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The media of manipulation: patriotism and propaganda – mainstream news in the United States in the weeks following September 11

dedicated to the memory of David H. Winton (1972–2001)
South Tower, World Trade Center

After the attacks of September 11, proclamations were made in all walks of life that nothing would ever be the same again. With regard to the American news media, this meant something positive: after decades of decline in public and professional opinion, American mainstream news had suddenly become respectable again in the eyes of many.¹ In the week following September 11, nine out of ten Americans said that the news media's coverage of the attacks had been good or excellent, with the majority saying that the coverage was excellent.² Tom Goldstein, dean of the Columbia University School of Journalism, stated, 'I think the press has risen to the occasion in an extraordinary fashion'.³ Bernard Goldberg, who wrote a scathing critique of the American news media in his conservative 2002 book *Bias, a CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distorts the News*, had only positive things to say: 'they did a fine job ... they were fair and accurate ... they gave it to us straight'.⁴

In this paper I will look at how the mainstream American news media was affected by the attacks of September 11. Did it become more sober, more responsible, and more international, as was generally believed at the time, or did it in fact – as I will argue – degenerate into an irresponsible organ of patriotic propaganda that not only used loaded language to promote the 'war on terrorism', but also remained silent on uncomfortable issues and actively marginalised dissenting opinion? These accusations against mainstream American news are, of course, nothing new. In *Manufacturing Consent*, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky traced similar biases in the American news media in the 1980s. What is new, however, is

the widespread belief that the American news media changed in the wake of September 11. In this paper, I will debunk this belief and show that, in fact, the American news media became ‘a propaganda machine on steroids’ following the attacks.⁵ My analysis will focus, in particular, on America’s mainstream news media in the first two weeks after the attacks, and, more specifically, on both broadcast television and the newsmagazine *Time*. Both of these news sources address a general audience that is nationwide, and therefore exert considerable influence among ordinary Americans. It is important to emphasise that I will not be looking at news outlets with a smaller and generally more educated audience such as the *New York Times*, ZNet, CNN,⁶ and the internet. Rather, my concern is with mainstream media, the news that the largest number of Americans turned to on and following September 11, 2001.

The most noticeable change in mainstream American news immediately following the attacks of September 11, and presumably one of the main reasons why the news media were seen to have changed for the better, was the elimination of inconsequential feature stories from the headlines. Just how much of a change this was becomes apparent when we look back at the major news stories on the three major broadcast networks – ABC, CBS, and NBC – in the month leading up to September 11. The top four stories were – in order of most coverage to least – the wild forest fires in the western United States, the political scandal surrounding the missing DC intern Chandra Levy, the so-called ‘Summer of the Shark’, and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.⁷ Clearly these are a mixture of important and unimportant stories. If we expand our view to look at the top three reports each week, we see an emphasis on the unimportant: stories about the failure of an attempt to circumnavigate the earth in a hot air balloon, a lottery jackpot exceeding \$280 million, and the start of the Little League baseball world series. (In fact, the Little League story had almost as much air time as the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.) In contrast, in the four weeks following September 11 the top three stories were the attacks themselves, the ‘war on terrorism’, and the Taliban regime under fire.⁸ Of the top ten stories in these weeks, all were in some way related to the attacks.⁹

Another factor leading to American news’s improved reputation in the wake of 9/11 was how broadcast news handled the chaos of that day’s events. It was, as CBS anchorman Dan Rather told the *Columbia Journalism Review* in October 2001, ‘a great moment for American journalism’.¹⁰ Reporters threw themselves into harm’s way to get the best footage. The major networks set aside competition for the first time and freely shared imagery and information with each other.¹¹ News staff tried relatively successfully to weed out rumours before presenting information on the air.

And anchormen and women maintained their composure despite the emotion of the situation.¹² Additionally, despite the financial burden, the three major networks broadcast news twenty-four hours a day, postponing regular programming and, more importantly, commercials for four days – the longest period of continuous non-commercial news reporting since the assassination of JFK in 1963.

Despite all the positives, however, personal bias ran unchecked in the initial hours following the attacks as television news struggled to bring order to the chaos without the luxury of time to reflect or even to prepare. Instead, editing was virtually non-existent at the very moment when the need for responsible coverage could not have been greater: more than 74 per cent of Americans aged 18–54 turned to television as their first source for information and guidance in the wake of the attacks.¹³ From almost the beginning, both Tom Brokaw at NBC and Dan Rather at CBS were using loaded language in their reports, language that promoted retaliation as the appropriate response to the attacks. Brokaw stated at the beginning of his Nightly News cast at 6.30 pm on September 11 that ‘terrorists [have] declare[d] *war* on the United States’.¹⁴ Dan Rather in his 6.30 newscast stated, ‘The nation is stunned but standing, and vowing to come back, *fight* back’. Both also quoted from George W. Bush’s response to the attacks, selecting phrases that further emphasised retaliation. Brokaw chose to quote, ‘Freedom has been attacked by a faceless coward. Freedom will be *defended*’, while Rather quoted Bush as saying that we ‘will find and *punish* those responsible for these cowardly events’.

