MEDIA COVERAGE OF WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

May 5-26, 1998

▪

October 11-31, 2002

▪

May 1-21, 2003

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FOREWORD

The American political system is in the early stages of contending with an unwelcome but ultimately unavoidable problem. The United States government initiated war against Iraq on the basis of an inaccurate representation of the scope and immediacy of the threat posed, and it did so without international authority. That has prejudiced the legitimacy of the occupation, thereby undermining the single most important ingredient of successful reconstruction. The consequences are likely to be seriously troublesome over an extended period of time. Reconstructing Iraq and restoring international support for nonproliferation policy will require admission of the original error and correction of the processes that generated it — a very difficult feat for any government.

So far, debate about this problem has focused largely on the Executive Branch, but Congress, the media, independent security analysts, and indeed the entire US political system are all implicated. An action of this magnitude and consequence cannot be exclusively ascribed to the President and his advisors or to the intelligence community that provided the information on which their judgments were based. If we are the democracy we claim to be — and need to be — then all of our institutions and all individual citizens bear some responsibility and are obliged to conduct some self-examination.

Media Coverage of Weapons of Mass Destruction is intended to contribute to this process of reflection and correction. This study reviews the content of American news media coverage during three periods of time when issues relating to what have been ubiquitously termed "weapons of mass destruction" (WMD) were being featured: May 2003, in the immediate aftermath of the Iraq war; October 2002, when both Iraq and North Korea were featured in the news; and May 1998, during the South Asian nuclear tests. It also compares the US coverage to comparable discussion in the British media. By analyzing coverage across time and between countries, it puts current concerns about news reporting on the war in Iraq into a larger context.

The study makes three important observations.

- First, it documents that virtually all of the news coverage accepted without serious question the political formulation "weapons of mass destruction" as a single category of threat. The very extensive objective differences in destructive potential among the various agents included in that category were barely noted if at all.

- Second, the paper analyzes the media's habit of associating mass destruction agents with the phenomenon of terrorism. That is undoubtedly an accurate reflection of common fears, but it is not an accurate representation of established fact. No terrorist organization has yet demonstrated the capacity to perform an act of mass destruction under a strict definition of that term. There is an important difference between common fears, however prudent they might seem, and actionable threat. It is extremely important that those who wield American military power understand the difference. Media coverage did not acknowledge that distinction during the periods examined, and that is an evident defect.

- Third, the paper notes that established operating principles of the American media make it easier for the incumbent President, whoever that might be, to dominate news coverage by setting the terms of public discussion. Journalistic standards that are meant to ensure objectivity and guard against political bias had the effect of insulating the president from informed critical scrutiny. That effect was compounded during the latter periods under review by the media's inclination to amplify what was considered to be patriotic sentiment. As a result, the American media did not play the role of checking and balancing the exercise of power that the standard theory of democracy requires.

It is important to note an important substantive omission in media coverage during the second and third time periods examined. It would have been especially irresponsible for the United States military to have initiated military action against Iraq believing that the country might be able to improvise massively destructive retaliation but not knowing where the relevant assets were located. It seems evident in retrospect, however, that American military commanders were in fact confident in Fall 2002 and Spring 2003 that Iraq did not have any truly serious capacity to harm the United States or any country in the region. That judgment, which would have undermined the justification for war, was not recorded in the news reports reviewed.

Recognizing the limited scope of the paper and the magnitude of the issues in question, we are circulating this study in hope that it will stimulate productive discussion, further research, and ultimately greater wisdom.

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INTRODUCTION

The public relies on the media to separate facts and tangible realities from assumptions and spin.

Media Coverage of Weapons of Mass Destruction evaluates how well the media has performed this task in regards to the issue of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The study assesses how the coverage of WMD has changed over time and across geographies — especially since the launch of the "War on Terror" and the positioning of Iraq as the "big" international story.

The events of the last year and a half in Iraq — the build-up to the war, the shock-and-awe campaign, the ground combat, the "post-victory" insurgency, the capture of Saddam Hussein, and the ongoing hunt for banned weapons — have dramatically demonstrated the need for greater public understanding of the role that WMD plays in the formulation of and rhetorical justifications for US security policy.

With that goal in mind, this study examines three time periods, each lasting three weeks, during which at least two major WMD-related stories were being covered. The specific beginning and ending dates were chosen to include coverage one week before and two weeks after the dates on which a major nuclear proliferation story appeared in the media: India's nuclear weapons tests in May 1998, the US announcement of evidence of a North Korean nuclear weapons program in October 2002, and revelations about Iran's nuclear program in May 2003. Iraq was purposely not chosen as one of these reference points because it was already overrepresented in the study relative to other significant countries. The three periods chosen cover major WMD issues during both the Clinton and Bush administrations and include important developments in Iraq and elsewhere:

- **May 5-26, 1998**. This period spans several climactic events in South Asia, including India's first overt nuclear weapons tests on May 11-13, declarations from Pakistan about its nuclear readiness, and the run-up to six Pakistani nuclear weapons tests on May 28-30. This period also witnessed a flare-up in concern and controversy over lax security for Russian nuclear weapons — the "loose nukes" issue.

- **October 11-31, 2002**. This period starts the day after the US Congress approved military action in Iraq, if Iraq "does not disarm," and includes the intense public debate over WMD as a justification for preventive war. It also includes the increased attention to the story of nuclear weapons development in North Korea, following the October 4 revelation by North Korean officials that the country has a nuclear weapons program using enriched uranium and the October 16 announcement by US officials that they had evidence of a nuclear weapons program in North Korea.

- **May 1-21, 2003**. This period starts on the day of President George W. Bush's declaration of "an end to major combat operations" in Iraq and covers the ensuing US hunt for Iraq's purported WMD. It also includes revelations about Iran's nuclear program and Russia's connection to it, beginning in earnest on May 8, with the Bush administration's demand that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) find Iran in violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

This study is based on a qualitative and quantitative analysis of articles or program transcripts from a range of agenda-setting print and radio news outlets. It used news stories downloaded from the electronic archive service Lexis-Nexis, examining the coverage of WMD in eleven news outlets: four US newspapers (The Christian Science Monitor, The Los Angeles Times, The New York Times, and The Washington Post); and two London newspapers (The Daily Telegraph and The Guardian). The study also searched two US newsmagazines and one UK magazine (Newsweek, US News & World Report, and The Economist). And it examined National Public Radio's morning and evening news programs (Morning Edition and All Things Considered). The study dropped its investigation of the WMD coverage in the Daily Telegraph in 1998 because the paper for that year was not archived in Lexis-Nexis. (See Appendix A for more information about the study's methodology.)

It should be noted that the findings in this study were at times supplemented by secondary analysis and references to news coverage that occurred outside the three designated periods. The study employed such tactics when it appeared that reporting that occurred in the time periods under investigation could be more fairly evaluated by reference to coverage and events outside the chosen 3-week spans.

SUMMARY

Overview of the Study

Media Coverage of Weapons of Mass Destruction is organized into three parts. The first section summarizes the key findings of the study and suggests ways the media might improve how they covers weapons of mass destruction (WMD) issues. The "Findings" section, beginning on page 25, is a detailed review and critical assessment of WMD coverage during the three time periods under consideration. The Appendices provide information about the study's methodology and further detail on WMD coverage, plus a short guide to weapons, organizations, treaties, and countries relevant to the issue.

Major Findings

This study supports four major findings about the media's coverage of WMD during the three periods:

1. Most media outlets represented WMD as a monolithic menace, failing to adequately distinguish between weapons programs and actual weapons or to address the real differences among chemical, biological, nuclear, and radiological weapons.

2. Most journalists accepted the Bush administration's formulation of the "War on Terror" as a campaign against WMD, in contrast to coverage during the Clinton era, when many journalists made careful distinctions between acts of terrorism and the acquisition and use of WMD.

3. Many stories stenographically reported the incumbent administration's perspective on WMD, giving too little critical examination of the way officials framed the events, issues, threats, and policy options.

4. Too few stories proffered alternative perspectives to official line, a problem exacerbated by the journalistic prioritizing of breaking-news stories and the "inverted pyramid" style of storytelling.

The "inverted pyramid" style of news writing is a standard invented by the Associated Press wire service soon after its birth in 1848. Still taught as the customary method for writing breaking-news stories, most journalists associate it with impartial, "just the facts, ma'am" reporting. Journalistic standards teach that basic news stories should lead with what the most "important" player — the President or Prime Minister, for example — has to say.

What this study discovered, however, is that the tendency of the US media to lead with the most "important" information and the most "important" players gave greater weight to the incumbent administration's point of view on WMD issues, at the expense of alternative perspectives.

Both the US and UK media tended to report uncritically the Bush administration's conflation of all "weapons of mass destruction" into a single category of threat, an error that leads the public to mistakenly equate the destructive power of, say, chemical weapons with that of nuclear weapons. Coverage also tended to repeat the administration's assertion that a core objective of the "War on Terror" is to prevent WMD from falling into the hands of terrorists. While that is a desirable goal, that formulation of the problem obscures the magnitude of the threat — particularly in contrast to the greater access terrorists have to non-WMD technologies — and so makes it difficult for the public to judge the appropriate degree of government response. Where such alternative perspectives were presented at all in the coverage, they

tended to appear much later in the stories. In that sense, the inverted pyramid has not served the needs of objectivity and comprehensiveness.

Poor coverage of WMD resulted less from political bias on the part of journalists, editors, and producers than from tired journalistic conventions. This study, therefore, recommends that when media cover WMD issues, events, and policies, they should strive to get more perspectives higher up in their breaking news stories — and to get more of their sources on the record. When time and space allow, an analysis or enterprise story that assesses the assertions made in the basic piece should be run in immediate and prominent juxtaposition to the basic, inverted-pyramid story.

The journalist's ethic of striving to be fair and to tell all the news demands that further commitment.

General Findings

US administrations have been remarkably successful at establishing the public parameters of WMD issues in a way that has inhibited the media from playing an independent role.

Overall Lessons

1. The Media's close relationship with the White House

It has often been noted that there is a symbiotic relationship between policymakers and the press. This study suggests that this relationship is particularly strong when the subject involves weapons of mass destruction. This seems to be the case for two reasons.

- First, issues and events relating to weapons of mass destruction often, if not always, occur in the complex realm of international affairs and involve questions of national security and intelligence. International events and issues are more easily spun by policymakers than are domestic stories because there are few unmediated channels through which the public can learn about them. The media's necessary reliance on relatively few sources themselves — and those often anonymous — makes it easier for policymakers to control leaks and stay on message.

- Second, policy responses to WMD are complicated, crossing political, military, and scientific domains. Yet "weapons of mass destruction" have a simplistic presence in the public's imagination: as conveyors of doom that threaten Americans where they live. It has been irresistible for policymakers to use threats of WMD as powerful tools of public persuasion and as forceful rationales for policy initiatives. It has been equally irresistible for the media to report both the doomsayer arguments and the defense and security arguments verbatim.

Table 1. Relationship between White House and media

General Impact of Administrations	General Impact of Media
▪ successful at **prioritizing** which international WMD issues receive the most media attention	▪ simple reiterations of White House, Pentagon, or other official administration statements **disseminate** administration's dominant messages
▪ successful at **directing** how the media interpret events and policies related to WMD	▪ simple reiterations of White House, Pentagon, or other official administration statements **validate** administration's dominant messages

Overall Lessons (cont.)

2. Media's imprecise coverage of WMD

Although individual "facts" about WMD are usually reported accurately, the study noted a pattern of imprecision in that coverage. For example, there are important differences between a nuclear energy program and a nuclear *weapons* program, and between a nuclear weapons *program* and actual nuclear weapons. Similarly, there are substantial qualitative and quantitative differences between chemical and biological agents. The media's failure to recognize these and other distinctions distorted reporting on the cost-benefit calculations to manage those risks. (See Appendix F for a guide to the relevant weapons, organizations, treaties, and countries.)

Table 2. Imprecision in coverage

Imprecision	Result of Imprecision
▪ conflation of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons into a WMD agglomeration	▪ WMD represented as monolithic menace — WMD often characterized as an integral element in global terrorism matrix
▪ failure to distinguish various agents or weapons systems from one another	▪ misunderstanding or under-reporting of differences in magnitude and type of threat posed by various agents and weapons systems ▪ greater coverage of politics of WMD than of scientific or security debate
▪ failure to draw clear distinctions between civilian nuclear programs and military use of nuclear technology, including failure to define clearly what constitutes a "nuclear weapons program"	▪ little coverage of how to evaluate what poses a serious or imminent security threat (nationally, regionally, or internationally)

3. The White House sets the agenda

Across the three time periods of May 1998, October 2002, and May 2003, the attention that both the Clinton and Bush administrations gave to WMD issues and events received a comparable level of attention from the media — even if, on certain occasions, the journalists were criticizing the administration's "spin." If the White House acted like a WMD story was important, in other words, so too did the media. If the White House ignored a story (or an angle on a story), the media were likely to as well.

When journalists did take on the administration — especially when the White House's perspective formed the "conventional wisdom" — their stories were often buried or their criticism was more implicit than explicit.

Since September 11, 2001, the Bush administration has been especially successful at getting the American media to confirm its political and diplomatic agenda. Media reporting on the President amplified the administration's voice: when Bush said to the country that Americans are vulnerable to WMD in the hands of terrorists, the media effectively magnified those fears. The media failed to independently prioritize WMD problems or to match alternative policy responses to particular problems. The net effect was to keep the administration's message dominant.

Table 3. Setting the WMD agenda

Administrative Action	Media Response
▪ public articulation of strong, direct link between WMD and American interests (usually security or economic interests, but occasionally humanitarian ones)	▪ prominent coverage of White House, Pentagon, etc. statements and actions
▪ control of media access to story	▪ acquiescence to White House, Pentagon, etc. controls in order to cover major story
▪ frequent public mention of seriousness of event or alternatively lack of public mention of issue	▪ change in volume of coverage follows Presidential lead — coverage of President results in de facto reiteration of President's prioritization of WMD event or issue

Setting the News Budget (cont.)

4. Media's focus on the "big story"

In all but extraordinary circumstances, limited resources restrict the media to focusing on one international "Big Story" at a time — that event or issue that receives the most critical mass of attention. In the case of this study, very few WMD stories emerged: India and Pakistan's me-tooism in 1998; allegations of an imminent Iraqi WMD threat and North Korea's brinkmanship in 2002; and the failure to find WMD in Iraq in 2003.

Table 4. Determination of "big story" coverage

Coverage Emphasis	Effect
▪ focus on apocalyptic WMD events that directly engage or menace the United States	▪ undercoverage of non-event WMD topics, such as bio-security and fissile controls ▪ undercoverage of WMD situations where the problems have stabilized, even if there is no resolution to them
▪ focus on a "big" WMD story in the public eye	▪ may trigger mention in passing of lesser WMD stories
▪ shrinking news hole for international stories	▪ "minor" stories rarely make it into the public eye ▪ even major international stories are often covered from Washington or New York – a tactic that saves money – a tactic that also prioritizes the American angle
General Trends	**How Media Trends Affect WMD Coverage**
▪ media mergers	▪ fewer independent media voices; greater pack journalism pressure to follow "Big Story" ▪ greater oversight of news by media owners (who often have ties to White House)
▪ increased corporate attention to profitability	▪ reduction of resources for investigations, ongoing coverage and overseas bureaus ▪ greater pressure for profit — commercialization of news

Setting the News Budget (cont.)

5. Distribution of coverage clusters around designated "big story"

This study's systematic review of all WMD-related coverage in the targeted US and UK news outlets during these three time periods revealed that "Big Story" coverage predominated (see Appendix B). Media outlets covered WMD in North Korea, for example, significantly less in May 2003 than they had during the previous October because of the dominance of the Iraq story that spring — even though the North Korean crisis had actually reached a more advanced state.

Other important WMD-related topics received short shrift and there was little ongoing coverage of WMD in countries other than the designated "rogue" states. Few articles or radio programs discussed the current state of Russian nuclear, chemical, and biological programs, for instance — a topic of great concern to experts. Instead, Russia made WMD news at discrete moments, including when the government gassed Chechen terrorists and their hostages at the Moscow theater, during the anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis, and when concerns surfaced about Russia's role in the development of Iran's nuclear energy program. Yet only rarely did such events rise to front-page coverage. In October 2002, for example, 65 WMD stories in the targeted newspapers mentioned Russia, but fewer than one in ten of those appeared on the front page — and the overall coverage was even worse in May 1998 and May 2003.

Table 5A. Distribution of coverage among media outlets

	Number of front-page articles citing WMD in:					
	The Washington Post	The New York Times	The Los Angeles Times	The Guardian (UK)	The Daily Telegraph (UK)*	The Christian Science Monitor
May 5-26, 1998	12	12	18	0	—	2
Oct. 11-31, 2002	15	28	18	5	2	12
May 1-21, 2003	19	9	8	1	0	4

*No data available on Lexis-Nexis for The Daily Telegraph in 1998

Table 5B. Distribution of coverage of countries

	Number of front-page articles/Total number of articles citing WMD in relation to:							
	Iraq	North Korea	India/ Pakistan	Russia	China	Iran	Israel	Syria
May 5-26, 1998	1/7	0/3	35/214	2/8	3/34	2/12	1/3	0/0
Oct. 11-31, 2002	50/270	20/135	0/11	6/65	1/6	0/5	3/9	0/0
May 1-21, 2003	27/212	8/58	2/19	1/20	0/2	2/23	1/8	0/15

Framing the Debate

6. Language used to frame the WMD debate

News outlets seldom signal to their audience that the language of the WMD debate can serve a political function. Politicians employ coded language in the WMD debate to elicit fear, as, for example, in the case of President Clinton's emphasizing the risks of WMD to Americans to defend his creation of the new Office of Infrastructure Protection and Counter-Terrorism and his decision to have US troops in the Persian Gulf inoculated against anthrax:

> "We will train and equip local authorities throughout the nation to deal with an emergency involving weapons of mass destruction, creating stockpiles of medicines and vaccines to protect our civilian population against the kind of biological agents our adversaries are most likely to obtain or develop. … If we fail to take strong action, then terrorists, criminals and hostile regimes could invade and paralyze these vital systems, disrupting commerce, threatening health, weakening our capacity to function in a crisis." (NPR-ATC 5/22/98)

Conversely, there have been occasions when US politicians have wanted to minimize Americans' concern over WMD. The Bush administration, for example, has had an interest in distancing US nuclear weapons systems from being considered "weapons of mass destruction." In the Congressional debate over funding research and development for new systems, for instance, many supporters of funding used "cute" terms such as "mini-nukes" or "bunker-busters" to refer to them.

Similarly, the Bush Administration's creation of the "deck of cards" or its use of the monikers "Dr. Germ" or "Chemical Ali" to refer to Rihab Taha al-Azawi al-Tikriti or Ali Hassan al-Majid framed the military objective of capturing Iraqi leaders with language that minimized the seriousness of their being at large — an important public-relations objective, especially given the US lack of success at capturing the leaders of al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Table 6. Language used to frame the debate

To Sensationalize WMD	To Minimize WMD
▪ the specter of WMD raised in order to assign blame to another country or leader	▪ WMD made light of in order to push a US domestic agenda of funding domestic WMD programs (e.g, R&D for new nuclear arms)
▪ the specter of another country's WMD raised in order to claim the moral high ground for the US	▪ WMD made light of in order to take pressure off US military WMD-related operations
▪ the humanitarian implications of WMD raised in order to emphasize the moral/ethical rationale for international action desired by US policy-makers	▪ the humanitarian implications of domestic WMD programs overlooked and the deterrent value of domestic WMD systems emphasized

Framing the Debate (cont.)

7. Forging a terrorism-WMD connection

Terrorists have long been referenced as security threats, but their cohesion into a monolithic menace occurred with President George W. Bush's pronouncement of a "War on Terror" in the immediate aftermath of the attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center in September 2001. With that declaration, weapons of mass destruction — as a single, blurred hazard — and individually identified nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons began to be automatically identified in the media as inseparably part of a global terrorism matrix.

Although journalists have become more aware of the pitfalls associated with the use of the politically charged term "terrorism" and "terrorist" when reporting on regional security issues, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the same sensitivity is not shown when reporting on security disputes between the United States and another country or group. The Washington Post, for example, has explicit guidelines that instruct reporters to use these terms cautiously, to emphasize specific facts over vague characterizations, and to look independently at the applicability of the labels. But those cautions are rarely followed in the coverage of purported terrorism-WMD connections.

Politicians use the WMD-terrorism link to scare the public into supporting a particular policy stance. Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's characterization of North Korea as a "terrorist regime" for its export of nuclear technology was often quoted by the media, for example, but his meaning of "terrorist regime" was not explored.

Table 7. Coverage of terrorism and WMD

May 1998	October 2002	May 2003
▪ few stories made a clear linkage between WMD and terrorism by either a rogue group or state	▪ Bush and Blair's linkages of terrorism and Iraq and WMD extensively **quoted** in news stories	▪ Bush and Blair's linkages of terrorism and Iraq and WMD extensively **quoted** in news stories
▪ most media made careful distinctions between acts of terrorism and the acquisition or use of WMD	▪ the **reasons** for Bush and Blair's linkages of terrorism and Iraq and WMD questioned in opinion and analysis stories	▪ the **reasons** for Bush and Blair's linkages of terrorism and Iraq and WMD increasingly questioned
	▪ few stories expressed reservations about the **evidence** of Iraq's connections with terrorists or reservations about administration officials' flat statements that Iraq had WMD	▪ more stories questioning **evidence** of and intelligence on Iraq's connections with terrorists and the existence of WMD — especially those datelined from Iraq

Narrowing the Policy Options

8. White House keeps focus on preferred policy tools

President George W. Bush's administration has been particularly successful at shaping the message on the designated "Big Story" of Iraq through its declaration of an Iraqi-WMD-terrorism association — an association so provocative that it has usurped much of the space and time for WMD stories in the media.

Coverage in 2002 and 2003 repeated the administration's blanket assertions that WMD are an integral part of a global terrorism matrix — an assertion that admits few distinctions among the "terrorist regime" of North Korea, the terrorism of Al-Qaeda, and the terror of Saddam Hussein. The failure of the media to insist on a differentiation allowed the calculated muddle to become the accepted wisdom.[1] Media coverage of the Bush administration's stance on WMD also helped promote Bush's "tough guy" attitude rather than foster a more reflective policy debate about a range of options.

The Clinton administration also attempted to direct media coverage on international issues to serve its public policy ends, as when it asserted that the genocide in Rwanda amounted only to isolated "acts of genocide," a clear attempt to minimize pressure for intervention.[2] But because the South Asian nuclear jockeying in the spring of 1998 was not sufficiently threatening to become a domestic crisis, the Clinton administration did not try to direct and dominate the story. Clinton's response (including, for example, the automatic implementation of economic sanctions) never became the sole perspective on the events in South Asia. His administration's stance, in other words, did not loom so large in the media's representation of 1998 WMD stories as the Bush administration's did in the 2002 and 2003 WMD stories.

The greater success of the Bush administration in manipulating the WMD message is also a result of a dramatic tightening of information flow from the White House to reporters. As "Washington Week in Review" anchor Gwen Ifill noted in a "Washington Week online," officials in the Bush administration are "even tougher" about releasing information than their Clinton administration predecessors. As a consequence, she noted, "The less information we get, the more likely we are to overreact to any dribs and drabs." (1/29/04)

Table 8. Bush Administration keeps focus on preferred policy tools

White House Impact	Media Result
▪ successful at dictating what to do about WMD – confrontation rather than cooperation – unilateral action if others won't follow – force as preventive measure (rather than as last resort or response to imminent attack)	▪ White House policy options prioritized – Bush policy featured, assessed (pro or con) – other policy options minimally considered

[1] Such a lack of differentiation may be the cause of many Americans' belief in such inaccurate statements as that Saddam Hussein was in part responsible for the attacks of 9/11. See the PIPA/Knowledge Networks Poll, "Misperceptions, the Media and the Iraq War," October 2, 2003.

[2] See Susan Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War & Death* (Routledge: 1999), ch. 6.

Narrowing the Policy Options (cont.)

9. Media habits minimize independent analysis

The media's coverage of WMD suffers from the same lapses as their coverage of other international stories: general practices of news media coverage hinder comprehensive reporting and lead to additional opportunities for an administration's message to become dominant.

Table 9. Effect of habits on coverage

General Problems of International Coverage	How Media Habits Affect WMD Coverage
▪ interest in statistics and quantifiable "facts"	▪ simple quoting of statistical claims about what a weapon can do – obscures scientific disagreements about effectiveness – obscures a lack of hard scientific information – obscures the often rapidly changing nature of a WMD story ▪ numerical assessments of effectiveness beg definitional questions (i.e. what do "power" or "damage" mean?)
▪ discomfort with reporting on uncertainty, i.e. when WMD events and issues are characterized by scientific or intelligence unknowns	▪ substitution of statistics for explanations ▪ uneven coverage of limitations of intelligence gathering
▪ tyranny of 24/7 deadlines in breaking-news coverage (even print periodicals are forced to compete with broadcast outlets)	▪ many stories have to go out without much investigative effort on the part of reporters. ▪ little time to confirm the statements of newsmakers, so stories appear with only one side represented
▪ pressures of pack journalism	▪ push news organizations to cover the same set of stories, in roughly the same way
▪ general time and space constraints	▪ limit news organizations' ability – to proffer sufficient context and background – to analyze the technical dimensions of the issues – to interview alternative sources

Table 9. Media habits (cont.)

General Problems of International Coverage	How Media Habits Affect WMD Coverage
▪ the news imperatives of the "inverted pyramid" style of reporting	▪ put statements by major policymakers, such as the president, high up in a story (and often in the headline, too) ▪ put rebuttals or caveats from opposition or alternative voices (less prestigious figures) lower in the piece – results in more weight being given to the more ranking actors – results in official prevailing frames of reference becoming most prominent
▪ coverage of partisan policy debates as "he-said-she-said" contests	▪ obscures why a WMD debate is unfolding the way it is ▪ obscures the validity of the differing perspectives ▪ allows media to avoid being identified with one side in a polarized debate
▪ coverage of sensational aspects of news	▪ characterizes WMD through emotion-laden adjectives, rather than through more dispassionate evaluations
▪ coverage of debates over policy as partisan struggles between Republicans and Democrats for electoral advantage	▪ emphasizes the notion that Americans are only interested in international news (WMD) as it affects them personally

Narrowing the Policy Options (cont.)

10. Sourcing problems prevent independent evaluation

As has been evident in the arc of stories on WMD in Iraq, lack of specific sourcing or negligence in careful sourcing tends to buttress the administration's message without allowing the media audience a way to assess statements purporting to be facts.

In October 2002, for example, the media covered the Bush administration's claims that what had been the US strategy for dealing with the Iraqi WMD problem — UN inspections, economic sanctions, the 1998 bombing, and the blockade — had been a failure. But the media did not investigate, in print or on air, whether those allegations were true, as could have been explored by talking to US military figures in the region.

In both October 2002 and May 2003, there were effectively no interviews in the media outlets studied with either named or anonymous officers challenging the notion that Iraq had WMD. The only US military personnel responsible for Iraq who were questioned were at the level of Lt. Gen. William Wallace or Col. Richard McPhee. There were a few pieces quoting lesser ranks in regards to some WMD issues (such as the finding of the "mobile labs" or the looting at Tuwaitha), but none of those quotations expressed doubts about the failure of the prior US Iraqi WMD strategy.

