
September 11, the Media, and War Fever



Douglas Kellner
University of California, Los Angeles

In the following analysis, I want to suggest how the images and discourses of the U.S. television networks framed the September 11 terrorist attacks to whip up war hysteria while failing to provide a coherent account of what happened, why it happened, and what would count as responsible responses. In an analysis of the dominant discourses, frames, and representations that informed the media and public debate in the days following the September 11 terrorist attacks, I will show how the mainstream media privileged the “clash of civilizations” model, established a binary dualism between Islamic terrorism and civilization, and largely circulated war fever and retaliatory feelings and discourses that called for and supported a form of military intervention. I argue that such one-dimensional militarism could arguably make the current crisis worse rather than providing solutions to the problem of global terrorism. Thus, while the media in a democracy should critically debate urgent questions facing the nation, in the terror crisis the mainstream U. S. corporate media, especially television, promoted war fever and military solutions to the problem of global terrorism.¹

On the day of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the networks brought out an array of national security state intellectuals, usually ranging from the right to the far right, to explain the horrific events of September 11. The Fox Network presented former UN ambassador and Reagan administration apologist Jeane Kirkpatrick, who rolled out a simplified version of Samuel Huntington’s clash of civilizations, arguing that we were at war with Islam and should defend the West. Kirkpatrick was the most discredited intellectual of her generation, legitimating Reagan administration alliances with unsavory fascists and terrorists as necessary to beat Soviet totalitarianism. Her 1980s propaganda line was premised on a distinction between fascism and communist totalitarianism that argued that alliances with authoritarian or right-wing terrorist and

fascist organizations or states were defensible because these regimes were open to reform efforts or historically undermined themselves and disappeared. Soviet totalitarianism, by contrast, should be resolutely opposed because a communist regime had never collapsed or been overthrown and communism was an intractable and dangerous foe, which must be fought to the death with any means necessary. Of course, the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, along with its empire, and although Kirkpatrick was discredited, she was awarded a professorship at Georgetown University to circulate her crackpot views.

On the afternoon of September 11, Ariel Sharon, leader of Israel, himself implicated in war crimes in Sabra and Shatila in Lebanon in 1982, came on television to convey his regret, condolences, and assurance of Israel's support in the war on terror. Sharon called for a coalition against terrorist networks, which would contrast the civilized world with terrorism, representing good versus evil, "humanity" versus "the bloodthirsty," and "the free world" against "the forces of darkness," who are trying to destroy "freedom" and our "way of life."

Curiously, the Bush administration would take up the same tropes, with George W. Bush attacking the "evil" of the terrorists, using the word five times in his first statement on the September 11 terror assaults, and repeatedly portraying the conflict as a war between good and evil in which the United States was going to "eradicate evil from the world" and "smoke out and pursue . . . evil doers, those barbaric people." The semantically insensitive and dyslexic Bush administration also used cowboy metaphors, calling for Osama bin Laden "dead or alive," and described the campaign as a "crusade" until he was advised that this term carried offensive historical baggage of earlier wars of Christians and Moslems. And the Pentagon at first named the war against terror Operation Infinite Justice until it was advised that only God could dispense "infinite justice" and that Americans and others might be disturbed about a war expanding to infinity.

Disturbingly, in mentioning the goals of the war, Bush never mentioned democracy, and the new name for the campaign became Operation Enduring Freedom. The Bush administration mantra became that the war against terrorism is being fought for "freedom." But we know from the history of political theory and history itself that freedom must be paired with equality, or concepts such as justice, rights, or democracy, to provide adequate political theory and legitimation for political action. As we shall see, it is precisely the contempt for democracy and self-autonomy that has characterized U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East in the past few decades, which is a prime reason why groups and individuals in the area passionately hate the United States.

In his speech to Congress on 20 September declaring his war against terrorism, Bush described the conflict as a war between freedom and fear,

between “those governed by fear” who “want to destroy our wealth and freedoms” and those on the side of freedom. The implication was that “you’re either with us, or against us,” and Bush laid down a series of non-negotiable demands to the Taliban while Congress wildly applauded. Bush’s popularity soared with a country craving blood revenge and the head of Osama bin Laden. Moreover, proclaiming what his administration and commentators would describe as “the Bush doctrine,” Bush asserted that his administration held accountable those nations that supported terrorism—a position that could nurture and legitimate military interventions for years to come.

What was not noted was that the dominant right-wing and Bush administration discourses, like those of bin Laden and radical Islamists, are fundamentally Manichaeic, positing a binary opposition between good and evil, us and them, civilization and barbarism. It is assumed by both sides that “we” are the good and the “other” is wicked, an assertion that Bush made in his incessant assurance that the “evildoers” of the “evil deeds” will be punished, and that the “evil one” will be brought to justice, implicitly equating bin Laden with Satan himself.

