

The reason that the propaganda guidelines above still apply so well is because the overall political situation persists as well: the decision for war preceded mass public assent. As Lasswell and others later showed, America entered the Great War

as the result of elite opinion that had been considerably manipulated by a well-orchestrated British propaganda campaign of atrocity stories and personal influence; amazingly, Britain even cut the transatlantic cable from Germany in 1914, and thereafter virtually dominated the war information flow to traditionally isolationist America (Sproule, 1997). Mass public support followed several steps behind elite opinion, and had to be both excited and directed (hence, in part, the need for the CPI; and, correspondingly, an important propagandistic function of the Department of Homeland Security today, with its billboards and spokespersons in so many local communities, where it serves as perhaps the most tangible remainder of threat.). Likewise the Iraq War decision was also a top-down affair, made it would seem on the basis of probabilistic assessments of murky intelligence reports under the warrant of broad executive powers legislated for use in the War on Terror. American publics then had to be sold on the war, and "psychological resistances" overcome; a situation virtually mandating the use of the how-to guidelines above.

Perhaps above all, Lasswell's call to "mobilize hatred" serves the purpose of drama; it disambiguates the unsatisfying fuzzy "iffy-ness" of elite decisions made on the basis of multiple contingencies and best-guess assessments; making it possible for the uninformed or partly-informed to comfortably arrive at and/or hold an opinion. For here we encounter another situational element of classic propaganda theory: the fact that the majority of the people in any mass democracy, under the very best of conditions, are only partly informed. Stalin is attributed with a well-known remark of similar drift concerning the need to dramatize war decisions: ten

thousand dead soldiers he described as a statistic, but one dead Russian mother's son, a tragedy.

But once again, according to classical propaganda theory, this is an essentially situational phenomenon. The masses of people and most publics (i.e., interest groups and voluntary associations) are necessarily distant from events and political actors. Describing this general remoteness of political events leading up to war decisions, Lippmann used the metaphor that the mass public is like a playgoer who arrives at the theatre in the "middle of the third act and leaves before the last curtain, having stayed just long enough perhaps to decide who is the hero and who the villain of the piece" (1925, p. 49). Hannah Arendt (1948) also underscored the need of mass publics for consistent, convincing, simplifying explanation at the expense of accuracy. She noted a mass preference for conspiracy theory to factual explanations, for conspiracy theories and topics are always easier to understand and more emotionally satisfying, despite or perhaps because of their "mysteriousness" (p. 351).

A final point on classical situational propaganda concerns its relative independence from ideology. This is surprising to those who regard propaganda as a more or less pure manifestation of ideology. Hannah Arendt extensively studied propagandas of totalitarian societies. According to Arendt, while ideology certainly plays in the indoctrination of followers, "the necessities of propaganda are always dictated by the outside world" (1948, p. 344); and pragmatic considerations rather than ideology prevail in response to "pressure" on a regime from the outside, (pressure which would include competing pluralistic interests). In fact the bedrock

beliefs of the masses are more important than ideology because propaganda must align with common beliefs for it to be effective; the propagandist becomes incredible when he swims upstream of popular culture norms and agendas; and this is why modern propaganda relies so heavily on polls and focus groups for guidance. Eugen Hadamovsky, who worked for Nazi propaganda minister Josef Goebbels, wrote that, contrary to much opinion, propaganda was not the art of inflicting an opinion on the people, but rather the art of receiving an opinion from them (1933). American political scientists are just getting back to this point. (See, for example, George Edwards, 2003).

Thus in classical propaganda the symbolic role of the leader is to dramatize and simplify, to disambiguate a fog of complex events in such a way as to satisfy manifold anxieties; a task which turns on the paradoxical nature of the demands that must be met. This anxious mass individual is classically viewed as a psychoanalytic case study, like the neurotic that Karen Horney describes (1950), a person of doubtful efficacy whose inner needs are mighty, who at some inner level craves and demands absolute or near-absolute love, power, security, leisure, independence, respect, honor, knowledge—all without great work or costs. Such demands by their nature conflict with one another. John Tropman (1998) has similarly identified an American value system of dilemmas, e.g., independence versus magnanimity to those who deserve help, and employs this paradoxical value system in explaining ambivalent policy toward the poor. Ellul (1965) recognizes a sort of conflicted hopelessness, an inherent human weakness and limitation in mass society individuals, that provides a receptive audience for propaganda.

