

# RED, WHITE, AND PARTISAN

How the Media Furor Over Bush's War on Terror  
Vanished Under Obama



a special report from the

 **media research center**  
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# Red, White, and Partisan

## How the Media Furor Over Bush's War on Terror Vanished Under Obama

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The premeditated murder of thousands of Americans on September 11, 2001 unified the United States in grief over the attacks and in resolve to never let it happen again. Just as members of Congress stood together as one on the Capitol steps to sing "God Bless America," the American major media united with the people in their collective shock and outrage.

But that feeling did not last. Within a month, America went to war in Afghanistan, and the media returned to its traditional pose of being above "nationalistic fervor." Instead, the media coverage grew dark and foreboding, presenting our government as a malignant force many Americans didn't recognize. When Barack Obama was elected, the pessimism faded, and so did the skepticism.

To review how the broadcast television networks portrayed the War on Terror in the decade since 9/11, the Media Research Center has identified major trends that stand out from ten years of media analysis. The Bush policy was often reviled, and the Obama policy was often ignored or praised:

- Under Bush, anchors and reporters painted the War on Terror as a dark era in American history where our civil liberties were vanishing. Terrorist suspects were often treated as morally superior to their U.S. military captors.
- Under Obama, the picture of unjustly detained terror suspects faded from view, and Guantanamo faded as an international outrage.

- Under Bush, the networks eagerly promoted partisan talking points that cast the administration as villainous or inept in its handling of the War on Terror – or, even worse, somehow to blame for the 9/11 attacks themselves.
- Under Obama, the media’s coverage of Obama’s failures on terrorism (the mass murder at Fort Hood and the near misses above Detroit and in Times Square) diverted the subject from Obama’s performance to other controversies (like America’s alleged “Islamophobia”). When Obama’s performance succeeded – as in his command of the mission to kill Osama bin Laden – the subject wasn’t changed.
- Under Bush, TV journalists were so averse to nationalism that they found allusions to an “axis of evil” in the world to be grotesque, and obsessed over the unpopularity of Bush’s America in Europe and the Middle East.
- Under Obama, the media simply assumed that a less nationalistic Obama’s outreach to the Muslim world (including his speech in Cairo) would warm global opinion, and ignored surveys that belied that assumption.
- Under Bush, the networks defended Bush’s partisan critics as patriotic dissenters who should not be impugned, even as those protesters impugned Bush in the vilest terms.
- Under Obama, Republicans were discouraged from criticizing the President for terror-policy failures, and left-wing critics of Obama’s continuation of Bush policies vanished from the airwaves.

MRC’s conclusion: While journalists like ABC News President David Westin insisted that the patriotic thing for journalists to do after 9/11 was “to be independent and objective and present the facts to the American people,” the networks failed to live up that “we report, you decide” standard.

# Red, White, and Partisan

## How the Media Furor Over Bush's War on Terror Vanished Under Obama

BY TIM GRAHAM, DIRECTOR OF MEDIA ANALYSIS

On a sunny, crystal-clear Tuesday – September 11, 2001 – three commercial jet airliners were hijacked and flown into famous buildings: two into the World Trade Center towers in New York, and one into the Pentagon. A fourth hijacked-airliner plot was foiled by courageous passengers and crashed in Pennsylvania.

In the shock and horror of these terrorist attacks on America, there was a remarkable reign of unity in the national press. It was the angry, nationalistic headlines on Wednesday morning: “A Day of Infamy” in the *Tulsa World*; “America Savaged, Forever Changed” in the *Detroit News*; “Outrage” in the *Atlanta Constitution*; and the *San Francisco Examiner* yelling, “Bastards!” It was *Time* magazine boasting on its cover, “One Nation, Indivisible.” It was *Newsweek* stating, simply, “God Bless America.”

It was CBS anchorman Dan Rather on the Letterman show twice breaking down in tears asking President Bush where he “wants me to line up.” Rather asked, “Who can sing now, with the same meaning we had before, one stanza of [*America the Beautiful*] that goes, ‘So beautiful, for patriot’s dream, that sees beyond the years/Thine alabaster cities gleam, undimmed by human tears’? We can never say that song again, that way.”

But even in those sorrowful days, a longer-lasting media spin was emerging. Within 24 hours, in the early morning hours of Wednesday, *Newsweek* Senior Editor Jonathan Alter was telling Brian Williams on MSNBC that “We don’t want this to change America too much...Yes, we must retaliate, but if we go on too much of a war footing, then we’ll get into a cycle that folks in the Middle East have been living with for many, many years and would truly change the nature of what it is to be an American.”

In that little speech were so many seeds of the media spin in the Bush years. The media elite never liked the “war footing” and constantly warned that the War on Terror was ruining America, both in terms of domestic civil liberties and global public opinion.

The titans of network news made it plain that they never signed up for war, and that any symbol of supporting that war or the Republican commander-in-chief would be avoided. ABC News President David Westin banned the wearing of flag pins by ABC reporters. Why? Because: "I think our patriotic duty as journalists in the United States is to try to be independent and objective and present the facts to the American people and let them decide all the important things."

Sadly, the media's coverage over the last decade was not objective, and it was certainly not independent of liberal partisans, leftist experts and terrorist defense lawyers. To review how the broadcast television networks portrayed the War on Terror in the decade since 9/11, the Media Research Center has identified major trends that stand out from ten years of media analysis. The Bush policy was often reviled, and the Obama policy was often ignored or praised:

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## *Civil Liberties: Bush's Abuse?*

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Under Bush, the media viewed the War on Terror as a dark era in American history where our civil liberties were vanishing. In November of 2001, the *Washington Post* found in a poll that seven in ten Americans believed the government was doing enough to protect the rights of suspected terrorists, and an equally large majority believed the government was doing enough to protect the rights of Arab-Americans and American Muslims.

The media, however, eagerly tried to “correct” that view. Attorney General John Ashcroft did a round of interviews on the networks on November 29, 2001, and not a single interviewer mentioned the poll or asked if the government was doing enough to prevent another terrorist attack. Instead, Ashcroft was uniformly hammered from the left about mistreating terror suspects.

NBC's Matt Lauer expressed disgust: “You said the other day at a press briefing, in referring to the question of are we infringing on the civil rights of some of these people being detained, you said there hasn't been one civil rights lawsuit brought against the Justice Department or the American government. Is that really a standard we want to live with? That we push things as far as we can until someone sues us?”

■ **Patriot Act.** Within the first week of media coverage after 9/11, discussion of the Patriot Act – which passed the House 357-66 and the Senate 98-1 in October 2001 – contained plenty of critics. Over the first five years of War on Terror coverage, ABC, CBS and NBC heavily favored Patriot Act opponents. Of 23 soundbites from “experts” (such as law professors or ex-FBI agents), 61 percent faulted the law as a threat to privacy rights. Of 19 soundbites from ordinary citizens, every one condemned the Patriot Act, despite polls showing most Americans support the Patriot Act and believe it has prevented new acts of terrorism.

Network reporters would return to the “endangered civil liberties” topic in a majority of their stories about the Patriot Act in those first five years (56 out of 91 stories, or 62 percent). The networks presented fears about a police state as valid and reasonable, perhaps even an admirable early warning. On the July 4, 2003 *CBS Evening News*, fill-in anchor John Roberts claimed that “as Americans celebrate their independence today, concern is growing that civil liberties are threatened as never before by the Patriot Act.”