Such hyperbolic rhetoric is a salient example of Bushspeak that communicates through codes to specific audiences, in this case domestic Christian right-wing groups that are Bush’s preferred subjects of his discourse. But demonizing terms for bin Laden both elevate his status in the Arab world as a superhero who stands up to the West and angers those who feel such discourse is insulting. Moreover, the trouble with the discourse of “evil” is that it is totalizing and absolutistic, allowing no ambiguities or contradictions. It assumes a binary logic where “we” are the forces of goodness and “they” are the forces of darkness. The discourse of evil is also cosmological and apocalyptic, evoking a cataclysmic war with cosmic stakes. On this perspective, evil cannot be just attacked one piece at a time, through incremental steps; rather, it must be totally defeated, eradicated from the earth if good is to reign. This discourse of evil raises the stakes and violence of conflict and nurtures more apocalyptic and catastrophic politics, fueling future cycles of hatred, violence, and war.

Furthermore, the Bushspeak dualisms between fear and freedom, barbarism and civilization, and the like can hardly be sustained in empirical and theoretical analysis of the contemporary moment. In fact, there is much fear and poverty in “our” world and much wealth, freedom, and security in the Arab and Islamic worlds—at least for privileged elites. No doubt, freedom, fear, and wealth are distributed in both worlds, so to polarize these categories and to make them the legitimating principles of war is highly irresponsible. And associating oneself with “good” while making one’s enemy “evil” is another exercise in binary reductionism and projection of all traits

of aggression and wickedness onto the “other” while constituting oneself as good and pure.

It is, of course, theocratic Islamic fundamentalists who themselves engage in similar simplistic binary discourse that they use to legitimate acts of terrorism. For certain Manichaeic Islamic fundamentalists, the United States is evil, the source of all the world’s problems, and deserves to be destroyed. Such one-dimensional thought does not distinguish between U.S. policies, people, or institutions while advocating a Jihad, or holy war, against the American evil. The terrorist crimes of September 11 appeared to be part of this Jihad, and the monstrousness of the actions of killing innocent civilians shows the horrific consequences of totally dehumanizing an “enemy” deemed so evil that even innocent members of the group in question deserve to be exterminated.

Many commentators on U.S. television offered similarly one-sided and Manichaeic accounts of the cause of the September 11 events, blaming their favorite opponents in the current U.S. political spectrum as the source of the terror assaults. For fundamentalist Christian ideologue Jerry Falwell, and with the verbal agreement of Christian Broadcast Network president Pat Robertson, the culpability for this “horror beyond words” fell on liberals, feminists, gays, and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Jerry Falwell said and Pat Robertson agreed,

The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked. And when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad. I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way—all of them who have tried to secularize America—I point the finger in their face and say, “You helped this happen.” (Quoted in Berkowitz 2001)

In fact, this argument is similar to a right-wing Islamic claim that the United States is fundamentally corrupt and evil and thus deserves God’s wrath, an argument made by Falwell critics that forced the fundamentalist fanatic to apologize.

For right wingers like Gary Aldrich, the “president and founder” of the Patrick Henry Center, it was the liberals who were at fault:

Excuse me if I absent myself from the national political group-hug that’s going on. You see, I believe the liberals are largely responsible for much of what happened Tuesday, and may God forgive them. These people exist in a world that lies beyond the normal standards of decency and civility. (Quoted in Berkowitz 2001)

Other rightists, like Rush Limbaugh, argued incessantly that it was all Bill Clinton's fault, and election-thief manager James Baker (see Kellner 2001) blamed the catastrophe on the 1976 Church report that put limits on the CIA.²

On the issue of "what to do," right-wing columnist Ann Coulter declaimed, "We know who the homicidal maniacs are. They are the ones cheering and dancing right now. We should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity."³ While Bush was declaring a "crusade" against terrorism and the Pentagon was organizing Operation Infinite Justice, Bush administration deputy defense secretary Paul Wolfowitz said the administration's retaliation would be "sustained and broad and effective" and that the United States "will use all [its] resources. It's not just simply a matter of capturing people and holding them accountable, but removing the sanctuaries, removing the support systems, ending states who sponsor terrorism."