Turning then to post-invasion Iraq, classical propaganda theory predicts that situational pressures created by the collision of real world events with mass public opinion will drive propaganda (public relations) use. Further, it suggests that rather than simply reflecting the ideological considerations of George W. Bush; administration propaganda will be sensitive to the needs and opinions of the mass public.

<div align="center">Paradox and Propaganda –Intervention without Costs</div>

The situation in post-invasion Iraq made many demands on the Bush administration. The most critical pressure, though, came from an expectation paradox that we call "intervention without costs." We define a paradox as conflicting or contradictory pressures regarding appropriate policy options. "Guns versus butter," for instance, is a classic policy paradox from economics. Our intervention without costs paradox is an attempt to conceptualize the conflicting expectations of the publics regarding Iraq.

Clearly, such paradoxes – and the tradeoffs that they require – are the rule rather than the exception in politics. Presidents risk loss of support when they pursue policies that seek too much of one good at the expense of another. Under normal circumstances, presidents act to strike the right balance. Paradoxes can create real problems, however, when a president has staked his presidency on one course of action and does not have the ability to balance competing goals through substantive policy change. As we detail below, President Bush faced a critical paradox of this sort because his administration staked its claim on a strategy in postwar Iraq that

did not allow for much policy flexibility and which then came under a great deal of criticism.

A campaign advertisement for Senator John Kerry, the 2004 Democratic presidential nominee, illustrated the paradox perfectly. Run in Iowa and New Hampshire in fall 2003 and early January 2004, Kerry's ad begins by arguing that the Bush administration should have created a *more robust* plan for rebuilding Iraq: "The problem is you declared 'mission accomplished' when you had no plan to win the peace." Seconds later the ad argues that Bush's plan already *costs too much*: "We shouldn't be cutting education and closing firehouses in America while we're opening them in Iraq" (Rutenberg 2003). Kerry's ad reflected the dual and conflicting pressures on Bush – the public expected progress in Iraq, but not at the expense of other matters.

As we will detail in greater detail below, the Bush administration has been very sensitive to this paradox. In his speeches, President Bush maintained throughout the post-invasion period that the US should ensure that Iraq's future is peaceful and productive despite the costs. Bush explained in October for example: "You see, we're providing this help not only because we've got good hearts, but because our vision is clear. A stable and democratic and hopeful Iraq will no longer be a breeding ground for terror, tyranny, and aggression. Free nations are peaceful nations. Our work in Iraq is essential to our own security – and no band of murderers or gangsters will stop that work, or shake the will of America" (Remarks by the President to New Hampshire Air National Guard, October 9, 2003).

Polls suggested that these speeches were well grounded on popular beliefs. Many Americans agreed with the interventionist proposition that the US should help rebuild Iraq, even among those who opposed the war in the first place. A Time/CNN poll reported that 42 percent of Americans would not consider it worth having fought the war in Iraq if a democratic government were not established there (Time/CNN February 5, 2004).

At the same time, however, Americans were also very sensitive to the perceived costs of the rebuilding effort in terms of casualties, economic impact, and with respect to the potential harm to US relations with the international community. As James Fallows put it, "Having taken over Iraq and captured Saddam Hussein, it [the US] has no moral or practical choice other than to see out the occupation and to help rebuild and democratize the country" (2004).

The paradox was thus clear: the public wanted to reap the benefits of the invasion and of rebuilding Iraq but also wanted the costs and casualties to be kept to a minimum. The paradox put Bush in a bind politically: he could not stay the course in Iraq while simultaneously avoiding casualties and economic costs. Simply stated, therefore, the first paradox required Bush to pursue "intervention without cost."

Confronted by this paradox, the Bush administration planted itself on the side of a unilateral nation-building intervention program that made it virtually impossible to make substantial reductions to the financial, human, and other costs of the policy. Since May 1st 2003 and the end of major combat operations, the Bush administration thus faced building pressure to resolve the paradox as costs, casualties, and criticism mounted.