Table 10. Effects of sourcing problems

Sourcing Dilemma	Sourcing Effect
▪ "off-the-record" has become the standard operating procedure in Washington, especially on foreign policy issues such as WMD	▪ difficult for journalists to defy "anonymous" conventions and still retain access or get the story
▪ over-reliance on anonymous sources, especially in the administration, such as: – "senior Administration official" – "a senior State Department official" – "a Government expert"	▪ reinforces the politically expedient secrecy surrounding WMD issues
▪ over-reliance on administration sources for WMD issues	▪ presents administration's position as fact ▪ little independent confirmation for administration's "findings"
▪ unquestioned adoption of language of sources	▪ places politicized language into public dialogue without signal of that politicization
▪ unquestioned adoption of sources' attribution of responsibility for conduct to individual actors (e.g., Saddam Hussein) or a nation or group (e.g, US, Iraq, Al-Qaeda)	▪ abdicates independent assessment of who or what has clear responsibility for conduct of events ▪ implies an individual is entirely responsible for the complex implementation of WMD policy ▪ minimizes interest in other indigenous authorities, experts or bureaucrats

11. Media's explanations of intelligence failures

In the three time periods of May 1998, October 2002, and May 2003, WMD intelligence failures were among the lead stories of the month. But major distinctions emerged in the media's attribution of the causes of the failures.

Table 11. Media explanations of causes for WMD intelligence failures

May 1998	October 2002	May 2003
▪ "ineptness" of intelligence-gathering agencies	▪ inherent uncertainties in intelligence-gathering, esp. in regards to North Korea	▪ "ineptness" of intelligence-gathering agencies
▪ inability of Clinton administration to interpret and evaluate intelligence	▪ conscious manipulation by Bush administration of release of intelligence on North Korea for political ends (i.e. passage of Iraq resolution)	▪ pressure from Bush administration on intelligence agencies to find evidence of WMD (i.e. statements about mobile bio-lab)
	▪ Bush administration's adoption of supportive Pentagon Iraqi intelligence while downplaying "murkier" CIA intelligence	▪ inter-agency rivalry between Pentagon and civilian intelligence authorities in Iraq

Narrowing the Policy Options (cont.)

12. Consequences of the Americanization of events

The US media find it irresistible to focus on an American angle on WMD news. The only international stories that get consistent coverage are those that have an American angle. Regularly breaking events in a WMD crisis and a perception of imminent risk to Americans or to the United States remain the best indicators of coverage.

There were exceptions to the tendency to feature Americans. In the ongoing WMD story in Iraq, where the news media made a commitment to sustained coverage and where the indigenous situation had become familiar, non-American players were occasionally featured. Children at risk, children wounded, children killed became the preferred way into Iraq WMD stories that had no immediate American hook. Alternatively, when there was little ongoing action, on-the-ground coverage of a WMD crisis — as was the case with South Asia in 1998 and with the non-Iraq WMD events in 2002 and 2003 — there were few stories that looked at the situation through indigenous perspectives at all.

Table 12. The Americanization of events

Coverage Emphasis	Effect
▪ focus on risks that WMD pose to Americans	▪ disproportionate attention to potential risks that WMD pose to Americans ▪ undercoverage of real WMD risks to citizens of non-US countries
▪ focus on stories covering US bilateral relations	▪ undercoverage of bilateral relations between pairs of other countries (India-Pakistan, Russia-Iran, North Korea-Japan) or multilateral interactions where the US is not the dominant player
▪ focus on WMD proposals advanced by the United States	▪ undercoverage of initiatives offered by other countries or international organizations ▪ the administration's proposals appear to be the most developed and the most salient

Comparison of US-UK Coverage

13. Forms of coverage

Most of the news outlets employed a range of stories types and used changes in format and language to signal the differences among those types (see Appendix C for a discussion of some of these differences). Most stories in the news outlets were straight news items of one form or another:

- News about breaking events tended to be told in inverted pyramid fashion, while human-interest pieces led typically with dramatic anecdotes and incorporated in the body of the story more adjectives and description.

- Backgrounders and broad summary pieces tended to appear at anniversary moments or after a breaking story cooled, but soon enough that general interest in the topic was still assumed to exist (say a week after the initiating event). Background pieces were discursive.

- Background and summary stories often included multiple comments from sources. When those who were interviewed were regional or scientific experts, the quotations helped bring context or helped illuminate an identified trend. When those who were interviewed were partisan players, the quotations played the role of communicating the political perspective of that one side.

Table 13. Forms of coverage

Type of Coverage	Style of Coverage
breaking news	▪ frequent ▪ often news briefs ▪ datelined from field ▪ inverted pyramid (Who/What/Where/When lead sentence; organization of story from most to least "important" information)
political/diplomatic stories	▪ frequent ▪ mid-length stories ▪ datelined from Washington or foreign capital ▪ inverted pyramid
features/human interest stories	▪ relatively common on "Big Story" — rare on secondary stories ▪ longer pieces ▪ datelined from field ▪ anecdotal lead, discursive style
background pieces	▪ relatively common on "Big Story" — rare on secondary stories ▪ mid-length stories ▪ datelined from field or Washington ▪ narrative style
commentary/opinion	▪ responsive to political debate
interviews/live debates	▪ responsive to political debate ▪ usually conducted by Washington-based hosts

Comparison of US-UK Coverage (cont.)

14. Differences in coverage

The British media reported more critically on public policy than did their American colleagues, even though the media in both countries typically prioritized the same international WMD events (with the obvious exception that the UK media covered US domestic stories and angles lightly, if at all).

The US media are not entirely at fault for their more passive coverage of the Bush administration's WMD claims and policy decisions. The US media presented relatively few alternative perspectives to those of the White House partly because US politicians and other Americans critical of the Bush administration not only substantially supported President Bush's declaration and articulation of the "War on Terror" but did so well into the summer and fall of 2003. By contrast, there was more consistent and vocal opposition among senior British political figures to some of the Blair government's WMD policies.

Table 14. Differences in coverage

American Media Coverage	British Media Coverage
▪ emphasized the heightening of global risk	▪ emphasized how internal politics can drive international WMD affairs
▪ focused on the presumably culpable country's flouting of both global norms and general good sense	▪ focused on multilateral consequences
▪ tended to confidently, even patronizingly, recount WMD "facts" and analysis (especially editorial commentary)	▪ tended to stress, often smugly, a political critique (especially editorial commentary)
▪ was engaged by the importance of the US presence on the global stage	▪ perforce referenced the role the US plays — because American foreign policy is the acknowledged 800-pound gorilla in the WMD arena
▪ emphasized the meaning of the breaking event for the United States	▪ typically criticized US policy on WMD as self-interested

Concluding Observations

15. Evaluation of coverage

Pack journalism did not drive all WMD coverage. Indeed, there were clear differences in the type and caliber of reporting among the different news outlets (see Appendix C). Both individual journalists and individual news organizations demonstrated that on specific story arcs they were capable of excellent enterprise reporting.

The clear lesson is that the public was not served well when immensely complicated WMD issues that crossed journalistic beats in domestic politics, national security, and regional affairs, as well as in science, medicine, and technology, were covered by a cavalier reporting of official statements and responses and were sourced anonymously.

In effect, weak coverage of WMD was classic scandal coverage. The media more comfortably followed breaking events and the partisan contests than the technological or scientific debates or the policy ramifications — especially the international ramifications.

Table 15. Evaluation of coverage

Strong Coverage	Weak Coverage
▪ resulted from an ongoing commitment to an issue by a reporter (or group of reporters) who had extensive background and expertise on the subject	▪ resulted when the issue was covered in the context of a political beat, where the interest was more on White House, State Department, or Congressional politics, for example, than on WMD
▪ resulted when WMD was examined in-depth in the context of a specific WMD event, issue, or debate	▪ resulted when WMD was reflexively mentioned in general stories about terrorism and terrorists
▪ resulted when articles relied on on-the-record, named sources	▪ resulted when articles relied on off-the-record, anonymous sources
▪ **During Iraq War**: resulted when reporters declined to sign nondisclosure agreements which freed them from special restrictions on what they wrote (as in the case with "unilateral" journalists covering WMD in Iraq, such as Washington Post reporter Barton Gellman)	▪ **During Iraq War**: resulted when reporters signed nondisclosure agreements[3]

[3] For example, embedded journalist Judith Miller reported in a page-one New York Times article about the stringent conditions she had agreed to in order to write about the interrogation of an Iraqi who was presumed to be a scientist with knowledge of Iraq's weapons program: "Under the terms of her accreditation to report on the activities of M.E.T. Alpha, this reporter was not permitted to interview the scientist or visit his home. Nor was she permitted to write about the discovery of the scientist for three days, and the copy was then submitted for a check by military officials." (4/21/03) In return for her scoop on the interrogation, she also, noted media critic Jack Shafer in Slate magazine, "consented to pre-publication review 'oh, hell, let's call it censorship!' of her story by military officials." (4/21/03)

Recommendations

In *Backstory* (Penguin Press, 2004), New Yorker media critic Ken Auletta writes about journalists' need for humility. Journalists have two "irreplaceable tools: the curiosity to ask questions and the ability to listen to the answers," he says in the introduction. "Each requires modesty because each requires us to assume that we don't already know the answers."

Journalists facing the admittedly difficult challenge of covering WMD stories might take his comments to heart. This study suggests that few reporters covering WMD ask enough questions of enough people — or ask the right questions of the right people. There were, however, prominent exceptions to that tendency, among them reporters Barton Gellman, Walter Pincus, and Dana Milbank of the Washington Post; Bob Drogin of the LA Times; and David Sanger and William Broad of the New York Times.

This study also suggests that during the three time periods under investigation, too few journalists recognized that certain answers were not being given — or that their assumptions about the answers they would find while reporting on WMD stories shaped not only what they ended up writing, but what they looked for in the first place. William Jackson, Jr., writing in Editor & Publisher Online, noted about NY Times reporter Judith Miller, for instance, that she was "a booster of the invasion who had hyped the threat of weapons of mass destruction" and had "essentially surrender[ed her] detached judgment to the Pentagon" (6/17/03 and 7/2/03).

The media cannot proffer complex and nuanced coverage of every issue — or consistently give complex and nuanced coverage of any single issue, even one as integral to national security as WMD. But they can do better. Washington Post ombudsman Michael Getler — the best ombudsman in the business — wrote in his February 29, 2004, column about the gap between "the real-world challenges of reporting about touchy subjects" and the Post's own internal guidelines about sourcing, which states the paper's "commitment to telling readers as much as possible about where the information in our newspaper is coming from."[4]

Getler writes that he understands

> "that there are certain subjects, especially national security issues, about which informants simply will not allow themselves to be quoted. So a reporter and a news organization must make a judgment about whether they trust the source or, better yet, sources, and the information. And then they decide whether the public interest is better served by reporting it on that constrained basis, if they cannot get the information elsewhere, or withholding it."

Then Getler gives his own take on the Post's judgment:

> "Officials get away too easily without having to use their names even on routine statements. Many reporters and editors are too comfortable with this practice. Editors do not sufficiently press reporters to go back and get something on the record or come closer to identifying the source, especially with reporting on government policy and security issues. … It is not easy to force changes, but it is definitely worth a new effort." (2/29/04)

[4] Washington Post executive editor Leonard Downie, Jr., wrote a piece in the March 7, 2004, Outlook section about the paper's guidelines for reporting the news, and in particular about its recent restatement of policies covering "reporting techniques, use of direct quotations, attribution of information, use of confidential sources and corrections of our mistakes."

With those thoughts in mind, this study proposes a number of recommendations for improving WMD coverage. These recommendations fall into four categories: covering the President, covering WMD policy and intelligence, covering the war on terrorism, and covering the science of WMD.

Covering the President

1. Understand that reporting on the President's policies and using administration sources — even critically — validates the President's prioritization and framing of issues and events.

2. Consider the general foreign policy implications of raising the specter of WMD.

3. Consider the general domestic policy and budget implications either of raising the specter of WMD abroad or of characterizing a WMD system as a deterrent.

4. Think critically about the language of WMD and whether it serves an other than descriptive purpose.

5. Consider whether similar situations are being represented similarly, and whether distinctive situations are being represented distinctively.

6. Be alert to changes in tone of administration assessments — especially if the administration's statements become less qualified and more alarmist (or vice versa) — and examine whether there has been a concomitant reason for that change.

7. Publish or air dissenting domestic and international voices more prominently.

8. Be alert to administration pressure to respond to crises "patriotically."

9. Be skeptical not only of information that is released by an administration, but also of the timing of the release of that information.

10. Don't let 24/7 deadline pressure preclude an assessment of official administration statements.

Covering WMD policy and intelligence

1. Cover WMD policy ramifications as thoroughly as breaking events and partisan debate.

2. Explore bilateral as well as multilateral repercussions of WMD policy — even when the US is not one of the primary players.

3. Explore potential and real WMD risks to people other than Americans.

4. Discuss how the administration has used policies of "pre-emptive war" and "regime change" as ways to deal with nuclear proliferation.

5. Consider and evaluate other policy options as ways to deal with nuclear proliferation.

6. Understand that evaluating a country's WMD status with incomplete data is not only an intelligence problem, but also a policy problem.

7. Explain the difference between intelligence collection and intelligence analysis, and explain the inherent uncertainties of intelligence gathering.

8. When the administration's intelligence claims cannot be independently confirmed, emphasize that lack of confirmation.

9. Identify for an audience the limitations and probable skew of reporting on an issue when the main sources are anonymous.

Covering the war on terrorism

1. Distinguish between acts of terrorism and the acquisition or use of WMD.

2. Challenge the assumption that WMD is an integral element in a global terrorism matrix.

3. Examine the reasons for the administration's articulation of a strong, direct link between terrorists' control of WMD and American interests.

4. Consider that reporting on administration's scare pronouncements not only serves a news function but also serves to validate the administration's policies.

5. Consider the moral suasion and political merit of language deeming a country or person to be "evil."

6. Debate worst-case scenario reasoning.

Covering the science of WMD

1. Cover not just the politics of WMD but the science of it as well.

2. Clarify distinctions in the degree of threat posed by chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons, rather than reference WMD as a monolith.

3. Clarify distinctions between civilian nuclear energy programs and military nuclear weapons programs.

4. Evaluate and distinguish among the elements that would make a situation a "serious" or "imminent" security threat — nationally, regionally, and internationally.

FINDINGS

1. The Administration as Agenda-Setter

Setting the news budget: Stenographic coverage

Big international stories achieve their level of prominence and their ongoing level of attention because of a confluence of factors: a strong, direct link to American interests (usually security or economic interests, but at times humanitarian ones), a public enunciation of those American interests by the White House, an ability by the media to cover the story (reporters can get access, updated pictures are constantly available), and no competing major domestic story (such as a presidential election campaign).

Several major international WMD stories that broke during the time periods under study did manage to call forth a critical mass of coverage. Such "big stories" included India's underground testing of three nuclear devices, or North Korea's revelation that it had been conducting a clandestine nuclear-weapons development program, or President Bush's declaration aboard a US carrier of an end to major combat operations in Iraq. News organizations ran not just one piece, but several, in order to report on the situation from a multitude of angles, even in a single day's issue or program.

Almost inevitably, however, the articles that ran on the front pages of the American newspapers or that led the radio broadcasts focused on American officials' statements and actions. The media follow power. The President's and his spokespeople's response to WMD events and issues — and even their enunciation of American interests — always get prime billing.

May 5-26, 1998

In May 1998, for example, the lead stories following the news of India's nuclear detonations led with President Clinton's statements and responses, clearly framing the underground testing through an American frame rather than through the meaning of the tests for the South Asian region or through the meaning of the tests for the scientific or even national security establishments. Stories that investigated those latter perspectives did appear in the papers and on the radio, but were buried in the back of the paper or later in the broadcasts.

NPR's lead story on its evening program All Things Considered, for example, began with reporter Mike Shuster saying: "President Clinton was in Germany for talks with Chancellor Helmut Kohl when he learned that India had exploded two more nuclear devices. The president said India's tests were unjustified and created a dangerous new instability in South Asia. And then he announced he had imposed immediate penalties on India, saying the tests had disappointed him personally." Shuster followed his opening with a three-sentence soundbite from the President. (5/13/98)

Similarly, the New York Times ran two front-page stories on India that same day. Its lead story, by Steven Lee Myers, focused on Clinton's imposition of "a raft of economic sanctions" on India; the second page-one story, by Tim Weiner, focused on the failures of US intelligence to "foresee or forestall India's nuclear tests," backing up that statement with the comment from the chairman of the Senate intelligence committee who called US ignorance "the intelligence failure of the decade." (5/13/98)

October 11-31, 2002

Stories in October 2002 followed much the same trajectory. The front-page Washington Post stories on the first and second days following the Bush administration's release of North Korea's admission of its nuclear weapons program both led with the President's and administration officials' statements. Wrote Peter Slevin and Glenn Kessler in their second-day lead: "President Bush said yesterday he would use diplomacy to avert a crisis over North Korea's surprise admission that it has been operating a covert nuclear weapons program, as senior US officials worried that a confrontation with the isolated Stalinist government could destabilize Asia as the administration pursues plans to disarm Iraq." (10/18/02)

Both the timing of the release of the news, which had been known by the President since October 4, and the dominant framing of it was scripted by the administration, although, as Slevin and Karen DeYoung wrote midway through their first-day story, there were various ways of evaluating the news: "US officials and commentators offered differing assessments last night of the implications of North Korea's announcement, with some considering it a belligerent act deserving of a strong response, and others saying it could be a bid by North Korea to create an opening to the United States." (10/17/02)

Yet even that mild questioning of the meaning of North Korea's admission was not paralleled by a similar questioning of the administration's decision about how and when to release the information, despite the observation made by Slevin and DeYoung (and other reporters for other news organizations) that the information came at an awkward time for the administration: "The revelation from the isolated Stalinist country presents the Bush administration with a serious, unanticipated foreign policy challenge as officials prepare to confront Iraqi President Saddam Hussein over his refusal to surrender weapons of mass destruction. Meanwhile, thousands of US troops remain deployed in an unstable Afghanistan and terrorist attacks have spiked in recent weeks from Yemen to Indonesia." (10/17/02)

May 1-21, 2003

Since the top story of early May 2003 — President Bush's "victory" speech from the USS Lincoln — had the President's words and actions as its pre-eminent angle, the administration's agenda even more dramatically framed the media stories. "By declaring that major combat operations in Iraq have ended," wrote reporter Linda Feldmann in her lead in the Christian Science Monitor, "President Bush has put an exclamation point on what is seen by the public as a successful war." (5/2/03) Or as Robert Siegel opened his introduction to live coverage of the speech: "President Bush addressing an audience of sailors on the USS Abraham Lincoln, telling them that major combat operations in Iraq have ended, that the battle of Iraq was, in his words, 'one victory in a war on terrorism,' a war against terror that began on September 11th, 2001." (5/1/03)

* * *

The US media typically confirmed the Bush administration's political and diplomatic agenda-setting. Through their reporting on the President, the media amplified the administration's voice — so when Bush said to the country that Americans are vulnerable to WMD in the hands of terrorists, the media effectively magnified those fears.

Across the three time periods, the level of recognition that each administration gave to WMD issues and events received a comparable level of recognition from the media — even if, on certain occasions, the journalists were criticizing the administration's "spin." If the White House acted like a WMD story was important so too did the media. If the White House ignored a story (or an angle on a story), the media was likely too, as well.

So, for example, in May 2003 both the administration and the media focused on such topics as: Did Iran have a military nuclear capacity? Was Syria making chemical weapons? Was drug money feeding North Korea's nuclear program? Did SARS suggest how vulnerable the US was to bioterrorism?

When journalists did take on the administration — especially when the White House's perspective formed the "conventional wisdom" — their stories were often buried or their criticism was more implicit than explicit.

In late October 2002, for example, as Americans worried about how the country was going to respond to the twin threats of Iraq and North Korea and looked to the President for guidance, the NY Times ran a lengthy article by reporter Judith Miller, its expert on WMD and bioterrorism. The story was 1833 words — more than twice the length of a typical story. Her lead signaled the importance of the piece:

> President Bush's release of an audacious new strategy last month for defending America against future foreign threats stunned Washington and even some close allies. The 33-page document, titled the "National Security Strategy of the United States," ostensibly departed from what had been the longstanding conventional wisdom about American strategy. (10/26/02)

While Miller's piece quoted several Republican spokespeople, her framing of the issues let critical Democratic voices dominate. Because the piece appeared at a time of great popularity for President Bush, one might assume that the NY Times would have prominently featured the story in order to educate its audience about potentially serious flaws in the White House's foreign policy white paper as well as to demonstrate the independence of its journalistic voice. Yet the Times' editors buried Miller's article. It appeared on a Saturday — the day of the week with the lowest readership. It was not a front-page article, nor even an A section piece. It appeared in the Arts and Ideas, "B," section — on page 9.

Reporter Danna Harmon, writing for the Christian Science Monitor, detailed the differences between the US and UK forces in Iraq, not by distinguishing between their grand plans, but by comparing how each side interacted with Iraqi children, letting her details about how the US troops treat Iraqi children be a backhanded way of criticizing American policy:

> "We came here with the Americans to liberate the Iraqi people and find the elusive weapons of mass destruction …," says Lt. Col. Ronnie McCourt, a spokesman for the British troops in Basra. "But now that we are in the peace-building phase, we are seeing some divergence."
>
> For example, the British hand out candies to Iraqi children, notes Pvt. James Patterson, speaking with a broad Scottish accent. "We kick a football around with 'em, too — no time for a full game, but we try. The Americans are too nervous for that," he adds. (5/20/03)

As one would expect, the British media were not so constrained. They reported differently — and more critically — on world events than their American colleagues, even though the media in both countries typically prioritized international news events in the same way (with the obvious exception that the UK media covered US domestic stories lightly if at all).

South Asia, North Korea, and Iraq were the top WMD news stories in both countries in the three time periods of this study. However, the British press took a different slant on those stories than their American counterparts.

The British press covered the 1998 South Asian nuclear tests in a different way from the US media, for example, and those distinctions remained in other story arcs covered during the three time periods.

See, for example, two editorials, one from the Guardian and the other from the NY Times, written after the news of the first Indian testing broke in mid-May 1998. Said the Guardian in its lead: "India has exploded three nuclear devices for muddled reasons to do with nationalism, the exigencies of internal politics, and international prestige." It then closed its editorial with this nudge at the United States:

> It looks as if New Delhi saw a window for testing and took it. The result is this dangerous precedent, to which the only real answer is genuine disarmament negotiations by the established nuclear powers. There are no doubt various lesser ways of placating or persuading India. But only obviously progressing nuclear disarmament will remove the justification for decisions like those which India has taken, and which many other countries might be tempted to take in the future. (5/12/98)

By comparison, the NY Times wrote in its lead:

> India's explosion of three nuclear devices in the Rajasthan desert makes the world a more dangerous place. By arrogantly challenging international efforts to control the spread of the most lethal weapons, the new Hindu nationalist Government of Prime Minister Atal Bhari Vajpayee may win applause at home from those who confuse military might with self-esteem. But for a paltry and short-lived domestic gain, India now faces a ruinous cutoff in foreign aid, a self-defeating arms race with Pakistan and isolation even from friends. (5/13/98)

British criticism of American policy became more explicit in October 2002 and May 2003 when UK journalists openly disputed the messages and the assertions of the Bush administration about the purported Iraqi WMD, whereas the American reporters appeared more muted in their coverage — most often relying on quotations from Democratic politicians to make the opposing case. (The Guardian was equally critical of those of Prime Minister Tony Blair.)

For example, in the immediate aftermath of President Bush's declaration of victory in Iraq on the first of May 2003, Armando Iannucci wrote in the Daily Telegraph:

> In the US, the presentation of the attack on Iraq by all the main television networks as a "War on Terror" helped to sidestep questions of the legality of a war that's so far uncovered no weapons of mass destruction, but plenty of mass graves from an uprising in the past that was urged, but left unsupported by the Americans — another factual omission from present-day commentary. (5/16/03)

In effect, the British press folded in more news "analysis" and even commentary into stories that in the US were treated in an inverted-pyramid-style, breaking news fashion. But even when editorial and opinion writers were compared, the British invective — especially in regards to WMD in Iraq — was stronger. Columnists in the States, such as Nicholas Kristof and Paul Krugman of the New York Times, may have actively challenged some of the Bush administration's claims, but with less vituperative glee than opinion writers in London bedeviled Prime Minister Tony Blair's contentions.

The politics of language: Seizing the moral high ground

The language used by politicians and repeated in the media to discuss issues and events relating to weapons of mass destruction is not always transparent.

Often there is no agreed-upon definition for even common terms. The phrase "weapons of mass destruction," for example, is an amorphous one, changing meaning according to the whims of the speaker. Raising the specter of WMD is more a way by which politicians assign blame or take a stand on seemingly objective moral standards than a way by which they assess a particular weapons system.

President Bush's designation of the "Axis of Evil" countries in his 2002 State of the Union address, to take another example, was an overt attempt to claim the moral high ground and preempt the need for defending specific actions the United States might want to take against Iraq or Iran or North Korea. If those countries were perforce evil (and had WMD), than any action against them would be justified.[5] Washington Post reporter Karen DeYoung led with the President's moral equation in her front-page story, "Bush Proclaims Victory in Iraq; Work on Terror Is Ongoing, President Says":

> President Bush proclaimed victory in Iraq tonight from aboard a US carrier returning to home port, but he cautioned that much remains to be done in the broader war against terrorism.
>
> "The battle of Iraq is one victory in a war on terror that began on September the 11th, 2001, and still goes on," the president said in his national address beamed from the deck of the Lincoln. (5/2/03)

When in May 2003 the media's patience for the WMD hunt wore thin and they therefore began asking harder questions of the Bush administration, the critiques of Bush did not entirely reject the war, or the notion that there were moral arguments that could still be made in defense of the war. Tom Friedman wrote in his NY Times May 14 column that he himself was "someone who never believed Saddam had any weapons of mass destruction that threatened us," but then he went on to say that it didn't take WMD: "this war could easily be justified by [Saddam's] mass destruction of his own people." (5/4/03)

Human rights stories about the mass graves also made the point that "mass destruction" had already occurred — to the Iraqis. The NY Times published a follow-up letter to Friedman's column, in which the writer wrote:

> Imagine if the Bush administration was filled with people who had long championed human rights and who had argued that it was the obligation of the United States to free the Iraqi people from Saddam Hussein.
>
> But it isn't, and they didn't.
>
> Instead, the president and his administration argued during the prewar buildup that a war was necessary to free the American people from the worry that Saddam Hussein could somehow get to us with his weapons of mass destruction. The war was about us, not them. (5/16/03)

Politicians rattle the WMD cage to scare the public into supporting a particular policy stance.

President Bush and Prime Minister Blair sold the Iraq war to Americans and British starting in summer 2002 on the grounds that Saddam Hussein had nuclear weapons that posed an "imminent threat." As the Economist wrote in a Leader article: "Mr. Bush and Mr. Blair claimed that the danger of Iraq's chemical and biological weapons was clear and present." (5/31/03)

WMD has come to refer not only to nuclear, chemical, radiological, and biological weapons but to a more generalized cataclysmic disaster.