Such all-out war hysteria was the order of the day, and throughout September 11 and its aftermath, ideological warhorses like William Bennett came out and urged that the United States declare war on Iraq, Iran, Syria, Libya, and whoever else harbored terrorists. On the Canadian Broadcasting Network, former Reagan administration deputy secretary of defense and military commentator Frank Gaffney suggested that the United States needed to go after the sponsors of these states as well, such as China and Russia, to the astonishment and derision of the Canadian audience. And right-wing talk radio and the internet buzzed with talk of dropping nuclear bombs on Afghanistan, exterminating all Moslems, and whatever other fantasy popped into their unhinged heads.

My point is that broadcast television allowed dangerous and arguably deranged zealots to vent and circulate the most aggressive, fanatic, and downright lunatic views, creating a consensus around the need for immediate military action and all-out war. The television networks themselves featured logos such as "War on America," "America's New War," and other inflammatory slogans that assumed that the U.S. was at war and that only a military response was appropriate. I saw few cooler heads on any of the major television networks, which repeatedly beat the war drums day after day without even the relief of commercials for three days straight, driving the country into hysteria and making it certain that there would be a military response and war.

Radio was even more frightening. Not surprisingly, talk radio oozed hatred and hysteria, calling for violence against Arabs and Muslims and demanding nuclear retaliation and global war. As the days went by, even mainstream radio news became hyperdramatic, replete with music, patriotic gore, and wall-to-wall terror hysteria and war propaganda. National Public Radio, Pacifica, and some discussion programs attempted rational

discussion and debate, but on the whole radio was all propaganda, all the time.

There is no question concerning the depth of emotion and horror with which the United States experienced the first serious assault on its territory by its enemies. The constant invocation of analogies to Pearl Harbor inevitably elicited a need to strike back and prepare for war. The attack on the World Trade Center evoked images of assault on the very body of the country, whereas the attack on the Pentagon represented an assault on the country's defense system, showing the vulnerability, previously unperceived, of the United States to external attack and terror.

For some years, an increasing amount of "expert consultants" were hired by the television corporations to explain complex events to the public. The military consultants hired by the networks had close connections to the Pentagon and usually would express the Pentagon point of view and spin of the day, making them more propaganda conduits for the military than independent analysts. Commentators and congressman, such as John McCain (R-AZ), Henry Kissinger, James Baker, Jeane Kirkpatrick, and other long-time advocates of the military-industrial complex, described the attacks as an "act of war" immediately on September 11 and the days following. For hawkish pundits, the terror attacks required an immediate military response and dramatic expansion of the U.S. military. Many of these hawks were former government officials, like Kissinger and Baker, who were currently tied into the defense industries, guaranteeing that their punditry would be paid for by large profits of the defense industries that they were part of. Indeed, the Bush family, James Baker, and other advocates of large-scale military retribution were connected with the Carlyle Fund, the largest investor in military industries in the world. Consequently, these advocates of war would profit immensely from sustained military activity, an embarrassment rarely mentioned on television or the mainstream press but widely discussed in alternative media and the internet.⁴

The network anchors as well framed the event as a military attack, with Peter Jennings of ABC stating "the response is going to have to be massive if it is to be effective." NBC, owned by General Electric (the largest U.S. military corporation) as usual promoted military action, and its talk shows were populated by pundits who invariably urged immediate military retribution. To help generate and sustain widespread public desire for military intervention, the networks played show after show detailing the harm done to victims of the bombing, kept their cameras aimed at "ground zero" to document the damage and destruction and drama of discovery of dead bodies, and constructed report after report on the evil of bin Laden and the Al Qaeda terrorists who had committed the atrocities.

To continue the sense of drama and urgency, and to ensure that viewers kept tuned into the story and their channels, the television cable news

networks all added “crawlers” to the bottom of their screens, endlessly repeating bulletins of the latest news highlighting the terrorist attack and its consequences. It was remarkable, in fact, how quickly the media corporations produced frames for the event, constructed it as it was going on, and provided innovative and striking visuals and graphics to capture viewer attention. Already on September 11, CNN constructed a four-tiered graphic presentation with a capitalized and blazing “BREAKING NEWS” title on the top of the screen followed by a graphic describing the “ATTACK ON AMERICA,” or whatever slogan was being used to construct the event. Next, a title describing what was being currently portrayed in the visuals flashed across the screen, with the crawlers scrolling the headlines on the bottom. In a remarkable presentation of the talk of Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon on September 11, for instance, the visuals were split between Sharon’s picture in Tel Aviv, images of the World Trade Center bomb site, and the graphics summarizing Sharon’s talk and the headlines crawling along the bottom of the screen. Although the Bush administration obviously had no idea what was happening to the United States as Bush’s presidential plane frantically flew around the country and Vice President Dick Cheney was carried off to the mountains to hide, the television networks were fully in control with frames, discourses, and explanations of the momentous events. It was a tremendous formal accomplishment for the high-tech flash visual production capabilities of the networks, although one could question the intelligence of the interpretations or the military retribution being fervently espoused without contradiction.