The Pressures of Paradox: Plans and Progress

The intervention without cost paradox exerted increasing pressure from various publics along two major axes. The first was the criticism that the administration lacked a clear plan for the rebuilding of Iraq and that the lack of progress, especially with respect to maintaining order and security, was driving up the costs of the war to unacceptable levels. James Fallows summarized a pointed version of this "lack of progress" theme in the *Atlantic Monthly*, "But the Administration will be condemned for what it did with what was known. The problems the United States has encountered are precisely the ones its own expert agencies warned against. Exactly what went wrong with the occupation will be studied for years – or should be. The missteps of the first half-year in Iraq are as significant as other classic and carefully examined failures in foreign policy, including John Kennedy's handling of the Bay of Pigs invasion, in 1961, and Lyndon Johnson's decision to escalate US involvement in Vietnam, in 1965" (2004).

From May 2003 polls suggested that the public felt that the rebuilding was going less well than it should, that the US would likely be in Iraq for many years, and that in the end the costs would be too high. A majority of the public agreed that the administration lacked a clear plan since the beginning of the post-invasion phase. In October 2003 76% of respondents to a New York Times/CBS News poll said that they did not believe the Bush administration had clearly explained how long US military forces would have to remain in Iraq. Comparisons to Vietnam and the "quagmire" debate in fact appeared as early as the middle of June (Robert Schlesinger and Amber Morley, "Iraq Occupation Has Deadly Toll for U.S."

Boston Globe June 16, 2003), and despite the capture of Saddam Hussein, 69

percent of Americans polled in December said that they believed it was 'somewhat'

or 'very likely' that the US would get bogged down in Iraq for a long time without

success.

Pressures of Paradox: The Rising Toll of War

As casualties mounted over the summer and fall of 2003, the pressure of the

intervention without cost paradox rose along with extensive media coverage and

escalating public concern about the human costs of the war. In May 2003 alone,

immediately after the invasion, the New York Times carried 176 articles about Iraq,

of which nearly 68% focused on the costs of the conflict in the form of blood,

suffering, money, or social-political disruption. Topics included the looting of Iraqi

artifacts, the destruction of Iraqi infrastructure and the costs of reconstruction, Iraqi

civilian casualties, and American casualties. And over the period from May 1, 2003

to February 29, 2004 a total of 266 New York Times stories specifically discussed

American casualties in some way, with coverage levels tracking monthly American

casualty rates very closely. Headlines like "2 G.I.'s Killed in Ambush," and "3

G.I.'s Killed in Capital, One at Campus," became commonplace during the summer

of 2003. Coverage of the use of suicide bombing attacks against civilian targets

(including religious sites) in Iraq also enhanced the theme of disorder and danger.

Polls reflected both the casualty toll and media coverage of costs of war. As

Figure One illustrates, the number of Americans who felt that the number of US

casualties is "unacceptable" grew from 28% during the invasion to 62% by early

January 2004. This rise in concern continued, perhaps surprisingly, even after a brief respite following the capture of Saddam Hussein in mid December.

Driven by resistance to growing and uncertain costs, Americans also began questioning whether the benefits to be gained from rebuilding Iraq were enough to justify the effort. The percentage of Americans who felt that the war was worth the costs dropped from a post-invasion high of 70% to under 50% in February. This uncertainty led to a "should we stay or should we go?" split among the public with regard to the US presence in Iraq. A Harris Poll from February 2004 found that that 45% favored "keeping a large number of US troops in Iraq until there is a stable government" while 51% favored "bringing most of our troops home in the next year." (Harris Poll February 9-16, 2004).

Winning the Peace: The Bush Administration Propaganda Response

The pressure generated by the intervention without cost paradox presented the Bush administration with a stiff challenge. Right or wrong, effective or ineffective, the Bush vision for Iraq clearly made it more difficult to use policy change as a mechanism to maintain or regain public support for the rebuilding effort even as pressure increased. As a result, the only avenue open to Bush was to use the bully pulpit to resolve the paradox through leadership of public opinion.