The Washington Post reported on a speech delivered by Presidential candidate Rep. Dennis Kucinich (D-OH):

[5] By the same token, President Bush's show of concern for civilian casualties in Afghanistan and Iraq, articulating a "compassionate" policy for "winning hearts and minds" — never mind that to a Vietnam-era generation the phrase will never lose its irony — were other ways that his administration has tried to seize the moral high ground.

> "I know where weapons of mass destruction are," he said to rising applause and eventually a standing ovation. "Joblessness is a weapon of mass destruction. Poverty is a weapon of mass destruction. Homelessness is a weapon of mass destruction. Poor health care is a weapon of mass destruction. And when the government lies to the American people, that is a weapon of mass destruction." (5/21/03)

Even Secretary of State Colin Powell, who has been in the frontlines of the foreign policy conversation over the "real" WMD, said to US News magazine, "The greatest weapon of mass destruction today on the face of the Earth is HIV, and it is a destroyer of people, families, nations, societies, and hopes in the poorest parts of the world." (5/5/03)

WMD has even entered the realm of metaphor. "In this summer's films," wrote the Los Angeles Times in its May 4 review of wannabe comic-book blockbusters such as "The Hulk," "X2," and "The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen," "the heroes themselves are weapons of mass destruction." (5/4/03) Berkshire Hathaway chair Warren Buffett was quoted in Newsweek as decrying derivatives as "financial weapons of mass destruction." (5/12/03) And the Guardian headlined an article about the devaluation of the dollar with "Markets Hit by Dollar's Fall: Recession Fears Grow as US Launches 'Weapon of Mass Destruction' Against Europe." (5/20/03) (Parenthetically, a Lexis-Nexis search pulled up more than 460 instances of the use of the pun "weapon of mass *distraction*" in 2003 — used to refer to everything from Britney Spears' breasts to toys delivered by Santa Claus.)

News outlets seldom signal to their audiences that there are sensitivities in the political or scientific debate about the usage of certain terms and phrases. Problematic terms are too rarely flagged as being problematic. Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's characterization of North Korea as a "terrorist regime" for its export of nuclear technology was often quoted, for example, but his meaning of "terrorist regime" was not explored — nor contrasted to the kind of terrorism attributed to al-Qaeda. All terrorism ends up being conflated.

In March 2002, the Washington Post wrote formal guidelines into its internal style manual to govern the paper's usage of the words "terrorist" and "terrorism." The guidelines developed in the context of pressure from watchdog groups concerned about the paper's coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Post ombudsman Michael Getler cited the manual extensively in a column written a year and a half later. He quoted:

> "The language we use should be chosen for its ability to inform readers. Terrorism and terrorist can be useful words, but they are labels. Like all labels, they do not convey much hard information. We should rely first on specific facts, not characterizations. Why refer to a "terrorist attack in Tel Aviv" when we can be more informative and precise: "The bombing of a disco frequented by teenagers in Tel Aviv," for example. Our first obligation to readers is to tell them what happened, as precisely as possible.
>
> "When we use these labels, we should do so in ways that are not tendentious. For example, we should not resolve the argument over whether Hamas is a terrorist organization, or a political organization that condones violence, or something else, by slapping a label on Hamas. Instead, we should give readers facts and perhaps quotes from disputing parties about how best to characterize the organization."
>
> The guidance also quotes Foreign Editor David Hoffman: "If the Israelis say they have assassinated a terrorist, we should not embrace their labeling automatically. We may say he was a suspected terrorist, or someone the Israelis considered a terrorist, or someone the Israelis say participated in a terrorist act. **In other words, we should always look independently at whether the person has committed an act of terrorism, whether we know sufficient facts to say he has or has not and what the facts are. We should always strive to satisfy our own standards and not let others set standards for us.**" (9/21/2003) (emphasis added)

Getler then noted: "That last sentence is central to the editing process here. The terrorist label is very powerful and the paper takes care in avoiding language that is preferred by one side or another in the Middle East."

The Post — as well as other media — was clearly not following these or similar guidelines in 2002 or 2003 as it applied the administration's articulated terrorism-Iraq-WMD linkage. **The journalism profession as a whole has been sensitized to charges of bias by its audience if reporters quote Israeli or Palestinian accusations of terrorism without explicit attribution. Yet, too few journalists covering the war on terrorism and the war in Afghanistan and Iraq have been equally careful about the Bush administration's language and characterizations. Charges of terrorism are loaded and problematic no matter who is the speaker and who is the purported terrorist.**

The choice of terms, the failure to define those terms, the conflation of disparate ideas, systems, events by the use of umbrella terms are all ways that the coverage of WMD can be distorted through language. While nuclear weapons experts prefer to use definitional terms that describe the attribute that matters (such as "low-yield" or "short-range"), many journalists distinguish weapons systems by employing more generic adjectival descriptions such as "smaller" vs. "larger," or "tactical" or "battlefield" vs. "strategic."[6]

This tendency can be seen in an article from the LA Times: "The United States already had disposed of most of its smaller, or tactical, nuclear weapons, and US and Russian officials were busy negotiating to get rid of the thousands of strategic nuclear weapons as well." (5/13/03). The same LA Times story also used such simplistic phrases to define the weapons as "new generation of nuclear weapons" and even "huge nuclear weapon."

Other reporters did not cavil at using "cute" terms such as "mini-nukes" or "bunker-busters" (or quoting others using them). Such friendly characterizations are in a long history of the military and administration officials using upbeat and accessible terms to refer to nasty weapons — whether the military hardware is officially named, such as the Patriot missile, or informally nicknamed, such as "Puff the Magic Dragon" or "Bouncing Betty." Employing such a term as "mini-nuke" conjures images of Austin Powers' "Mini-Me" — a wanna-be weapon not to be taken terribly seriously.

By the same token, putting the "deck of cards" in the lead or using the monikers "Dr. Germ" or "Chemical Ali" when referring to Rihab Taha al-Azawi al-Tikriti or Ali Hassan al-Majid also trivializes the events of the war. Such references turn WMD into a cartoon-esque James Bond film, where "evil" characters have names like "Dr. No" or "Goldfinger." As writer Margaret Drabble wrote in the Daily Telegraph, "Long ago Voltaire told us that we invent words to conceal truths." (5/8/03)

How seriously can an audience take an ABC News report when this is Peter Jennings' lead-in: "The US has another individual on the list of most-wanted, in custody. She is Huda Salih Ammash. She's been dubbed Mrs. Anthrax or Chemical Sally, by some intelligence officials." (5/5/03)

Washington Post columnist Al Kamen, poked fun at such cartoonish reporting:

> To some, the capture of top biological weapons scientist Huda Salih Mahdi Ammash, a.k.a. "Mrs. Anthrax," a.k.a. "Chemical Sally," might not have seemed like a big deal.

[6] See Robert Nelson, "Nuclear Bunker Busters, Mini-Nukes, and the US Nuclear Stockpile," *Physics Today*, Nov. 2003. Online at http://www.physicstoday.org/vol-56/iss-11/p32.html.

> After all, she only ranked 53rd on the US list of the 55 most-wanted Iraqis, despite a doctorate from the University of Missouri.
>
> But she may be able to provide key information on finding any biological or chemical weapons in Iraq, and, more important, she was the five of hearts on the Pentagon's famous playing cards of wanted Iraqis.
>
> That means that, with her capture, poker fans draw ever closer to filling a straight flush in hearts. The four, six and seven of hearts had been in custody, so now collectors are hoping someone captures the three, Fadil Mahmud Gharib, the Ba'ath Party regional command chairman for the Babil district — no photo available — or the eight of hearts, Sultan Hashim Ahmad al-Tai, the defense minister. (5/7/03)

Commentator Jake Tapper noted the general problem on NPR's All Things Considered, "One of the reasons we know who each card represents is because the media keep telling us, completely with a straight face. It's not just the more sensational types like the New York Post with its 'Seven of Hearts Dealt Out of Game' or 'Two More Cards Cut From Deck' headlines. With the capture or confirmed kill of each of the most wanted, even the completely straight-laced Associated Press announces which card each has been assigned." (5/2/03)

The infinitely malleable nature of language makes it possible for a discussion of WMD to be skewed without any factual inaccuracies. We weren't lying, said a Bush spokesman to correspondent John Cochran of ABC's Nightline. "It was just a matter of emphasis." (4/22/03)

Sensationalizing the story: Leading with the risks

As if journalists weren't already susceptible to the frisson of fear evoked by talk of WMD post 9/11, the Bush White House ratcheted up the dread — and thereby the media's attraction to covering WMD stories. In the last several years, President Bush set the tone for an apocalyptic approach to the WMD issue, not only because of his administration's insistence that Saddam Hussein had WMD that posed an "imminent threat," but because of his identification of WMD as an integral part of the 21st century terrorist arsenal.

As his May 2003 carrier speech detailed:

> With the liberation of Iraq and Afghanistan, we have removed allies of al Qaeda, cut off sources of terrorist funding and made certain that no terrorist network will gain weapons of mass destruction from Saddam Hussein's regime.

One could say of the Bush administration's treatment of WMD, as Mark Leibovitch of the Washington Post did about the related topic of terrorism, that "the nation is being trained to consider terrorism only in its most apocalyptic forms."

Leibovitch explained: "Many sociologists, scenario planners and counterterrorism experts believe the government and the media are too focused on extreme menaces — namely the terrorist attacks that involve weapons of mass destruction." (5/1/03)

The inherently dramatic WMD are not only easy to sensationalize — they also have become a Trojan Horse. The public is so apprehensive of the big horse in its midst, that it doesn't notice all the policies that slip through, unawares, while attention is focused on the spectacular issue. WMD have become a way to provoke a knee-jerk reaction: protect America.

Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge could capitalize on the trepidation of Americans when he moved the US terror alert back to Orange in May 2003. Ridge noted that while there was no specific

threat against the US that had prompted the heightened status: "Weapons of mass destruction, including those containing chemical, biological or radiological agents or materials, cannot be discounted," he said.

Reporting on supposed WMD terrorist threats, or on speeches about apocalyptic scenarios averted, diverts the media from other WMD topics — topics seemingly less cataclysmic (at least at the moment), but more "real" in their consequences. Such topics are of significant concern to scientists and think tanks in the WMD field, but since there is often not a sexy news peg to hang a story on, such subjects get overlooked on tight news budgets.

May 5-26, 1998

Pre-9/11, the WMD-generated "fears" that the media wrote about were collective fears: "fears of a new arms race" (Christian Science Monitor, 5/12/98); "fear that, if Pakistan also carries out a nuclear test, both locals and foreigners will pull out their money and wreck the economy" (Economist, 5/23/98); "India's fear of China [as] threat number one," (NPR's Morning Edition, 5/18/98).

For all that journalists could discuss — as did Washington Post reporters Kenneth J. Cooper and John Ward Anderson, Pakistan and India's "Misplaced Faith in Nuclear Deterrence," as their headline had it, (5/31/98) — **few stories in May 1998 rattled the nuclear saber or raised a compelling specter of a nuclear holocaust. India didn't really exercise the Clinton administration; Clinton was said to be "deeply distressed" and he called the testing "a terrible mistake." As a result, the media weren't especially troubled either.**

As Newsweek dismissed the South Asian testing: "If You Really Want to Worry, Think Loose Nukes [in Russia]." But even that article didn't raise many goose bumps: the "starker post-cold-war threat" emerging from the former Soviet Union, said the special report, was "that "loose nukes" could end up in the hands of what one US official last week called 'no-goodniks.'"(5/25/98)

October 11-31, 2002, and May 1-21, 2003

In May 2003, Iraq sucked up most of the WMD oxygen in the newsrooms. The previous October, it shared the world WMD stage with North Korea. During those months, between those two blockbuster stories, there wasn't much space for the mundane WMD stories. Other countries beyond Iraq and North Korea entered the dialogue when they too were portrayed as part of a terrorist matrix.

Said John Hughes of the Christian Science Monitor, for example: "President Bush's 'axis of evil' — Iraq, Iran, and North Korea — may indeed be linked by the evil actions of their respective regimes." (10/23/02)

There was little interest in the military and industry's concern for biosecurity — except in passing, as related to Attorney General John Ashcroft's focus on Steven Hatfill as a "person of interest" in the ongoing investigation of the anthrax case. Nor was there interest in the formerly riveting issue of nuclear weapons — except a couple of articles that said that there had been insufficient attention given to the topic.

One example of those few articles that did at least nod to other WMD issues beyond Iraq, was a piece by commentator Jim Hoagland, who observed in the Washington Post:

> The Bush administration is no slouch at dramatizing foreign threats. Ask Saddam Hussein or Osama bin Laden. If you can find them. But on the sharpening nuclear threat presented by North Korea's Kim Jong Il, the White House remains outwardly cool, as if it has unlimited time to nudge the regional powers in Northeast Asia into persuading the saber-rattling tyrant to relent. Why this dichotomy of response? Liberal critics attribute it

> to hypocrisy, saying President Bush will wage preemptive war only against the weak. Foreign policy analysts blame a stalemate on Bush's divided national security team. …
>
> Does it matter if Kim's regime, which has had enough fissionable material to build one or two nuclear bombs since the George H.W. Bush administration, gets some more? Does it matter if it reprocesses enough plutonium for five more bombs by the end of 2003 and goes on to become what experts call "a serial manufacturer" of nuclear weapons year after year? It does. (5/25/03)

Nor was there appreciable interest in stories about cooperation with the former Soviet Union, although a number of articles discussed the US pressure on Russia to stop selling nuclear reactors and technology to Iran, and a dozen or so mentioned in passing the impact of the June 2002 US withdrawal from 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with Moscow.

A story in the Washington Post about "loose nukes," for example, turned out not to be about the states of the former Soviet Union, but about Canadian and European pharmaceutical companies' use of bomb-grade uranium to produce medical isotopes for hospitals. (5/7/03)

Surprisingly, even despite the scheduled early June meeting of Bush and Putin there were no more than one or two stories that addressed broader questions of big-power, bilateral nuclear diplomacy. One of those was a short (466 words) article on page A16 of the New York Times that led with: "President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia, seeking to heal relations bruised by the war in Iraq, has written to President Bush seeking cooperation 'on all levels,' a senior Russian official said today." (5/23/03)

What emerged were a new breed of stories about strategic changes in who Americans should be afraid of — rogue states and terrorists who were unlikely to use missiles as "delivery vehicles" for nuclear weapons, and were more likely to use "a ship, a truck, a plane … or a FedEx package." (NPR's All Things Considered, 10/18/02)

2. The Terrorism-WMD-Iraq Connection

Terrorists have long been referenced as security threats, but their cohesion into a monolithic menace occurred with President George W. Bush's pronouncement of a "War on Terror" in the immediate aftermath of the attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center in September 2001. With that declaration, weapons of mass destruction — as a single blurred hazard — and individually identified nuclear, biological, radiological, and chemical weapons began to be automatically identified in the media as inseparably part of a global terrorism matrix.

The War on Terror made WMD a security issue of compelling importance no matter their geographical location. The Bush administration's constant reminder that a core objective of the War on Terror is to prevent WMD from falling into the hands of American-hating terrorists (and the media's pickup of that refrain) catapulted the issue into the news on a constant basis — even if the stories in the news rarely examined the quotidian realities of terrorism (the 9/11 terrorists used box cutters and commercial planes, not vials of smallpox or dirty bombs, for example) or the real but often prosaic threats related to WMD.

May 5-26, 1998

In May 1998, only a handful of stories in the US and UK press made the clear linkage between WMD and terrorism by a either a rogue group or state.[7]

Washington Post reporter Walter Pincus wrote an article that ran on page A4 about the failures of the CIA's "human espionage capability" that articulated a connection between terrorism and WMD. He quoted Rep. Porter Goss (R-FL), the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee and a former CIA case officer, as saying:

> "there was a serious shortfall" in pinning down Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. Such limitations in foreign intelligence information must be corrected, he said, because "the risk that a terrorist group or a rogue country will use chemical, biological or nuclear weapons against the US or an American citizen or American interests here or abroad is increasing." (5/10/98)

And the Economist, in a May story about "asymmetrical threats," noted that:

> no adversary in his right mind would try to match America's vast arsenal of tanks, ships or nuclear weapons. It makes far better sense for the enemy — be it a terrorist group, a rogue state, or a combination of both — to wage chemical, biological or even cyber-warfare against American society, exploiting its openness. (5/9/98)

A couple of other articles that same May articulated a concern that Russia's "loose nukes" might be acquired by terrorists. Doyle McManus, writing a page-one story for the LA Times noted that nuclear threats were "now" coming from new sources in "unstable places," such as Pakistan, India, North Korea, Iraq, and Israel. "Plus," he wrote, "there's the impossible-to-quantify danger of 'loose nukes,' of nuclear material falling into the hands of rebels, terrorists or gangsters." (5/13/98) And William Drozdiak, writing for the Washington Post, quoted a "senior NATO diplomat" as observing that a NATO-Russian council "could serve a useful purpose" in trying to keep Russia's 10,000 to 12,000 tactical nuclear weapons "from falling into the hands of terrorists or rogue states." (5/2/98)

But beyond those very few stories, **most of the media made careful distinctions between acts of terrorism and the acquisition or use of WMD**.

NPR reporter Mara Liasson, for example, made a point of using the word "or" to separate the two: "After failing to agree on a common plan to impose economic sanctions on India, to punish that country for its nuclear tests," she noted, "President Clinton and the Europeans compromised on another sanctions dispute today. The issue was a US law passed by the Republican Congress. Its intent is to deprive Iran and Libya of revenue those countries could use to support terrorism or develop nuclear weapons."

October 11-31, 2002

By a year after 9/11, President George W. Bush and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's constant linkages of terrorism and Iraq and WMD had engrained the three as a triple threat in the media. It wasn't that the media were oblivious to the sales job of the White House, it was that the conventions of breaking stories tied journalists to leading with the "news" — which in the case of WMD meant reporting the President's assertions as he stated them.

[7] The Lexis-Nexis search was "terror! w/25 'weapon! of mass destruction' or weapon w/10 nuclear or biological or chemical and date is may 1998 and publication (christian science monitor or los angeles times or new york times or washington post or guardian or telegraph or economist or newsweek or national public radio or us news)."

For example, the page-one headline in the Los Angles Times following a major speech by the President on October 7, noted: "Bush Tells Nation the Threat by Iraq Is 'Simply Too Great.'" Reporter Ed Chen followed his headline with several lead paragraphs that emphasized the President's assertion of "significant" danger:

> Courting public support for his campaign against Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, President Bush declared Monday that the Baghdad regime "stands alone" as a threat to America because "it gathers the most serious dangers of our age in one place." … Asserting that evidence "indicates that Iraq is reconstituting its nuclear weapons programs," Bush said this risk "is simply too great that he will use [weapons of mass destruction] or provide them to a terror network." (10/8/02)

The New York Times' front-page story on the speech also led with a lengthy reiteration of Bush's warning of danger:

> President Bush declared tonight that Saddam Hussein could attack the United States or its allies "on any given day" with chemical or biological weapons. In a forceful argument for disarming Iraq or going to war with that country, he argued that "we have an urgent duty to prevent the worst from occurring."
>
> Mr. Bush, in a half-hour indictment of Mr. Hussein delivered before an audience of 400 here and millions around the country and the world, insisted that leading a campaign to disarm the Iraqi leader would not detract from the war against terrorism. "To the contrary," he said, "confronting the threat posed by Iraq is crucial to winning the war on terror." …
>
> The president likened the threat the country faces today from Iraq to the Cuban missile crisis, which unfolded exactly 40 years ago this month. The comparison was intended, his aides acknowledged, to give the confrontation a sense of urgency and to explain why the United States could wait only weeks or months to disarm the Iraqi leader. (10/8/02)

The British papers also matter-of-factly reported Bush's terrorism-WMD-Iraq conflation: "Bush warns of chemical attacks on the US," noted the headline to a Daily Telegraph article on October 8. The lead detailed the threat: "Saddam Hussein is considering using unmanned aircraft to attack the United States with chemical or biological weapons and has worked hand-in-glove with al-Qa'eda, President George W. Bush said last night." (10/8/02)

US politicians beyond the president also seized on the politically expedient conflation of Al Qaeda terrorism, Iraq, and WMD — and in breaking stories the media reported mostly perfunctorily on those comments, too. Journalists rarely took politicians to task for their distortions or their stating uncertainties as facts, caught up instead in covering the horse-race politics.

Senate candidate John Thune, South Dakota's only member of the House who was personally recruited for the race by President Bush, employed the same broad brush in an attack ad as his White House patron. "Al Qaeda terrorists. Saddam Hussein. Enemies of America. Working to obtain nuclear weapons. Now more than ever, our nation must have a missile defense system to shoot down missiles fired at America. Yet Tim Johnson has voted against a missile defense system 29 different times." That ad and Thune's campaign were the focus of stories both on NPR and in the Washington Post — not for their distortion of facts, but rather because, as Bob Edwards of NPR said, no other race had "attracted more outside money or media attention than South Dakota" since the parties viewed it as a proxy fight between President Bush and the then Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle. (NPR 10/23/02; WP 10/25/02)

Yet, a few news analysis and opinion pieces did articulate that the President's claims for a "triple threat" were primarily "powerful arguments for the actions Bush sought," as Post reporter Dana Milbank wrote.

In the lead of a page-one story on October 22 carrying the headline, "For Bush, Facts Are Malleable," Milbank questioned the reasons for Bush's claims:

> President Bush, speaking to the nation this month about the need to challenge Saddam Hussein, warned that Iraq has a growing fleet of unmanned aircraft that could be used "for missions targeting the United States." Last month, asked if there were new and conclusive evidence of Hussein's nuclear weapons capabilities, Bush cited a report by the International Atomic Energy Agency [IAEA] saying the Iraqis were "six months away from developing a weapon." And last week, the president said objections by a labor union to having customs officials wear radiation detectors has the potential to delay the policy "for a long period of time."
>
> All three assertions were powerful arguments for the actions Bush sought. And all three statements were dubious, if not wrong. Further information revealed that the aircraft lack the range to reach the United States; there was no such report by the; and the customs dispute over the detectors was resolved long ago. (10/22/02)

As New Yorker media critic Ken Auletta noted in a piece in January 2004, Milbank's October 2002 front-page article "enraged" the White House, and was one of a number of "more aggressive" stories that fall to look at "the Administration's march to war with Iraq." Milbank, however, had already had a reputation for taking on the White House and being somewhat "snarky." Milbank told Auletta: "There's little time to do entrepreneurial work. It's more a stenographic kind of job." Yet he, together with his Post colleagues Barton Gellman and Walter Pincus, and New York Times reporter David Sanger, had reputations for looking beyond the White House statements. Post executive editor Leonard Downie characterized Milbank's coverage to Auletta in this way: "He breaks news; he explains to readers how and why Bush and the White House do things the way they do; he provides the political context for policy decisions and actions." (New Yorker: 1/19/04)

A week after Milbank's Post piece, New York Times reporter Steven Lee Myers wryly noted Bush's scare tactics in a page-one article about the Russians' use of gas to disable Chechen guerrillas in their siege of a Moscow theater:

> In his remarks, Mr. Putin never mentioned Chechnya's fighters or the roughly 50 guerrillas who seized the theater. Instead he spoke broadly of the threat of international terrorists, who, he said, were "behaving in a more and more cruel manner." As Mr. Bush has done repeatedly, Mr. Putin raised the specter of a terrorist attack using nuclear, chemical or biological weapons, vowing that Russia would respond with its full might. (10/28/02)

And Michael Kinsley, writing on the op-ed page of the Post noted that the White House "dissembling" served a propagandistic purpose:

> Ambiguity has its place in dealings among nations, and so does a bit of studied irrationality. Sending mixed signals and leaving the enemy uncertain what you might do next are valid tactics. But the cloud of confusion that surrounds Bush's Iraq policy is not tactical. It's the real thing. And the dissembling is aimed at the American citizenry, not at Saddam Hussein. Hussein knows how close he is or isn't to a usable nuclear bomb — we're the ones who are expected to take Bush's word for it. (10/11/02)

While a few articles and programs called into question the *reasons* for the White House's terrorism-WMD-Iraq linkage — and were well in the mode of previous generations of political stories about Presidential lies and "misstatements" — stories that explicitly expressed reservations about the *evidence* of Iraq's connections with terrorists were rarer.

The few that did appear, such as one by Tyler Johnson in the LA Times, tended to run well back from the front page — Johnson's ran on page 15 — and tended to bury the reservations. Only deep in Johnson's article did he write about the Security Council's unwillingness to consider the issue of terrorism together with questions about the UN inspections. He also countered quotations that did express hesitations over

an Iraq-Al Qaeda connection with comments that made the assumption that Saddam Hussein had the ability to pass WMD on to terrorists. (10/15/02)

New York Times reporter Elisabeth Bumiller did write a page-one story covering President Bush's response to the Bali bombing that expressed doubts about the President's statements: "Mr. Bush again linked Mr. Hussein to Al Qaeda, without citing evidence, and suggested that the Iraqi leader could give a biological, chemical or nuclear weapon to the terrorist organization for use against its enemies. 'We need to think about Saddam Hussein using Al Qaeda to do his dirty work, to not leave fingerprints behind,' Mr. Bush said." But that paragraph was the last one in the lengthy story — on the inside jump. (10/15/02)

May 1-21, 2003

The British news outlets were the ones most likely to point out that the Bush administration used the term "terrorist" as a conscious element in its foreign policy — with groups or countries it wants to condemn, it applies the term terrorist, while with groups it is interested in allying itself with, it will ignore a prior label of terrorist.

"Growing US pressure on Iran takes many forms, much of it questionable and some of it deeply hypocritical," noted the Leader article in the Guardian on May 20.

> A campaign of public accusation is now in full flood; in the past few days alone, national security adviser Condoleezza Rice has reiterated her view that Iran harbours al-Qaida terrorists, while another official claimed it is stockpiling chemical weapons. Pressure is applied through burgeoning US collaboration with the Iraq-based, Iranian opposition Mujahedeen; and by intimidation of Iranian allies like Syria and Lebanon. The US is pushing Russia to curtail its nuclear technology sales to Tehran; and it is barely less hostile to an EU (and British) policy of critical engagement that contradicts unilateral US trade and investment sanctions. … In these many ways, the Bush administration seeks to convince the world that Iran, like Saddam's Iraq, constitutes a threat that may one day have to be extinguished by force.
>
> While most remain sceptical, US tactics may yet prove self-fulfilling. Iran, for example, helped the US pursue al-Qaida fugitives from Afghanistan; there is no evidence of collusion with al-Qaida now. But Tehran is justifiably outraged by US sponsorship of the Mujahedeen, who Washington itself has long labeled terrorists. (5/20/03)

Throughout May, even as the purported Iraqi WMD proved elusive, American news media continued to buy into the connection between Iraqi WMD and terrorists, ignoring the fact that the most devastating terrorists attacks to date had not used WMD or fissile material, or even involved Iraqis.