This hyperbole didn't just emerge in Patriot Act stories. It even showed up on September 11 anniversaries. On September 11, 2002, NBC anchor Tom Brokaw launched this first-anniversary observance: “That brings us to America's growing Arab and Muslim communities. For many, this has been the year – as one observer put it – that the American dream for them descended into nightmares.”

Reporter Jim Avila mourned: “This is Jeanean Othman, an American of Palestinian descent. Born 42 years ago in suburban Chicago. Now worried everything she learned as an

American about justice and civil rights collapsed along with New York's Twin Towers." Othman added: "All of a sudden, this, you know, the regular Constitution doesn't apply to Muslims somehow."



After live coverage of the State of the Union address in 2004, Peter Jennings challenged Sen. John Kerry by quoting from an outraged Iowa college student, pushing from the left: "'John Kerry voted yes for President Bush's Patriot Act, he voted yes for Bush's No Child Left Behind, he voted yes for Bush,' these are his words, 'to invade Iraq. If you support John Kerry for President you might as well stay home on election day as Bush is already doing a good job of leading America into a war and shredding the Constitution.'"

Anchormen thought the notion of Bush "shredding the Constitution" was fair comment, even to the extreme that they would suggest an ultra-liberal senator like John Kerry was failing to oppose emphatically enough this metaphorical shredding.

■ **Guantanamo.** On January 10, 2002, less than four months after September 11, military police began transferring captured enemy combatants to a newly-established prison facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

For most of 2002, the networks covered Guantanamo as a military story, largely focusing on the preparations and security measures. After 2002, however, the networks shifted their coverage away from the challenge the detainees presented to their military guards. Just 39 stories mentioned the dangers posed by the Guantanamo prisoners (14 percent of the total). Far more stories focused on charges that the captured al-Qaeda terrorists were due additional rights or privileges (100 stories, or 36 percent) or allegations that detainees were being mistreated or abused (105 stories, or 38 percent). (Some stories included more than one topic.)

Despite the knowledge that detainees had used deception to win their way back into battle against the U.S., network reporters exhibited amazingly little skepticism of their claims of innocence and torment at the hands of their American captors. On September 12, 2002, referring to the observance of the 9/11 anniversary, ABC's Jennings oddly observed: "It was a somber day for U.S. soldiers at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, obviously. But for nearly 600 prisoners, it was another day. They have no calendars, and nobody told them it was the first anniversary."

The following year, ABC's *World News Tonight* weirdly chose the second anniversary of the September 11 attacks to offer a sympathetic view of the prisoners. "There have been 31 suicide attempts to date," reporter Claire Shipman fretted. "Letters home obtained by ABC News show despair. One Kuwaiti prisoner writes [that] he wants, quote, 'to die, as I cannot

stand this place.'...Prison guards have told us that it's the uncertainty of their fate that is the worst punishment for prisoners here."

The networks did not seem to ponder whether or not the terror suspects were guilty. If they had plotted the deaths of Americans, why should Americans be urged to feel regret that they're unhappy in detention? The tone of this coverage suggested that the prisoners had more moral authority than their U.S. military captors.

■ **Betraying America's Values.** On ABC's *Nightline* on December 19, 2005, Terry Moran threw this hardball at Vice President Dick Cheney: "I'd like to put this personally, if I can. You're a grandfather. I'm a father. When we look at those girls and we think that the country we're about to pass to them is a country where the Vice President can't say whether or not we have secret prisons around the world, whether water-boarding and mock executions is consistent with our values, and a country where the government is surveilling Americans without the warrant of a court - is that the country we want to pass on to them?"

This matches what MRC analysts found when they reviewed the three broadcast evening newscasts and found 69 stories on the National Security Administration phone-surveillance program from December 16, 2005 (the day the program was disclosed by the *New York Times*) through February 3, 2006. Most network stories (57, or 83 percent) cast the NSA program as legally dubious or outright illegal....Reporters most often framed the story as about government infringing on "civil liberties" (the focus of 29 stories, or 42 percent). Half of the soundbites from experts (30, or 56 percent) condemned the ethics or legality of the NSA program, compared with just four (seven percent) who found the program justified, an eight-to-one disparity.

The tone was set by ABC's new anchorman Bob Woodruff, who began his newscast with loaded Orwell phrases: "Big Brother. The uproar over a secret presidential order giving the government unprecedented powers to spy on Americans."



A CBS News/*New York Times* poll showed how the public shifted sides on this surveillance question depending on how the question is framed. First question: To stop terrorism, "would you be willing or not willing to allow government agencies to monitor the telephone calls and e-mails of ordinary Americans on a regular basis?" Unsurprisingly, this idea was rejected: 70 percent to 28. Then the pollsters changed the wording to be much more precise in who is being monitored: "In order to reduce the threat of terrorism, would you be willing or not willing to allow government agencies to monitor the telephone calls and e-mails of Americans that the government is suspicious of?" When the targets are suspected terrorists or sympathizers, the numbers completely flipped: 68 percent supported monitoring them, and only 29 percent said no.

Most correspondents in those stories portrayed the NSA as casting a wide net, targeting “Americans” or “U.S. citizens” (53, or 40 percent), or used terms such as “domestic” or “communications inside the U.S.” (60, or 45 percent). ABC’s Dan Harris even began on December 24 by hyping “the spying was much more widespread, with millions of calls and e-mails tracked – perhaps even yours.” By contrast, only about a sixth of these descriptions (21, or 16 percent) stated that the government was focused on persons contacting suspected terrorists (12) or the suspected terrorists themselves (nine).

In the wake of the NSA “domestic spying” scandal, the media liked casting aspersions on the Bush administration as a dangerous cabal of authoritarians. *Newsweek* senior editor Jonathan Alter cried tyranny: “We’re seeing clearly now that Bush thought 9/11 gave him license to act like a dictator, or in his own mind, no doubt, like Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War.” Alter suggested leaking the NSA story to the *New York Times* was not shameful, as Bush suggested, but patriotic: “It was the work of a patriot inside the government who was trying to stop a presidential power grab.”

## ***Obama Opens the Prison Gates?***

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Once Barack Obama was elected, the narrative changed, detained terror suspects faded from view, and Guantanamo wasn’t as much of an international outrage.

An MRC review of the first 100 days of the Obama presidency on network television news found the networks focused most of their coverage on Obama’s decision to end the “torture” of detainees; to close the prison for suspected terrorists Guantanamo Bay, Cuba; and to publicly release Bush-era Justice Department memos on permissible interrogation methods.

Coverage of the President was not uniformly positive. In fact, a slight majority of statements from reporters and quoted news sources (51 percent) supporting Obama’s actions, vs. 49 percent who disapproved. NBC and CBS were mostly positive of Obama’s softer line, but ABC’s *World News* remained critical of detainee policy.

While these stories presented a nearly balanced debate about President Obama, the networks cast former President George W. Bush and his administration in a far harsher light. Four out of five statements (80 percent) on the network newscasts during President Obama’s 100 days cast the Bush administration as corrupt or criminal in their handling of terrorist detainees. Only a handful included a response from any former administration official such as Vice President Dick Cheney.