In contrast to these reports were those by Peter Jennings at ABC, who described the events in a much more even tone, calling them a ‘horrendous attack on the United States’. Clearly exhausted and affected by the day’s events, he was nonetheless much more careful about his choice of words, delivering news rather than the angry bias of his colleagues. ABC also distinguished itself from its broadcast competitors by being the only one of the three not to have a special ‘Attack on America’ logo for its 6.30 broadcast (NBC had theirs already by 1.00 pm).¹⁵ One could argue then that the news found on NBC and CBS following the attacks – albeit hard news – was continuing with the sensationalism of what had previously been infotainment stories. This emphasis on sensation can then be traced to later reporting on the bombing of Afghanistan, the Anthrax cases, and the Enron and Catholic Church scandals as the weeks and months progressed.¹⁶

While one might be inclined to dismiss the anger found in much of Rather’s and Brokaw’s reporting on September 11 as a natural, human response for an American to the attacks, something by which Jennings was perhaps less affected, either because he is Canadian or because he is just less

emotional on air, the reporting in subsequent days cannot be so easily excused.¹⁷ If we take a closer look at the first few minutes of Dan Rather's 6.30 pm news report from the next day, Wednesday, September 12, we can see an intensification, and arguably even a codification, of the previous day's bias: virtually all of his stories emphasise a unanimous call for war. In particular, there is a sense of rallying around the president, using the inflamed rhetoric from his speeches the day before – words such as war, justice, and punish – the sense that the international community stands behind the United States without reservation, and that Americans wholeheartedly support retaliation. Rather begins by stating, 'it is not a declared war, but a war just the same', war being the word, he explains, that President Bush is now using to describe these suicide attacks.¹⁸ He then goes on to say that a White House spokesman said the intended targets included the White House and Air Force One, which, he elaborates, means that the attacks were against the president of the United States, seemingly justifying the use of the term war.¹⁹ Rather continues by saying that in an unprecedented move NATO has said that terrorist attacks against the US will be considered attacks against the entire alliance. Then, in addition to talk of the heroic search for survivors, he returns to Bush calling the attacks acts of war, a war Bush vowed we will win. This is followed by the results of new polls – he does not say by whom, nor how many were polled – that indicate *widespread* American public support for retaliation.²⁰ He mentions that Congress reconvened in a public show of unity to condemn the attacks, that planes across the United States continued to be grounded, that the US and our allies have vowed that these acts will not destabilise the world economy, and that federal investigators are following hundreds of leads to find out who was behind the attacks and bring them to *justice*.²¹ Clearly the emphasis in this first five minutes of reporting – which is representative of the entire thirty-minute newscast – is on a unified front calling for a military response, the validity of which is not questioned despite admittedly not yet knowing who the enemy is.

Perhaps this is because – after less than thirty-six hours – the enemy had already been decided upon, despite the lack of hard evidence. Osama bin Laden is mentioned as the prime suspect four times in Rather's newscast between 6.30 and 7.00. Five minutes into the broadcast, Rather asks a reporter in DC if the main focus of the investigation is increasingly on bin Laden, to which the reporter replies, 'certainly no other names are being mentioned'. Despite then stating that sources caution that they do not yet have a definitive link, his tone makes it clear that it is only a matter of time. Ten minutes into the broadcast, another reporter on another story states that, 'while the evidence is still in the early stages, sources say all of it ...

points like a compass to Osama bin Laden'. Fifteen minutes into the broadcast, a third reporter states that 'the investigation into who caused ... this continues to point toward Osama bin Laden and there's no doubt the US will retaliate against whoever is responsible'. This is followed a little less than a minute and a half later by Rather stating, 'In Afghanistan today bin Laden's Taliban *protectors* insisted again *but offered no evidence* that bin Laden had nothing to do with the attacks.²² At the same time, the Taliban made *what could be interpreted as a threat* suggesting that any US military action that causes *what they call* suffering in Afghanistan might lead to more suicide attacks.' Clearly by the statements and their frequency in the newscast, bin Laden is all but convicted already, fulfilling the need to place a face on the enemy and contradicting reports that the American news media was being more careful in its accusations than they had been in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing fiasco.²³

These biases also appeared in United States mainstream print media. Although print media were the primary source of news for only 5–7 per cent of Americans aged 18–54, they have the advantage of time, the editorial process, and a reputation for more in-depth coverage. It therefore should stand as a less biased example of how the American news media responded in the early days after the attacks.²⁴ With this in mind, I will compare the coverage found in the United States' best-selling news magazine *Time* with that of Germany's best-selling news magazine *Der Spiegel*.²⁵ While *Der Spiegel* has an agenda of its own, its coverage nonetheless sheds light on how the American news media responded.

In the days following 9/11, news magazines around the world scrambled to respond. *Der Spiegel* incorporated substantial coverage of the attacks into an already planned issue, which it then published on September 15, two days ahead of its normal schedule. The stories about the attacks covered a range of perspectives from sympathy for the victims, to first-hand accounts by Germans living in the United States, to criticism of the Bush administration. There were also in-depth articles about bin Laden and the terrorists.

In contrast, the United States' *Time* magazine created a separate, undated issue without advertisements that was entirely devoted to the events of September 11.²⁶ With the exception of a brief letter from the managing editor on page 3 – which is basically a personal recounting of where he was that day and what they were trying to accomplish with this issue – the first thirty pages are double-page colour spreads under the rubric 'Day of Infamy', and consist mostly of photographs of survivors, rescue workers, and the wreckage, with a minimum of text along the bottom edge. Then on page 34 begins the issue's one multi-page article – a fourteen-page piece

laced with photographs – detailing the events of 9/11 in New York, Washington DC, and Pennsylvania.