To assess the administration's response to the pressures of the intervention without costs paradox we analyzed every public address made by the president, the vice president, and national security adviser Condoleezza Rice regarding Iraq from May 1, 2003 through February 29, 2004, 77 addresses in all. Classical propaganda

theory predicts that the pressures of the intervention without cost paradox will spur and shape the administration's propaganda efforts. In particular, it suggests that the Bush administration will react to the pressures outlined above in ways that reduce the public's psychological discomfort. In the case of post-invasion Iraq the discomfort stemmed first from a sense that little progress was being made toward reaping the benefits of the invasion and second from a growing belief that the costs were beginning to outweigh the potential benefits.

The Bush administration's strategy for "winning the peace" encompassed three central tactics aimed at changing public perceptions of benefits and costs. First, the administration attempted to reframe Iraq as America's central counterterrorism operation (a change in emphasis from the operation to rid Iraq of weapons of mass destruction), thereby justifying the cost on the grounds that the policy would make America safer. Second, in response to media coverage and complaints from congressional opponents about lack of progress, the administration worked to sell the progress being made while downplaying the challenges and costs. Finally, the administration dealt with public anxiety about casualties by distancing Bush from vivid images of the war's human toll.

The "Central Front in the War on Terror"

Before the invasion, the primary justification for the invasion was to find and destroy Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, not to prevent future terrorism against the United States. President Bush announced as Operation Iraqi Freedom began, "The people of the United States and our friends and allies will not live at the mercy of an outlaw regime that threatens the peace with weapons of mass murder." And as

presidential spokesman Ari Fleischer said about weapons of mass destruction on April 10th during the ground war, "That is what this war was about" (Nicholas Kristoff, "Missing in Action: Truth" New York Times, May 6, 2003).

With the failure to find substantial evidence of Iraqi WMD programs during the summer of 2003, however, Bush shifted away from this argument and instead promoted Iraq as the "central front in the war on terror." Despite little evidence that Iraq was connected to Al Qaeda or any other anti-US terrorist activity, the Bush administration began promoting the more general argument that occupying and rebuilding Iraq was justified even in the absence of weapons of mass destruction because a peaceful Iraq would not be a breeding ground for future terrorists

The administration's emphasis on this rationale as the justification for the continued US presence in Iraq after the war did not fully emerge until July, after criticism of the situation in Iraq and the missing WMD's had grown heated. Bush first made major use of this theme in a speech at the White House before a meeting with L. Paul Bremer, the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq. Bush outlined his new justification for staying the course in Iraq, "A free, democratic, peaceful Iraq will not threaten America or our friends with illegal weapons. A free Iraq will not be a training ground for terrorists, or a funnel of money to terrorists, or provide weapons to terrorists who would willing use them to strike our country or our allies. A free Iraq will not destabilize the Middle East. A free Iraq can set a hopeful example to the entire region and lead other nations to choose freedom. And as the pursuits of freedom replace hatred and resentment and terror in the Middle

East, the American people will be more secure." (Remarks by the President with the Secretary of Defense and the Presidential Envoy to Iraq, July 23, 2003).

After Bush's initial use of the theme it became a staple of all administration public addresses. The very next day Vice President Richard Cheney argued that, "In Iraq, we took another essential step in the war on terror. The United States and its allies rid the Iraqi people of a murderous dictator, and rid the world of a menace to our future peace and security" (Vice President's Remarks on War on Terror at the American Enterprise Institute, July 24, 2003). Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz took up the frame in his testimony to Congress a week later, ""The military and rehabilitation efforts now under way in Iraq are an essential part of the war on terror" (Maureen Dowd, "Blanket of Dread," New York Times July 30, 2003).

Analysis of the Iraq-related public addresses made by Bush, Cheney, and Rice reveals that 82% of them made a link to the war on terrorism. The link was emphasized most powerfully in President Bush's major addresses to the public. On August 14th, for example, Bush declared, "The war on terror continues in Iraq. Make no mistake about it; Iraq is part of the war on terror. Our coalition forces are still engaged in an essential mission. We met the major combat objectives in Operation Iraqi Freedom by removing a regime that persecuted Iraqis, and supported terrorists, and was armed to threaten the peace of the world" (Remarks by the President to Military Personnel and Families, MCAS Miramar, California August 14, 2003).