The Bush administration was rarely defended. ABC’s *World News* on April 18, 2009, for example, presented a one-sided attack without any rebuttal, citing liberal journalist Jane Mayer claiming higher-ups pushed CIA interrogators to abuse prisoners. “We’ve got people

inside the CIA saying, 'We don't want to do this. This is criminal. This is not what America is about,' and they were ordered to do it anyway," Mayer alleged.

For all of their early claims of bipartisanship, Obama knew his liberal base wanted outspoken attacks on the previous administration. Network reporters never suggested that President Obama or his aides should justify their criticisms of President Bush's record on terrorism or detention of terror suspects.

■ **Clubbing Navy SEALs.** One obvious demonstration that the networks (and other national media) were still more concerned about suspects than they were about American military personnel was the case of three Navy SEALs who were court-martialed in late 2009 for allegedly punching a terror suspect named Ahmed Hashem Abed, believed to be the mastermind behind four American contractors in Iraq being brutally murdered, burned, and hung from a bridge in Fallujah.

Kate Wiltrout had the story for the *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*: "The military confirmed Wednesday that Petty Officer 2nd Class Matthew McCabe, 24, was charged last month with assaulting a detainee, dereliction of duty for failing to protect a detainee and making a false statement. Petty Officer 1st Class Julio Huertas and Petty Officer 2nd Class Jonathan Keefe are accused of failing to protect the man, whose identity is classified."

The *New York Post* wasn't shy about this outrage. "And so the SEALs will be arraigned on December 7 - another reason for the date to live in infamy," it stated. "Ironically, if the three had treated Abed like Al-Qaeda-in-Iraq has routinely treated American soldiers it captures, his bloody, mutilated corpse would've turned up floating in a river."

Eventually, the three SEALs were all cleared - Huertas and Keefe in April 2010, and McCabe in May 2010. None of these verdicts drew any more network interest than the court-martials did. These fighting men and their plight under the Obama administration were never defined as newsworthy.

■ **Ahmed Ghailani.** The Obama Justice Department's first showcase attempt to try a Guantanamo terrorist suspect in civilian court was a man named Ahmed Ghailani, accused of aiding the bombing of two U.S. embassies in 1998, which killed hundreds, including 12 Americans. A Clinton-appointed federal judge mangled that attempt by barring a witness that was important to the case. On the October 6, 2010 *CBS Evening News*, Katie Couric offered an anchor brief, calling it a "big setback for federal prosecutors," not for the Obama administration. ABC and NBC skipped it.

A month later, on November 18, *CBS Early Show* news anchor Erica Hill asserted that "the verdict is in for the first Guantanamo detainee to be tried in a civilian court and it is being seen by some as a serious setback for the government." Ghailani was acquitted on 284 out of 285 charges against him. Obama's name never came up on CBS.

Over on NBC's *Today*, the four-hour morning program devoted a scant 40 seconds to the topic. News anchor Ann Curry at least softly allowed "the decision could undermine President Obama's plan to put other Guantanamo Bay detainees on trial in civilian courts." NBC never offered more than anchor briefs on Ghailani's trial and verdict.

ABC offered one full story, but Jake Tapper was the only reporter to include criticism from Republicans, with Peter King lamenting the verdict "demonstrates the absolute insanity of the Obama administration's decision to try al Qaeda terrorists in civilian courts." But later, news anchor Juju Chang offered an anchor brief that only repeated the administration line: "The Obama administration argues Wednesday's conviction of an al Qaeda operative on only one of nearly 300 charges, does not show that civilian courts can't handle terrorism trials. The White House says that one conviction will send Ahmed Ghailani to prison for at least 20 years for his role in two embassy bombings in Africa."

■ **Ahmed Warsame.** On July 6, 2011, the story broke that Team Obama had held Somali terror suspect Ahmed Warsame on a Navy ship in the Persian Gulf for two months while he was interrogated. Does anyone recall those allegedly objective, nonpartisan journalists unleashing outrage about the floating "gulag"?

This story broke as a front-page story in the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*, but somehow that didn't translate to TV. ABC's *Good Morning America* offered a brief 97-word story from news anchor Josh Elliott. That's 33 words more than the 64 words on CBS's *The Early Show*. NBC News apparently skipped reading newspapers that day and offered nothing. The harshest critique from the Big Three was this bland sentence from ABC's Elliott: "The case will likely stir more debate in Washington over whether military detainees should be brought into the U.S."

Even MSNBC was almost silent in prime time. Rachel Maddow was the only evening host on the "progressive" network to cover the Warsame story and protest that the alleged terrorist was questioned before he was read Miranda warnings. Terror suspects and their defense lawyers didn't have much of a megaphone any more.

## ***Bush and His Inept Villains on Terror***

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Network anchors, reporters, and analysts relentlessly suggested the War on Terror, whether at home, in Iraq, or around the world, was wildly controversial and overwhelmingly ineffective. The utter lack of another attack on the American homeland for the rest of the Bush presidency carried no weight, as liberal journalists highlighted that the Bush administration never passed their evaluations for competence.

■ **Civilian casualties in Afghanistan.** From the beginning, some TV reporters were eager to show how the U.S. military often killed innocent people instead of terrorists. When asked why in October of 2001 why the Taliban would allow Western journalists in, ABC's Dan Harris announced "They have one single, unerring goal, which is to show that civilian casualties are mounting that the U.S. is responsible for."

In a survey of the first three weeks of Afghanistan air strikes, MRC analysts found that ABC's *World News Tonight* devoted nearly four times as much of its programs to allegations of civilian casualties as the *CBS Evening News*, and almost twice as much as *NBC Nightly News*. While all three newscasts displayed pictures of structures identified as damaged civilian buildings, ABC repeatedly used disturbing images of wrapped bodies and injured people, including children with facial wounds.

At the same time, ABC downplayed the American military's dedication to keeping such casualties low, and the obvious benefits to the Taliban of exaggerating the number of deaths caused by U.S. bombs. The *CBS Evening News* spent twice as much airtime covering these points as did ABC's *World News Tonight*.

Worse yet, ABC skipped over intentional civilian casualties that weren't caused by American bombing. On Sunday, October 28, 2001, terrorists massacred 16 Christians as they worshiped at a Catholic church in Pakistan. ABC's *World News Tonight* skipped this nightmarish massacre of innocents in its entirety. But they did find time that night for a full story on how two people in the Northern Alliance-controlled portion of Afghanistan were accidentally killed by U.S. bombs. "An old woman cried out to God in pain," David Wright relayed.

CBS and NBC both reported the story on their next evening news broadcast, but *World News Tonight* never touched it. It wouldn't have been missed if the church had been accidentally bombed by the U.S. instead of intentionally shot by extremists.

■ **Did Bush Knowingly Allow 9/11?** On May 15, 2002, CBS reporter David Martin first reported that President Bush had received intelligence reports of a potential al-Qaeda hijacking last August. He calmly put this scoop into the context of larger intelligence failures, lamenting it was "as close as U.S. intelligence came to alerting the President to an airliner attack."

Hours later, CNN's Judy Woodruff transformed it into a declarative statement about how "President Bush knew that al-Qaeda was planning to hijack a U.S. airliner." The following morning, NBC's Katie Couric led with the dramatic Watergate-scandal question "What did he know and when did he know it?" On ABC, Charlie Gibson echoed that and topped it. He wondered out loud if President Bush was "really surprised" when chief of staff Andy Card told about the World Trade Center bombing.