Had *Time* magazine ended there, this issue would have been a moving tribute to the events of 9/11, its overall lack of text and breadth of reporting as well as its patriotic imagery understandable and appropriate for the time of publication and the audience. To its discredit, however, the issue does not end there. Instead, there is a one-page essay by Lance Morrow, a professor of journalism at Boston University. This essay, ‘The Case for Rage and Retribution’, faces the inside back cover and, as its title indicates, is far from journalistic neutrality. Instead, it calls for violence and discredits thinking. It begins by stating this is no time for grief counsellors and healing – both of which he calls dangerous – and continues by saying, ‘A day cannot live in infamy without the nourishment of rage. Let’s have rage. What’s needed is a unified, unifying, Pearl Harbor sort of purple American fury’, a fury that should not look at the reasons why, what he calls ‘thoughtful relativism’. Instead, he states,

Let America explore the rich reciprocal possibilities of²⁷ ... [a] policy of focused brutality ... America needs to relearn a lost discipline, self confident relentlessness – and to relearn why human nature has equipped us all with a weapon (abhorred in decent peacetime societies) called hatred ... Anyone who does not loathe the people who did these things, and the people who cheer them on, is *too philosophical for decent company* [my emphasis] ... If what happened on Tuesday does not give Americans the political will needed to exterminate men like Osama bin Laden and those who conspire with them in evil mischief, then nothing ever will and we are in for a procession of black Tuesdays ... The presidency of George W. Bush begins now ... The worst times, as we see, separate the civilized ... from the uncivilized ... Let the civilized toughen up, and let the uncivilized take their chances in the game they started.

Although one might at first assume that this piece is not the view of the magazine as a whole, a number of factors suggest otherwise: Morrow has been a regular contributor and editor for *Time* magazine for more than thirty years, the term ‘essay’ for similarly placed articles in other issues was removed, and there is a close relationship between his text and the layout of the magazine with its use of the phrase ‘day of infamy’. Regardless of intention, however, this essay, both as one of only three texts in the issue and through its placement at the end of the magazine, becomes an important part of how the viewer responds to the magazine as a whole, basically acting as a frame on how to remember the photos and the information just read.

With its next issue, September 24, *Time* returns to a more traditional format of multiple articles, although there are no stories not related to the

events and aftermath of 9/11. Similarly, the normal layout of the magazine – its various departments – has been eliminated, and would not return until December. Notably, this includes the section titled ‘World’, illustrating the fact that despite the claims that mainstream American news had become more international in scope, the expanded international coverage was only in direct relation to American interests abroad – that is, Afghanistan and its neighbours in the ‘war on terrorism’.²⁸ By comparing this issue with the first post-9/11 issue published by *Der Spiegel*, one can gain a better perspective on how the American news media responded. I will focus, in particular, on the three areas where they diverge the most: their coverage of George W. Bush, Osama bin Laden, and international opinion.

In *Time* magazine there are two articles about George W. Bush. While both point out some of his faults – for example, his immediate call for a military response before having any information, his uninspiring speech following the attacks, and the seemingly false cover story of the president as a target of the terrorist attacks²⁹ – the overall ending tone for both is praise for Bush, the sense that he has come into his own after a faltering start.³⁰ Nor does one actually have to read the articles to understand this conclusion, since the titles indicate as much: ‘Bush in the Crucible, Is the Crisis Changing Bush from a Detached Chief Exec to an Inspiring Leader?’ is preceded by the answer, ‘When He Ignored PR, the President Began to Discover His Best’.

This positive view of Bush stands in sharp contrast to what appears in *Der Spiegel*. Instead of a man rising to the occasion, a man worthy to wage the global war on terrorism, Bush is portrayed as a wounded cowboy, a man to be feared because of his combination of stupidity and military might. This view is made explicit in an article titled, ‘Mood Against the Cowboy’, in which eight Brazilians discuss their impressions of 9/11, indicating that this negative view is not limited to just Germany.³¹ Yet this negative view of Bush in some countries with whom we have friendly relations was not reported in the United States’ mainstream news. To do so would have raised too many uncomfortable questions about the president, the war, and our own history – would have required us to think at a time when Lance Morrow’s editorial was more palatable to many.

There is an even starker contrast between how Osama bin Laden is portrayed in the two magazines. The American article, written by Lisa Beyer, begins by calling bin Laden a rich, second-rank Saudi: ‘Things might have turned out differently for Osama bin Laden – and for the denizens of southern Manhattan – if the tall, thin, soft-spoken 44-year-old [he was actually 46] hadn’t been born rich, or if he’d been born rich but not a second-rank Saudi’.³² This negative sentiment is then reiterated several

paragraphs later: ‘Though Bin Laden grew up wealthy, he wasn’t entirely within the charmed circle in Saudi Arabia. As the son of immigrants, he didn’t have quite the right credentials.’³³

In comparison, *Der Spiegel* reports that bin Laden grew up in a wealthy immigrant family, his father gaining many important commissions through his close relationship to the royal family of Saudi Arabia.³⁴ It goes on to say that bin Laden was brought up by nannies and private schooling, and that his few close friends were almost all from noble families, thus earning him the nickname, ‘the Prince’. This portrayal of bin Laden indicates that he was far from a second-rank Saudi.