And in his televised address to the nation in the days before the anniversary of September 11th, Bush made his most sustained case to that point, "Two years ago, I told the Congress and the country that the war on terror would be a lengthy war, a different kind of war, fought on many fronts in many places. Iraq is now the central front. Enemies of freedom are making a desperate stand there -- and there they must be defeated. This will take time and require sacrifice. Yet we will do what is necessary, we will spend what is necessary, to achieve this essential victory in the war on terror, to promote freedom and to make our own nation more secure." (President Addresses the Nation, September 7, 2003).

Making Progress

On May 1st President Bush announced the end of major combat operations in front of a huge "Mission Accomplished" banner aboard the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln (President Announces Major Combat Operations in Iraq Have Ended. Remarks by the President from the USS Abraham Lincoln at Sea Off the Coast of San Diego, California, May 1st, 2003). Almost immediately thereafter, criticism emerged about the Administration's handling of the postwar phase as it became clear that Iraqi democracy would come neither quickly, nor quietly, nor cheaply.

Whether or not the Bush administration conducted sufficient planning for the rebuilding phase, the administration had nonetheless managed to create public expectations of a rapid and relatively low cost transition to Iraqi sovereignty. As James Fallows notes, the administration exercised great discipline in avoiding any extended discussion of the war's likely cost. And when the administration did

discuss how much it might cost, it did so in a way that appears to have been calculated to encourage people to imagine a very low cost affair. On March 27, eight days into the war, Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz told the House Appropriations committee, "There's a lot of money to pay for this. It doesn't have to be US taxpayer money. We are dealing with a country that can really finance its own reconstruction, and relatively soon." (Fallows 2003)

Even after it became clear that the US would wind up paying a great deal more than had been initially admitted, the administration kept focusing on the fact that other nations would soon be picking up the tab. Even in September as the administration was seeking $87 billion in supplemental funding for the rebuilding of Iraq, the president and others insisted that the bill for Iraq would be shared widely once the international donors conference met in mid October and other nations stepped forward.

By June, however, serious debate arose about US plans for rebuilding Iraq and the lack of progress being made. And beginning in earnest in July, the administration was making "progress," along with the war on terrorism, a central theme of most of its propaganda strategy, with 78 percent of all public addresses discussing progress being made in Iraq. President Bush was the primary promoter of the progress theme. A staple of his speeches throughout the summer and fall was the recitation of key indicators from Iraq: "Together, we're helping the Iraqi people move steadily toward a free and democratic society. Economic life is being restored to cities of Iraq. A new Iraqi currency is circulating. Local governments are up and running. Iraq will soon begin the process of drafting a constitution, with free

elections to follow" (Remarks by the President to the Troops, Butts Army Air Field, November 24, 2003).

A final piece of the administration's effort was to argue that the news media were painting an overly negative picture of progress in Iraq. As the administration made a concerted push to reframe the situation, it began to give interviews to local and regional broadcasters while casting doubt the national news media's performance. Secretary Rumsfeld first sounded this negative-media theme in a speech at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, "The part of the picture that's negative is being emphasized, and the part of the picture that's positive is not" (Eric Schmitt, "Cheney Lashes Out at Critics of Policy on Iraq," NYT October 11, 2003). Soon after President Bush told one reporter for Hearst-Argyle Television, a regional television news provider, "There's a sense that people in America aren't getting the truth. I'm mindful of the filter through which some news travels, and sometimes you have to go over the heads of the filter and speak directly to the people." Later, in December, the Pentagon announced the creation of a satellite feed to carry official military briefings directly to network affiliates and cable stations such as C-SPAN. As one unnamed senior administration official told the *New York Times*, "The American people need to hear good news from Iraq to supplement the bad news they get" (Christopher Marquis, "US Plans to Offer Official Coverage of Iraq Directly to Viewers," *New York Times* December 16, 2003).

Responding to Casualties

Despite having argued that the peace and democracy in Iraq were worth the price, the Bush administration nonetheless had to deal with the potentially volatile issue of American casualties. In attempting to minimize the pressure created by American casualties the Bush administration has followed three main paths. First, very simply, they restricted media access to American casualties by barring journalists from witnessing the unloading of caskets from airplanes at Dover Air Force Base. This aimed at ensuring that the steady stream of caskets did not become a defining image or symbol of the rebuilding of Iraq.