By nightfall, CNN was exploiting this notion to bash Bush, reporting an instant poll: “Did the Bush administration act on 9/11 warnings the proper way? Forty-one percent said yes, 52 percent said no.”

This burst of coverage underlined that the networks disliked President Bush enough that they could entertain the notion that Bush was told of a specific al-Qaeda plan to attack America and did nothing, that he would allow 9/11 to happen. No one can imagine that these same networks would ever suggest President Obama could be that callous.



Then the conspiracy fever broke. On ABC’s *Nightline*, Ted Koppel suggested that intelligence warnings aren’t always obvious: “At times like these, it can be difficult to remember that no one had ever deliberately flown a plane into a building before. It is easy to overlook the fact that reams of raw intelligence data inundate the FBI and CIA every day. What seems glaringly significant now could easily, and understandably, have been overlooked ten months ago. Still, Congress is stirring and the administration is twitching.”

■ **Petraeus: From Bumbler to Brilliant Choice.** One obvious double standard in network coverage came in stories on Gen. David Petraeus, who was maligned by left-wing activists as “General Betray Us” under Bush. The media didn’t really object to a MoveOn.org full-page ad in the *New York Times* using that epithet, although they did report President Bush’s objection to it.

On the September 10, 2007 *World News*, reporter Jonathan Karl related: “War critics inside and outside the hearing room attacked Petraeus, saying he had manipulated statistics – failing, for example, include many killings in his calculation of ethnic violence. The anti-war group MoveOn.org went further, accusing the General of cooking the books for the White House.”

On the September 12, 2007 *NBC Nightly News*, anchor Brian Williams interviewed Gen. Petraeus, and despite telling viewers he had a Ph.D. from Princeton, the anchorman treated him as someone who couldn’t grasp that the U.S. invasion had created terrorists.

Williams told Petraeus NBC had counted how many he times he mentioned al-Qaeda in his testimony (160), but “all these insurgents, how can you be so sure in a war without uniforms or membership cards, the claim by the critics is it fuzzes it up, it makes it a convenient, unified argument....How are we so sure all of these insurgents can be labeled al-Qaeda?” Williams insisted the general admit that “al-Qaeda in Iraq wasn’t around” on 9/11, and demanded to know “how are we so sure all of these insurgents can be labeled al-Qaeda?”

He also pounced on what liberals found to be a gaffe: Petraeus' admission that he's not sure if the war had made Americans safer. Williams said, "Moments after you responded to a question that you weren't sure that the war in Iraq had made Americans safer, I heard a commentator on television say, 'Can you imagine Eisenhower saying the same thing?'"

That unnamed commentator: Williams' MSNBC colleague Chris Matthews, who exclaimed, "This must be a first, an American field commander who can't say whether the sacrifices he's asking of his troops every day and night are worth it to their country. Did General Washington not know the answer in the American Revolution? Did General Eisenhower not know the answer in World War II? What are we doing in Iraq if the very man commanding the war doesn't know if it's doing us any good in terms of our national security? This is the real news of the so-called Petraeus Report." Petraeus worked for Bush, so he was a bumbler.

This came at the same time the Democrats in Congress were expressing the notion that Petraeus was out of his depth. Sen. Hillary Clinton, then in full campaign mode, stared across at the general and insisted "Despite what I view is your rather extraordinary efforts in your testimony both yesterday and today, I think that the reports that you provide to us really require a willing suspension of disbelief." Clinton added that "any fair reading of the advantages and disadvantages accruing post-surge, in my view, end up on the downside."

But fast-forward three years, and when Gen. Petraeus was appointed to oversee Obama's surge strategy in Afghanistan on June 23, 2010, the journalists were immediately giddy. In live afternoon coverage, NBC Pentagon reporter Jim Miklaszewski declared: "This is nothing less than a stunning development, Brian, and quite frankly, at a quick glance, almost brilliant." White House correspondent Chuck Todd added: "Politically, in this town, it's going to be seen as a brilliant choice by the President."

"Brilliant" was the word of the day. "It sounds like a pretty brilliant decision, really," said CBS White House reporter Chip Reid. Over on CNN, anchor Wolf Blitzer echoed: "Politically, a very brilliant move to tap General Petraeus." The next morning, ABC's George Stephanopoulos added, "That pick really seems to have been the political masterstroke that got President Obama out of the tight box he was in."

Not only that, Obama's critics should be silent. Reid explained: "So the President avoids both the criticisms here, number one, putting somebody new in charge and, number two, since he fired McChrystal, he's not going to be accused of being weak." Miklaszewski noted: "This may quiet some of the critics up on Capitol Hill." Todd later predicted "you will not hear a single word from Capitol Hill, no Republican will dare say a negative thing about this decision."

■ **Warmer to Obama's War.** President Obama's decision to implement a surge of new U.S. troops to Afghanistan drew positive network coverage, in sharp contrast to their reaction to President Bush's 2007 move to send additional troops to Iraq.

In 35 stories in the first 100 days, 91 percent of the statements made on a network evening news broadcast about Obama's Afghanistan strategy were favorable. Most of the favorable comments naturally came from President Obama and his aides. The numerical tilt came from an almost complete absence of critics from the airwaves, from the right or left. In 2007, congressional Democrats – including Obama himself – loudly decried Bush's troop surge as a mistake. But none of the networks' 100 day coverage noted the irony that President Obama was adopting a similar strategy, when Obama proclaimed in 2007 that “The best way to protect our security and to pressure Iraq's leaders to resolve their civil war is to immediately begin to remove our combat troops. Not in six months or one year – now.”

Back then, the networks cast the Iraq troop surge as wildly risky and profoundly unpopular. The day after Bush's announcement, on the January 11, 2007 *Evening News*, CBS anchor Katie Couric argued it was a non-starter: “If the early reaction to President Bush's new Iraq strategy is any indication, selling the American public on it could be a mission impossible....The reviews of the speech last night were largely negative, from the American public and Congress.”

On the day of the long-anticipated report from General David Petraeus on the “surge,” Couric's newscast ignored how its latest poll had discovered the third straight month of an increase in the percent of Americans who believe the surge has “made things better” in Iraq. As public support grew, CBS's interest in the result disappeared.

In July, anchor Katie Couric led her newscast with how only 19 percent thought the surge was “making things better.” A month later, in August, when that number jumped to 29 percent, CBS and Couric waited 20 minutes into the show and gave it just 12 seconds. When the share crediting the surge for “making things better” rose to 35 percent in the survey, CBS skipped it and found time to highlight three other findings that stressed public opposition to the war and distrust of President Bush.

The network reaction to President Obama's surge in Afghanistan was vastly different. When word came on February 17, 2009 that Obama was dispatching 17,000 troops to Afghanistan, none of the networks cast it as controversial or even worthy of more than perfunctory coverage. ABC and CBS held themselves to brief reports, while NBC's Miklaszewski argued that with violence in Afghanistan rising, “these additional forces are urgently needed.”

## *Obama's Terror Policy Failures*

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While the Bush administration's war on terror was covered in overwhelmingly negative tones on television, failures of the Obama administration were covered as tragic events that somehow shouldn't reflect too much on the President or his appointees. Network anchors and reporters often changed the subject of controversy.