The *Time* article, then, occludes important facts that would contradict the claims it makes. These claims encourage a negative view of bin Laden, a view that is further emphasised by the implication that bin Laden is irrational. If we continue on with the first paragraph where I left off earlier, the *Time* author states, ‘It might have been another story if, while studying engineering in college, the young man had drawn a different teacher for Islamic Studies rather than a *charismatic* Palestinian lecturer who *fired* his religious *fervor*’. In contrast, *Der Spiegel* states that not much is known about bin Laden’s school days other than that he lived a wild life with lots of drinking, which in itself is another difference from the *Time* article which states that bin Laden was always religious. *Der Spiegel* continues by saying that in 1979, the year bin Laden finished college, he was angered by the Israel–Egypt peace treaty and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and as a result decided to do something with his life, thereby turning to a radical form of Islam. This explanation makes bin Laden’s turn to religion understandable and rational, and places it within a historical framework.

This historical framework, however, is a thorny issue for American news because of the reality that the US is at least in part responsible for making bin Laden into the terrorist that he is. This angle is a major theme in *Der Spiegel*, whereas it is only glossed over in *Time*. Compare the following reference to the US support of bin Laden and his troops against the Soviets in the 1980s. *Time* magazine: ‘Though the US, with billions of dollars in *aid* [my emphasis], helped the militias in their triumph, bin Laden soon turned on their benefactor’. Here we have the sense that America was doing a good thing, they were helping – or aiding – the militias and were then stabbed in the back by the ungrateful bin Laden. A later paragraph, however, admits, ‘During the same years, the CIA, intent on seeing a Soviet defeat in Afghanistan, was also funneling money and arms to the *mujahedin* [Islamic guerrilla fighters] ... [While the CIA had] no direct dealings with bin Laden ... U.S. officials acknowledge that some of the aid probably ended up with bin Laden’s group anyway’.³⁵ Again, the use of the word ‘aid’ belies the

reality of the fact that the CIA recruited troops – 35,000 Islamic militants from 40 countries – and then trained and equipped them for battle, what some have called the first *jihad*, or holy war. All of this information appears in *Der Spiegel*'s article about bin Laden.

While it was possible to find similar information in various alternative outlets in the United States – such as the internet and print media aimed at a more educated audience – this less-than-stellar track record of American policy was glossed over – when mentioned at all – in American mainstream media, as was the fact that there are a lot of people in the world who hate America. When journalists in mainstream American news asked – as they repeatedly did – ‘why do bin Laden and his followers hate us so?’ the answer was the one George W. Bush provided in his speeches: because of our freedom, our democracy. The answer to that question was quite a different one in Germany's mainstream news media, however, as evidenced by an interview in *Der Spiegel* with Professor Chalmers Johnson, an American political scientist from the University of Berkeley, and author of the January 2001 book *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*.³⁶ Reiterating the points he made in his book, which looks at American foreign policy in Asia, Chalmers stated that terrorism is the weapon of the weak, and that a lot of people hate America with their whole heart and with motive as the US extends its power to all corners of the earth and forces the US economy on all people without concern for the damage it does. As in the cold war, the US acts as a protectorate, with troops in sixty-five other lands. Chalmers calls it a form of imperialism.

This view of America as an imperialist power that has inadvertently nourished anti-American hatred in various parts of the world is backed up in several Latin American newspapers. In its September 13 issue, a commentary in the Brazilian daily, *Jornal do Brasil* stated, ‘These attacks are not surprising’, while a commentary in *Globo* stated, ‘Pepper in foreign eyes doesn't hurt. It burns only in one's own eyes’.³⁷ The tone of the *Globo* article is sarcastic, stating that the USA did not hurt anyone in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Nor were any civilians in Vietnam hurt. Nor were there victims of the American-backed dictators in Latin America.

Absent from both *Time* magazine and American mainstream news reporting in general is any open discussion of the United States' past actions and unfavourable reputation in various parts of the world, especially in countries not considered enemies. It is no wonder. A close look at Bush's speeches in the initial weeks after the attacks emphasises exactly the points Johnson made about America's imperialist attitude: from Bush's first comments a few hours after the attacks that ‘The United States will hunt down and *punish* those responsible’, to his comment about terror

threatening the stability of *legitimate* governments, to which he adds, 'And you know what? We're not going to allow it'.³⁸

The absence – or glossing over – of history in the American mainstream news media is also not surprising considering the fact that America's tarnished past stands in the face of the image that Bush was creating: one in which America is good, civilised, just, tolerant, and right; all words Bush used in his address to Congress on September 20. According to history, however, America is not so squeaky clean. History raises too many uncomfortable questions such as: what is terrorism, and have we in fact been terrorists ourselves? Yet Bush's black and white 'you are either with us or you are with the terrorists' rhetoric means that anyone who raises such questions is 'with the terrorists', and therefore is an uncivilised opponent of 'progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom'.³⁹ Or, in the words of Lance Morrow, such people are 'too philosophical for decent company'.⁴⁰