Second, the administration took care to distance the president personally from the issue of casualties. The president on many occasions honored the sacrifice of American soldiers in his speeches, but the administration studiously avoided having President Bush attend any military funerals. Though some criticized Bush for this, the strategy had the effect of making sure that casualties and costs of the war did not become indelibly linked with the president. (Rosenthal 2003)

Third, as classical propaganda theory would predict, the Administration responded to the flow of casualties in Iraq by stepping up its propaganda efforts to reframe the war and to assert progress. As Figure Two illustrates, the administration's propaganda tempo rose and fell with the monthly rate of casualties in Iraq that, in turn, tracked very closely with the level of New York *Times* coverage of casualties. In short, as discussion of American casualties heated up, so did the Administration's efforts to justify them.

[Figure Two about here]

The most obvious illustration of the Administration's efforts to respond to casualties came in the President's April 13th primetime television press conference. As a result of Sunni and Shiite uprisings in Fallujah and Najaf against the US occupation, United States forces lost almost 90 soldiers during the first two weeks of April. Press coverage of that two-week span spawned the most graphic images of the war to date. From grisly pictures of four American contractors whose burnt bodies were hung from a bridge over the Euphrates River to images of American and allied hostages held by Iraqi insurgents, pressure mounted on the Administration once again to explain to the American people why the United States should pay such a price.

In response Bush called just the third primetime televised press conference of his presidency. In that forum he reiterated the central arguments of the Administration's position while acknowledging for the first time the impact of media coverage of American casualties on the public. At one point Bush said, "Look, nobody likes to see dead people on their television screens – I don't. It's gut wrenching." But Bush urged his audience to support his policies with the same themes the Administration had relied upon since May 2003, arguing, "Look, this is hard work. It's hard to advance freedom in a country that has been strangled by tyranny. And, yet, we must stay the course, because the end result is in our nation's interest" (President Addresses the Nation in Prime Time Press Conference, April 13, 2004).

Presidents, Propaganda, and Democracy

Scholars of the war/media/public opinion nexus have long been concerned about the president's ability to control information, manage news, and shape public opinion in times of war. We have described the vigorous efforts of the Bush Administration to do just that in response to the situational pressures of paradox. The questions that motivate our research, however, remain. How successful was the Administration in shaping public opinion? To what extent did the Administration's framing of events dominate public debate in the news media? Should we be concerned about presidential dominance of the news? Or, to state the questions in terms of classical propaganda theory: Has this official campaign helped the administration resolve the "conflicting ideals of safety for the institution, and candor to [the] public" as described by Lippmann? Is the official story sufficiently dramatic and does it affix culpability in a way that will impress itself upon that mass democratic citizen who arrived so late in the third act?

We conclude that the answers to these questions are a mixed bag and offer a more nuanced perspective on propaganda than is usually described. On one level, the answer is troubling for deliberative democracy. A series of polls taken during the summer of 2003 reveals a powerful connection between presidential propaganda and public misperception, mediated by the news media. The study suggests that Bush Administration propaganda efforts created misperceptions among the public about what was really happening in Iraq. These misperceptions, in turn, helped build support for the president and his policy.

The study, carried out by the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland and the polling firm Knowledge Networks, investigated whether people correctly perceived that the US had no evidence of a strong link between Iraq and Al Qaeda and 9/11, that world opinion was largely against US policy in Iraq, and that no evidence of weapons of mass destruction had yet been uncovered in Iraq since the invasion. Though only a minority of the public held any given misperception, surveys found that 70 percent of the public held at least one key misperception about Iraq, 20 percent held two of them, 8 percent held all three, while just 30 percent held none (PIPA/Knowledge Networks 2003).

Misperception, in turn, led directly to increased support for the president's policies in Iraq. Support for Bush was 23 percent among those with no misperceptions, 53 percent for those with one, 78 percent for those with two, and 86 percent for those holding all three misperceptions. And though partisanship was found to play an important role in encouraging misperception (with Bush supporters more likely to misperceive), the general thrust of these findings held up after controlling for partisanship, attentiveness to news, and other demographic factors (PIPA/Knowledge Networks 2003).