Said Rod Nordland in the closing to a Newsweek article about Iraqi looting at radioactive sites: "Not finding WMDs doesn't mean there are none. … Proving Saddam's guilt is almost beside the point. The urgent job now is to keep his WMD materials out of terrorist hands — if it isn't already too late." (5/19/03)

It took until the summer and fall before the terrorism link between Iraq and 9/11 was finally admitted to be spurious.

The New York Times ran as its lead editorial on Sept 19 "The Terrorism Link That Wasn't": "On Wednesday, President Bush finally got around to acknowledging that there was no connection between Saddam Hussein and the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001," the editors wrote as the lead. Why did the Bush administration draw "a link between Mr. Hussein and 9/11"? Because, "recent polls suggest that the American public is not as enthusiastic about making sacrifices to help the Iraqis as about making sacrifices to protect the United States against terrorism. The temptation to hint at a connection with Sept. 11 that did not exist must have been tremendous." (9/19/03)

3. Habits of Coverage

The wish for cold facts and hard statistics

The issue of WMD crosses political, military, scientific, and legal lines. Rarely are reporters deeply conversant in such a breadth of fields, so in the case of WMD most journalists need to rely on the expert testimony of others.

A typical pitfall in WMD coverage is for reporters to rely too heavily on statistics — for example, to quantify force by using kiloton differences such as "a force of less than 5 kt of TNT" — to be able to relay a message effectively. Yet clarity does not always come with numbers, despite most journalists' comfort level at reporting on "facts" that are clearly delineated: poll data, voting records, budget figures, soldiers killed, treaties signed. In fact, numbers, while not inconsequential, can obfuscate more than illuminate what is happening.

For example, many officials speak as if it would be possible to develop a nuclear weapon that can simultaneously destroy deeper targets than current capabilities permit *and* cause little or no collateral damage such as widespread radioactive fallout — and the media have often reported these claims as if such a weapon could actually be developed. In fact, increasing the yield and decreasing the collateral damage are two very different objectives: it would take a high-yield (i.e., more than 100 kt) nuclear weapon to destroy a hardened, deeply buried underground bunker — but a weapon exceeding 5 kt in yield would cause extensive collateral damage.

There is a presumption with statistics that they are self-evidently understandable — an attitude that results at times in the media's uncritically passing on the statistical claims of what a new weapon could do.

So, for example, Paul Richter in the LA Times could write matter-of-factly — without caveats — about the nuclear debate in the Senate:

> The bill would provide $15.5 million in funding for research on a large hydrogen bunker-buster bomb called the Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator [RNEP].
>
> This bomb would be a redesigned version of an existing nuclear weapon to make it better able to burrow deeply into the earth.
>
> Unlike the proposed low-yield bombs, which have an explosive force of no more than 5 kilotons — five thousand tons of TNT — this weapon would have yields in the range of tens of kilotons, to a megaton, making it at least **six times more powerful than the bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima**, Japan.
>
> It would be intended to generate shock waves that could crush targets 300 meters below the earth, experts say. (5/10/03) (emphasis added)

At times statistics changed dramatically, without explanation of the discrepancies (and without corrections). For example, reporter Helen Dewar of the Washington Post wrote on May 21 that the "high-yield 'bunker buster' bomb" was "capable of burrowing deep into the earth before exploding. Designed to destroy underground facilities, it would have **a force 10 times that of the Hiroshima blast**." (5/21/03) The following day, in a story still following the defense budget debate in the Senate, Dewar noted that Senator Carl Levin said that "the Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator, or bunker-buster … could explode with as much as **70 times the force of the Hiroshima bomb**." (5/22/03) (emphases added)

In all three cases Hiroshima was evidently used to signal to readers with only a casual understanding of the weapon system how destructive the proposed "high-yield" bomb could be. But that historical referent

didn't adequately explain how powerful the Hiroshima bomb was (it was about 15 kt): Was it six times more powerful (i.e., 90 kt) than that dropped on Hiroshima, as Richter reported? Was it 10 times more powerful (150 kt), as Dewar reported? Or was it 70 times more powerful (1,050 kt), as Dewar reported Levin as saying?

Even aside from that exponential difference in power, reporting this kind of data in isolation focuses attention on one facet of a weapon while obscuring other details. In none of the three stories, for example, was anything else said to explain what "more powerful" meant: More people — soldiers, civilians? — killed? A greater area devastated? Greater fallout and longer-lasting radiation threats? Or something else entirely?

Nuanced but critical details such as those are rarely part of the media story. Such sins of omission are often harder to detect by casual readers or listeners than factual inaccuracies, which, generally speaking, are sooner or later corrected in the record.

One way to short circuit the reflex to tell the news through statistics is to find a human angle. (Not all stories, however, can be "humanized" and care must be taken to avoid ignoring stories about important, rather abstract issues in favor of soft, personalized ones that prioritize coverage of personal incidents over larger economic, political, or social forces.)

One strong story by the Post that did take the "human" approach was a lengthy (3610-word) piece begun on the first page of the Style section on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's investigation of the SARS epidemic and its lessons for other infectious outbreaks or even bio-terrorism. (5/6/03)

The personalizing of stories can make them page-one material. Such approaches presumably appeal not just to policy wonks but to average readers who are attracted by the "humanization" of the issue. Not every type of news can be covered with the human-interest approach. But many ongoing events and issues can benefit from a step back from the "what just happened" to tell readers in depth the reasons why "it" happened, and the consequences of "it" for the future. Telling the story through people can make even quite detailed and sophisticated stories accessible.

One article that did get fronted with this approach was a Washington Post page-one behemoth about an Army Site Survey Team in Iraq. The story ran for 4489 words. Not only was it a veritable colossus but it was written as a veritable "story" — starting with a come-on anecdotal lead (the entire first paragraph was: "For once the team found a building intact.") and following that with "a tale of frustration and disillusionment." The point of the story was not that this new "Al Capone's" vault was discovered empty — that component of the story was already known. The Post "story" was valuable because it showed through a chronological accounting of events through the participants that the Army's failure to find WMD was only partly because Saddam Hussein's regime covered its tracks so well. The other part was because of American problems: intelligence failures, the failure to give the US search teams inventory data collected by the UN inspectors on the same facilities, insufficient security for key sites, and lack of Arabic language skills, among other difficulties. (5/18/03)

Had the Post run a similarly critical breaking-news article on the search teams' failures (as it did on several occasions), much of the same information would have been conveyed, but the impression left in readers' minds would have been that the Post was taking sides — was outing itself as part of the "liberal," anti-Bush media. By relating the same information through the words and actions of the Army team members, charges of media bias were inevitably reduced.

Misunderstandings of technical and scientific dimensions:

The Conflation of Nuclear, Chemical, and Biological Weapons, Distinctive Weapons Systems and Agents, and Civilian and Military Programs

Conflating nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons amorphously together as "weapons of mass destruction" often was a result of journalists keying off speeches and statements by President Bush, such as the following one about Iraq, delivered on October 2, 2002, and transcribed in the New York Times:

> It [Iraq] has developed weapons of mass death. It has used them against innocent men, women and children.
>
> We know the designs of the Iraqi regime. In defiance of pledges to the U.N. it has stockpiled biological and chemical weapons. It is rebuilding the facilities used to make those weapons. U.N. inspectors believe that Iraq could have produced enough biological and chemical agent to kill millions of people. The regime has the scientists and facilities to build nuclear weapons and is seeking the materials needed to do so. (10/3/02)

The Bush administration's deliberate aggregating of a plethora of weapons systems and agents as well as of the nuclear interests of a wide range of nations tempted journalists to follow suit — to discuss widely divergent WMD issues in a single story, without taking sufficient care to distinguish one from another.

A page-one story by Steven Weisman in the New York Times, for example, conflated the "nuclear weapons programs" (and potential or possible nuclear weapons programs) and other nuclear interests of North Korea, Iran, Pakistan, Israel, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and Saudi Arabia:

> As with North Korea, whose nuclear weapons program could lead, if it continues, to the acquisition of nuclear weapons by South Korea, Japan and Taiwan, the United States fears that an Iranian program could lead to nuclear ambitions by Iran's neighbors. They would include Saudi Arabia, which is believed capable of quickly acquiring such weapons from its ally, Pakistan, and Israel, which is already assumed to be an undeclared nuclear weapons state. (5/8/03)

Speaking of all those countries together gave the faulty impression that all have equal interests in nuclear weapons, all have equal ambitions or arsenals, and all are equal regional and global threats.

Even if WMD terms were used distinctively and consistently, similar weapons systems were not always characterized similarly. Saddam's various purported WMD, for example, were reflexively characterized as offensive weapons, as have been North Korea's, while US and Israeli nuclear weapons systems have historically been characterized as "deterrents."

Noted a Newsweek 1998 special report on "Ground Zero," for example: "North Korea's despotic leaders are possibly crazy enough to use nuclear weapons against South Korea, which the United States is sworn to defend." (5/25/98) And an article by LA Times reporter Doyle McManus noted (somewhat contradictorily): "US officials believe that Israel maintains 100 to 200 nuclear weapons as a deterrent to would-be attackers — and is ready to use them." (5/13/98)

Bush's doctrine of preemption did, however, change some of the discussion in 2003 about the role of the American nuclear arsenal, as an article in the Christian Science Monitor observed:

> Meanwhile, as North Korea and other "rogue states" proceed with their nuclear weapons programs, the Pentagon itself is interested in a new generation of nukes designed specifically to attack an enemy's conventional military forces, including weapons of mass destruction hidden deep underground.

> All of this comes as the United States, expressed in Bush administration policies, shifts its doctrine from deterrence in conjunction with NATO and other allies to unilateral preemption — attacking enemies before they become more dangerous rather than hoping to hold them off with the threat of overwhelming attack. (5/27/03)

An LA Times article pondered similar questions, as the headline to a May 2003 story noted: "Bush Is Seeking Newer, Smaller Nuclear Bombs; Cold War-era devices are too big to be a believable deterrent, and the US needs options to confront current threats." (5/13/03)

Were WMD, especially nuclear weapons, "deterrents," or were they offensive weapons and indicators of a nation's "rogue" status (as the Monitor raised above)**? The response to that question typically derived from the administration's level of engagement with a particular situation. One key indication that the South Asian nuclear testing in 1998 never rose to the level of a domestic US crisis for the Clinton administration, for instance, was that even during the weeks of tension the key reason behind the countries' testing was characterized as one of deterrence.**

Often, US reporters quoted Indian and Pakistani officials' assertions that their nations' nuclear weapons systems were "deterrents." Some of Pakistan's "most influential figures," noted New York Times reporter Stephen Kinzer, "concluded sadly that Pakistan could not count on long-term security guarantees from the United States or anyone else and would be exposing itself to Indian attack if it did not develop a nuclear deterrent." (5/18/98)

And an NPR highlight for an All Things Considered package noted: "NPR's Mike Shuster reports on what is known about the nuclear weapons capability of both Pakistan and India and the possibility of nuclear deterrence in the region, now that both countries have resumed nuclear testing." (5/28/98)

By the end of May 1998, with the news of the Pakistani nuclear tests, the volatility of the situation was, of course, commented upon by reporters, such as NY Times experienced hand John Burns, but the coverage tended towards a "on the one hand, on the other hand" style. Even the mention that the bombs were "warheads" for medium-range missiles was mentioned in the same breath as the desire by both countries "to step back from the brink of military confrontation":

> A day after Pakistan matched India by setting off its own underground nuclear tests, both nations began talking of new arrangements that would stabilize their rivalry and minimize the risk of war.
>
> But neither seems ready to consider an agreement not to deploy nuclear weapons, especially missiles. And it is too soon to say whether the day's tone was merely a respite after turbulent events of this month. (5/30/98)

Even those who regularly follow the news may not be aware of how specific words or phrases are contested — whose terms are being employed, and in what context. Stories may refer to terms such as "strategic nuclear weapons," "tactical nuclear weapons," and "low-yield nuclear weapons" without clarifying the differences (if any are meant) among them. Is a reporter quoting a government official or an independent scientist? The casual political "meaning" of terms such as "small nuclear weapons" or "battlefield nuclear weapons" may differ from specific scientific or military usage, but without the reporter signaling differences — including brief definitions — the audience is left clueless.

Reporters' use of very general terms to describe various weapons systems — both in their analysis and in their selection of quotations from others — skewed the stories towards the politics of the nuclear debate and away from the scientific debate about the weapons systems' physical attributes and limits.

Helen Dewar's Washington Post story with the headline, "Nuclear Weapons Development Tied to Hill Approval; Senate Democrats Fight Administration's Effort to Build 'Mini-Nukes' and 'Bunker-Busters,'" was a case in point. (5/22/03)

Some journalists, however, made an effort to quantitatively describe the weapons systems (for example, as speaking about certain nuclear weapons as "low-yield," below 5 kt, or "high-yield," over 100 kt), which did help to distinguish one system from another. Those journalists who attempted to give context and background often did so through their sources by pushing them to explain (and at times, defend) their position.

In several stories in May 2003, for example, NPR's Washington correspondent Tom Gjelten brought in scientists to clarify the science of the Congressional nuclear weapons debate and quoted Rumsfeld in the defense of his position:

> GJELTEN: In fact, the US military seems to be a long way from having a nuclear weapon that could detonate underground without putting people nearby at great risk. The one penetrating nuclear warhead in the US arsenal right now, a so-called B61, is capable of burrowing down only a few dozen feet. A nuclear explosion at that depth would throw up a huge amount of radioactive soil and rock and, in that sense, could be even more damaging than a bomb exploding aboveground. Matthew McKinzie, a staff scientist for the Natural Resources Defense Council, says past underground testing of nuclear weapons demonstrated how much fallout is produced by warheads exploding at various depths.
>
> Mr. MATTHEW McKINZIE (Natural Resources Defense Council): These formulas show that even for a very low-yield weapon, say half a kiloton, you need to bury it upwards of a hundred and fifty feet or so in order to completely contain the fallout. And the current technical capability of the B61 is to penetrate some 10 feet in frozen soil. So the challenge is that the penetration capability of US nuclear weapons has to increase dramatically in order to substantially contain the fallout.
>
> GJELTEN: But to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, this reality just underscores the need for more nuclear weapons research if the United States is to maintain military superiority.
>
> Secretary DONALD RUMSFELD (Defense Department): To the extent the United States is prohibited from studying the use of such weapons, for example, for a deep-earth penetrator, the effect in the world is that it tells the world that they're wise to invest in going underground. And that's not a good thing from our standpoint. (5/21/03)

Yet even Gjelten did not always make room for alternative perspectives. While in the story quoted above Gjelten challenged the purported penetrating powers of nuclear weapons by bringing in scientists to speak to the current capabilities of nuclear warheads, earlier in that same story Gjelten presented as definitive the military's case for "how low-yield nuclear warheads could be used to destroy biological or chemical weapon facilities." Gjelten quoted General Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as saying:

> In terms of anthrax, it's said that gamma rays can, you know, destroy the anthrax spores, which is something we need to look at, and in chemical weapons, of course, the heat can destroy the chemical compounds and not develop that plume that conventional weapons might do that would then drift and perhaps bring others in harm's way.

Gjelten did not follow up that assertion with any alternative perspectives.

Technical distinctions between civilian and military programs were rarely mentioned, making it difficult for audiences to evaluate whether an admitted civilian nuclear energy program poses a serious security threat.

A conversation between NPR host Bob Edwards and reporter Ivan Watson, for example, raised the issue of whether Iran had a covert military nuclear weapons program, but the dialogue neglected to give listeners any way to evaluate whether a civilian program could indeed be a front for a military one:

> EDWARDS: The US also is accusing Iran of pursuing a nuclear weapons program. How's Teheran responding to that?
>
> WATSON: Well, again, the officials here have repeatedly denied these charges. They have denied that they are seeking to build any nuclear weapons at all. At the same time, they are defending what they say is their right to develop a nuclear program for civilian energy needs, that they can build some kind of reactors to help power the country. (5/27/03)

Secondary stories: On the radar, but off the front page

The preponderance of WMD stories in the 1998 and 2003 time periods centered on one key region (India andPakistan in 1998 and Iraq in 2003), while in the 2002 time period WMD stories split between coverage of Iraq and coverage of North Korea — oftentimes in the same piece. But on all three occasions, other countries and regions came in for significant coverage. There was a ripple effect of interest in WMD as related to other Middle Eastern nations, such as Iran, Syria, and Israel, and to Russia and China (see Appendix B).

In all three periods there also appeared US domestic threads of international stories — articles on Congressional action over international incidents or administration proposals (such as debate over arms control treaties or over the Bush administration's proposal to remove the ban on research and development of low-yield nuclear weapons), discussions about economic sanctions triggered by India's nuclear testing or Iraq's failures to comply with UN investigators, and follow-up stories on the 2001 anthrax cases, reports on the Seattle and Chicago Topoff 2 scenarios, or the bidding out of the Los Alamos lab.

When a big story broke — in, for example, India and Pakistan, North Korea, or Iraq — coverage of that news tended to marginalize all other regions WMD stories for several days. But in the immediate aftermath of a major WMD story, other WMD stories from other regions bounced significantly back into the news.

Indeed, there appeared overall to be a generally heightened coverage of WMD-related issues because an anointed "big story" had placed the issue in the public eye. In fact, WMD were frequently referred to in stories that had little to do with WMD. Evidently, reporters, editors, and producers assumed there was great public interest in WMD — an interest perhaps heightened by the prominence that "risk to Americans" played in the coverage.

For example, the chief news story that emerged out of South Asia in May 2003 had little to do with the nuclear arsenal or ambitions of Pakistan and India. The breaking news of the time revolved around the restoration of bus, train, and air links between the two countries. But few articles about the subcontinent failed to mention the 1998 nuclear tests, even above or instead of any mention of the more recent violent confrontations over Kashmir by conventional military forces.

Sourcing dilemmas

The public, which generally lacks knowledge about international politics, is at an even greater disadvantage when trying to follow a WMD story abroad because it often lacks basic knowledge about the science of WMD. Audiences are especially dependent on government and media information sources for guidelines about what to think of WMD policy and how to react to WMD crises.

Sourcing is always a crucial element in the telling of any news story — but it is particularly so in the coverage of highly partisan debates, because quotations are a way in which the reporters can get ideas on the air or in print that would be problematic if they themselves articulated them. The vehemence of Donald Rumsfeld and Clare Short can best be appreciated when hearing their own words, but interviews and soundbites also provide windows into the expertise of scientists, the strategic priorities of the military, or the policy goals of activists.

Yet "off-the-record" and "anonymous" have become the way business is done in Washington. It is then extraordinarily difficult for journalists covering the WMD beat to defy these conventions and still retain their access to critical venues such as the White House and the Pentagon. What can emerge are stories with prominent administration figures on record in public statements, but with the analysis and critique of the issue or event attributed to anonymous sources. The situation is indeed a Catch-22 — lack of identifiable sources damages the credibility of journalists' stories, yet without those sources there would be far fewer stories.

A page-one New York Times story in 1998 on India's nuclear tests was a case in point. Reporter Tim Weiner attributed the specifics about how economic sanctions are triggered to five named sources: National Security Advisor Sandy Berger, Senators John Glenn and Sam Brownback, Clinton spokesman Michael McCurry, and former senior Pentagon official Henry Sokolski. But the bulk of the analysis of the crisis and the implications of sanctions came from anonymous sources: "one senior Administration official," "American officials," "United States intelligence agencies," "US officials," "a World Bank official," "a senior State Department official," "several … Government experts," "Government experts," and "a senior Administration official." What is a reader to make of those attributions? Of the nine sources mentioned (several of whom included more than one person), only five were even identified by a general departmental affiliation: the administration, intelligence, the World Bank, the State Department. (5/12/98)

Because of the secrecy surrounding all WMD programs, there exists a high degree of uncertainty about what various countries — including the United States — are actually intending to do: Does a country have a weapons program, or is it just an energy program? How close to the nuclear "line" is a certain country willing to go? One difficulty in reporting such stories is the nebulousness of information, which comes out in journalists' use of background or off-the-record sources, which create problems for audience members who want to check the candor of the statements.

In stories about the US concern over whether the Russian assistance in building a Iranian light-water reactor is a cover for assisting Iran in a weapons program, for example, there was much talk about "Washington believes" or "Washington suspects" or the "United States says" without any formal attribution of who was actually doing the believing or the suspecting. This 2003 LA Times story was a case in point. Reporters Robin Wright and David Holley, from Moscow, noted in their story:

> Russia's cooperation with Iran in developing that country's nuclear power capabilities, which **the US fears** is in turn assisting a weapons program, was another key focus of Powell's talks. **The United States says** Iran is conducting a clandestine nuclear weapons program.
>
> "I think we have a better understanding of one another's concerns and we've come a little closer as to how we should deal with our concerns," he said. Russia has been helping Iran build a 1,000-megawatt light-water reactor in the western port of Bushehr and has considered more such projects.
>
> **Washington believes** that the Bushehr project, estimated to cost $800 million, is a cover for obtaining sensitive technologies to develop nuclear weapons. **It also suspects** that Russian scientists, without government approval, are helping Iran with a nuclear weapons program. (5/15/03) (emphasis added)

And a story that same month by Bradley Graham in the Washington Post about the White House's release of a four and a half page internal document titled "National Policy on Ballistic Missile Defense" never directly quoted any source on the paper or on the reason for its release, referring only to "administration officials" as sources to discern the intention of President Bush and the Pentagon:

> The Bush administration presented its rationale yesterday for pursuing a network of new antimissile systems, releasing a White House policy paper that says the defenses are necessary to guard against possible attack by chemical, biological or nuclear weapons from hostile states or terrorists.
>
> The rationale was a familiar one, articulated by President Bush and senior aides frequently over the past two years as the administration has boosted spending on missile defenses and embarked on an aggressive plan to combat all kinds of missiles in all phases of flight. … Most presidential directives remain secret. But the missile defense paper was drafted as an unclassified document with the intention of offering it eventually as a public policy statement, officials said.
>
> Its release coincides with congressional debate of the administration's 2004 military spending plan. … But officials suggested yesterday that the timing of the release was largely because there was no other major news. (5/21/03)

Understandably, journalists rely heavily on anonymous sources when they cover stories about US intelligence — especially its failures, as became clear with India in 1998, Iraq and North Korea in 2002, and Iraq in 2003. Since the issues and events relating to WMD are generally wrapped in secrecy, the dilemmas posed by anonymous sourcing are particularly acute for journalists covering the WMD beat.

In October 2002, for example, a front-page article in the Christian Science Monitor on North Korea's news of its nuclear weapons program demonstrated the problems. Not a single American was quoted by name. Instead, reporter Robert Marquand attributed the statements and analysis to "US officials," "senior Bush administration officials," "one official … speaking off the record," "a US official" (quoted several times), "some analysts," "sources," and "a senior US official in South Korea." Only two sources in the 1000-word story were mentioned by name: Xing Rui, a research fellow at Tsinghua University in Beijing, and Paik Jin-Hyun, a senior professor at Seoul University. In addition, entire paragraphs relayed information with no attribution at all, even anonymously. (10/18/02)

The Post faced the same problem in reporting on the intelligence gathering about North Korea. In an almost 1400-word article only two sources were quoted by name — one a Japanese university analyst, the other the director of a Berkeley think tank. Most of the sources quoted or paraphrased were identified generically as "sources" or "officials." (10/19/02)

Editorials, too, relied on anonymous sources and passive voice attributions, such as in this 2003 Washington Post editorial about Iran, for example, which said that while Iran's

> Islamic regime has been suspected of pursuing weapons of mass destructions for some time, powerful evidence has surfaced in recent months of a race by Tehran to acquire nuclear bombs. (5/29/03)

In the instance of that editorial, it would have made a difference to readers to know if Iran was "suspected" of pursuing WMD by the CIA, by Russian intelligence, by the French government, by Mujaheddin-e Khalq (an exile opposition group) — or by all of these. It also would have helped to learn what that "powerful evidence" was — rather than having to take the editorial's word for the "power" of that evidence.

Common phrases such as "suspected weapons of mass destruction" or "suspected mobile biological weapons lab" that have been in play can be understood as problematic by recollecting the subjectiv-

ity of the word "suspected." No ethical journalist, for instance, would ever write about a "suspected murderer" in a criminal case. Or, if there was some specific reason to do so, it would be because of the identity of the person who "suspected" — and that person would, of course, be identified.

Post reporter Barton Gellman typically went beyond stenographically repeating the White House's characterizations of events, publishing articles in both April and May 2003, for example, detailing the frustrations of US troop units searching for WMD in Iraq (including one lengthy story that described one team's hunt for weapons that ended in the discovery of a cache of vacuum cleaners instead [5/18/03]). Still, even Gellman relied on problematic anonymous sourcing. He wrote in a story about the looting at the Tuwaitha Nuclear Research Center in Iraq:

> US authorities do not know what is missing, if anything, because of an ongoing conflict between the Bush administration and the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency, as well as a dispute within the administration about how much to involve the IAEA in Iraq. The unresolved struggle has kept US forces out of Tuwaitha's nuclear storage areas, but a brief outdoor inspection on April 10 found the door to one of them had been breached. (5/4/03)

There is no source cited for the statement "the unresolved struggle has kept US forces out of Tuwaitha's nuclear storage areas," yet surely this information came from somewhere, presumably within the administration. In addition, the statement is not clear on its face. Why does an internal administration debate over IAEA and between the White House and the IAEA keep US forces out of a storage area?

Vague sources leave readers with no understanding of who is advocating the positions cited.

An LA Times story, for example, "balanced" its initial discussion of the 2003 Senate Armed Services Committee debate over the nuclear weapons ban with the following two paragraphs:

> The moves [to lift the ban] dismay arms control advocates.
>
> They fear that by developing small nuclear weapons that could be used in battle, the United States is legitimizing weapons that have been all but unthinkable, encouraging other countries to build nuclear arsenals, and undermining arms control treaties. They maintain that such bombs aren't even needed, because of the enormous capabilities of conventional precision munitions. (5/13/03)

Nowhere in the article does reporter Paul Richter say who these "arms control advocates" are, although he does repeat that phrase throughout the piece. Are these arms control advocates Democrats in Congress, scientists, scholars in think tanks? It is not made clear. (A similar piece, also by Richter, published May 10, 2003, also cites "arms control advocates," again without identifying who they might be.)

An equally troubling problem is when major stories break — especially on the front pages — and the only sources who are quoted are those of the administration or of like-mind others.

In Washington Post reporter Mike Allen's A1 story from May 2003, headlined "Bush: 'We Found' Banned Weapons; President Cites Trailers in Iraq as Proof," for example, no sources appeared in the article other than administration sources or Bush's ally, Tony Blair. The complete tally of sources is: Bush, "Bush administration officials," Rumsfeld, "US authorities," the CIA, Powell, Blair (as reported by Reuters), and "a senior administration official." The lead to the article read:

> President Bush, citing two trailers that US intelligence agencies have said were probably used as mobile biological weapons labs, said US forces in Iraq have "found the weapons of mass destruction" that were the United States' primary justification for going to war. (5/31/03)

According to journalistic conventions, the Post editors' placing of the controversial allegation that American troops had "found" weapons of mass destruction in quotation marks in the headline and reporter Allen's direct quotation of President Bush in his charge, were sufficient to inform readers that the "finding" of WMD was not a fact, but an assertion. Yet casual readers of the Post could be forgiven if they came away from their skimming of the newspaper's headlines and leads with the impression that WMD had unequivocally been found. After all, the President said so — and the paper ran the story on the front page.