So, rather than raising difficult questions, the mainstream news media in the United States closed its eyes to all but the official line. While one could question whether the US government was actively involved with the mainstream news media's bias, especially in light of the close relationship between Bush's words and vision and the media's coverage, I believe the bias in these earliest weeks after the attacks stems rather from a misguided sense of patriotism, a belief that circling the wagons against the enemy – be it an external threat or internal criticism – and rallying behind the president are more beneficial, or at least more popular, than an honest appraisal of the situation. As Dan Rather stated in his September 17 interview with late-night talk show host David Letterman, 'George Bush is the president. He makes the decisions. Wherever he wants me to line up, just tell me where. And he'll make the call'.⁴¹ Clearly, Rather saw no paradox between publicly declaring his unquestioning loyalty to George W. Bush and his role as a journalist. Perhaps he believed, like Bryce Zabel, chairman and CEO of the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences, that, 'no propaganda is required. Truth is on our side'.⁴² Clearly, television audiences did not notice a conflict of interest, or perhaps objectivity no longer mattered in light of recent events, as Rather quickly gained celebrity status following this interview.⁴³

This public support both for patriotic news anchors – many of whom then began wearing American flag pins during their broadcasts⁴⁴ – and for news that encouraged an uncritical view of 'good versus evil' taps into another major factor affecting the American news media in the wake of 9/11: financial concerns. Following a loss of approximately \$400 million in ad revenue during the four days of commercial-free news coverage after the attacks, television networks were keen to keep viewers and advertisers, and therefore pulled or 'killed' anything that caused – or could cause – con-

trovery.⁴⁵ In the initial days and weeks following the attacks, this meant patriotic bias was in, thinking was out.

Perhaps the most famous example of censorship on television resulting from this 'sensitivity' to the audience and financial backers is the case of Bill Maher, host of the television news programme *Politically Incorrect*, which, as its title indicates, was a programme where people could express their opinions, even when those opinions were unpopular. During its September 17 episode, Maher criticised Bush's use of the word 'coward' for the terrorists, stating that, 'We have been the ... [ones] lobbing cruise missiles from 2,000 miles away. That's cowardly. Staying in the airplane when it hits the building, say what you want about it, it's not cowardly.'⁴⁶ Although this comment did not elicit a negative response from the live audience, it did from some television viewers, prompting both FedEx and Sears to cancel their advertising on the show, while at least seventeen television stations suspended the programme.⁴⁷

Whether the news media's bias stemmed from patriotism, a sensitivity to their audience or their financial backers, or was the result of 'suggestions' from the government, the end result was the same – American mainstream news had degenerated almost completely into blatant propaganda. Not only did it use loaded terminology to promote the 'war on terrorism' and remain silent on uncomfortable issues, it also actively marginalised dissenting opinion. An example of this marginalisation in the print media is the political cartoon (fig. 1) by Rob Rogers from 29 September 2001, two and a half weeks after the attacks. This cartoon was 'killed' by a unanimous vote of the editorial staff.⁴⁸

Although, on the one hand, we can understand the sensitivity of news editors to the feelings of the American public and the desire to focus on keeping America strong in those early weeks after the attacks, on the other hand, there is something seriously wrong when works like Rob Rogers's political cartoon are rejected and the editorial by Lance Morrow calling for rage and retribution is printed.

In conclusion, I bring us back to the questions I posed at the beginning of this paper:

- Did the American news media become more sober following 9/11? Yes, and no. They turned from inconsequential feature stories to hard news, yet their use of logos and loaded language sensationalised that news.⁴⁹
- Did they become more responsible? No. The American news media's coverage immediately following 9/11 was, in fact, quite irresponsible. It promoted a military response to the attacks, excluding stories that expressed alternative views. It all but convicted bin Laden and the

Taliban before there was evidence to do so. And it glossed over or ignored uncomfortable historical information. Additionally, the blatant show of patriotism through the wearing of American flag pins and publicly declaring their bias in interviews is not responsible behaviour from people whose job it is to report the *news*, especially at the national level.⁵⁰

- Did the American news media become more international? Yes, if international means covering stories about other countries. There was an explosion of stories about Afghanistan, for example. But if international means covering important stories from abroad even if they do not have direct bearing on American policies, then no.

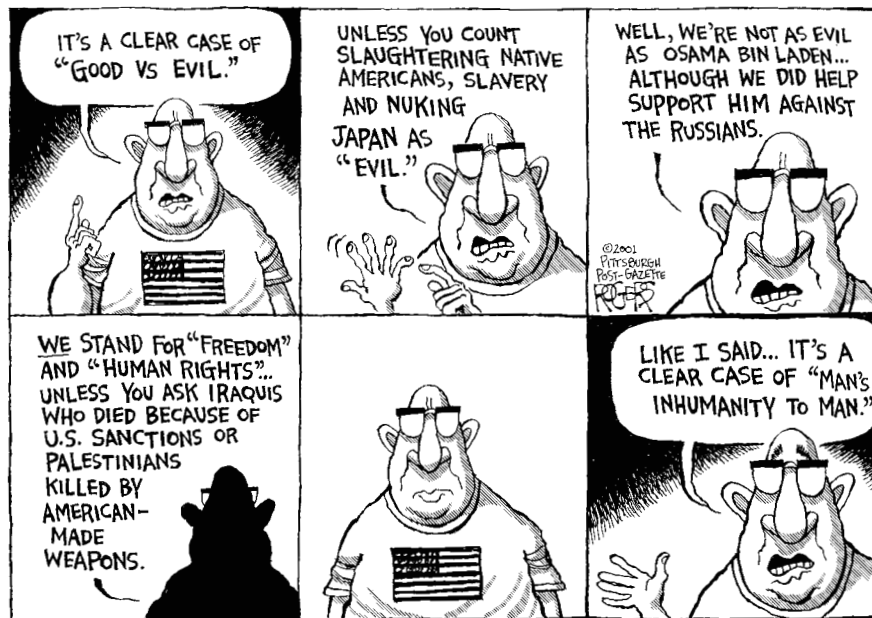


Figure 1 Rob Rogers/Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. Reprinted with permission.