Strikingly, misperception levels depended on what news source a person relied upon to learn about the war, implicating the news media directly in the propaganda process. 80 percent of Fox TV news viewers, for example, held at least one misperception, compared to 55 percent of CNN viewers, 47 percent of print media readers, and only 23 percent of National Public Radio news listeners. Fox TV news executives have publicly argued that they see their role as countering the liberal bias

of existing news offerings. In this case, however, Fox appears to have played a role in helping confuse the public – both liberals and conservatives. Among Bush supporters, 78 percent who watched Fox believed that Iraq had a strong link to Al Qaeda or played a role in 9/11, compared to 50 percent of Bush supporters who got their news from National Public Radio. Among those who said they would support the eventual Democratic presidential nominee, 48 percent of Fox viewers believed that Iraq had a strong link to Al Qaeda while none of those who listened to National Public Radio did so. Incredibly, the more Fox news a person watched, the more likely they were to have a misperception. The opposite was true for listening to National Public Radio (PIPA/Knowledge Networks 2003).

These misperceptions are logical consequences of the Bush Administration's propaganda efforts as outlined above. As noted, the Administration spent a great deal of time connecting Iraq to the war on terror. Between the focus on terrorism and the Administration's prewar suggestions of Iraq's links to Al Qaeda, it is perhaps not surprising that this was the most common misperception held by almost half of the public. Despite the ability of other news sources to help the public see more clearly, these findings suggest that to the degree that they enjoy control over information about a conflict, officials will enjoy the fruits of their propaganda campaigns.

Considered from another perspective, however, official propaganda appears seriously limited. Recall that President Bush failed to maintain high levels of public support for his Iraq policies after the invasion. Despite his efforts to reframe the situation and to justify the costs of peace, by February 2004 a majority disapproved

of his handling of the situation in Iraq, down from 78% approval just after the invasion. Significantly, the president's own performance ratings fell in almost perfect concert with the public's judgments about Iraq, hovering just at or below 50% (NYT/CBS Poll 2/12-14/03). At this level, it is difficult to argue that propaganda either dominated debate or swayed the public.

As classical propaganda theory suggests, using the media to influence the public becomes more difficult as the administration's control over information erodes and as the public slowly grows aware of discrepancies between official rhetoric and the reality on the ground. The variation in success of the Bush Administration's propaganda efforts by news source thus highlights the role of a pluralistic and open public sphere. If pro-government news sources can amplify the impact of propaganda and misperception, the importance of multiple and independent news outlets grows accordingly. Even during times of greatest official control over information, the existence of a diverse marketplace of news providers offers the greatest chance for an informed public capable of deliberating matters of war and peace.

References

Arendt, H. (1948). *The Origins of Totalitarianism (Second Edition)*. New York:

    Harcout Brace Jovanovich.

Bennett, W.L., Paletz, D. L., eds. (1994). *Taken by Storm: The Media, Public*

    Opinion, and US Foreign Policy in the Gulf War. Chicago: University of

    Chicago Press.

Bernays, E. L. (1928). *Propaganda.* New York: Horace Liveright.

Edwards, G. C. (2003). *On Deaf Ears*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Ellul, J. (1965). *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*. New York: Knopf.

Fallows, J. (2004). "Stumbling into Baghdad," *Atlantic Monthly*

    (January/February).

Hadamovsky, E. (1933). *Propaganda und Nationale Macht.*

Horney, K. (1950). *Neurosis and Human Growth: The Struggle toward Self-*

    Realization. New York: Norton.

Jackal, R., Hirota, J. (1995). America's First Propaganda Ministry: The Commitee

    on Public Information During the Great War. In R. Jackall (Ed.), *Propaganda.*

    New York: New York University Press.

Lasswell, H.D. (1927). *Propaganda Technique in the World War.* New York:

    Knopf.

Lippmann, W. (1922). *Public Opinion.* New York: Macmillan.

Lippmann, W. (1925/1995). The Phantom Public. In R. Jackall (Ed.), *Propaganda.*

    New York: New York University Press.

MacArthur, J. (1992). *The Second Front: Censorship and Propaganda in the Gulf War*. New York: Hill and Wang.

Mermin, J. (1999). *Debating War and Peace: Media Coverage of US Intervention in the Post-Vietnam Era*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Rosenthal, A. (2003). "Accounting for Casualties of War Shouldn't Be a Matter of Politics," *New York Times* November 14, 2003

Rutenberg, J. "Candidates Plan Responses to GOP Commercial on Terrorism," *New York Times* November 24, 2003.