Politicized language needs to be identified as such, as well as conscientiously attributed.

Some concerns about language and sourcing are, in effect, concerns that can be allayed by better attribution. Other concerns about language can't be allayed by greater detail or greater efforts to attribute responsibility. They are concerns about whether the playing field is "level."

As the Post's internal style guidelines make clear, it is not enough to put statements into quotations, such as this sentence by LA Times reporter Ed Chen: "'Instead,' as the Post wrote in its manual, reporters 'should give readers facts and perhaps quotes from disputing parties about how best to characterize' organizations and individuals."

Quotations from privileged individuals and prominent politicians, such as George W. Bush, Donald Rumsfeld, or Colin Powell, for example, carry a weight beyond those from more "common" sources. In such cases, the authority of the speakers — or at least the prominence of the speakers — makes their words both memorable and powerful. But the knee-jerk instinct to use the big quote should be joined by an effort to deconstruct that quote — as when Bush is quoted as saying that Saddam Hussein is a "homicidal dictator who is addicted to weapons of mass destruction" or saying that we live in "an age of global terror and weapons of mass destruction." If the politics of such statements are not discussed, a muddling of the differences between "terror" and "WMD" results.

The sourcing vise that journalists are in over WMD tightens further when policymakers consciously work to narrow the public's interest in learning about alternative perspectives. One way in which politicians shape the public's interest is to talk about major world figures who are recognizable to an audience — Bush, Blair, Putin, Hussein, Kim Jung-il, Vajpayee, etc. — as if they were the only political actors in a country capable of affecting WMD events.

Consider, for example, President Bush's March 17, 2003, address to the nation and ultimatum to Saddam Hussein, when he said:

> We are now acting because the risks of inaction would be far greater. In one year, or five years, the power of Iraq to inflict harm on all free nations would be multiplied many times over. With these capabilities, Saddam Hussein and his terrorist allies could choose the moment of deadly conflict when they are strongest. We choose to meet that threat now, where it arises, before it can appear suddenly in our skies and cities.

Journalists repeat those politicians verbatim — extreme quotes make good soundbites — further reinforcing the notion that not only is it appropriate for US policymakers to target and eliminate individual "evil" political actors, such as Saddam Hussein, but by so doing, a crisis can be resolved.

The NY Times, for example, quoted Rep. Richard Gephardt (D-MO) extensively in his floor speech during the October 2002 debate on the use of force against Iraq. Said Gephardt:

> once a madman like Saddam Hussein is able to deliver his arsenal, whether it's chemical, biological or nuclear weapons, there's no telling when an American city will be attacked at his direction or with his support. A nuclear-armed Iraq would soon become the world's largest safe haven and refuge for the world's terrorist organizations. (10/11/03)

The day before, the NY Times quoted a House colleague who was making a similar case against Hussein:

> Another Bush supporter, Rep. Cliff Stearns (R-Fla.), declared: "Saddam Hussein is uniquely evil — the only ruler in power today and the first one since Hitler to commit chemical genocide." (10/10/03)

Following politicians' lead, reporters' stories fall into ascribing to individual actors greater power than can be realistically exercised. There is some basis for claims of great power — especially in the case of totalitarian states such as North Korea. But speaking of an individual as *the* representative of a country and implying that that individual is entirely responsible for the complex implementation of WMD policy minimizes an audience's interest in any other indigenous authorities, experts, or bureaucrats.

A similar sourcing dilemma occurs when politicians and journalists attribute responsibility generically either to a nation at large or to its people. Discussing events in this fashion is a bit akin to the passive voice: it begs the question of who actually did what; the story abdicates the assignment of clear responsibility for the conduct of events.

For example, Neil Conan, the host of Talk of the Nation for NPR, asked one of his guests about the length of time it was expected that American troops would stay in Iraq: "As you look ahead, does any kind of timetable present itself to you? I know that the United States has said, you know, 'As long as we're needed and not one day longer.' That's not a very concrete time proposal." (5/12/03) And on another show Conan could lead into the program with this background: "US officials accused Iran of harboring the al-Qaeda command cell that orchestrated the attacks in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, earlier this month; Iran denies the charge. And the US has long believed that Iran is developing nuclear weapons; again, Tehran rejects the accusation." (5/28/03)

Or an LA Times article could say: "The United States, concerned that Iran may be running a nuclear weapons program, is pushing for the International Atomic Energy Agency to declare that Tehran has violated the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, diplomats said Thursday." (5/9/03) Or in a New York Times article on the regional response to the American reconstruction effort in Iraq, reporter Daniel Wakin wrote: "The United States has demanded Hezbollah's withdrawal from southern Lebanon and an end to Iranian and Syrian support for Hezbollah, which the Lebanese government embraces as a legitimate resistance force." (5/14/03)

Since these countries to which behavior is ascribed are clearly not entities that are themselves capable of action, is an audience to presume, in the case of the "United States," for example, that what is really meant is "the Bush administration"? But even if the audience does make that determination, who is the one acting in the Bush administration? The Department of State or that of Defense? Colin Powell or Donald Rumsfeld? Or President Bush? Without clearer attribution and sourcing, the audience has little way of assessing the credibility of what the US has "said," has "accused," is "pushing for," or has "demanded."

The discomfort with uncertainty

In all three time periods, WMD intelligence failures were among the lead stories of the month. Most articles took the tack that the intelligence and the assertions of the White House and Pentagon were self-evidently flawed either because the extent of India's and North Korea's nuclear programs had gone undetected or because the Iraqi WMD that had been purported to have existed had not been found. In October 2002 and May 2003, for example, there was little examination of what NY Times columnist Tom Friedman has come to call Bush's "faith-based intelligence about weapons of mass destruction" (2/1/04).

May 5-26, 1998

Comparing the coverage of the intelligence communities' failures in 1998, 2002, and 2003, a clear distinction emerges. The 2002 and 2003 critiques of the CIA and Pentagon's reports on Iraq and North Korea focused on the Bush administration's politicization of intelligence gathering. The 1998 critiques of the intelligence gathering on India emphasized instead the ineptness of the "spy agencies" and of the ostensible inability of the Clinton administration to interpret and evaluate the information it received.

As a NY Times editorial had it:

> To escape obsolescence when the cold war ended, America's intelligence agencies said they would tackle threats like terrorism and the spread of nuclear weapons. Yet after spending billions of dollars on these efforts, the spy services inexplicably gave President Clinton no warning that India was ready to test nuclear weapons this week. That failure requires not only a searching inquiry into the mishandling of India's nuclear threat but also a broader examination of how effectively spy agencies are tracking the development of nuclear technologies abroad.
>
> This was not just an intelligence failure. The Clinton Administration as a whole misread India's intentions. (5/14/98)

Newsweek asked similar questions in its "Special Report" on India. Said its subhead: "India's blasts dramatize the new nuclear age. How did the CIA miss them? And what's to do now?"

The intelligence failures were not the fault of the Clinton White House, but the intelligence agencies themselves, noted Newsweek, quoting a source inside the Clinton administration:

> The intelligence failure "ranks right up there with missing the collapse of the Soviet Union," says a senior State Department official. The intelligence community offered excuses, some legitimate. Yet Americans wondered: if the CIA can't predict that India, a friendly democracy, is about to set off a nuclear bomb, how about a rogue state like Iran? Or a terrorist group with a loose nuke?

Newsweek Americanized the story of India's nuclear tests by emphasizing the threat unleashed: "India could be a harbinger of a more chaotic world order, of rivalrous nationalities scrambling to arm themselves with the bomb. Think of Europe in August 1914, only with weapons of mass destruction." And Newsweek further invested Americans in the South Asian events by making the US culpable:

> Keeping the nuclear genie bottled up on the Asian Sub-continent is obviously not the sole responsibility of the United States. But America's mishandling of the Indians offers some cautionary lessons for the larger question: how to contain a new worldwide nuclear-arms race. The Indians may have been so hell-bent on building a bomb that no amount of warning or jawboning would have made a difference. Still, indifference and naiveté on the part of American spooks and policy-makers are partly to blame. (5/25/98)

October 11-31, 2002

October 2002 saw further efforts by the Bush administration to craft an argument for war with Iraq. With no independent way to challenge the "truth" of the intelligence assessments that were being released by the CIA and the Pentagon, the major media instead turned to investigate the discrepancies in the two intelligence communities' reports over the status of Hussein's WMD program and his links to al Qaeda.

Washington Post reporters Bradley Graham and Dana Priest, for example, commented on the

> persistent differences between the Pentagon and CIA over assessments of Iraq. Rumsfeld and senior aides have argued that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein has strong links to international terrorism, poses an imminent threat and cannot be constrained from eventually unleashing weapons of mass destruction. The CIA's publicly released reports have painted a murkier view of Iraq's links to al Qaeda, its weapons capabilities and the likelihood that Hussein would use chemical or biological weapons unless attacked. (10/25/02)

Tom Shanker of the NY Times, too, noted the same inconsistencies.

> Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld went to great lengths today to describe a collegial, cooperative relationship between the Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency, even as he noted "differences of opinions" over how to interpret data on terrorist cells and adversary states like Iraq. … He spoke at an afternoon news conference that his aides said was organized specifically to respond to reports of rifts between the Pentagon's senior civilian leaders and the C.I.A., and to counter those who say Mr. Rumsfeld and his advisers are trying to mold intelligence findings to bolster those in the administration who advocate attacking Iraq. (10/25/03)

Articles also appeared comparing the situations in Iraq and North Korea, trying to locate the distinctions between them. Reporters interviewed fewer sources about North Korea's covert nuclear weapons program, a symptom of the fact that fewer players were involved in that intelligence assessment. As a result, stories about the North Korean situation tended to be "straighter" news stories, with administration sources dominant.

NY Times reporter Elizabeth Bumiller, for example, wrote a story following President Bush's first public remarks about North Korea after the release of the news of its weapons program. She wrote in her lead:

> President Bush said today that the North Korean leader, Kim Jong Il, had to disarm his nation 'for the sake of peace,' but indicated that he saw a significant difference between North Korea's development of nuclear weapons and Iraq's pursuit of them. … Mr. Bush said he was threatening military action against President Saddam Hussein of Iraq because his case was 'unique' in that he had gassed his own people and 'thumbed his nose' at United Nations resolutions for more than a decade.
>
> The president's remarks reflected recent comments by Secretary of State Colin L. Powell and Condoleezza Rice, the national security adviser, that Iraq poses a greater threat to the United States, even if it does not yet have nuclear weapons, because of its record of using chemical weapons and its hatred of the United States and its allies. (10/22/02)

Stories tended to key off the Bush administration's articulation of how the situations in North Korea and Iraq were different. The administration set the agenda — even though reporters and the Democrats in Congress took the opportunity to challenge the decisions that emerged from that agenda.

The LA Times, for instance, wrote a lengthy piece on the Bush administration's strategies in Asia and Iraq, quoting comments made by Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice during their appearances on several Sunday talk shows. Robin Wright and Mark Magnier wrote:

> Powell and other senior administration officials blitzed the Sunday morning television talk shows in an effort to explain why the US is emphasizing diplomacy in its approach to North Korea's admitted rogue weapons program even as it gears up for possible war with Iraq over that nation's alleged pursuit of weapons of mass destruction.

Only late in the piece — three paragraphs from the end — did the reporters bring in a Congressional critique of the White House: "Reflecting a growing undercurrent on Capitol Hill," they wrote, Sen. Bob Graham (D-Fla.), chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, on a competing talk show, "criticized

the administration for delaying disclosure of North Korea's stunning confession at the beginning of this month until after the congressional vote on an Iraq resolution." (10/21/02)

Interestingly, while the LA Times buried the charges by Democrats in Congress, the Washington Post led its same-day story with Powell's talk-show refutation.

> Two of the Bush administration's top foreign policy officials yesterday vigorously refuted charges that the administration withheld North Korea's admission of a nuclear weapons program from key congressional Democrats to ensure passage of its resolution authorizing war with Iraq.
>
> "Why would we have withheld it because of that?" Secretary of State Colin L. Powell said on "Fox News Sunday." … National security adviser Condoleezza Rice said that the administration held back news of North Korea's stunning admission only long enough to allow President Bush to receive recommendations from his advisers on the matter. … "Well, it's a peculiar notion that the moment that you find out something like this, you need to make it public before the president has had a chance to review his options," Rice said on CBS's "Face the Nation." …
>
> Late last week, Democrats on Capitol Hill criticized the 12-day gap between the admission by North Korean officials — made during a meeting with Assistant Secretary of State James A. Kelly — and the administration's public disclosure. During that time, Congress passed the Iraq resolution, which Bush signed just hours before the administration confirmed the developments in North Korea during a conference call with reporters. (10/21/02)

May 1-21, 2003

Most of the May 2003 stories about Iraqi WMD focused on the consequences of the faulty intelligence and on the question of whether the White House deliberately misrepresented the intelligence collected. Fewer covered the inherent uncertainties in intelligence gathering about nuclear, biological and chemical weapons programs. Noted NY Times columnist Paul Krugman on this point: "The failure to find WMD's has been described as an 'intelligence failure,' but this ignores the fact that intense pressure was placed on intelligence agencies to tell the Bush and Blair administrations what they wanted to hear." (5/30/03)

As the month of May passed, and any Iraqi WMD remained elusive, reporters became increasingly cynical about their existence. But even late in the month few news reporters (as distinct from columnists or commentators) frontally challenged administration assertions about the existence of WMD or about the conduct of the search. However, by the simple expedient of juxtaposing contradictory statements, reporters left readers with the impression that the administration's statements and conclusions were suspect. Judith Miller and William Broad did just that in a New York Times page-one lead on May 21:

> United States intelligence agencies have concluded that two mysterious trailers found in Iraq were mobile units to produce germs for weapons, but they have found neither biological agents nor evidence that the equipment was used to make such arms, according to senior administration officials. (5/21/03)

However, the overall impression made by Miller and Broad's article was that the trailers provided proof of Hussein's WMD program — an impression made, in large measure, by the page-one headline: "GERM WEAPONS; U.S. Analysts Link Iraq Labs To Germ Arms."

> Sabrina Tavernise, also writing for the NY Times, also juxtaposed contradictory or at least curiously different statements when speaking about the discovery of the trailer suspected as being a mobile biological weapons laboratory:

> **It was parked**, missing its wheels and stripped by looters, **about 50 feet from the entrance** to Al Kindi, Iraq's largest missile research and testing complex, near Mosul. **Soldiers had been guarding the gate for weeks but had never noticed the trailer**, the major said. The soldiers found [inside] an air compressor, refrigerator, fermenter and dryer — all items associated with a biological weapons laboratory, Major Handelman said." (5/10/03) (emphasis added)

The 2003 stories about North Korea's nuclear weapons program took a different tack. As late as April 2003, statements from the White House asserted that the US had gone to war in Iraq because of Saddam Hussein's WMD: "We have high confidence that they have weapons of mass destruction," said White House spokesman, Ari Fleischer, in a press briefing on April 10. "This is what this war was about and is about. And we have high confidence it will be found." (NYT, 4/14/03) By contrast, **because the Bush administration had no war rationale to defend in regards to North Korea, the media had less to cover in regards to political fallout over the repercussions of what the intelligence community had alleged — or was said by the White House and the Pentagon to have alleged.**

The skirmishing over the "facts" about North Korea and WMD was minimal in part because most news stories reported on North Korea's nuclear program with caveats, such as prefacing statements with qualifiers or using cautionary verbs, rather than presenting them as certain facts.

So, for example, an article in the New York Times hedged:

> Mr. Bush's advisers are engaged in a running argument over whether to continue negotiating with a country that **says** it is building nuclear weapons. (5/11/03) (emphasis added)

US News magazine noted:

> North Korea and Iran are **believed** to be running active nuclear weapons programs. If [weapons proliferation] negotiations fail, the CIA **believes** that Pyongyang can churn out an additional half-dozen nukes in just months. (5/5/03) (emphasis added)

And reporter Neil Shuster, on NPR's All Things Considered, observed:

> North Korea is **believed** to have enough plutonium stored in some 8,000 spent nuclear fuel rods to build six nuclear bombs on top of the two they've been capable of producing for years. In Beijing, the North Koreans announced they had reprocessed all of it, **but** the US intelligence community has not detected the particular kind of radiation emission in North Korea that must accompany plutonium production. (5/14/03) (emphasis added)

Overall, the press did remarkably well in consciously acknowledging the limitations on intelligence-gathering about North Korea in the fall of 2002 and spring of 2003.

"The limitations of spying," observed the New York Times in a May 2003 editorial,

> are demonstrated by the fact that Washington has yet to establish how many underground uranium enrichment plants the North has, where they are and whether they are operational. Nor can it confirm or refute North Korea's claim to have enriched plutonium from thousands of spent fuel rods. If such large quantities of bomb fuel in fixed locations can evade scrutiny, small amounts in transit can surely do so. (5/6/03)

Reporters Peter Grier and Faye Bowers of the Christian Science Monitor similarly noted the conundrums:

> [Bush] administration officials insist publicly that their policies have not changed — and that their long-term goal remains the dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear weapons program in its entirety. But the state of that program remains a mystery. If North Korea is to be believed, it has already begun reprocessing material to make more weapons, and may have passed a point of no return on its way to becoming a member of the exclusive club of world nuclear powers. The Clinton administration drew up plans for military

> strikes against suspected North Korean plutonium production sites during its own stand-off with the Kim regime in 1994. Such preemption seems less likely now, however, given the US involvement in Iraq, and the lack of good intelligence about exactly what North Korea is doing, and where. (5/7/03)

Surprisingly few stories overtly connected the acknowledged limitations of intelligence about North Korea with the now-publicized failures of intelligence about the status of Iraq's WMD.

But there was one very solid — and well-placed — story that looked at the policy repercussions of poor intelligence gathering about WMD in general — although it admittedly focused on Iraq, mentioning North Korea and other nuclear "suspects" only in passing. The page-one story by William Broad in the New York Times' Week in Review section noted:

> Uncovering weapons of mass destruction has always been a tough job. The science is complex, the languages tricky, the secrecy intense and the clues often too few and partial to warrant firm conclusions. Reports, based on inference and deduction, tend to be rich in caveats and qualifiers. In the gap between what is known and what is suspected, error and bias can creep in, sowing the seeds of failure. Now, the Bush administration's doctrine of pre-emption has given this iffy, imprecise art grave new responsibilities. It presumes that American intelligence can ferret out the most secret of foreign science with near infallibility, doing so not only to inform policy makers but potentially to build a case for war. In effect, it posits a crystal ball. (5/11/03)

A number of stories did suggest that the lack of certainty in WMD intelligence gathering had its own repercussions for diplomacy and policy, as NY Times columnist Nicholas Kristof reminded his readers. It matters if there are no WMD in Iraq — their existence matters "enormously, for American credibility." (5/6/03)

Similarly, there were reports that explored the ramifications of the uncertainty over state actors' intentions, as the following two stories demonstrate.

In a story on All Things Considered, for example, reporter Lawrence Sheets covered Secretary Powell's visit to Russia:

> (Soundbite of interview) Sec. POWELL: We are concerned about what Iran is doing, and we have shared our concerns with our Russian friends, and we believe Russia also has some concerns.
>
> SHEETS: But **Russia gave no indication it intends on abandoning the nuclear power plant project with Iran. Asked if the US might resort to military force to stop the project, Powell said there were no such plans**, at least for now.
>
> (Soundbite of interview) Sec. POWELL: We don't need any more weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear weapons, in this part of the world. But it is not a matter for the armed forces of the United States, at the moment.
>
> SHEETS: **Such a qualified response is unlikely to fully allay Russian suspicions** about US intentions toward Iran. (5/15/03) (emphasis added)

And William Broad's May 11 story in the New York Times observed that without more information, policy makers were hampered in what they could do:

> Two decades ago, said Robert M. Gates, director of central intelligence under the elder President Bush, the government went from simply describing terrorism to gathering detailed evidence for defensive action.
>
> Now, Dr. Gates said, **'It's not enough to say Iran is developing nuclear weapons. You need information specific enough to give policy makers options for acting** against those programs,' he added. 'It's a very big challenge.' (5/4/03) (emphasis added)

"He-said-she-said" and "horse-race" coverage

Every presidential election year, watchdog groups are loud in their criticism of media coverage of the campaigns as less engaged with issues and more engaged with who's ahead in the polls. News organizations have worked hard to address those criticisms, offering lengthy pieces on candidates' stances and proffering easy-to-read graphics that compare individual and party platforms.

Covering the drama of inside-the-Beltway politics will always be a core element of a political beat. And working in news environments that prioritize conflict and controversy of all kinds prompts journalists to keep partisan debate prominent in their coverage — a habit that crosses the years and carries over into coverage of events beyond elections. "He-said-she-said" and "horse-race" coverage characterized the coverage of WMD during all three time periods — but was only problematic when the who's-ahead coverage was all there was.

A May 2003 story in the LA Times on the Senate's passage of the bill on research and development of low-yield nuclear weapons, for example, appropriately reported on the floor debate, but then failed to go beyond the political rhetoric to the scientific questions of the viability of "robust nuclear earth penetrators." The article simply quoted Sen. Pete Domenici (R-NM), "whose state is home to Los Alamos National Laboratory" as saying: "Some of our scientists just might come up with a great idea about a low-level bomb that could be good for America." The LA Times then followed up with the remark that "Democrats argued that any move to allow research of new tactical nuclear weapons could bring the unthinkable — the world's first nuclear attack since 1945 — closer to reality." (5/21/03)

A New York Times story the same day followed the same pattern of following up a Republican assertion with a caveat made by a Democrat, but failing to challenge the validity of those assertions:

> "In this new world, there could well be reason to have these weapons," said Senator Jon Kyl, Republican of Arizona. But Senator Jack Reed, Democrat of Rhode Island, said that talking about low-yield nuclear weapons was like discussing a "small apocalypse." He questioned their military value and said they "shouldn't be confused with benign or, you know, casual weapons that we would use. These are atomic weapons." (5/21/03)

Neither the LA Times nor the New York Times took the occasion to forward the scientific misgivings over such a weapons system. (However, a 7500-word essay titled "The Thinkable" by Bill Keller, the new executive editor of the Times, published in the May 4 New York Times Magazine, did go into more depth on the general topic of nuclear weapons — but even that piece shied away from the science to focus on the geopolitics of the historical debate.)

By contrast, Walter Pincus writing in the Washington Post early that month in his kick-off article on the R&D bill did lead with the expectation of a partisan debate on the topic, but then followed up his coverage of the political football to acquaint readers with the scientific debate — and the range of alternative military options:

"The Cold War is over," Pincus wrote,

> but advocates and critics of nuclear weapons inside the Bush administration and on Capitol Hill continue to battle over how the United States should reduce and restructure its enormous stockpile. …
>
> Although arms control experts on Capitol Hill worry that the Bush administration is seeking new nuclear weapons, the man who runs US Strategic Command is looking to reduce dependency on the current nuclear stockpile by turning to smart, precision conventional bombs and missiles. Adm. James O. Ellis Jr., head of US Strategic Command, has said he wants to reduce the country's dependence on nuclear weapons by using conventional,

> precision-guided bombs and missiles to destroy deeply buried targets that some in the Pentagon say can be threatened only by a new nuclear warhead. …
>
> As Sidney Drell, the nuclear physicist, recently wrote, 50 feet is about as deep as a bomb or missile warhead could dig itself. To be effective, it would take more than 100 kilotons to reach a target 1,000 feet down. That size weapon would create a much larger crater than Ground Zero at the World Trade Center and create a large amount of dangerous radioactive debris. One solution, Drell said, is a new, so-called pilot hole conventional weapon system under development at the Sandia National Laboratories. In this program, Drell said, one detonation creates a hole, and using global position satellites, successive warheads are directed in the same hole. "You have successive explosions, and you can increase the depth to which you penetrate," Drell said. (5/4/03)

This more comprehensive reporting by the Post was not limited to a single article. Although the number of column inches that the New York Times and the Washington Post each dedicated to the general topic of WMD in May was roughly comparable (with the Times having slightly more), the Post was more aggressive in its coverage — both by challenging the Bush administration's handling of the Iraq war and by moving beyond the partisan politics.

When covering stories where the domestic political debate loomed large, such as the defense bill in Congress or the failure to find Iraqi WMD, news outlets used a ping-pong of antagonistic voices as an unsatisfactory replacement for a more mediated political article. On the one hand there is nothing wrong per se with stories that are "inside the beltway"-oriented, but limitations of time and space made it a reality that few had the space or time to follow up the re-telling of the he-said-she-said disputes with in-depth analysis in the same issue or program. If the outlets had been able to resist some of the ping-ponging, there would have been an opportunity to include more background and context.

In general, there has been too little attempt to fill in that background and context with outsider voices. It is not anti-American to register dissent; it is critical to a full understanding of the debate. In fact, it is critical to an understanding that there *is* a debate.

As Washington Post ombudsman Michael Getler noted about the press coverage of the Iraq war itself: "criticism and dissent, two essential American freedoms, are coming under unchallenged attack in the name of patriotism." (5/4/03)

CNN reporter Christiane Amanpour agreed. She said on "Topic A with Tina Brown" on CNBC in September 2003 in regards to whether journalists were limited in what they could cover in Iraq:

> It's not a question of couldn't do it, it's a question of tone. It's a question of being rigorous. It's really a question of really asking the questions. All of the entire body politic in my view, whether it's the administration, the intelligence, the journalists, whoever, did not ask enough questions, for instance, about weapons of mass destruction.

And then she added that part of the cause of the journalists' failures or reticence was that they had to contend with "disinformation at the highest levels."

In other words, many journalists toed the administration's and Pentagon's line, forgoing their own investigation of events. That was especially true elsewhere in the world where fewer journalists were deployed, but with the dozens of journalists in Iraq that too was the norm.

NY Times Pulitzer-Prize winning reporter John Burns noted his disgust over the media coverage of Iraq in an interview included in a book released in September 2003 on the media's coverage of Iraq.[8] "It's not impossible to tell the truth," he said. More information could have been gotten out about the Bush administration's stated rationale for American involvement, and even about the Iraqi regime:

> I have a conviction about closed societies, that they're actually much easier to report on than they seem, because the act of closure is itself revealing. Every lie tells you a truth. If you just leave your eyes and ears open, it's extremely revealing.

Many journalists and pundits now charge that pre-war and during the "hot" conflict in Iraq most of "the media largely toed the Bush administration line in covering the war and, by doing so, failed to aggressively question the motives behind the invasion," as USA Today media critic Peter Johnson wrote. (9/15/03) "For some reason or another, Mr. Bush chose to make his principal case on weapons of mass destruction, which is still an open case," noted NY Times reporter Burns.

But by May 2003, it wasn't so much that the media accepted the administration's rationale for its policies — in fact by then many journalists, especially editorial and opinion writers, were downright skeptical of the linkages Bush had drawn between other nations' purported WMD and the concomitant threat to the US. By May, therefore, it wasn't that journalists were uncritical of the statements emanating from the White House, the Pentagon, and the State Department, as that they too often accepted how international issues and events were prioritized.