The U.S. corporate media continued to fan the war fever, and there was an orgy of patriotism such as the country had not seen since World War II. Media frames shifted from “America under Attack” to “America Strikes Back” and “America’s New War”—even before any military action was undertaken, as if the media frames were to conjure the military response that eventually followed. As indicated, during the initial day of attack on September 11 and for the next few weeks, the networks continued to beat the war drums and the mouthpieces of the military-industrial complex continued to shout for military action with little serious reflection on its consequences visible on the television networks. There was, by contrast, much intelligent discussion on the internet, showing the dangers of the takeover of broadcasting by corporations that would profit by war and upheaval.

The flag became a dominant icon for television news logos and graphics, as well as a potent advertising device for a wealth of products. Television entertainment shows peppered their programs with flags. Regular series such as *The West Wing* and *Law and Order* used computer-generated flags to help capture viewer attention and spread the new patriotism. Flags in ads for automobiles, soft drinks, and other products multiplied endlessly. As patriotism swept across the country, advertisers picked up on the vibe, with

General Motors broadcasting ads to "Keep America Rolling" and Ford motors insisting that "Ford Drives America." The flag and the traditional red, white, and blue provided a bonanza for web designers, as major U.S. corporations such as Pepsi, Proctor & Gamble, Microsoft, Dell, the Gap, and Ask Jeeves immediately redesigned their web sites to reflect the new patriotism.

A return to normal was signaled by the return of television entertainment, advertising, and the evening late-night entertainment shows, after a few days of all-news-all-the-time. But it was not an especially proud moment for American television. CBS anchor Dan Rather, in one of the most embarrassing media performances of his life, blubbered on the David Letterman show that "George W. Bush is my President" and that he would do whatever told, a pathetic collapse of a once-critical and respected journalist. Fox television and the NBC networks continued to be wall-to-wall propaganda for whatever line the Bush administration was putting out. Likewise, CNN became highly propagandistic, in a stunning collapse of a respectable news organization into a vehicle of conservative ideology.

This situation calls attention once again to the major contradiction of the present age with regard to information and knowledge. On the one hand, the United States has available the most striking array of information, opinions, debate, and sources of knowledge of any society in history with its profusion of print journalism, books, articles, and internet sources in contrast to the poverty of information and opinion on television. This is truly a scandal and a contradiction in the construction of contemporary consciousness and political culture. Thus, whereas television functioned largely as propaganda, spectacle, and the producer of mass hysteria (close to brainwashing), fortunately there is a wealth of informed analysis and interpretation available in print media and on the internet, as well as a respectable archive of books and articles on the complexity of U.S. foreign policy and Middle East history.

Notes

1. This study is part of a larger work in progress on "September 11, Terror War, and Blowback" that will be regularly updated and available on my home page at <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/kellner.html>. This section of the text is indebted to students of my cultural studies seminar at the University of California, Los Angeles, and to Richard Kahn, who developed a web site where the class posted material relating to the September 11 events and Afghan war (see <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/ed270/index.html>).

2. In a *Wall Street Journal* editorial on 5 October 2001, Rush Limbaugh wrote: "Mr. Clinton can be held culpable for not doing enough when he was commander

in chief to combat the terrorists who wound up attacking the World Trade Center and Pentagon." Shortly thereafter, Limbaugh confessed that he was almost fully deaf and had been feigning dialogue on his radio show all year. On right-wing attempts to blame Clinton for the terrorist attacks, see John F. Harris, "Conservatives Sound Refrain: It's Clinton's Fault," *The Washington Post*, 7 October 2001, A15.

3. Shortly after this and other outbursts, the frothing Coulter was fired from *National Review* when she reacted violently to efforts to tone down her rhetoric by the editors, helping to provide her with martyr status for the U.S. Talibanites. Later, Coulter stated in a speech that American Taliban John Walker Lindh should be executed so that liberals and the Left can get the message that they can be killed if they get out of line.

4. The Bush-Baker-Carlyle connection was documented in many English newspapers, the *New York Times*, and other sources, collected on www.bushwatch.com and Phil Agre's Red Rock Eater list collected at <http://dliis.gseis.ucla.edu/people/pagre/rre.html>. See also Melanie Warner, "The Big Guys Work for the Carlyle Group," *Fortune* (18 March 2002).

Reference

Berkowitz, Bill. 2001. Religious Right on the Ropes. *Alternet*, 31 October.