Smith, Hedrick, ed. (1992). *The Media and the Gulf War*. Washington, D.C.: Seven Locks Press.

Sproule. J.M. (1997). *Propaganda and Democracy: The American Experience of Media and Mass Persuasion.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Sproule, J.M. (1989). "Progressive propaganda critics and the magic bullet myth," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication,* Vol. 6*, 225-245.

Thrall, A. T. (2000). *War in the Media Age.* Newark, NJ: Hampton Press.

Tropman, J. E. (1998). *Does America Hate the Poor? The other American Dilemma: Lessons for the 21st Centtury from the 1960s and 1970s.* Westport, CN: Praeger.
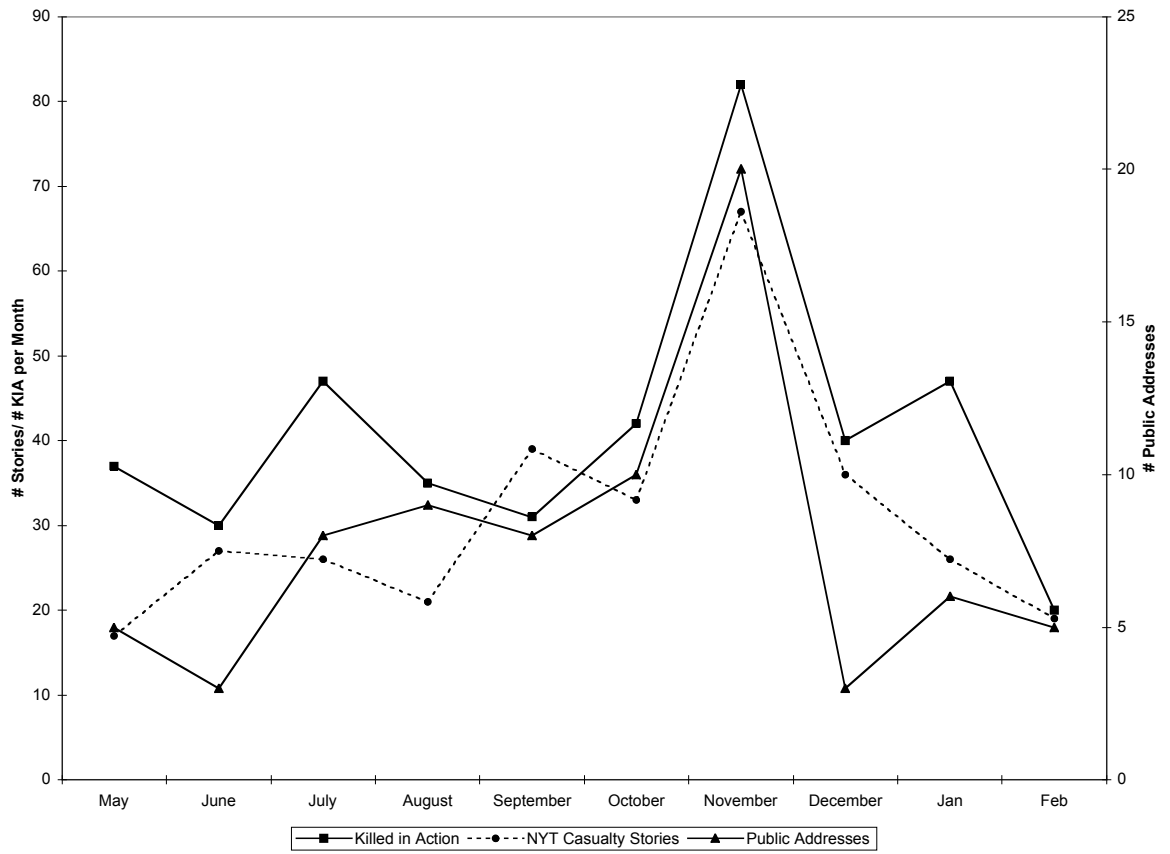
Figure One. Public Perceptions of Casualties in Iraq

Figure Two. Responding to Casualties