Washington Post ombudsman Michael Getler understood that concern in this way: is "the press is doing enough to report the issue as well as the events"? Getler ended his May 4 column not with answers, but a long list of questions:

> Did the press catch on early enough to the administration's switch of focus from Afghanistan to Iraq? Was it slow to sense that while there was little or no public dissent over the post-9/11 war in Afghanistan against al Qaeda and the Taliban, there was wider and growing dissent over a war in Iraq? Was it slow to record that dissent and to give it prominence, considering the stakes? Did the press report, probe and challenge the administration's case about weapons of mass destruction, or its shifting rationales for the war, with sufficient vigor? Did it buy into official language, everything from "coalition forces" to "Operation Iraqi Freedom" to "weapons of mass destruction"? Did it press hard enough on the claimed linkages of Hussein to 9/11 and on the question of whether intelligence had been politicized? Did it pull any punches in the post-9/11 world in carrying out its patriotic duty to press institutions to account for their statements and actions, wherever the story led?

4. The Americanization of Events

Me first

The US media prioritize those international events that are perceived to have a strong and direct American connection: American troops are involved, the American public is at risk, American economic or national security is in jeopardy, etc.

In all three time periods of this study, the main WMD event of the month took place overseas — but in each case, the stories written by US media outlets about those events were more focused on

[8] Bill Katovsky and Timothy Carlson, eds., *Embedded: The Media at War in Iraq* (Lyons Press: 2003).

the United States and Americans than on India and the Indians, North Korea and the North Koreans, or Iraq and the Iraqis.

Americans and the American media aren't the only chauvinistic observers. It is a truism that most everyone cares about themselves — or others closely resembling themselves — first.[9]

The UK media highlight what's happening to people "like us," too, as in this story from the Economist: "In Riyadh, Saudi Arabia's capital, nine suicide bombers rammed their vehicles packed with explosives into three compounds housing expatriates, killing at least 34 people, seven of them American." (5/17/03) Presumably, the other 27 of those killed were Saudi or other foreign nationals of self-evidently lesser interest.

In the US media, all international crises are Americanized. Sometimes that comes through by way of analogy: decision makers refer to present situations by reference to some past American event — as in the conversations during summer 2003 as to whether the reconstruction period in Iraq was becoming a Vietnam-like quagmire. Other times, that comes through by way of the reflexive prioritization of domestic stories over international ones.

A classic example of the hurdles that even compelling international stories face in when they come up against a domestic one was noted by LA Times reporter Ron Brownstein: "It barely made the newspapers late last week," he wrote in late October 2002, "when the FBI released a national alert warning that Al Qaeda terrorists may be planning an attack on passenger trains inside the US. That news didn't capture much attention because the media were riveted on the arrests of two men linked to the sniper attacks that had been terrorizing Washington for three weeks. One form of terrorism squeezed out the other." (10/28/02)

Most often the Americanization comes through via a concern with relevance — how does *this* international event affect us? What should *we* do?

The subhead to a New York Times front-page story on Iraqi "Reconstruction Policy," framed that policy by saying, "Looting Disrupts Detailed US Plan to Restore Iraq" — as if the disruption of the US plan was the most significant outcome of the looting. (5/19/03)

Similarly, a Washington Post subhead to a page-one article on "Iraq's Infrastructure" noted that "US Troops Face Daily Scramble in 'Bringing Order to Chaos.'" (5/21/03) And another page-one Post article noted in its headline: "India Sets Off Nuclear Devices; Blasts Create Shock Waves For US Policy." (5/12/98)

As the Christian Science Monitor bluntly observed in one of its headlines: "Whose Chaos Is It, Anyway? Iraq's or America's?" (5/13/03)

As these headlines suggest, international stories can become less simple hard-news telling of the problems existing in Iraq or India than commentaries on the meaning of the events for Americans.

The premium on news gathering is to select such details from an event as can give a reader a sense of identity with the topic. Americans are terribly preoccupied with themselves. They don't need

[9] A comparison of the coverage of the anthrax threat in the United States with the coverage of the risk faced by Iraqi civilians of exposure to dangerous levels of radiation due to the US failure to secure radiological materials after the Iraq war demonstrates that real WMD threats to Americans — especially on American home turf — elicit exponentially more coverage than real WMD threats to other nationalities.

further encouragement to be interested in what US troops are up to, but they may need encouragement to learn about crises where American military force is not an issue. Drawing implicit, and at time explicit, connections to American life is a way for journalists to try and bring an American audience into the news.

In the following story from the New York Times, reporter Neela Banerjee led an account of Iraqi civilian life by juxtaposing the disruptions of the war with homey details that would be familiar to American families.

> Around 8:30 in the morning on Thursday, with her three children off to school and her husband puttering in the front yard, Fatin Halaf begins to organize her small kitchen to make bread, her most important task of the week.
>
> Once Mrs. Halaf loved to bake cakes and cookies but now she makes pita bread, out of pure necessity. The kerosene-fired burners she uses are intensely hot. As in most of the capital, her house has only sporadic electricity, so the overhead fan, immobilized for now, does nothing to relieve the heat. … Just then, her 9-year-old daughter, Fanon, runs in, breathless. "Mama, Mama!" she says. "The school has been looted! They told the students to go home!" … Standing in her driveway after hearing her daughter's news and keeping a lookout for her two boys, Mrs. Halaf could pass for an American mother on a summer day. She wears her dark blond hair short and dresses for housework in a bubble-gum pink T-shirt and Bermuda shorts. …
>
> Her sons, Fadi, 11, and Fayez, 10, return, and everyone enters the two-story tan house together.
>
> Downstairs, there is a living room and just past it a small room with a desk and then the kitchen, the buzzing center of the family's life. The Halafs are Catholics, and pictures of the children on the walls are garlanded with rosaries. (5/19/03)

It is easier, more provocative, and more attention-getting to select those details that emphasize the personal, direct, American connections. The peril, of course, is that there is a danger of grossly over-simplifying the event or grossly distorting its meaning. By making international stories into American ones, much important content and broader analysis may be ignored. And readers and viewers who depend on the news (and the government, which is often setting the news agenda) are led to believe that the opinions they reach are well informed.

The Americanizing of stories (once called the "Coca-Colonization" of events) is typically a product of editors and producers in the media's home offices listening more to the administration's agenda and to their presumptions about the public's interest than to their own foreign correspondents in the field. For obvious reasons, the foreign correspondents see more of the perspective of the country they are in and less of a narrow American perspective, so decisions about focusing so extensively on the American angle is due, most often, to the predilection of the editors and producers in New York and Washington — and abetted, at times (such as in Iraq) by the administration and the Pentagon (which set up the policy of embedding, for example), which are interested in tying reporters to the American experience rather than to a more international one.

Prioritizing US relations and US initiatives

It's not just Americans and Western Europeans who garner media attention but also US policy and diplomacy as well. Political and diplomatic stories make news budgets when American successes (or failures) are at the center.

So, for example, look at a 1998 New York Times headline: "Clinton Seeks to Limit Effects of India's Test by Pressing Yeltsin on Arms Pact." (5/18/98)

Or the crux paragraph in a Newsweek story about how to handle the "calamitous" problem of "loose nukes" in Russia:

> In its increasingly strenuous efforts to constrain the sellers, US diplomacy can claim some successes. In the 1980s, China was an unapologetic proliferator, peddling arms and technology to Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Since then, there has "been a sea change" in Beijing's behavior, the State Department says. US officials found evidence this year that lower-level Chinese officials were negotiating to sell Iran anhydrous hydrogen fluoride, which is used to enrich uranium for nuclear weapons. Once alerted, US sources say, the Chinese promptly scuttled the deal. (5/25/98)

Similarly, a 2002 lead to an LA Times story on Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) emphasized:

> An ocean away from the most volatile parts of their region, leaders of Pacific Rim governments meeting here this weekend are expected to adopt an ambitious US plan to dry up financing for terrorists and strengthen security procedures for air travel and shipping. (10/26/02)

Or a Washington Post story on North Korea's nuclear program that led with the US demands of Pyongyang:

> North Korea proposed earlier this month to begin negotiations on ending its nuclear weapons program, but the United States rejected the overture, demanding instead a complete dismantling of the effort, the top State Department official who met with the North Koreans disclosed today. (10/20/02)

It was only halfway into the article before responses from Japan and South Korea as to how to resolve the crisis were mentioned.

The US media spotlights US diplomatic efforts at a cost of under-covering the diplomatic initiatives of others, especially international organizations such as the UN and IAEA.

There is also a tendency for the US media to validate US officials' critical assessments of the contribution of other countries or international organizations. Officials from those other organizations or countries may not be given an equally prominent opportunity to counter charges of ineffectiveness — the counterarguments may be run far down in the story or even omitted entirely.

In a page one story in the New York Times, for instance, the lead sentence repeated a top American official's charge against the UN. In the entire rest of the story, there was no follow-up voice from the UN speaking in its defense:

> Jay Garner, the former lieutenant general who has been in Iraq for nearly a month with a mandate to get the country running again, blamed United Nations sanctions today for the gasoline shortages that have prompted Iraqi anger at the American occupation forces here.
>
> Waving his arm to indicate the long lines of cars waiting at a gas station in central Baghdad, General Garner said the economic sanctions still in force on Iraq had stalled deliveries of oil for its domestic needs.
>
> "Put in there that the U.N. really needs to lift the sanctions so we don't have all of this," he said. (5/5/03)

Similarly, a Los Angles Times story (with the lengthy headline: "U.N. Officials Warn of a Humanitarian Crisis; Disaster looms if basic services aren't restored, say relief organizers returning to Iraq after the war. Critics fault their response so far") led with a warning by Ramiro Lopes da Silva, the UN humanitarian coordinator for Iraq, but lingered on the criticism of the UN, rather than examining the full panoply of causes for the failures to deliver sufficient humanitarian aid:

> About 870 U.N. officials who oversaw several thousand Iraqi employees fled Iraq on March 18, two days before the war started. Along with other aid organizations, U.N. humanitarian agencies have been slow to return to a country where gunfire rings out day and night.
>
> About two dozen U.N. officials began darting into southern Iraq from Kuwait and Jordan over the past week, often leaving the country again before dark. Twenty, including Lopes da Silva, arrived Thursday, just a day and a half after U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan gave the go-ahead for some key officials to return, Lopes da Silva said. Officials are scheduled to return to some northern cities in the next week.
>
> With more than 750 overseers still away, however, the U.N. has been conspicuously absent in the nascent relief efforts.
>
> The U.N. Security Council's opposition to the invasion, followed by what some see as the world body's ineffectual and slow return to the country, has elicited harsh criticism from many who supported the ousting of Hussein. "The Americans are helping. The British are helping. Where is the rest of the world?" asked Baghdad resident Amira Sadoon. (5/4/03)

When the Americans are safe, save the children

Breaking news stories rarely mention children except when children are themselves the story.

The priority of a breaking story is to get the most timely news across in a manner consistent with journalistic norms of importance. Breaking news is presumed to be interesting to its audience because it just happened and the audience needs to act on the information immediately: Was war declared? Did the bill pass? How far did the stock market drop?

Feature stories, backgrounders, and other non-breaking news pieces, on the other hand, dispense discretionary information. Like advertising, they have to jostle each other for the eye and ear of their audience. To attract attention, feature stories use more innovative journalistic techniques than the inverted-pyramid stories that prioritize answering Who-What-Where-When (and maybe Why and How) in their lead paragraph.

What will get an audience to pay attention to a feature story? Self-interest: demonstrate that Americans are at risk. And what if no Americans are threatened or no American connection can be drawn? Find an innocent for Americans to care about. Children are the best. Children at risk have become a default way for journalists to capture the interest of their readers and listeners. If there is no American "hook" into a story, children work well as attention-grabbers.

Children command our sympathies and our engagement. They keep our attention. Injury to them provokes our outrage. So using children to discuss terrorists threats or WMD is not only a "natural," but also one of the most powerful, tools of a journalist — or a politician.

President Bush recognized that power when he twice mentioned children and three times mentioned "the innocent" in his May 2003 "Victory in Iraq" speech:

> In these 19 months that changed the world, our actions have been focused, and deliberate, and proportionate to the offense. We have not forgotten the victims of September 11th — the last phone calls, the cold murder of children, the searches in the rubble.

It's not just American politicians who employ the image of innocent children to defend or incite action. Osama bin Laden has as well. As noted in the Washington Post:

> The starkest reflection of al Qaeda's weakening, according to terrorism experts, has been the lack of reprisals for the US-led war against Iraq, especially after leader Osama bin Laden in an audiotape released April 7 urged followers to mount suicide attacks against the United States and Britain to "avenge the innocent children … assassinated in Iraq." (5/6/03)

Interestingly, children featured in few WMD stories over the three time periods of this study, other than in stories written about Iraq in May 2003. That fact alone is a strong indicator that the coverage of the various WMD events and crises in 1998 and 2002 never went much beyond the power politics to cover indigenous responses. There was little ongoing, on-the-ground coverage of what everyday Indians and Pakistanis were thinking, for example, or of whether South Koreans were nervous, or of how the money spent on nuclear programs and nuclear tests was affecting local populations and infrastructure.

The cliché of childhood as a time of innocence is latent in public policy debates. Elemental to such debates is the notion that children in their natural state are innocent. In fact, for quite practical purposes a hierarchy of innocence has been established, crowned by the most innocent, infants, and then in descending order: young children up to the age of 12, pregnant women, teenage girls, elderly women, all other women, teenage boys, and all other men.

How that translates is often in the enumeration of victims: the "most important" victims — the ones outsiders care about — are identified by age or gender or other attributes ("mother," "son," etc). This played out in some of the commentary on the Iraq war, as for example in a Washington Post editorial on why the war in Iraq might have been justified:

> So far, no sites of weapons of mass destruction have been found in Iraq, a non-development that has puzzled the special disposal teams sent into the country and raised questions about the Bush administration's prewar intelligence. But another kind of grisly site is turning up all over the country, faster than Western occupying forces can cope: mass graves. At least 10 have been publicly reported in the past month, from Kirkuk in the north to Basra in the south. The smallest are reported to have a few dozen bodies, while in the largest identified so far, near the town of Hilla, about 3,200 corpses had been found by Wednesday. Western journalists have described horrific and pitiful scenes from that southern town as Iraqis scrambled to dig up remains of lost relatives: tiny children found next to their mothers; pregnant women uncovered with their fetuses; and people still wearing blindfolds with holes in the backs of their skulls. Many in these mass graves are Shiites shot in groups after a 1991 uprising. (5/16/03)

The "fact" that "many" in the graves were killed after an uprising suggests that most victims in the graves were adult males, yet the first four categories of people mentioned as being dug up were children, mothers, pregnant women, and fetuses. Victims presumed to be of lesser interest to Americans are left entirely anonymous, folded into the larger number of those wounded or killed, or not even referred to at all.

Injury to children appears to be a more heinous crime than injury to adults.

A Washington Post story on May 3 about North Korean prison camps noted the State Department's human rights report on the country and spelled out four categories of abuse conducted by the North Korean government:

> forced abortions, murders of babies in prisons, kidnappings, and experiments using chemical and biological weapons on inmates.

Two of the described abuses related to children, and those were the two mentioned first.

To mention the abuse (especially the intentional abuse) of children is to make a moral statement. The reporting of such abuse is an attempt to irretrievably damage the reputation of those accused of the harm.

A NY Times story looking at civilian casualties of the Iraq conflict listed a few of those killed in the war-time bombing of "Chemical Ali's" neighborhood. Ten people were mentioned:

1. a girl in a "pink dress, Zeena Akram, 12"
2. "Mustafa Akram, 13, who loved to read books"
3. "Zain El Abideen Akram, 18, who so badly wanted to be a doctor like his father that when he was only 13 he would peter visitors by insisting on taking their blood pressure"
4. "Zainab Akram, 19, who loved fashion "
5. "Hassan Iyad, 10, who had begged his father to let him come stay at Grandpa's house"
6. "Ammar Muhammad was not yet 2 when his grandfather pulled him from the rubble and tried to give him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, but his mouth was full of dust and he died."
7. "Noor elhuda Saad, an infant dressed up in a pink jumper"
8. "Wissam Abed, 40, … who was to be married in June"
9. "Dr. Ihab Abed, 34, who … came to her father's house because she was frightened"
10. "Khairiah Mahmoud was the mother of 10 and the grandmother of many more" (5/11/03)

Five of the ten mentioned were children, two more were just out of childhood at ages 18 and 19, one was described as a mother and grandmother, one as a medical doctor and a daughter, and the only adult man older than 18 to be mentioned was identified as going to be married in June.

Katie Woodruff, Lori Dorfman, and Liana Winett observed in their 1995 paper "Frames on Children and Youth in US Newspapers" that the media's use of images of children reflects "a cynical" approach: "The innocence and vulnerability of children were used often to heighten irony, instill moral outrage, or intensify a call to action …."[10] The pages of the press were full of photographic and narrative images of the disconnect between the innocence of children (symbolized by play or toys) and war's destruction and potential for continued hurt.

As the Bush administration's policies in Iraq came under increasing fire, the media referred to children increasingly often. Since children are the literal embodiment of a society's future, what they do is emblematic of what is happening in the whole of society. Mentioning children in an international story enlists Americans' sympathy for children trapped by and sacrificed to adult agendas. Children became ideal synecdoches for the contested Iraqi policy.

Scott Peterson, reporting for the Christian Science Monitor, used children to comment on US failures to protect Iraqi civilians from radioactive threats. On the outskirts of Baghdad, he wrote, is

> a burnt-out Iraqi tank, destroyed by — and contaminated with — controversial American depleted-uranium (DU) bullets. Local children play "throughout the day" on the tank,

[10] Katie Woodruff, Lori Dorfman, and Liana Winett, "Frames on Children and Youth in US Newspapers," delivered at "Media Matters: The Institute on News and Social Problems," September 29-30, 1995, p. 6.

> Hamid says, and on another one across the road. … The children haven't been told not to play with the radioactive debris. They gather around as a Geiger counter carried by a visiting reporter starts singing when it nears a DU bullet fragment no bigger than a pencil eraser. It registers nearly 1,000 times normal background radiation levels on the digital readout. (5/15/03)

Newsweek also underlined the failure of Americans to secure nuclear sites or to protect the population from radiation hazards by talking about the children:

> Last week American troops finally went back to secure the site. Al Tuwaitha's scientists still can't fully assess the damage; some areas are too badly contaminated to inspect. "I saw empty uranium-oxide barrels lying around, and children playing with them," says Fadil Mohsen Abed, head of the medical-isotopes department. (5/19/03)

5. Telling the News

For the media there are two major categories of what to cover:

1. **Cover what everyone else in your market is covering.**

2. **Cover something different.**

Most of the newspapers and NPR news programs in this study were careful to cover what everyone else was covering. Some went more in depth on stories. Some fronted the same story that others buried farther back. Some did follow-ups. Some just had better reporters, knowledgeable enough to ask better questions than their peers and to write it all up more clearly. What few news outlets did was cover different "stuff."

The newsmagazines, for example, covered events relating to WMD — and even WMD trend stories — very poorly, if at all, and certainly less extensively than the newspapers. Able to include fewer stories in their issues, Newsweek and US News, but also the Economist, made triage decisions about what international news to feature — and WMD rarely made the cut. Understandably, the three newsmagazines also effectively ignored breaking WMD stories, a fact attributable to their weekly, rather than daily deadlines. Overall, the newsmagazines added the least to the dialogue.

Newspapers and radio covered breaking news better than might have been assumed — especially when one considers how restricted access to WMD stories was in Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, or at the White House for that matter. Distinctions existed, however, even between quite comparable outlets — the Washington Post and the New York Times, for example — often a factor of the interests of individual reporters or editors or of the specific geographic region of the news medium.

A case in point: During the war in Iraq, many news organizations held what amounted to "war meetings" every day — and sometimes more often — in order to plan their news budget and apportion their reporters. The Washington Post, for instance, put several of its most senior reporters on the home-front build-up and national security beat, including Dana Priest, Karen DeYoung, Barton Gellman, Dana Milbank, and the 70-year-old Walter Pincus, who, as Harry Jaffe, a media critic for Washingtonian magazine noted, has been reporting on national security for the Post for a quarter century and who has legions of sources in the Pentagon, the CIA, Congress, the State Department, the scientific community, and UN inspector Hans Blix's office.

From the beginning of the 2003 calendar year until August 10, Pincus had 81 bylined stories relating to WMD, many written with other staff writers. Through January and February, Pincus wrote 23 stories, nine of which landed on the front page — four in January having to do with Hans Blix, and the five in

February relating to North Korea's nuclear plans or to Secretary of State Colin Powell's visit to the UN, and the questions raised in the aftermath of that visit. From February 5 to May 29, Pincus had only three front-page stories — out of 38 bylined pieces. Jaffe wrote:

> According to reporters, editors continually underplayed Pincus's scoops and discounted their stories that ran counter to Bush's call to arms. … "It was ridiculous. Many of the stories were buried," says Priest, also a star on the national-security beat. "Editors continually undervalued what he does." (Aug. 2003)

But eventually, with pressure from Bob Woodward and others (and with the indefatigable Seymour Hersh at the New Yorker and David Sanger and others at the New York Times also riding herd on the story), managing editor Steve Coll and others did begin to front Pincus's critical stories. From May 29 to August 10, Pincus had 30 bylined stories that related to WMD, 14 of which were fronted — including three in papers on Sunday. That's a record, wrote Jaffe, that put the Post in the lead on the constellation of Iraqi WMD stories that has included the intelligence failures and the White House's exaggeration of intelligence claims into facts, the hunt for the "missing" weapons of mass destruction, and the spurious Niger nuclear transfer.

Others, too, have critiqued WMD coverage and noted that the Post has out-reported the Times. Wrote Daniel Okrent, the "public editor" (ombudsman) for the New York Times:

> [A] story that ran in The Washington Post on Jan. 7 [2004], "Iraq's Arsenal Was Only on Paper," by Barton Gellman, was so stunning a piece of reporting that it led Bill Keller [the New York Times' executive editor] to tell The New York Observer that it "caused everyone who competes with [Gellman] a serious case of indigestion followed by admiration." In a conversation in his office last week, Keller elaborated: Gellman's piece, he said, was "rich and subtle and deeply reported." I asked him why, if it was so good, it didn't merit a story in The Times recounting its main points, especially since The Times's own reporting on Iraqi weapons programs last winter has continued to suffer a hurricane of criticism. Keller said that trying to do a summary of Gellman's work for Times readers ran the risk of oversimplification — that the nuances that made the piece so strong would not survive reduction to summary form. Gellman's piece, he said, was "easy to admire, hard to represent." (2/1/04)

The New York Times, the Washington Post, the LA Times, and NPR's Morning Edition and All Things Considered all took the panoply of WMD breaking news events seriously and covered them accordingly. They also deviated relatively little from each other in regards to what stories were covered and how they were prioritized, once questions of print vs. broadcast and regional demographics are taken into account. The Guardian and the Daily Telegraph also applied themselves to breaking news, spending less space on the stories than their American counterparts, but not neglecting them either.

Of all the news outlets in the study, the Christian Science Monitor was the medium apart: a daily newspaper that operates on a delayed deadline. It couldn't compete for breaking news with the metro dailies. It couldn't compete on background analytical stories with the weekly newsmagazines. It has a small international news hole; it's a small paper with little real estate for any news. But repeatedly the paper turned these limitations into advantages. Because it *couldn't* follow the pack, it was freed from pack journalism.

So, for instance, the Monitor was the only major news outlet in the country to run a story in May 2003 on the radiation hazards in Iraq left by American depleted uranium (DU) armor-piercing shells (although Science Friday on Talk of the Nation on NPR in April and the LA Times in June ran stories on DU). The Monitor article, by Scott Peterson, ran 2784 words — almost four times the length of an average story. (5/15/03)

The Monitor tackled policy ideas, as the highlight for one article suggested: "Research on low-yield nuclear weapons underscores US shift from a strategy of deterrence to one of preemption." (5/27/03)

And it explored new directions in science that others weren't investigating — such as a story about how scientists were genetically engineering certain plants to act as "'sentinels,' detecting harmful chemical and biological agents in the atmosphere," much as canaries used to be the sentinels for bad air in coal mines. (5/1/03) (The New York Times ran a more conventional story about chemical-weapon-sniffing dogs.)

Finally, the Monitor was not loath to cover bilateral or multilateral relations between or among other countries even when those relations didn't primarily affect the United States. For example, a lengthy (1657 words) article on the diplomatic talks between India and Pakistan only got around to mentioning US concerns 17 paragraphs into the story. (By contrast, a New York Times story of Iranian President Mohammad Khatami's visit to Lebanon brought in the United States beginning in the third paragraph.)

All the news outlets — even the newsweeklies — covered breaking news better than policy debates. Events mattered more than ideas. Policy concerns tended to emerge when there was a news peg to hang them on — such as a David Sanger piece on ways the administration could counter North Korea's nuclear program, that was pegged to a Crawford, Texas, meeting between Bush and Australian Prime Minister (PM) John Howard. But there were a few exceptions to that rule, most notably articles in the NY Times Week-in-Review section. It was there that the NY Times covered ideas and policy brilliantly.

Often the daily NYT reporters, such as Sanger or William Broad were given space to write incisive, analytical pieces on such topics as whether a quarantine would be effective in stopping North Korea from exporting plutonium or the historical limitations of intelligence in uncovering nuclear secrets. Other times, outside experts, such as Samuel Loewenberg or James Atlas, were brought in to speak to the value of Europe's precautionary principle in public policy and foreign affairs or the influence of Leo Straussian philosophy on the foreign policy of the White House. (Occasionally, if the news peg was strong enough — and the article was sexy enough — that kind of analysis could be found elsewhere, such as Elisabeth Bumiller's May 16 front-page article of almost 1600 words on the care and keeping of Bush's image. And the pre-eminent example in the entire study was the 7500-word tome in the NY Times Sunday magazine by Bill Keller on the first and second "nuclear ages.")

Because of its preeminence as still, to some degree, the US "newspaper of record," the New York Times' articles tended to be more focused on a straight recapitulation of the breaking news than those of the Washington Post and the LA Times. Facts were related, numbers were cited in all three papers, but the New York Times stories were marginally longer and there were more of them, so especially in the aggregate the range was broader.

Stylistically, the Washington Post and the LA Times' news stories were more discursive. Oftentimes there was an over-arching analysis, although it may have come through in the ordering of a story or the selection of sources rather than in overt commentary. Hardly stream-of-consciousness gonzo journalism, the Post and the LA Times yet told stories that were inspired less by the inverted pyramid than by feature writing.

One example was as an article in the LA Times on how Palm Pilots have become an "essential tool" on the battlefield for such purposes as determining "if mass casualties have been inflicted by chemical or biological weapons" or looking up "helpful Arabic and Pashto phrases, such as … 'Put your hands over your head.'" (5/21/03) Or another lengthy feature-ish article (2157 words) on North Korea's drug trade that made the point that the same methods used by North Korea to smuggle heroin "could be used to smuggle plutonium."

While some analytical stories were on the front pages, like the North Korea story, most policy stories were buried where fewer people were going to discover them.