The mass shooting at Fort Hood on November 5, 2009, with 13 killed and 30 wounded by an Army psychiatrist and Islamic extremist, drew more concern for American prejudice than for Obama ineptitude. ABC's Martha Raddatz offered this summary: "As for the suspect, Nidal Hasan, as one officer's wife told me, 'I wish his name was Smith.'" Diane Sawyer repeated the Raddatz line on *Good Morning America* the next day. Sadly, that was better than CBS or NBC, which utterly avoided the name of the Muslim assailant on the first night.

On the next evening, ABC made sure Americans were "educated" about prejudice. Bill Weir reported: "The Pentagon has made a real concerted effort to create a military that is culturally sensitive and religiously tolerant, but Muslims in uniform today face a challenge not seen since Japanese-Americans fought in World War II. They taste suspicion from some fellow soldiers who question their loyalty and resentment from fellow Muslims opposed to both American wars."

By Sunday, CBS *Face the Nation* host Bob Schieffer just wanted to forget about the issue of Islamic extremists finding religious justifications for killing our military. All religions have their murderers: "It's looking more and more like he was just, sort of, a religious nut. And you know, Islam doesn't have a majority - the Christian religion has its full, you know, full helping of nuts, too."

When CBS's Harry Smith turned to an Obama administration official for answers, he asked if the problem was that we have too many wars going on: "How disturbing is it to you that it looks like various agencies failed to connect the dots on Major Hasan?...We know from the beginning of the Iraq war, the escalation in number of cases of post-traumatic stress disorder. The other fact is, is that the more people go back to these fields, these theaters of war, either in Iraq or Afghanistan, it multiplies the incidence of these kinds of things occurring."

Less than two months later, only ineptitude prevented Nigerian extremist Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab from exploding a suicide bomb on a Northwest Airlines flight just before landing in Detroit on Christmas Day. Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano strangely claimed "the system worked," but the media were again playing defense.

On January 6, 2010, CBS *Early Show* co-host Maggie Rodriguez pressed Rep. Peter King (R-N.Y.) to stop complaining about Obama: "Congressman, here you are a Republican talking about everything that's wrong and everything that went wrong. I want to read to you from

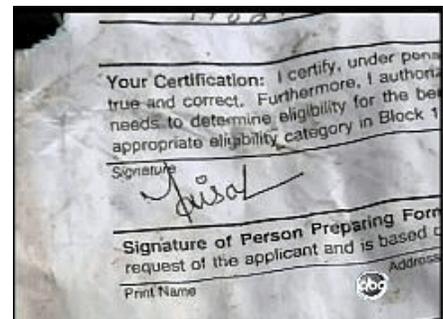
today's *New York Times*. Tom Kean, who was the co-chairman of the 9/11 Commission said quote, 'we should dismiss the partisan bickering over the security failures over this issue. Both parties have presided over security failures and successes.' Do you agree and do you say to your colleagues let's try to support the President here and get to the bottom of the real issue?"

According to the media elite, the President wasn't inept. He was merely failed by intelligence agencies. This wasn't a working excuse for President Bush. But Obama was a Democrat, and could be lovingly connected to John F. Kennedy. On ABC's *Good Morning America*, investigative reporter Brian Ross explained: "Like another young President almost 50 years ago, Barack Obama found the so-called intelligence professionals, the veterans, the old hands, failed him and failed the country. And as John Kennedy did when the CIA blew an invasion of Cuba in 1961, President Obama took responsibility for the failure to stop and spot the underwear bomber."

ABC encouraged the concept that the President could gain popularity, not lose it, for the failed attack. Anchor Diane Sawyer asserted: "I have to say, 'the buck stops here.' It's an echo of another young President in another time." George Stephanopoulos added: "John Kennedy after the Bay of Pigs. Huge intelligence failures at the Bay of Pigs. The President took responsibility, his popularity shot up. The White House is calculating with the President taking personal responsibility, they can put this behind them."

On May 1, 2010, there was another failed terrorist attack by another Islamic radical named Faisal Shahzad, who attempted to blow up Times Square in New York City with explosives parked in an SUV. Again, the networks somehow saw the story as disconnected from the Obama administration's war on terrorism. They even tried to suggest the comforts of America should have persuaded Shahzad against his violent intentions.

On the May 4 *World News*, Chris Cuomo asked "Why did someone, with apparently so much to live for, simply decide to throw it all away? Faisal Shahzad seemed to be living the American dream. Wife, two kids, nice house in the suburbs, an immigrant from Pakistan bettering himself through education and hard work....Shahzad would go on to earn a BS and MBA at the University of Bridgeport. Even his signature seems to suggest optimism - it appears a heart is dotting the 'i' in Faisal...."



On the May 5 *CBS Evening News*, Bob Orr reported: "Investigators say a quest for revenge seems to have played some role, but personal financial pressures may also have pushed Shahzad to act. He became a U.S. citizen just a year ago, but he has not realized any American dream. He quit his job, lost his house, and was separated from his family."

ABC's Barbara Walters later spoke for many journalists when U.S. Navy SEALs killed Osama bin Laden. Obama was the hero: "President Bush tried, President Clinton tried, but Barack Obama was the one who had the courage and the guts and the coolness, and took that chance. Had this not worked out, he would have gotten all the blame. It was enormously, enormously courageous."

### *Averse to Nationalism as a Pro-Bush Platform*

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The media are averse to nationalism. They associate it with a surrender of their journalistic independence. This is why you can easily notice reporters skipping the Pledge of Allegiance at official events.

Shortly after the 9/11 horror faded, the media elite reverted to being transnational, willing to emphasize (and overemphasize, and then caricature) the dark motives and actions of the United States. Someone inside the Reuters wire service sent the *Washington Post's* Howard Kurtz an internal memo from Stephen Jukes, their global head of news: "We all know that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter and that Reuters upholds the principle that we do not use the word terrorist...To be frank, it adds little to call the attack on the World Trade Center a terrorist attack."

Kurtz asked Jukes: Why this neutrality between murderers and victims? "We're trying to treat everyone on a level playing field, however tragic it's been and however awful and cataclysmic for the American people and people around the world," Jukes replied. "We're there to tell the story. We're not there to evaluate the moral case."

That sounded like complete neutrality, to the point of refusing to acknowledge the attacks were intended to terrify the American people. But Reuters wasn't really abandoning moral judgment. On September 3, 2002, came this photo caption: "Recovery and debris removal work continues at the site of the World Trade Center known as 'ground zero' in New York, March 25, 2002. Human rights around the world have been a casualty of the U.S. 'war on terror' since September 11." It was distributed with a story: "Rights the first victim of 'war on terror.'"

NPR foreign editor Loren Jenkins told the *Chicago Tribune* that his "marching orders" from his taxpayer-subsidized network were to find where American troops are and "smoke 'em out." When asked if he would reveal the location of a U.S. commando unit in Pakistan, he declared "You report it. I don't represent the government. I represent history, information, what happened." He then slammed the military because "in one form or another, they never tell you the truth. They've been proven wrong too many times."