While American news did change quite radically in the initial days and weeks following September 11, in the months that followed, it slowly returned to its old patterns so that the only noticeable changes a year later are mostly superficial: patriotic logos, the continuous news scroll at the bottom of the screen, and indefinite sign-offs such as Tom Brokaw's 'See you tomorrow, if not before'.⁵¹ Despite the claims that nothing would ever be the same again, the reality is that today, one year after the attacks, not

much has changed at all in mainstream American news from its pre-9/11 coverage. While this means that a critical voice has returned to the news – one that questions Bush's focus on war and US foreign policy – it also means the return of inconsequential feature stories to the top of the newscast.⁵² In late August 2002, for example, a story about the aversion of a players' strike in Major League Baseball had almost as much coverage on the nightly news as did the tense political situation with Saddam Hussein.⁵³ So much for proclamations of change for the better.

Notes

- 1 Associated Press, 'Poll: 9 in 10 rate news media coverage good or excellent after attacks'. See *Freedom Forum*, 24 September 2001, <<http://www.freedomforum.org/templates/document.asp?documentID=14967>>.
- 2 A survey of 1,200 adults conducted from 13–17 September by the Pew Research Center. There is an error margin of 3.5%; 56% said the coverage was excellent. See Associated Press, 'Poll'.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Bernard Goldberg, *Bias, A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distorts the News* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2002), 196. Goldberg argues that the broadcast networks' regular news coverage reflects an unconscious leftist bias inherent in those who work for the American news media. Ironically, he does not seem to notice that post-9/11 coverage swings completely to the right, and therefore better reflects his own inclination rather than being 'fair and accurate'.
- 5 From an email by Peter Snyder, 'Your thoughts on Sept. 11 news coverage', *Freedom Forum*, 24 September 2001, <<http://www.freedomforum.org/templates/document.asp?documentID=14955>>.
- 6 Of the cable networks, CNN had the highest viewership with regard to the attacks, with an average cable household rating on 11 September 2001 of 5.5 versus 2.9 for Fox News and 2.1 for MSNBC. See 'Made-for-TV Terrorism', *Broadcasting and Cable*, 17 September 2001.
- 7 Minutes of coverage on ABC, NBC, and CBS between 13 August and 10 September 2001: wild fires (40), missing intern (35), Sharks (20), Israeli–Palestinian conflict (18), Little League (16). See *The Tyndall Report*, <<http://www.tyndallreport.com>>.
- 8 It is in the fifth week following the attacks that the United States first began bombing Afghanistan, at which point the American mainstream news media are responding to more than just the attacks of 9/11. In this paper I do not look at how the news media changed in response to US military action abroad.
- 9 17 September–5 October 2001. See *The Tyndall Report*, <<http://www.tyndallreport.com>>.
- 10 Richard Sambrook. 'International News and the Media: The Impact of September 11', Conference Keynote Address, 11 June 2001, <<http://www.pewfellowships.org/conferences/impact911/sambrook.html>>.
- 11 'As the story broke, all the major TV news organizations, at the suggestion of veteran *60 Minutes* producer Don Hewitt, agreed to share all video footage and

satellite feeds, agreeing that it was more important to get information out than to compete. The agreement expired after the second day'. See 'Made-for-TV Terrorism'.

- 12 In *Covering Catastrophe*, there are numerous examples of journalists risking their lives to get a good story at the WTC, of the chaos in the news rooms as rumours flew, and of keeping one's composure while on air. See Allison Gilbert, Phil Hirschhorn et al. (eds), *Covering Catastrophe, Broadcast Journalists Report September 11* (Chicago: Bonus Books, 2002).
- 13 According to a survey by the ad agency Euro RSCG Worldwide, television was the primary source of news about the attacks for 74% of those aged 18–34, and 81% of those aged 35–54. See Associated Press, 'September 11 attacks spawn new news junkies', *New York Times*, 11 September 2001, <<http://www.freedomforum.org/templates/document.asp?documentID=15337>>.
- 14 Italics throughout this paper are my own emphasis unless otherwise noted. All references to ABC, CBS, and NBC broadcast contents come from the broadcasts as found at *The Television Archive*, <<http://tvnews1.televisionarchive.org/prog>>. Although the news ran non-stop for four days following the attacks, I focus on the 6.30 nightly news as a point of comparison. Each channel normally has its nation-wide news at that time.
- 15 Jill Geisler, 'Minute by Minute with the Broadcast News', *The Poynter Institute*, 11 September 2001, <<http://www.poynter.org/Terrorism/Jill1.htm>>. ABC used their standard crisis rubric, 'ABC News Special Report'.
- 16 This turn to sensationalism began about two decades ago as a result, at least in part, of the proliferation of television channels. The resulting competition created the need to capture an audience's attention. See Sambrook, 'International News and the Media'.
- 17 In many ways, the events of September 11 did not change how the anchors reported news so much as amplify their personal idiosyncrasies.
- 18 The term 'war' in the sense of 'a state of hostility, conflict, or antagonism' accurately reflects the attacks of 9/11. Nonetheless, the term has additional connotations that cannot be separated from it in this context: in particular, the definitions of war as 'a state of usually open and declared armed hostile conflict between states or nations' and 'a struggle or competition between opposing forces'. Not only were the terrorists not representing states or nations, nor any other body that could be seen as even remotely 'competitive' to the US, but also the term subtly supports the idea of a military response since war is not one-sided. The word 'attack' therefore is a much more neutral explanation of the events of 9/11. See *Merriam Webster Online Dictionary*, 30 July 2002, <<http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary>>.
- 19 Nine days later radar evidence would indicate this was not the case. One has to question, as *Time* magazine did, if this report was released to stem the criticism about Bush taking so long to return to the White House on September 11, especially important in light of his own pronouncements about the faceless 'cowards' who committed these 'cowardly' acts. This more critical view also appeared in the *New York Times* (William Safire, 'New Day of Infamy', 12 September 2001). While an investigation of the *New York Times* stands outside the parameters of this paper, I think it is nonetheless important to point out that it clearly continued to have an impact on the mainstream media after 9/11, although in this case, rather than setting the tone, its criticism