Lengthy articles that addressed the politics of WMD were more likely to get buried, too, such as the page-12 LA Times news analysis of the Bush administration's "quest for a new generation of nuclear bombs that are smaller, less powerful — and that the Pentagon might actually use in battle" (5/13/03) NPR also buried policy stories; it produced an excellent lengthy segment on containment strategies of nuclear weapons programs — a panel discussion among Linda Wertheimer, Ambassador Wendy Sherman and Anthony Cordesman. Unfortunately, it ran on the Saturday Weekend Edition, when just a fraction of the weekday audience is listening. (5/10/03)

What was generally true, however, was that the newspapers, newsmagazines, and NPR radio programs focused more on the short-term, gave little context and follow-up except on a "big story," and included few competing voices, especially on second and third-tier stories.

APPENDIX A
Methodology

This study used transcripts downloaded from the electronic archive service Lexis-Nexis. Individual news organizations daily submit their articles or transcripts of their programs to the electronic news archive, which is then searchable by keyword, date, byline, periodical, and so on. One advantage of the electronic archive is that any corrections to articles and programs appearing after the original publication date are retroactively appended to the electronic record of the original piece.

Eleven news outlets were independently searched through Lexis-Nexis:

- **Four United States newspapers:**
  - The Christian Science Monitor
  - The Los Angeles Times
  - The New York Times
  - The Washington Post

- **Two London newspapers:**
  - The Daily Telegraph
  - The Guardian

- **Two US newsmagazines and one UK magazine:**
  - Newsweek
  - US News & World Report
  - The Economist

- **National Public Radio's morning and evening news programs:**
  - Morning Edition
  - All Things Considered

Certain of these news outlets, such as The New York Times, were selected because they are the acknowledged agenda-setters in their specific medium. Others were selected for regional balance (as with the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the LA Times) or political balance (as with the Daily Telegraph and the Guardian). On occasion, certain periodicals or programs were selected and others were not because the others do not submit their articles or transcripts to the Lexis-Nexis data bank — so, for example, Time magazine, Public Radio International's The World news program, and the BBC's Today program on Radio 4 are not accessible via Lexis-Nexis. This study did not attempt to analyze television coverage because of the methodological challenges in analyzing audio feeds as transcripts without reference to the accompanying video.

The articles and transcripts from the 11 news outlets were found on Lexis-Nexis by using a keyword search within a set timeframe. With some stories and events that ran over the three-week time frame, later dates were searched as well. The keywords searched for in all 11 cases were "weapons of mass destruction," "weapons w/3 nuclear" (meaning that the word "weapon" would be have to be found within three words — before or after — of the word "nuclear"), and similarly "weapons w/3 chemical" or "weapons w/3 biological." Articles or transcripts would only have to have one of these four sets of words in order to be identified as part of the study. Other keywords were considered, such as "WMD" or "nukes," but there was little difference in the list of articles found, since in most cases the periodicals and programs under consideration are serious news outlets, which tend to formally introduce a topic or issue to be discussed

before using jargon or slang (so that, for instance, an article that used the term "WMD" would first reference "weapons of mass destruction" before reverting to the acronym).

In the case of the daily newspapers and the radio programs, the time frames for which the searches were conducted were May 5-26, 1998; October 11-31, 2002; and May 1-21, 2003. In the case of the three weekly newsmagazines that were used in the 2003 search, however, the practice of forward-dating issues prompted the search to look at more inclusive dates. (For example, the issue of Newsweek that went to bed on Saturday night, May 17, 2003, landed on most newsstands on Tuesday morning, May 20, but carried a cover date of Monday, May 26.) As a result of the different deadlines necessitated by the weekly publications, it is expected that there may be a slightly different set of events covered, but the premises of the type and style of coverage should still hold.

There was a substantial difference in the number of articles or programs — and the length of the individual articles or programs — downloaded from each news sources (see Table A1). A simple listing of the total number of pages downloaded suggests a rough level of commitment of each news organization to the general issue of weapons of mass destruction. (It must be mentioned at the outset, however, that most of the stories in all the news outlets referred to weapons of mass destruction in passing, in the context of a "larger" story; in other words, most of the stories downloaded did not focus specifically on the weapons themselves, or even specifically on their wider ramifications.)

Table A1: Number of pages downloaded, by publication

Publication	Number of pages downloaded
New York Times	232
Washington Post	225
LA Times	155
Christian Science Monitor	43
Guardian	75
Daily Telegraph	46
Newsweek	40
US News	15
Economist	36
Morning Edition	45
All Things Considered	28

Each article or program that was downloaded was given its own page or pages. All the articles and transcripts downloaded were then saved as MS Word documents. They were read in their totality and were electronically searched. The articles and transcripts were examined qualitatively and quantitatively, and were considered individually and compared to each other.

APPENDIX B

Frequency of coverage

Anja Kuznetsova, CISSM

The tables that follow illustrate the frequency with which WMD issues were featured in the media outlets examined in this study, based on searches of the Lexis-Nexis archive service and analyses of the content of the resulting articles to determine their relevance.

The search parameters were a variant of: "iraq and 'weapon! of mass destruction' or weapon w/10 nuclear or biological or chemical and date (aft april 30 2003 and bef may 22 2003) and publication (christian science monitor or los angeles times or new york times or washington post or guardian or telegraph or economist or newsweek or us news or national public radio)".

These numbers do not necessarily refer to discrete articles. An article that mentioned WMD in relation to both Iraq and North Korea, for example, would be counted twice: once in the "Iraq" column and again in the "North Korea" column.

The tables also do not include every article that resulted from the Lexis-Nexis searches. Those stories that included the search terms but that were clearly not relevant to the study were not counted at all.

Finally, not all of the articles found by these searches referred directly to WMD or to the specific region counted. Occasionally, specific search terms appeared only in the keyword subject referent or in article abstracts and not in the story itself. When these were considered relevant to the study, they were counted for the purposes of these tables.

While perhaps not a precise measure of coverage, this tabulation of citations does give a rough estimate of the level of focus these media outlets gave to the countries and regions under consideration.

Table B1. Lexis-Nexis Citations of WMD and Various Countries*

	Number of articles citing WMD in relation to:							
	Iraq	**North Korea**	**India/ Pakistan**	**Russia**	**China**	**Iran**	**Israel**	**Syria**
May 5-26, 1998	7	3	214	8	34	12	3	0
Oct. 11-31, 2002	270	135	11	65	6	5	9	0
May 1-21, 2003	212	58	19	20	2	23	8	15

Table B2. Front-Page Stories on WMD

	Number of front-page articles citing WMD in relation to:							
	Iraq	North Korea	India/ Pakistan	Russia	China	Iran	Israel	Syria
May 5-26, 1998	1	0	35	2	3	2	1	0
Oct. 11-31, 2002	50	20	0	6	1	0	3	0
May 1-21, 2003	27	8	2	1	0	2	1	0

Table B3. Front-Page WMD Stories: The Washington Post

	Number of front-page articles citing WMD in relation to:							
	Iraq	North Korea	India/ Pakistan	Russia	China	Iran	Israel	Syria
May 5-26, 1998	0	0	12	0	0	0	0	0
Oct. 11-31, 2002	7	7	0	0	0	0	1	0
May 1-21, 2003	15	2	0	0	0	1	1	0

Table B4. Front-Page WMD Stories: The New York Times

	Number of front-page articles citing WMD in relation to:							
	Iraq	North Korea	India/ Pakistan	Russia	China	Iran	Israel	Syria
May 5-26, 1998	1	0	8	1	2	0	0	0
Oct. 11-31, 2002	21	5	0	2	0	0	0	0
May 1-21, 2003	6	2	0	0	0	1	0	0

Table B5. Front-Page WMD Stories: The Los Angeles Times

	Number of front-page articles citing WMD in relation to:							
	Iraq	North Korea	India/ Pakistan	Russia	China	Iran	Israel	Syria
May 5-26, 1998	0	0	13	1	1	2	1	0
Oct. 11-31, 2002	9	5	0	1	1	0	2	0
May 1-21, 2003	4	2	1	1	0	0	0	0

Table B6. Front-Page WMD Stories: The Guardian (UK)

	Number of front-page articles citing WMD in relation to:							
	Iraq	North Korea	India/ Pakistan	Russia	China	Iran	Israel	Syria
May 5-26, 1998	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Oct. 11-31, 2002	4	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
May 1-21, 2003	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0

Table B7. Front-Page WMD Stories: The Daily Telegraph (London)

	Number of front-page articles citing WMD in relation to:							
	Iraq	North Korea	India/ Pakistan	Russia	China	Iran	Israel	Syria
May 5-26, 1998*	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Oct. 11-31, 2002	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
May 1-21, 2003	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

* No data available on Lexis-Nexis for The Daily Telegraph in 1998

Table B8. Front-Page WMD Stories: The Christian Science Monitor

	Number of front-page articles citing WMD in relation to:							
	Iraq	North Korea	India/ Pakistan	Russia	China	Iran	Israel	Syria
May 5-26, 1998	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
Oct. 11-31, 2002	8	2	0	2	0	0	0	0
May 1-21, 2003	2	1	1	0	0	0	0	0

Table B9. Front-Page WMD Stories: Across Periodicals

	Number of front-page articles citing WMD in:					
	The Washington Post	The New York Times	The Los Angeles Times	The Guardian (UK)	The Daily Telegraph (UK)*	The Christian Science Monitor
May 5-26, 1998	12	12	18	0	—	2
Oct. 11-31, 2002	15	28	18	5	2	12
May 1-21, 2003	19	9	8	1	0	4

* No data available on Lexis-Nexis for The Daily Telegraph in 1998

APPENDIX C
Differences in coverage

It is a truism that the media are not monolithic, even though many critics tend to use a wide brush when they tar them. As expected, this study found that the parameters of the individual outlets (US vs. UK, daily vs. weekly, print vs. broadcast, etc.) led to significant distinctions among them.

Certain general comments can be made about the news outlets, beginning with the observation that there were clear distinctions among them, relating to facets such as:

- the type of news each could realistically provide (breaking news vs. news analysis and features), given economic or practical limitations such as daily vs. weekly deadlines (the newspapers vs. the newsmagazines);

- the potential length of stories given a large newshole vs. a small one (the New York Times vs. the Christian Science Monitor); and

- the focus of the audience, i.e., American foreign policy vs. British foreign policy (Newsweek vs. the Economist).

And the following are some of the journalistic concerns that limit all media's ability to cover the news:

- budget limitations

- lack of access to breaking events

- deadline pressures and time constraints

- competing news agendas (for example, a big breaking story elsewhere will trump important follow-up pieces)

- considerations about which angle or frame on a story would most attract listeners

- audience demographics that compel particular styles of coverage and types of content

- need to retain important administration and Pentagon sources

When each news outlet was considered in its totality (in other words, when all the articles or programs were referenced), each outlet appeared to make an effort to conscientiously follow recognizable standards of journalistic integrity: there were clear attempts in each's coverage to be accurate, comprehensive, and balanced. Especially in feature news coverage, in print and on radio, the reporters and hosts often attempted to consult with a range of sources, to use tempered language in their own commentary, and to introduce background historical and political factors to at least a minimal degree.

However, when the coverage was of a breaking news event, the reporters and hosts were not always fully comprehensive in their accounts, nor were they always able to appropriately apportion responsibility. Some of their worst failings related to inadequate or biased sourcing — under the pressure of deadline (or possibly because more neophyte journalists didn't recognize that there might be competing perspectives on the "facts" under discussion). Too often journalists resorted to what the trade calls "stenographic" coverage: writing down what the military or political officials said without getting additional confirming

or contesting sources. Other failures frequently related to inaccuracies in the given definitions, political context, or ramifications of the weapons systems mentioned.

There is no way, however, to chart simply how the individual media differed in their coverage. Differences emerged in the content or style of individual stories, in where or when stories were covered (front-page or top of the news vs. inside or later coverage), in how many stories were published, and in what type of stories appeared (breaking news, analysis, features, editorials).

A reliable demonstration of the differences among the various news outlets can be seen through a comparison of how each outlet covered two of the major stories in May 2003.

President George W. Bush's "victory" speech, May 1, 2003

The tone of news stories is set by the lead sentences — different kinds of news stories demand different kinds of leads: a hard news breaking story will typically begin with a traditional who-what-where-when (W-W-W-W) series of sentences, while a human-interest feature story will often start with an anecdotal lead. However, different news outlets also have distinctive styles: A New York Times hard news lead, for example, will tend to be more "serious" and more comprehensively informative. But, as suggested by the two lead paragraphs from the news outlets as they reported President Bush's speech on May 1 aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln, there are other differences (see Appendix D).

Both the New York Times and the Washington Post ran multiple articles on the President's speech, including two A1 stories. Both papers ran one story that was relatively "straight," repeating the President's words and describing the scene, adjuring verbs that put a qualitative spin on the subject, and, in general, staying away from overt, subjective news analysis. Both papers also ran a second A1 story that focused on the "Cold Truths Behind the Pomp," as the headline in the Times had it. Those articles, by contrast, were quite pointed in their assessment of the calculated political reasons behind the address and content, leading a reader to assume that both papers were not only skeptical of the timing and context of the speech, but were skeptical of the politics of the administration.

The Christian Science Monitor, the Los Angeles Times, the Daily Telegraph and the Guardian each ran one article only (although the Los Angeles Times did carry a second story inside that was comprised of excerpts of the speech). The two US papers ran their stories on their front pages; the UK papers ran their stories inside. All four papers delivered their news with a modicum of overt analysis, although there clearly were choices made by each paper about what to include or about how to describe the president and the scene that slanted the stories beyond a neutral recital of facts. The Los Angles Times was perhaps the most obvious of the four, with its opening words that detailed the "carefully arranged backdrop" rather than noting the declaration of "victory in Iraq" made by Bush. The Guardian took a similar tack, starting with the "triumphal … gesture" of Bush's carrier landing, before reporting what Bush had to say. The Christian Science Monitor opened with the news of Bush declaring an "end to major combat operations," then moved to put that declaration into a historical context of the World Wars. In so doing, the Monitor gave the most politically balanced coverage of all the papers. The Daily Telegraph (with the shortest article of all at 271 words) led with the most basic W-W-W-W lead, but by its selection of what to say in its short piece ("Bush Flies Jet to Carrier to Welcome Crew Home from War" was its head) made its support for the president clear.

Only two of the three newsweeklies under study mentioned the speech in its print edition at all — Newsweek ran a quote from President Bush in its "Perspectives" section: "The tyrant has fallen, and Iraq is free." US News ran a remark by Sen. Robert Byrd "rapping President Bush's carrier landing" in its "In Quotes" section. And Newsweek briefly referenced the speech halfway through an article about the challenges of nation-building. (Newsweek did write two stories specifically on the speech that appeared exclusively in its "web edition.") The Economist omitted coverage of the speech. All the newsweeklies

were hampered by their deadlines, which meant that any coverage of the Thursday speech would have appeared almost a week after the event. Evidently, the publications made the assessment that any specific analysis they could do after the fact would not be worthwhile.

By contrast, NPR, as a broadcast outlet, ran live coverage of the speech, then followed that with about 10 minutes of commentary by its evening news host Robert Siegel, its senior news analyst Daniel Schorr, and its national political correspondent Mara Liasson. The following morning, on its drive-time news program Morning Edition, the speech was again revisited. On both occasions the reporters recapped the main points made by the president and described the drama of the locale. The reporters in the longer story, on All Things Considered on May 1, also detailed high in the package their observation that "whereas there had been a lot of talk about weapons of mass destruction as a reason for the invasion of Iraq, that theme had practically disappeared in his speech," and noted that the speech "couched that the reason for the invasion was the War on Terror, which is somewhat still controversial since they have not been able to prove very much connection between the two." On NPR, the immediacy of the audio clips of President Bush, of a jet landing, and of a cheering crowd acted to sweep the radio audience up in the Bush-orchestrated victory rush; but the immediate poking and prodding by the commentators acted to deflate that political balloon. Like the New York Times and the Washington Post, NPR's coverage was detailed and comprehensive, but the spin of the commentators left the impression that the news organization was at best skeptical of President Bush's speech and event.

Senate debate over whether to lift ban on research and development of low-yield nuclear weapons, May 2003

A different kind of story, about the Senate debate over whether to lift the 10-year-old ban on research and development of "low-yield" nuclear weapons, prompted a different kind of coverage (see Appendix E). Different news organizations made different choices about when to cover the story, as, unlike the Bush speech, there was no single climatic moment, although the 51-43 vote by the Senate to turn down the Democratic amendment on May 20 was perhaps the most significant event during that time period.

Because the news was, on its face, about a political debate, the characteristic story aligned along a he-said-she-said format, with much emphasis on the competing political perspectives on the issue. The inside-the-Beltway nature of the story and the complexity of the Congressional debate made it a natural for the US newspapers that cede space to cover political news and have reporters already on the Hill beat. But it was a more problematic story for other media that tend to avoid such hard news stories in favor of either breaking news (such as that related to the war in Iraq) or trend stories. Neither Newsweek nor US News covered the Congressional debate at all, nor did the two UK papers. The Economist, however, saw the final decision to lift the ban as a bellwether for the direction of US security policy and assigned an article accordingly. As the editors wrote in the May 17 "Leader": "by treating nuclear weapons as just another explosive in the arsenal, rather than as a deterrent weapon of last resort, America would dangerously blur the line against nuclear use by anyone."

Even Morning Edition and All Things Considered, news programs that originate in Washington, DC, only covered the arc of the story once — after the Senate repeal of the 10-year ban on the development of "so-called mini-nukes." The four US newspapers — the Christian Science Monitor, the LA Times, the New York Times, and the Washington Post — covered the Senate side of the story with two stories: one lengthy story early when the appeal to lift the ban was in committee and all the papers took the opportunity to put the initiative into a larger context; and then another, shorter article when the full Senate voted on the ban. (The NYT also published a short, 262-word story on how the ban was faring in the House.)

The Washington Post and the LA Times reported on the full Senate vote with articles that gave an accounting of the partisan animosity using emotionally laden adverbs ("scornfully dismissed" in WP), dramatic adjectives ("horrific power" in LAT), and value-laden verbs ("accused" in LAT and "trigger" in

WP) to describe the debate. Both papers paired quotations by Democrats with quotations from Senate Republicans or Rumsfeld, but both also used quotations that were more theatrical than informative — both, for example, used Sen. Dianne Feinstein's exclamation, "Just a study? Baloney! Does anyone really believe that?"

While both emphasized the Democratic protests to the "decade-old ban," the LA Times emphasized the role of the Bush administration and the Pentagon (in the person of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld), while the Washington Post emphasized the roles played by the Republicans in Congress and the Bush administration (although a paragraph on Rumsfeld's defense of the initiative was high up in its story).

The distinction can be seen in the two leads:

• from Nick Anderson, writing for the LA Times:

> Democrats on Tuesday accused the Bush administration of risking a new arms race as the Senate endorsed a Pentagon plan to end a 10-year ban on research and development of a new generation of tactical nuclear bombs.

• from Helen Dewar, writing for the Washington Post:

> The Republican-controlled Senate yesterday turned back a Democratic effort to stop the Bush administration from conducting research to develop "low-yield" nuclear weapons but faces other showdowns today over the administration's nuclear weapons policy.

And the distinction played throughout the pieces. The LA Times, for example, emphasized the Pentagon's role with such phrases as "the Pentagon … wants" and Bush's role with such phrases as "the administration's proposal" and the "administration's plan." Even the LA Times in its photo caption emphasized the Pentagon's investment: "IN SUPPORT: Pentagon wants 'ability to reach a deeply buried target,' Defense chief Donald H. Rumsfeld says." By contrast, the Washington Post's headline read, "GOP Blocks Democrats' Effort to Halt Nuclear Arms Studies," and the story noted high up that the initiative was a "GOP proposal," observed twice that the debate was split "largely along party lines," and used the construction "Republicans stressed" or "Republicans said" several times.

The New York Times' characteristic A1 news story (as distinct from A1 news analysis or feature) is a straightforward accounting of a single event or discussion of a single issue — a format it followed in all three of its articles on the initiative. In its final story following the Senate vote, NYT reporter Carl Hulse eschewed most of the drama of the debate — unlike the Post or the LA Times — using paraphrases such as, "Some Democrats, however, called the Senate action dangerous," rather than using emotional quotes or employing adjectives or adverbs. And while Hulse did quote Senators on both sides of the aisle, he began in his lead paragraphs to pit the Senate, as an institution, against the Democrats ("The Senate agreed tonight to lift the ban … rejecting Democratic arguments" and "the Senate turned down a Democratic amendment"). In subsequent paragraphs Hulse did, however, distinguish between the Republicans and the Democrats and twice mentioned that the Bush administration had "sought" the change in nuclear policy.

The representative Christian Science Monitor front-page story includes more news analysis than A1 news articles in the metropolitan dailies, and not infrequently a major Monitor article is actually a packaged blend of distinctive types of stories: it might lead, for instance, with a political news peg, then segue to diplomatic news or even bring in feature-type elements. Because the Monitor is typically mailed to subscribers, it has to operate on a different deadline than its ostensible peers; not only can't it "break" news, it "goes to bed" mid-day, rather than the late evening like most dailies — in effect putting its news almost a day and a half behind other city-based newspapers. Faced with those logistical hurdles, the Monitor has adopted some of the same strategies as the newsweeklies — it includes more news analysis,

emphasizes trend stories, and tries to look at top stories through perspectives that others aren't likely to, such as giving an international perspective on a domestic story, as it did in its first story covering the Senate nuclear debate, when it used a reporter, based in Delhi, to cover the story. As its highlight said: "A plan to repeal a US ban on nuclear-weapons research could embolden India and Pakistan."

The Monitor's second story on the full Senate vote came almost a week after the other papers wrote their stories — on May 27 vs. May 21. The news of the Senate approval of "a Bush administration request to research new nuclear weapons" came halfway into the story. The article tracked the "US shift from a strategy of deterrence to one of preemption" and led with the "Strangelovian anachronism" of the US interest "in a new generation of nukes." With only one quote from Senator Feinstein and another from Secretary Rumsfeld, the thrust of the story was less the political acrimony of the debate than the concerns that have been raised by a military strategy that contemplates "nuclear attack options that vary in scale, scope and purpose."

The LA Times and the Post in their first stories took a similar tack in news analysis as did the Monitor in both of its articles. In two lengthy stories, of 1203 words in the LAT and 1091 in the Post, the papers looked at not only the lines of the partisan debate but the strategic arguments for and against low-yield nuclear weapons. Walter Pincus's article on the Sunday before the debate was taken up in committee (May 4) provocatively named names and traced the arguments both on the Hill and between the White House and the head of the US Strategic Air Command. Pincus spent most of his piece on the seeming discrepancy between the Bush administration, which "is seeking new nuclear weapons," and Adm. James Ellis, who "is looking to reduce dependency on the current nuclear stockpile by turning to smart, precision conventional bombs and missiles."

The LA Times spoke in greater generalities. Paul Richter wrote his first story after the Senate Armed Services Committee voted out of committee the defense authorization bill (to which the amendment to lift the ban was attached). Other than the lead, which mentioned the "Bush administration," neither another name, nor another political party, nor another government office (such as the Pentagon) was mentioned for seven paragraphs — and then it was another six before the Democrats and Republicans were mentioned. The reporter's generalizing of the responsibility for the actions being taken was pronounced. He repeatedly mentioned "the administration" as the principal actor, never mentioning the president by name (except in the formulation the "Bush administration"), never mentioning Rumsfeld, nor any Republican senator. Democrats were referred to not by party affiliation but by the more nebulous "arms control advocates," and only one Democratic senator was mentioned, Jack Reed, who was quoted twice. Low in the story two spokesmen for two different arms control advocacy groups were each quoted for nine words, and at the end of the story an argument made by Adm. Ellis of the US Strategic Command was paraphrased. The reporter's failure to make the most principal actors visible had the effect of blurring who had (or was taking) responsibility.

Conclusion

As a whole, the media treated these two stories — Bush's carrier speech and the debate in Congress over low-yield nuclear weapons — as typical domestic political stories, giving little attention to their international origins or repercussions. (By contrast, the media tended to include the domestic angle prominently in their stories with international datelines.)

While the news outlets included some background and analysis, especially on secondary stories, that background and analysis was construed narrowly. In covering Bush's "Victory" speech, the commentary focused on two elements: the meaning of the moment for the upcoming presidential campaign and how closely the arguments made by the president at the close of the war mirrored the arguments made by him prior to the war. Mention was made in the news that Bush gave WMD

short shrift in his speech and connected the war in Iraq too closely to the war on terrorism, given that no connections had been discovered between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda.

In covering the Senate debate of the lifting of the ban on research and development of low-yield nuclear weapons, the media also focused on the familiar formula of partisan debate, and gave just a modicum of information on the arguments being made by all sides. The Post did a better job than the others at suggesting that the issue was more complex than a Democrat vs. Repupblican "should-we-or-shouldn't-we-have-tactical-nuclear-weapons-in-our-arsenal" argument. But even the Post related very little of the larger meaning of the vote — for example, fiscally for the military/private contractors or for the proponents of conventional weapons — or of the scientific (and strategic) debates over low-yield weapons, the effectiveness of "bunker-busters," the viability of nuclear weapons to "disarm" chemical or biological hazards, and so on.

APPENDIX D

Leads and Articles on Bush's Carrier Speech
May 1, 2003

The following are the first two lead paragraphs from the news outlets, as they reported President Bush's speech on May 1 aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln.

The Christian Science Monitor

• May 2, page 1, Linda Feldmann: "Bush's Verbal Tightrope: Success, Not 'Victory'" (899 words)

> By declaring that major combat operations in Iraq have ended, President Bush has put an exclamation point on what is seen by the public as a successful war.
>
> But the Bush administration is choosing its words carefully. For legal and political reasons, the US is not declaring victory or saying "the war is over." In fact, the days of declared wars that end with clear definition, such as World Wars I and II, have been waning.

The Los Angeles Times

• May 2, part 1, page 1, Maura Reynolds and Anna Gorman: "Bush Hails Victory in Iraq" (1340 words)

> Against a carefully arranged backdrop of fighter jets, cheering sailors and azure seas, President Bush savored the victory in Iraq, declaring Thursday that "the United States and our allies have prevailed."
>
> "Operation Iraqi Freedom was carried out with a combination of precision, speed and boldness the enemy did not expect and the world had not seen before," Bush said. In a veiled warning to anyone else who might cross the United States, he added, "You have shown the world the skill and might of the American armed forces."

Also, a second story on page 10 with excerpts of the speech

The New York Times

5 stories: two page A1 stories (one from the foreign desk, one from the national desk labeled "news analysis"); one page A17 foreign desk article; the lead editorial; and one on page A16 that gave the speech in its entirety

• May 2, A1, Foreign Desk, David Sanger: "Aftereffects: The President; Bush Declares 'One Victory in a War on Terror'" (1749 words)

> President Bush declared tonight that the military phase of the battle to topple Saddam Hussein's government was "one victory in a war on terror that began on Sept. 11th, 2001, and still goes on."
>
> Speaking from the deck of the aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln before thousands of uniformed sailors and aviators as the ship approached San Diego Harbor, he argued that by vanquishing Mr. Hussein's government, he had removed "an ally of Al Qaeda," and he vowed to continue to search for banned weapons in Iraq — a search that so far has been

largely unsuccessful — and to confront any other nations that use such weapons to threaten the United States or could sell them to terrorists.