News executives tried so energetically to be “independent” that they suggested perhaps the Pentagon was a legitimate terrorist target. The MRC caught ABC News President David Westin’s remarks at an October 23, 2001 event which C-SPAN played on October 27:



“The Pentagon as a legitimate target? I actually don’t have an opinion on that and it’s important I not have an opinion on that as I sit here in my capacity right now. The way I conceive my job running a news organization, and the way I would like all the journalists at ABC News to perceive it, is there is a big difference between a normative position and a positive position. Our job is to determine what is, not what ought to be and when we get into the job of what ought to be I think we’re not doing a service to the American people. I can say the Pentagon got hit, I can say this is what their position is, this is what our position is, but for me to take a position this was right or wrong, I mean, that’s perhaps for me in my private life, perhaps it’s for me dealing with my loved ones, perhaps it’s for my minister at church. But as a journalist I feel strongly that’s something that I should not be taking a position on. I’m supposed to figure out what is and what is not, not what ought to be.” Westin later backed away and apologized for that statement.

Media executives were defensive about the accusation that they’re unpatriotic. “Any misstep and you can get into trouble with these guys and have the Patriotism Police hunt you down. These are hard jobs,” lamented MSNBC President Erik Sorenson in a *New York Times* story on November 7, 2001. “Just getting the facts straight is monumentally difficult. We don’t want to have to wonder if we are saluting properly. Was I supposed to use the three-fingered salute today?”

If reporters were truly attentive to just getting facts straight, this lament would be more credible. Instead, reporters in the Bush years had a bad habit of siding against American policy, even when the goals were utterly humanitarian.

■ **Food Aid Is Propaganda?** One day after bombing began in Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, American networks picked up “internationalist” complaints that U.S. food aid drops were harmful exercises in propaganda. “One other item about these food and medicine drops,” ABC’s Peter Jennings stated on *World News Tonight*. “They’re not popular with everyone. The international relief group, Doctors Without Borders, which won the Nobel Peace Prize for relief work, described it today as military propaganda to justify the bombing.” By the next night, ABC had sent reporter Dan Harris to follow up on the charge. “Some humanitarian aid workers were saying this effort is little more than propaganda.”

On October 10, NBC’s Matt Lauer questioned the Air Force general in charge of the air drops, D. L. Johnson: “But you can’t deny the fact that when you drop these into impoverished areas you’re, in effect, sending U.S. propaganda into those areas, you’re saying,

‘Taliban bad. Here’s a gift from the U.S.’” Johnson bluntly replied that “We’re saying this is a gift of food and nourishment to people who are starving.” It somehow didn’t occur to Lauer that these acts of kindness would project what liberal reporters would insist Bush didn’t project: that it wasn’t a war on all Muslims or all Afghanis, but on the terrorists.

On October 12, ABC’s Michele Norris even questioned the Bushes asking school children to donate a dollar for aid to Afghanistan as using the kids as propaganda pawns. “Behind the scenes there are quiet grumblings about this dollar drive. There are concerns that American children are being used in a propaganda campaign. But school officials said they wouldn’t dare air those concerns publicly, not when America appears to be swept up by symbolism.”

■ **Axis of Malice?** The media elite never liked Ronald Reagan’s “evil empire” speech about the Soviet Union under communism. The same disdain emerged when George W. Bush identified an “axis of evil” in his first State of the Union address after 9/11. When President Bush declared his opposition to an “axis of evil” in his 2002 State of the Union address, the networks dismissed the notion as oafish, and even dangerous.

MRC analysts reviewed all 37 evening news stories on ABC, CBS, and NBC discussing the “axis of evil” from January 30, 2002 (the day after the speech) through coverage of Bush’s trip to Asia on February 19. Only five of those stories (or 14 percent) focused on the identified countries – Iran, Iraq, and North Korea – while 73 percent of stories were dominated by negative reaction to Bush’s concept.

On January 30, ABC’s Jim Wooten described the Iranians as “genuinely astonished” by the “axis of evil” label. “Thousands of Iranians took part in pro-U.S. demonstrations here after September 11,” he declared, but “whatever goodwill may have been generated, they say, has now evaporated in the heat of the indictment from President Bush.” ABC’s Terry Moran explained “the President and other top officials are trying to calm jittery nerves in Asia and dispel images of Mr. Bush as a dangerous warmonger.”

They clearly wanted this phrase to be unpopular: out of 19 “talking heads” invited by the networks to comment, 89 percent condemned Bush’s statement. To be fair, these numbers exclude summarized views of Iranian, Iraqi, and North Korean officials, as well as administration explanations of “axis of evil” policy. But it also included the “jittery” Bush opponents in foreign countries.

On February 11, all three anchors linked Bush’s remark to government-organized protests in Iran. CBS’s Dan Rather credited the rally as being “the biggest anti-American demonstration there in years.” Peter Jennings called the rally “gigantic,” adding that “millions of people do not like being referred to as evil” – shifting the focus of Bush’s statement from the totalitarian regime to its victims. ABC’s Mark Litke highlighted “angry South Koreans, and not just the usual student demonstrators, also accusing Bush of arrogance for taking the path of confrontation with the North.”

■ **Wallowing in Abu Ghraib.** There is a vast difference between sexual humiliation and brutal murder. But the networks displayed much greater outrage for U.S. prisoner abuse than for the enemy's murders. Viewers received a false picture of moral equivalence, with only American offenses amplified.

To illustrate a fraction of the bias problem, MRC analysts counted the number of prisoner-abuse stories on NBC's evening and morning news programs (*NBC Nightly News* and *Today*) from April 29, 2004, when the Abu Ghraib story emerged, through May 11 (which captured only part of the furor). In those 13 days, there were 58 morning and evening stories. Using the Nexis news-data retrieval system, analysts then counted the number of stories on mass graves found in Iraq from the reign of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and 2004. The number of evening and morning news stories on those grim discoveries over many months? Five.

On the May 6, 2003 *Nightly News*, Jim Maceda reported a very pointed story, suggesting as many as 300,000 may be buried in groups around Iraq. *Today* never aired a story in 2003 or 2004 on mass graves in Iraq. But *Today* used the Abu Ghraib pictures to insist on political damage to the Bush administration. NBC was in a rush to punish. Katie Couric and Matt Lauer asked repeatedly about whether Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld should resign.

The same strange standard emerged when American aid worker Nicholas Berg had his head sawed off in Iraq by notorious terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. None of the networks could show the grotesque snuff-film footage of Berg's murder, although CBS came closest, showing Berg as he was pushed to the ground and holding the still frame as they played the audio of his last screams.

With few exceptions, the Berg beheading was at best a two-day TV story, an obstacle to get around. On the very night of the Berg story's emergence, ABC's *Nightline* couldn't spend more than a few minutes on Berg before Ted Koppel was back to soliciting John McCain to address Abu Ghraib and other U.S.-imposed nightmares.

By the second night, even though NBC was showing the Berg photo in the show's introduction (sitting in front of his captors), the newscast itself was sticking to prison abuse, prison abuse, prison abuse. Berg's death was in revenge to the Great Satan. NBC's Richard Engel explained, "Berg, a 26-year-old from suburban Philadelphia, may not have understood what the militants were saying in Arabic, the reason why they were about to execute him: revenge for what the militants call the Satanic degradation of Iraqi prisoners at Baghdad's Abu Ghraib prison."

On May 12, NBC's Fred Francis reported, "In Amman, Jordan, and most Arab capitals, the stories of the abused prisoners got far more coverage than the horrific slaying of Berg." The same was true in America.