exposed chinks in Bush's armour that the mainstream media then attempted to fill.

- 20 Whether widespread means that many people felt this way, or that one can find people across the United States who felt this way is unclear, although the implication is the former. In the weeks following the attacks of 9/11, UK and US polling companies were guilty of misrepresenting their own data to overemphasise the support for the war and military retaliation. David Miller, 'World Opinion Opposes the Attack on Afghanistan', *Znet*, 21 November 2001, <www.globalpolicy.org/wtc/media/1121opinion.htm>.
- 21 In the wake of 9/11 the term 'justice' became a euphemism for military retaliation. There is also the added complication of who can determine what is just.
- 22 Less than thirty-six hours after the first plane's impact, a tenet of American democracy – innocent until proven guilty – had already been thrown out the window by the American news media.
- 23 Following the Oklahoma City bombing, the news media were quick to blame Islamic fundamentalists, only to find out later it was the work of disgruntled American militia members. Ironically, it is currently believed that Osama bin Laden did not actually plan the terrorist attacks himself. According to a video, he did not know when the attacks would take place until Thursday, 6 September 2001. 'Presumably ... the leader of Al Qaeda set the ball rolling, but had nothing more to do with the actual planning' (Der Spiegel Magazine (ed.), *Inside 9/11: What Really Happened* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2002), 202).
- 24 According to a survey by the ad agency Euro RSCG Worldwide, print media were the primary source of news about the attacks for 6% of those aged 18–34, and 5% of those aged 35–54. See 'September 11 attacks spawn new news junkies'.
- 25 In 2001, *Time* magazine was the best-selling news magazine in the United States, reaching more than 4 million readers. The next was *People*, reaching approximately 3.7 million readers, followed by *Newsweek*, at 3.3 million. (See 'Average Circulation for Top 100 ABC Magazines, 2001', <http://www.magazine.org/resources/fact_sheets/cs2_9_02.html>.) *Der Spiegel* is the top-selling news magazine in Germany. It has a circulation of more than 1 million. Its closest competitor, *Focus*, reaches approximately 800,000. (See Frankfurter Societaets-Druckerei GmbH, 'Print Media in Germany', <<http://www.publikation-deutschland.de/content/archiv/archiv-eng/99-02/art4.html>>.) It is important to acknowledge that while *Der Spiegel* and *Time* are both the top-selling news magazines in their respective countries, they are not parallel in terms of content. *Der Spiegel* addresses a more educated audience than *Time*. Nonetheless, I believe this discrepancy reflects a fundamental difference between the two cultures and therefore stands as a more valid comparison than one between *Time* and a more American-style German newsmagazine like *Focus* or *Bild*. It should also be noted that *Der Spiegel* has traditionally held a critical view of the US.
- 26 This issue became the magazine's best-selling issue ever and won a National Magazine Award (see <www.time-planner.com/planner/national/national_911_issue.html>). The *Time* issue that had been under way already was later released with the date September 17, an issue that is jarring for the disconnect between its date and absence of 9/11 content. In contrast to both *Der Spiegel*

and *Time*, *Newsweek*, another major news magazine in the United States, did not publish again until September 24.