• May 2, A1, National Desk, Elisabeth Bumiller: "Aftereffects: News Analysis; Cold Truths Behind Pomp" (950 words)

President Bush's made-for-television address tonight on the carrier Abraham Lincoln was a powerful, Reaganesque finale to a six-week war. But beneath the golden images of a president steaming home with his troops toward the California coast lay the cold political and military realities that drove Mr. Bush's advisers to create the moment.

The president declared an end to major combat operations, White House, Pentagon and State Department officials said, for three crucial reasons: to signify the shift of American soldiers from the role of conquerors to police, to open the way for aid from countries that refused to help militarily and — above all — to signal to voters that Mr. Bush is shifting his focus from Baghdad to concerns at home.

The Washington Post

3 stories: two page A1 stories (one from a reporter on board the carrier, one from Washington); one on page A25 that gave the speech in its entirety

• May 2, A1, Karen DeYoung (aboard the carrier): "Bush Proclaims Victory in Iraq; Work on Terror Is Ongoing, President Says" (1556 words)

President Bush proclaimed victory in Iraq tonight from aboard a US carrier returning to home port, but he cautioned that much remains to be done in the broader war against terrorism.

"The battle of Iraq is one victory in a war on terror that began on September the 11th, 2001, and still goes on," the president said in his national address beamed from the deck of the Lincoln.

• May 2, A1, Dana Milbank (Washington): "For Bush, the Military is the Message for '04" (1289 words)

In declaring military victory over Iraq last night, President Bush made a strong effort to direct Americans' attention away from the aftermath of Saddam Hussein's fall and back toward the ongoing campaign against al Qaeda.

Until yesterday, the White House had postponed a presidential speech declaring victory because of the messy uncertainty that remains on the ground in Iraq. There have been no confirmed findings of chemical, biological or nuclear weapons. Hussein and most of his top leadership remain unaccounted for. And celebrations among liberated Iraqis have turned into ant-American protests as the country's disparate groups begin to feud.

The Daily Telegraph

• May 2, page 16, Toby Harnden (Washington): "Bush Flies Jet to Carrier to Welcome Crew Home from War" (271 words)

President George W. Bush addressed America from the deck of a returning aircraft carrier off the coast of California this morning to declare that victory in Iraq represented the "turning of the tide" in the war against terrorism.

"Major combat operations in Iraq have ended," he told the 5,500 sailors on board and the millions watching on television. "In the Battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies

have prevailed." To cheers from the crew, he said: "Because of you, the tyrant has fallen and Iraq is free."

The Guardian

• May 2, page 21, Julian Borger and Oliver Burkeman (Washington); Ewen MacAskill (Baghdad): "Bush Makes Carrier Landing for TV Address" (978 words)

> President George Bush performed a triumphal and dramatic gesture to mark victory in the Iraq war, co-piloting a navy jet on to an aircraft carrier to underline his role as America's commander-in-chief, and steel the nation for more combat in the years ahead.
>
> In a nationally televised address from the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln in the Pacific ocean, the president celebrated American's military prowess, but warned that although major combat operations had finished in Iraq, there was still "difficult work" to do there.

Newsweek

• May 12, page 31, Michael Hirsh, et. al. "Our New Civil War" (1690 words)

No mention of speech in lead; brief references deep into story. Newsweek wrote two stories on May 2 for its online site, but not in the magazine

> Two alternative versions of postwar Iraq bumped into each other in the news last week, then went their separate ways. One was expressed in the beaming face of President Bush as he stood on a sunlit carrier deck before cheering sailors beneath a sign proclaiming mission accomplished. …
>
> Iraq, like Afghanistan, will be a test case for whether American power is enough not just to win wars, but to fundamentally transform societies that have turned into harbors for terrorists or weapons of mass destruction.
>
> Bush himself has clearly moved in that direction, at least rhetorically. In his carrier speech, he declared that America would stay in Iraq until it makes "the transition from dictatorship to democracy." Yet the administration's old "we don't nation-build" ideology still seems to work against that goal.

US News & World Report

No story or mention in an article

The Economist

No story or mention in an article

National Public Radio (Morning Edition and All Things Considered)

• All Things Considered, May 1, host Robert Siegel, reporters Daniel Schorr and Mara Liasson (1976 words)

> ROBERT SIEGEL, host: President Bush addressing an audience of sailors on the USS Abraham Lincoln, telling them that major combat operations in Iraq have ended, that the battle of Iraq was, in his words, "one victory in a war on terrorism," a war against terror that began on September 11th, 2001.

You're listening to live coverage of President Bush's address to the nation from NPR News.

I'm Robert Siegel. We're going to take about 10 minutes right now to talk about the president's speech, what he said, what it might mean. And with me first are NPR senior news analyst Dan Schorr and our national political correspondent Mara Liasson.

Dan, thoughts on what the president said tonight?

DANIEL SCHORR reporting:

Well, it was a very carefully crafted speech. And the first thing I noticed was that whereas there had been a lot of talk about weapons of mass destruction as a reason for the invasion of Iraq, that theme had practically disappeared in his speech. There was one reference to, "We have begun the search for hidden chemical and biological weapons and already know of hundreds of sites that will be investigated." Nothing about nuclear weapons at all, and so little on this subject.

More, it was couched that the reason for the invasion was the war on terror, which is somewhat still controversial since they have not been able to prove very much connection between the two.

• Morning Edition, May 2, host Bob Edwards, reporter Pam Fessler (756 words)

BOB EDWARDS, host: 'This is MORNING EDITION from NPR News. I'm Bob Edwards. President Bush has declared an end to major military operations in Iraq. But in a speech to the nation last night, he stopped short of saying that war is over. The president said much work remains to be done in reconstructing Iraq and in fighting what he called the "broader war on terror." He acknowledged that the United States has still to find biological or chemical weapons and to apprehend many former Iraqi leaders, including Saddam Hussein. NPR's Pam Fessler reports.

PAM FESSLER reporting: It wasn't exactly a victory lap, but it was close enough. The president chose to deliver his speech aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln, an aircraft carrier about 30 miles off the coast of California. The ship, with its crew of 5,000 sailors and Marines, was returning home after being deployed for more than nine months as part of US military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. As if that backdrop weren't dramatic enough, the president, who was a pilot in the Texas National Guard, landed on the ship in the co-pilot's seat of a Navy jet. (Soundbite of jet landing)

APPENDIX E

Leads and Articles on Senate Debate over Low-Yield Nuclear Weapons May 4-20, 2003

The following are the lead paragraphs from the news outlets as they reported the US Senate debate, first in the Armed Services Committee beginning the week of May 5, 2003, and culminating with the vote on the floor on May 20.

The Christian Science Monitor

2 stories: one after the bill passed committee, on May 15; one after the Senate vote, on May 27

- **May 15, page 6, Scott Baldauf (New Delhi): "US May Stoke Asian Arms Race" (885 words)**

> Amid all the talk of weapons of mass destruction, a curious bill passed through the United States Senate Armed Services Committee last Friday, repealing a ban on the research and development of low-yield nuclear weapons.
>
> Such weapons are so sophisticated and specialized that few nations have the capability to respond with their own similar weapons programs.
>
> But for the clutch of nuclear-weapons states here in Asia, accustomed to American diplomatic lectures on the benefits of nuclear restraint, the change of tone in the Senate comes as a welcome change.

- **May 27, page 2, Brad Knickerbocker: "US Sees Renewed Role for Nukes in Military Arsenel" (749 words)**

> In recent years, nuclear weapons have seemed a Strangelovian anachronism — Cold War relics from the days when Leonid Brezhnev and Ronald Reagan glowered at one another, brandishing their missiles while the rest of the world quaked … [skip of seven paragraphs] … Over the objections of Democratic lawmakers, the Senate last week moved in this direction. It approved a Bush administration request to research new nuclear weapons designed for such circumstances.

The Los Angeles Times

2 stories: one after the bill passed committee, on May 10; one after the Senate vote, on May 21

- **May 10, part 1, page 1, Paul Richter: "Door Opened for New Era of Nuclear Arms" (1203 words)**

> The Bush administration took a big step toward developing a new generation of nuclear weapons Friday when a Senate panel approved a bill that would lift a 1-year ban on researching small atomic bombs for battlefield use and fund more study on a nuclear "bunker-buster" bomb.
>
> The annual defense authorization bill, approved by the Senate Armed Services Committee, would also increase funding for a nuclear weapons site in Nevada to enable the Pentagon — if necessary — to move quickly resume the weapons testing it suspended 11 years ago.

• May 21, part 1, page 22, Nick Anderson: "US Risks New Arms Race, Democrats Warn" (852 words)

> Democrats on Tuesday accused the Bush administration of risking a new arms race as the Senate endorsed a Pentagon plan to end a 10-year ban on research and development of a new generation of tactical nuclear bombs.
>
> The charge drew a sharp denial from Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, who asserted that the Pentagon only wants to study new weapons that could help the United States destroy caches of chemical and biological weapons or other targets deep underground.

The New York Times

3 stories: one after the bill passed the Senate committee, on May 10; one after the bill failed to pass the House committee, on May 15; one after the Senate vote, on May 21

• May 10, A2, James Dao: "Senate Panel Votes to Lift Ban on Small Nuclear Arms" (888 words)

> A sharply divided Senate Armed Services Committee voted today to repeal a 10-year-old ban on the development of small nuclear weapons, asserting that the United States must begin looking at new ways of deterring terrorist groups and so-called rogue nuclear powers like North Korea.
>
> The Bush administration, which requested the repeal, said it had no plans to develop a new low-yield nuclear weapon. But it contends that the existing prohibition has had a chilling effect on weapons research at a time when the United States is trying to reconfigure its military to address post-Soviet threats.

• May 15, A22, James Dao: "Panel Rejects Nuclear Arms of Small Yield" (262 words)

> A proposal by the Bush administration to allow development of new kinds of small nuclear weapons has been rejected by the Republican-controlled House Armed Services Committee.
>
> In a voice vote held Tuesday night, the committee approved a Democratic measure retaining a 10-year-old ban on the development of nuclear weapons with explosive force of less than five kilotons of TNT. The atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945 was about 15 kilotons.

• May 21, A26, Carl Hulse: "Senate Votes to Lift Ban on Producing Nuclear Arms" (773 words)

> The Senate agreed tonight to lift a ban on research and development of smaller nuclear weapons, rejecting Democratic arguments that any step toward such arms could spur other nations to build tactical nuclear weapons of their own.
>
> On a 51-43 vote, the Senate turned down a Democratic amendment that would have preserved a 10-year-old prohibition on moving toward producing nuclear weapons of less than five kilotons. Many modern nuclear weapons have a blast force of several hundred kilotons.

The Washington Post

2 stories: one at the start of the Senate debate, on May 4; one after the Senate vote, on May 21

• May 4, A6, Walter Pincus: "Future of US Nuclear Arsenal Debated" (1091 words)

> The Cold War is over, but advocates and critics of nuclear weapons inside the Bush administration and on Capitol Hill continue to battle over how the United States should reduce and restructure its enormous stockpile.
>
> The infighting will become public this week when Congress considers the fiscal 2004 defense authorization bill. It contains language that eliminates current restrictions on researching low-yield nuclear weapons, gives added money for research on a high-yield nuclear bomb for use against deeply buried targets, and completes funding for reducing to 18 months from three years the preparation time required for resuming underground nuclear testing.

• May 21, A4, Helen Dewar: "GOP Blocks Democrats' Effort to Halt Nuclear Arms Studies" (793 words) (a reworking of the story appeared on May 22)

> The Republican-controlled Senate yesterday turned back a Democratic effort to stop the Bush administration from conducting research to develop "low-yield" nuclear weapons but faces other showdowns today over the administration's nuclear weapons policy.
>
> The vote was 51-43, largely along party lines, in favor of a GOP proposal to lift a decade-old ban on research or other activities to develop these new battlefield weapons.

The Daily Telegraph

No story or mention in an article

The Guardian

No story or mention in an article

Newsweek

No story or mention in an article

US News & World Report

No story or mention in an article

The Economist

• May 17, Leader, "Ban the Mini-Bomb" (675 words)

> They are, says George Bush, some of "the world's most dangerous weapons". Earlier this month his diplomats were urging members of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) both to tighten up the rules against the spread of nuclear weapons and to deal more strictly with rule-breakers. To show that America was doing its disarming bit too, as required by the treaty, they told of the cuts being made to existing weapons stockpiles and efforts to deal safely with fissile materials no longer needed for bombs. So why are Mr. Bush's military planners now pressing Congress to lift its decade-long ban on research into low-yield nuclear weapons, or "mini-nukes"?
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> Research, of course, is not full development, testing and deployment, all of which would need more cash and therefore further congressional approval. Nor would it be illegal for any of the five nuclear powers recognized by the NPT to work on new warhead designs

(China is tinkering with lighter warheads so as to be able to mount several on one rocket, as others do). Yet America's proposed nuclear dabbling is not only unnecessary, it could ultimately prove self-defeating.

Also mentioned in passing in an article on US foreign policy post-Iraq, May 31, and in World Wrap-Up, May 24

National Public Radio (Morning Edition and All Things Considered)

• Morning Edition, May 21, host Bob Edwards, reporter Tom Gjelten (834words)

BOB EDWARDS, host: There'll be more debate today in the Senate on Bush administration plans to resume research on the new class of small nuclear weapons. In a vote last night, the Senate agreed to repeal a 10-year prohibition on the development of so-called mini-nukes. Democrats had argued that ending the ban could suggest to other countries that the United States is prepared again to use nuclear weapons. NPR's Tom Gjelten reports.

TOM GJELTEN reporting: During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union both maintained nuclear stockpiles, with large bombs for destroying cities and smaller low-yield warheads for use on the battlefield. After the Cold War ended, nuclear arsenals made less sense, and in 1993, Congress barred the development of new mini-nukes. But the Bush administration and the Pentagon are once again interested in nuclear weapons. General Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, yesterday explained how low-yield nuclear warheads could be used to destroy biological or chemical weapon facilities, an operation for which conventional weapons might not be suitable.

• All Things Considered, May 22, host Melissa Block, reporter David Kestenbaum (776 words)

MELISSA BLOCK, host: And I'm Melissa Block. The Senate has voted to repeal a 10-year ban on the development of low-yield nuclear weapons. The term "low-yield" here is relative; it refers to any weapon less than 5 kilotons. The bomb dropped on Hiroshima was about 15 kilotons. The Defense Department would like to study mini-nukes, as they're called, to see if they might be useful for destroying underground bunkers, which are sometimes protected by dozens or even hundreds of feet of rock. Yesterday, senators spoke passionately for and against the ban, but some weapons scientists and physicists who watched the debate say neither side got the science right.

NPR's David Kestenbaum reports.

DAVID KESTENBAUM reporting: Michael Levy watched the debate on C-SPAN, but had to turn it off in frustration. Levy is a physicist and a fellow at The Brookings Institution. Like any self-respecting analyst, he started to write an editorial to set the record straight.

Mr. MICHAEL LEVY (The Brookings Institution): And maybe half an hour later, I just got too frustrated with it and I abandoned even that.

APPENDIX F
Definitions and Chronologies

Robert D. Lamb, CISSM

Types of weapons of mass destruction (WMD)

Biological weapons (BW). Use microorganisms (or pathogens), dispersed by animals, aerosol packages, artillery shells, or warheads, to cause sickness or death. Level of damage depends primarily on the biological agent's transmissibility, lethality, and susceptibility to countermeasures.

Chemical weapons (CW). Use various chemical substances, dispersed in liquid, vapor, gas, or aerosol form, to cause sickness, paralysis, unconsciousness, or death as a result of physical contact or inhalation. Civilian and commercial chemical production facilities can easily be converted to CW production. Damage is generally limited to the immediate target area, though some chemicals can remain for years.

Nuclear weapons. Use nuclear fission or fusion to produce large explosions and hazardous radioactive materials. Nuclear weapons can be delivered by artillery, plane, ship, ballistic missile, or suitcase and can be either tactical weapons (with an explosive force less than a kiloton) or strategic weapons (explosive force up to thousands of kilotons). Damage is complete or nearly complete within a few miles of the target area due to explosive forces and extreme heat, but radiation and radioactive debris ("fallout") affect large populations in surrounding areas as well, depending on weather conditions.

Radiological weapons. Also called "dirty bombs" and radiological dispersal devices (RDDs). Use conventional explosives to disperse radioactive material, such as nuclear waste or radioactive isotopes, and cause radiation sickness, cancer, death (eventually), and contamination of the target; contamination could make the immediate and downwind areas uninhabitable until cleaned up or razed. The health effects depend on type of radioactive material used; certain radioactive isotopes, such as cesium-137 and cobalt-60, tend to be more deadly than, for example, nuclear waste. Damage is limited to the immediate area of the explosion and an area downwind of the target.

WMD-related international organizations and treaties

Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM). Prohibited deployment of national missile defense systems in the United States and the Soviet Union (later Russia) until US withdrawal nullified it in June 2002. Originally negotiated as part of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) between the two superpowers. Prohibited development and testing of space-, air-, sea-, and mobile ground-based ABM systems, but permitted deployment of a fixed, ground-based regional ABM system in two locations (later decreased to one location) in each country. Signed on May 26, 1972; entered into force on October 3, 1972. The United States announced its withdrawal on December 31, 2001, arguing that it prevented deployment of an ABM system to guard against ballistic missile attacks from "rogue states" and terrorists. No longer in force as of June 13, 2002.

Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC). Prohibits development, production, or stockpiling of bacteriological and toxin weapons. Requires member states either to destroy all agents, toxins, weapons, equipment, and means of delivery or to redirect them to peaceful useful. Does not include verification or enforcement mechanisms; attempts to negotiate a Protocol adding such provisions were blocked by the United States in 2002. Opened for signature on April 10, 1972; entered into force on March 26, 1975.

Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). Prohibits development, production, stockpiling, and use of chemical weapons. Requires member states to destroy all chemical weapons and chemical weapons production facilities. Includes extensive verification provisions. Opened for signature on January 13, 1993; entered into force on April 29, 1997.

Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT). Bans all nuclear explosions, with the intent of constraining nuclear weapons development. Adopted by UN General Assembly on September 10, 1996, and signed by 71 states, including all five declared nuclear-weapons states (NWS), on September 24, 1996. Does not enter into force until the 44 nuclear-capable states that were UN Conference on Disarmament (CD) members on June 18, 1996, ratify it; to date, only 41 have signed it and only 31 have ratified it. India, Pakistan, and North Korea have not signed it. The United States, among others, has not ratified it (the Senate rejected the treaty on October 14, 1999).

Conference on Disarmament (CD). Established in 1979 as multilateral disarmament negotiating forum. Originally had 40 members, now has 66. Organization and its predecessors negotiated NPT, CTBT, and CWC, among others. The CTBT was the last agreement it negotiated, in 1996. Agreement on work plan is currently blocked due to disagreement between China and the United States over Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space (PAROS) negotiations (the US opposes PAROS).

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Established as autonomous organization under the United Nations in 1957 as an intergovernmental forum for scientific and technical cooperation in the peaceful use of nuclear technology. Inspects nuclear power and other facilities to ensure compliance with relevant international obligations, especially to confirm that non-nuclear weapons states (non-NWS) that are parties to the NPT do not have any unsafeguarded nuclear material that could be used in a weapons program; each non-NPT party is expected to negotiate and sign a Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement with the IAEA setting out the mechanics of verification, and since the first Iraq war, IAEA has encouraged parties to sign an Additional Protocol, with tougher safeguards, as well. IAEA headed by Hans Blix from 1981 to 1997 and by Mohamed ElBaradei today.

Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Adopted by UN General Assembly on June 12, 1968; entered into force on March 5, 1970; extended indefinitely on May 11, 1995. The five declared nuclear weapons states (NWS) agree not to transfer nuclear weapons technology to other states, and the non-NWS state parties agree not to develop or acquire nuclear weapons. Most countries (about 187) have signed it; India, Israel, and Pakistan have not; North Korea signed it in 1985 but withdrew in January 2003. Article 1: NWS will not transfer nuclear weapons or related technology and expertise to non-NWS. Article 2: Non-NWS parties will not receive, manufacture or otherwise acquire nuclear weapons. Article 3: Non-NWS parties will accept comprehensive international safeguards through agreements negotiated with the IAEA. Article 4: Parties are encouraged to cooperate in peaceful nuclear programs. Article 6: Parties will pursue nuclear arms control leading to general disarmament.

Iran

On May 8, 2003, print media reported that the Bush administration announced it was concerned Iran was accelerating its secret nuclear weapons development program and called on the IAEA to find Iran in violation of its obligations under the NPT.

Nuclear weapons. Ratified the NPT on February 20, 1970; signed the CTBT on September 24, 1996; has allowed IAEA inspections since February 1992. The Bush administration alleges Iran is building a uranium enrichment facility in Natanz and a heavy water production facility near Arak. The IAEA has asked Iran to respond to questions surrounding its failure to declare uranium imports pursuant to its IAEA Safeguards Agreement. Iran has 5MW and 30KW research reactors and 0.01KW critical assembly at

Esfahan and Tehran, which are under IAEA safeguards, and it plans to build 15 reactors, with Russian assistance, as part of its civilian energy program.

Chemical weapons. Ratified the CWC on November 3, 1997, but has not submitted initial declaration. Iran began CW production in mid-1980s after CW attacks by Iraq, and began stockpiling cyanogen chloride, phosgene, and mustard gas after 1985; it reportedly initiated nerve agent production in 1994. China is an important supplier of technology and equipment, but Iran is developing an independent program.

Biological weapons. Ratified BWC on August 22, 1973. Research effort reportedly initiated in 1980s during war with Iraq; suspected research laboratory at Damghan; may have produced small quantities of agents and begun weaponization; likely has capability for independent production program, although Russia has supplied expertise.

Iraq

Nuclear weapons. Ratified the NPT on October 29, 1969; has not signed the CTBT. Iraq initiated a nuclear energy program in 1975 and is known to have had an active nuclear weapons development program by the late 1980s. Israeli bombers destroyed a reactor facility in 1981. In 1988 Iraq had a plan to produce its first nuclear weapon sometime in 1991. In 1990, it embarked on a "crash" program to meet that deadline, but ongoing technical difficulties made that unrealistic. The effort was slowed during the Persian Gulf War when a key facility was bombed and destroyed. During the 1990s, IAEA weapons inspectors determined that, despite an ongoing clandestine program, Iraq didn't have the physical capability to produce enough nuclear materials for use in a weapon, partly because IAEA inspectors destroyed those facilities and removed weapons-grade materials. Inspectors were kicked out of Iraq in 1998, but returned in late 2002 after the United States, citing WMD concerns, threatened to use armed force to remove Saddam Hussein, a threat it carried out a few months later. No definitive evidence of an ongoing nuclear weapons program has been discovered since the United States began its occupation of the country, although the Bush administration claims it has discovered nuclear-weapons-related program activities.

Chemical weapons. Has not signed the CWC. Used CW against Iranian forces during Iran-Iraq war in the mid-1980s and against Iraqi-Kurdish civilians in 1988. Produced and stockpiled sarin, mustard, tabun, and VX before the Persian Gulf War, but its CW program was dismantled by UN weapons inspectors in the 1990s. No definitive evidence of an ongoing CW program has been discovered since the United States began its occupation of the country.

Biological weapons. Signed the BWC on May 11, 1972, but didn't ratify it until after the Persian Gulf War, on June 19, 1991. In 1995, it admitted to having 30,000 liters of biological agents or filled munitions and to having filled and deployed BW during the war. No definitive evidence of an ongoing BW program has been discovered since the United States began its occupation of the country.

North Korea, Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)

Nuclear weapons. Signed the NPT in 1985 under international pressure but didn't sign the IAEA safeguards agreement (as required by the NPT) until 1992. In January 1993, it refused to allow IAEA inspection of suspected nuclear waste facilities, and on March 12, 1993, it announced it would withdraw from the NPT, although talks with the United States led to North Korea's agreement to "suspend" the withdrawal. In late 1994, US-DPRK talks resulted in the Agreed Framework, under which North Korea agreed to freeze and eventually dismantle all of its existing nuclear programs in exchange for supplies of alternative energy sources (heavy oil in the short term and two proliferation-resistant light water nuclear

reactors in the long term). US Congress never appropriated sufficient funds for the light water reactors, citing evidence of a nuclear weapons program. On October 17, 2002, print media reported that North Korea admitted to a secret nuclear weapons development program. In January 2003 it withdrew from the NPT (suspending its 1993 suspension); in April 2003, it admitted it possesses nuclear weapons and has reprocessed spent fuel rods, although these claims have been disputed. Since then, North Korea has participated in talks involving six-countries (North and South Korea, the United States, China, Russia and Japan) to discuss the future of its nuclear program.

Chemical weapons. Has not signed the CWC. Began developing CW in the 1960s and is believed to have had a mature CW program since 1989 that includes a large stockpile of existing CW and the capability to produce additional nerve, blister, choking and blood chemical agents.

Biological weapons. Signed the BWC in 1987. Began BW research in the 1960s and accelerated work in 1980. National Defense Research Institute and Medical Academy (NDRIMA) has studied anthrax, cholera, bubonic plague, smallpox, and yellow fever, among other pathogens. North Korea has the capability to weaponize BW agents.

India

On May 12, 1998, print media reported that India had conducted three underground nuclear tests the day before.

Nuclear weapons. Has not signed the NPT; voted against, and has not signed, the CTBT at the UN. Conducted its first nuclear detonation ("peaceful nuclear explosion") on May 18, 1974, and maintained an "options strategy" that left open the option to build nuclear weapons if regional and international conditions warranted. It was likely developing thermonuclear weapons before 1980 and is known to have been doing thermonuclear research by 1989. On April 8, 1998 (two days after a Pakistani missile test), India's prime minister authorized nuclear weapons tests; three were carried out on May 11, 1998, and two more on May 13, 1998.

Biological and chemical weapons. Not directly relevant to this study.

Pakistan

Nuclear weapons. Has not signed the NPT or the CTBT. Began nuclear weapons program after the India-Pakistan war, and by 1990 was able to make cores for several weapons. In response to India's nuclear weapons tests, Pakistan carried out five nuclear weapons tests on May 28, 1998, and one more on May 30, 1998.

Biological and chemical weapons. Not directly relevant to this study.

Acronyms

ABM — anti-ballistic missile

APEC — Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation

BWC — Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention

BW — biological weapons

CD — Conference on Disarmament

CTBT — Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty

CW — chemical weapons

CWC — Chemical Weapons Convention

DPRK — Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea)

DU — depleted uranium

IAEA — International Atomic Energy Agency

kt — kiloton

LAT — The Los Angeles Times

NDRIMA — National Defense Research Institute and Medical Academy (North Korea)

NPT — Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty

NWS — nuclear-weapons states

non-NWS — non-nuclear-weapons states

NYT — The New York Times

PAROS — Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space

PM — Prime Minister

R&D — research and development

RDD — radiological dispersal devices

RNEP — Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator (the "bunker-buster" bomb)

SALT — Strategic Arms Limitation Talks

UK — United Kingdom

UN — United Nations

US — United States of America

WMD — weapons of mass destruction

WP — The Washington Post