Two nights before in a story on “Arab street” reaction to Abu Ghraib, Francis really underlined the willingness to sling vile accusations at America under Bush: “In Cairo, anti-U.S. sentiment is so strong many here see no difference here between the actions of Saddam Hussein and George Bush....One Arab businessman [said], ‘That is not Jeffersonian democracy. It’s more like a lesson from Hitler’s book, *Mein Kampf*.’”

## ***Obama Crumbles a Wall***

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On Barack Obama’s inauguration day, former NBC anchor Tom Brokaw was so overjoyed he thought of communist-overthrow metaphors: “It reminds me of the Velvet Revolution. I was in Prague when that happened. And Vaclav Havel was a generational leader and was in the square in Prague and the streets were filled with joy.”

In June, when Obama planned a Muslim-outreach speech in Cairo, Brokaw’s successor Brian Williams interviewed the new President and suggested Bush could never do such a thing: “It’s a speech that your predecessor perhaps could not have given constitutionally, given who he is, and could not have given because the attack came on his watch.” Obama rejected Williams’ premise: “I’m not sure that it’s true that President Bush couldn’t have given a speech in the Muslim world.” Both ignored that he did just that, speaking about Muslim democracy in the Muslim nation of Turkey on June 29, 2004. The networks barely acknowledged the speech near the Ortakoy Mosque and the Bosphorus Bridge, which links Europe and Asia.



Network personnel portrayed Obama’s Cairo address as certain to have a massive impact on public opinion in the Mideast. CBS correspondent Lara Logan previewed the speech: “Terrorists who are threatened by Obama’s popularity amongst Muslims do not want America’s President to succeed.”

After the speech Bob Schieffer raved: “This was a remarkable speech...The most remarkable thing to me was just simply that he made it...That he would go to Cairo and that he would speak with the candor he did...the fact that he was there, that Muslims got a chance to see him, to hear him, as he said, you know, he looks like them. This will have a great impact.”

CBS anchor Harry Smith found a powerful professor was talking: “Powerful, far-ranging speech this morning that President Obama has delivered in Cairo....He was not only presidential, he was also professorial. He was very much a teacher this morning. He was giving Americans and Muslims a history lesson.”

Over on ABC, Chris Cuomo proclaimed, “This is going to be a speech that is going to be talked about for a long time. The President has outlined, basically, seven major points which covers everything that has to do with American and Muslim and Arab relations. It has been very comprehensive. And very thoughtful and historic.”

CBS’s Lara Logan talked about the “excitement” in Cairo over Obama’s “historic” speech, and highlighted Obama’s personal popularity there: “This is a first in Cairo – the name of an American President on T-shirts and souvenirs on sale here. It’s a sign of Barack Obama’s personal popularity and how much is resting on his shoulders.”

NBC’s Andrea Mitchell crowed: “This was a transformational speech potentially, by reaching out to the Islamic world, by using the language, as Richard [Engel] pointed out, by saying ‘As-Salamu Alaykum,’ he has transformed the view of America among 1.5 billion people, and that is potentially the biggest, biggest benefit of all. This could change the Obama presidency.”

■ **So Much for Global Attitudes.** In 2002, liberals at the Pew Research Center created a Pew Global Attitudes Project to underline with international public-opinion surveys the world’s dissatisfaction with President Bush.

On October 17, 2008, NBC reporter Dawna Friesen announced from Istanbul: “Polls show the image of the U.S. has improved slightly this year simply because President Bush is leaving. And, that if the world had a vote, Barack Obama would win in a landslide. Regardless of who wins, the world is clamoring for a new America in 2009.”

Friesen offered no statistic to back that up that obsequious claim, but used a Pew Global poll against Bush: “Much of the sympathy and solidarity that existed after 9/11 evaporated during the Bush years, especially in the Muslim world. A recent Pew poll found only 37 percent of Indonesians, 22 percent of Egyptians and 19 percent of Pakistanis had a positive opinion of the U.S. Even among traditional western European allies, approval is low: 31 percent in Germany, 33 percent in Spain, 42 percent in France.”

In 2009, Pew announced with great fanfare “Obama More Popular Abroad Than At Home, Global Image of U.S. Continues to Benefit.” But the 2010 survey found that when Pew sampled Egyptians to see if they had a favorable or unfavorable view of the United States, just 20 percent of Egyptians had a favorable view of the United States, compared to 79 percent unfavorable. This wouldn’t reflect well on the Obama image after the Cairo speech.

Pew asked specifically if Egyptians had confidence in President Obama. It was still negative: 35 percent had confidence, while almost double that number, 64 percent, disagreed. By contrast, fully 75 percent of those surveyed had a favorable view of the radical Muslim Brotherhood. That doesn’t sound like the country full of Obama T-shirt-wearers Lara Logan promised on CBS.

This is certainly not the reception that media liberals and Pew pundits expected. They couldn't imagine that perhaps people in other countries just have an anti-American animus regardless of the President. So the networks avoided them.

**Ground Zero Mosque.** Just before the ninth anniversary of 9/11, controversy erupted in New York over a proposed mega-mosque two blocks from Ground Zero. The proposal was unpopular: by a wide margin of 66 percent to 29 percent, the ABC News/*Washington Post* poll found the public was opposed. It was passionate: more than half (53 percent) told ABC News they are "strongly opposed" to building it near Ground Zero versus only 14 percent strongly in favor.

MRC analysts reviewed all 52 stories about the Ground Zero mosque on the ABC, CBS and NBC evening newscasts from August 14 through September 13, 2010 – the first month after President Obama propelled the issue into the headlines with his remarks at a White House dinner. The results showed that the networks tilted in favor of mosque supporters and against public opinion, with more than half (55 percent) of all soundbites or reporter comments coming down on the pro-mosque side of the debate, and just 45 percent for opponents.

The debate grew more aggressively tilted over time. During the first week (August 14-20), the networks actually provided more visibility to mosque opponents – 55 percent of soundbites, vs. 45 percent for mosque supporters. But in the following weeks (August 21 to September 13), the networks' coverage lurched in the other direction, with mosque supporters receiving a 63 percent to 37 percent advantage.

On the August 23 *Nightly News*, for example, NBC's Ron Allen picked up how "many Muslim-Americans insist this debate is more evidence of religious intolerance." On the August 25 *CBS Evening News*, fill-in anchor Jeff Glor linked the stabbing of a cab driver to the mosque debate: "That alleged hate crime took place in the shadow of a heated and divisive debate over whether a mosque should be build near Ground Zero."

Four days later, on ABC's *World News*, correspondent Steve Osunsami cited "a string of recent incidents suggesting that many Americans don't care for Muslims – the back and forth over the Islamic center near Ground Zero, the cab driver who was stabbed simply for being Muslim." ABC's Dan Harris chimed in on the September 5 *World News*: "Critics say all the rhetoric is fueling anti-Muslim violence."

Parsing the numbers shows that there were two debates going on. Debate about the Islamic center real-estate project itself and/or its organizers was almost perfectly balanced (57 soundbites arguing against the project, vs. 54 soundbites in favor, or a 51-49 percent split). But the "debate" about whether opposition reflected Islamophobia was almost perfectly one-sided: 27 soundbites (93 percent) leveling that accusation, with just two soundbites (7 percent) offering a defense.

The coverage raises the question of whether the networks feel anyone should be allowed to question Islam or Islamic radicalism without being painted as racist or “Islamophobic.” This is certainly not the way the networks routinely treat anti-Christian attitudes.