- 27 Morrow actually uses the word 'fatwa' here, but his implication is that this word means 'a policy of focused brutality' (the phrase that immediately follows 'fatwa') rather than its actual definition of 'a legal opinion or decree handed down by an Islamic religious leader' (see *Merriam Webster Online Dictionary*).
- 28 Similarly, the September 24 issue of *Newsweek* has no stories not related to the events and aftermath of 9/11. It also discarded its normal layout, including its 'International' section.
- 29 See note 15.
- 30 Margaret Carlson, 'Letter from Washington: When He Ignored PR, the President Began to Discover his Best', *Time*, 24 September 2001, 50; Eric Pooley and Karen Tumulty, 'Bush in the Crucible, Is the Crisis Changing Bush from a Detached Chief Exec to an Inspiring Leader?', *Time*, 24 September 2001, 48–9.
- 31 Matthias Matussek, 'Stimmung gegen den Cowboy', *Der Spiegel*, 15 September 2001, 166.
- 32 Lisa Beyer. 'Osama bin Laden: the Face of Terror, a Portrait of the Saudi Renegade and his International Network', also called, 'The Most Wanted Man in the World, He Lives a Life Fired by Fury and Faith: Why Terror's \$250m Man Loathes the U.S', *Time*, 24 September 2001, 54–9.
- 33 *Time*, 24 September 2001, 54–9. Seemingly without noticing the contradiction, Beyer then mentions that bin Laden's father had become rich through the many important commissions he had been given by the royal family in Saudi Arabia.
- 34 'Der Prinz und die Terror – GmbH', *Der Spiegel*, 15 September 2001, 132–43.
- 35 *Time*, 24 September 2001, 54–9.
- 36 Erich Wiedemann. 'Interview mit dem Politikwissenschaftler Chalmers Johnson über Washingtons Hegemonialpolitik', *Der Spiegel*. 15 September 2001, 164. Johnson, an American political scientist, would not have been able to voice these views in the United States mainstream media following 9/11.
- 37 Matthias Matussek, 'Stimmung gegen den Cowboy', *Der Spiegel*, 15 September 2001, 166.
- 38 Presidential News and Speeches, September 2001, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/>>.
- 39 George W. Bush's Address to Congress, 20 September 2001, *ibid*.
- 40 Pointing out such inflammation of language following 9/11 also invited harsh criticism. Susan Sontag retells her experience: 'I am astonished at the rhetorical overkill used to attack a short piece I published in *The New Yorker*, written while I was in Berlin (in a brief residency at the American Academy there) on Thursday, September 13th, after spending 48 hours watching CNN. I addressed the government and media rhetoric that quickly surrounded the event, deploring the self-congratulatory identification of the United States with "the world" and with "humanity" and with "civilization." I said: this is a political event, a response to the status of and alliances contracted by the United States, not only a monstrous crime – which it certainly was. I suggested that not every negative adjective applied to the perpetrators of the attack. (Maybe "cowardly," I said, didn't apply.) I urged – this was the principal idea of the piece – deliberation in forming an appropriate and effective response.

These rather banal observations won me responses that, in a lifetime of taking public positions, I've never experienced. They included death threats, calls for my being stripped of my citizenship and deported, indignation that I was not "censored." In newspapers and magazines I was labeled a "traitor." A columnist in the *New York Post* declared that I should be "drawn and quartered." One article had the headline "Osama bin Sontag." An article in *The New Republic* started with the sentence: "What do Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, and Susan Sontag have in common?" No, the answer is not that we all, presumably, have brown eyes. The answer was that we all wish the destruction of the United States.' See *Defending and Strengthening Open Society After the Attacks*, panel discussion at the Open Society Institute in New York, 8 November 2001, <http://www.soros.org/911/911_forum_transcript.htm>.

- 41 Norman Solomon, 'When Journalists Report for Duty', *Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting*, 21 September 2001, <<http://www.fair.org/media-beat/010920.html>>.
- 42 Bryce Zabel, 'Television and the War on Terrorism', *Electronic Media*, 19 November 2001.
- 43 Numerous other interviews followed, e.g., *Entertainment Tonight*, *Rolling Stone*, *Larry King Live*, as Dan Rather attained cult-like status as a model American – tough yet tender – in the wake of 9/11. See Alicia Mundy, 'In Dan We Trust', *Media Weekly*, 29 October 2001, 21.
- 44 Tom Brokaw was a notable exception, refusing to wear an American flag pin on air. See Michael Littlejohns, 'The P-words: Patriotism, Press, and Propaganda', *Earth Times Service*, 6 December 2001.
- 45 Wayne Friedman, 'Commercial-free TV: Cost \$400 million', *Advertising Age*, 17 September 2001.
- 46 'Politically Incorrect comments cost show two sponsors', Associated Press, 20 September 2001.
- 47 Ibid.; Kenneth A. Paulson, 'Politically Correct Speech', *Freedom Forum*, 7 October 2001, <<http://www.freedomforum.org/templates/document.asp?documentID=15083>>. Although Maher has since been awarded a First Amendment Award, the show has been cancelled. See Marc Gunther, 'Is Free Speech a Laughing Matter?', *Fortune*, 145:7 (1 April 2002), 36.
- 48 Political cartoon provided courtesy of its creator, Rob Rogers.
- 49 The American mainstream news media, however, did demonstrate some restraint with regard to sensation. Unlike in some other countries, in America, television news did not intentionally show bodies falling from the World Trade Center, although they did have the footage. And while there were occasional photos of this in the print media, they were not as frequent, nor did they show recognisable faces, as was the case in some news magazines abroad. On the other hand, their excessive showing of the footage of the planes hitting the buildings and the buildings' subsequent collapse created enough public unrest that, a week later, many stations publicly decided to cut back on their use of the footage.
- 50 A particularly egregious example of this public airing of personal views occurred on *Larry King Live* on October 18 when Dan Rather responded to King's question of why so many people in Arab countries hate the US with, 'They hate us because they're losers. They see us as winners'. And losers hate winners. See Alicia Mundy, 'In Dan We Trust', *Mediaweek*, 29 October 2001.

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- 51 Substantive differences are the inclusion of stories about the aftermath of 9/11 and the 'war on terrorism', and the absence of political scandals such as the Chandra Levy-Gary Condit story.
- 52 The return of a more critical voice to the news should not be understood as a 'return' to unbiased news coverage. Rather, the American news media has returned to normal levels of manufacturing consent.
- 53 Minutes of coverage: 'Iraq: Saddam Hussein's Baath regime under fire' (24 minutes), 'Baseball major league players' strike averted' (21 minutes). See *The Tyndall Report*, 26–30 August 2002, <www.tyndallreport.com>.