Some anchors saw twin towers of intolerance. In her online commentary, CBS anchor Katie Couric editorialized: “It might be Islamophobia, Obamaphobia, or both, but when loudspeakers are blaring ‘Born in the USA’ and signs say ‘No Clubhouse for Terrorists,’ it’s clear we aren’t just talking about a mosque anymore. There is a debate to be had about the sensitivity of building this center so close to Ground Zero. But we can not let fear and rage tear down the towers of our core American values.”



### *The Glory, and Then Invisibility, of Dissent*

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While a strong majority of the American people favored war in Iraq in early 2003, the networks were promoting war opponents. A major protest on January 18, 2003 drew 26 segments on ABC, CBS, and NBC, 14 of them before the rally began. (By contrast, a major rally against abortion four days later was ignored.) Anti-war protesters were portrayed as diverse and patriotic and religious.

“Braving frigid temperatures,” ABC’s Lisa Sylvester proclaimed on *World News Tonight*, “they traveled across the country – black and white, Democrat and Republican, young and old.” In a second January 18 story, ABC reporter Geoff Morrell followed the trip to DC by a doctor and his “honor student” daughter: “So they rode a bus all night from Asheville, North Carolina. On board were businessmen, soccer moms and military veterans – all members of the same church.”

Terry Moran intoned from the anchor desk: “The scene was similar on the West Coast where anti-war protesters marched in San Francisco. Tens of thousands of people packed the city’s streets and, as in Washington, they called for the U.S. to resolve the crisis in Iraq peacefully. And there were anti-war demonstrations in dozens of cities around the world as well. Thousands of demonstrators blocked traffic as they marched in Syria’s capital, Damascus. In Tokyo, the scene was similar.” However, an AP story at the time pointed out it wasn’t all similar: “Not all protesters were pushing for peace: In the Syrian capital, Damascus, some people shouted, ‘Our beloved Saddam, strike Tel Aviv,’ a refrain from the 1991 Persian Gulf War.” But the “anti-war” crowds were presented as peaceful and newsworthy even when they favored Saddam Hussein.

**The 9/11 Family Tilt.** In 2004, the commission investigating the 9/11 terrorist attacks wrapped up a high-profile series of public hearings in Washington. Throughout these

hearings, the TV networks gave a forum to relatives of those who died that day, asking them to judge the hearings and the conduct of the participants.

An MRC review of interview segments on ABC's *Good Morning America*, CBS's *The Early Show* and NBC's *Today* from March 23 through April 15, 2004 found a slant against Bush. Nine guests, with a total of 20 appearances, were critics of the President, compared with only three interviews with two Bush supporters. (None of the relatives were neutral or ambiguous in their comments about the Bush administration's supposed negligence.)

Neither ABC nor CBS featured any morning interviews with pro-Bush relatives, while NBC squeezed in two Bush backers: Jim Boyle, the father of a New York firefighter killed on 9/11, appeared twice on the *Today* show, while Deborah Burlingame, the sister of one of the pilots on American Airlines Flight 77, appeared once. But they were hardly alone in their views; Boyle was one of 40 9/11 relatives who signed a public letter praising Condoleezza Rice and rejecting the charge the President ignored obvious signs that the horrible terrorist attacks were coming.

But such views were minimized on the networks in favor of relatives who blamed the Bush administration for not thwarting the attacks. NBC's *Today* hosted Kristen Breitweiser, whose husband died in the World Trade Center, four times in those three weeks. In the fall, she appeared with Democratic nominee John Kerry on the campaign trail.

Six other anti-Bush relatives appeared a total of seven times on *Today* during the same time period. ABC's *Good Morning America* featured six interviews with relatives, all of whom were Bush critics, while CBS's *Early Show* showcased three anti-Bush relatives who each appeared once.

**Cindy Sheehan's Evil-Bush Access.** On their Saturday evening newscasts on August 6, 2005, ABC and CBS touted a tiny Cindy Sheehan protest outside Bush's Crawford, Texas ranch with just "a few dozen people," allowing her to say Bush is enjoying his vacation while "I'm never going to be able to enjoy another vacation because he killed my son." The networks saw no need for civility in dissent. On her website, Sheehan wildly proclaimed "overwhelming" evidence that Bush was a traitor: "George [Bush] and his indecent bandits traitorously had intelligence fabricated to fit their goal of invading Iraq." She was not a radical with a very cynical view of government policy. The networks described her as a "Peace Mom" on a "peace vigil."

Meanwhile, Sheehan was telling fellow leftists "Thank God for the Internet, or we wouldn't know anything, and we would already be a fascist state." She stated President Bush is an "evil maniac" who should "sign up his two little party-animal girls" for the war. Bush was the "biggest terrorist," and was promoting the "cancer of Pax Americana" and "imperialism in the Middle East" with the help of other "war criminals."

The networks piled on this story for weeks, while Bush stayed in Crawford on his vacation, skipping over the more wild-eyed, uncivil insults. Those might drained what they called her “moral authority.” After the weekend, ABC morning host Charles Gibson promoted this segment: “Standing her ground. She lost her son in Iraq, she opposes the war, now she’s camped out at President Bush’s ranch and says she won’t leave until he meets with her. An exclusive interview on *Good Morning America*.” CBS anchor Bob Schieffer wondered, “We had this mother of a soldier who was killed in Iraq sort of camping out there down in Crawford....I wonder why the President doesn’t meet with her?”

The networks even touted their own hype. ABC’s Geoff Morrell marked a week of stories by adding another story: “Over the last seven days, this one-woman protest has gone from being a roadside distraction to a potential political problem for the President. In the 11 days Mr. Bush has been on vacation, at least 37 troops have been killed in Iraq. And as the bloodshed continues, his approval ratings are falling.” On August 17, CBS reporter Bill Plante oozed: “Out of nowhere, Cindy Sheehan has suddenly become the red-hot symbol of opposition to the war....By camping out on the road to President Bush’s ranch, Sheehan, in just ten days, has become a magnet for the anti-war movement.” By August 22, ABC was asking on screen: “Can Anti-War Moms Stop Bush?”

But in 1998, a few weeks after Clinton admitted sex with Monica Lewinsky, he went to his first partisan pep rally in Worcester, Massachusetts. The streets outside the hall were filled with protesters demanding Clinton resign, but while ABC and CBS did full stories on the event itself, neither network stooped to interview the demonstrators.

Even Cindy Sheehan, when she showed up at Martha’s Vineyard to protest President Obama in 2009, could not find any publicity from ABC, CBS, or NBC. Only Bret Baier of Fox News noted on September 10, 2010 that Sheehan was in Manhattan proclaiming: “I am a 9/11 truther. We just don’t know – I don’t know how far inside it went. But, you know, I’m sure Dick Cheney had something to do with it.” Baier added Sheehan claimed Obama was doing everything he can to “protect the criminals of the Bush regime.” The other networks seemed to forget her “moral authority.”

ABC anchor Charles Gibson clearly had a change of heart, telling Don Wade of WLS Radio in Chicago that Sheehan should pack it in: “Anybody who has given a son to this country has made an enormous sacrifice, and you have to be sympathetic. But enough already.”

Apparently a “peace” protest isn’t patriotic when the President’s not a Republican.

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