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# Terrorism as a Context of Coverage before the Iraq War

*Amy Fried*

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This article examines terrorism as a context in the major newsmagazines' coverage of Iraq in the prewar period. Contexts and associated issues help create news frames, which can affect judgments of events and policies. This investigation relies on the issues of *Time* and *Newsweek* published in September 2002 and from the first issue of January 2003 through the March 24, 2003, issue and includes analysis of the issues' cover art, graphics within news stories, and Iraq and terrorism stories. During this period, newsmagazines frequently juxtaposed terrorism and Iraq and used graphics that linked Iraq to terrorism and terrorists.

**Keywords:** *news media; framing; graphics; Iraq; terrorism; September 11; newsmagazines*

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Fifteen months after the Iraq War began, the commission investigating September 11 made news by declaring, "We have no credible evidence that Iraq and al Qaeda cooperated on attacks against the United States" (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States 2004: 5). This conclusion struck a nerve with the administration because, as the *Washington Post* reported, "President Bush, Vice President Cheney and other top administration officials have often asserted that there were extensive ties between Hussein's government and Osama bin Laden's terrorist network; earlier [that year], Cheney said evidence of a link was 'overwhelming.'" Indeed, in the 2003 State of the Union Address, President Bush (2003b) declared, "Saddam Hussein aids and protects terrorists, including members of al Qaeda."

Furthermore, before the war most Americans believed that there were linkages between Saddam Hussein and terrorists who threaten the nation. The CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll found that 88 percent in March 2003 and 86 percent in August 2002 agreed that "Saddam Hussein is involved in supporting

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terrorist groups that have plans to attack the United States.” Fifty-one percent in March 2003 and 53 percent in August 2002 answered yes to the question, “Do you think Saddam Hussein was personally involved in the September 11th terrorist attacks, or not?”<sup>2</sup>

This article examines terrorism as a context in the major newsmagazines’ coverage of Iraq in the prewar period.<sup>3</sup> Contexts and associated issues are important in creating frames, which can “generate support or opposition to political actor or policy” (Entman 2004: 47).

### Research Approach

This analysis relies on the issues of *Time* and *Newsweek* published in September 2002 and from the first issue of January 2003 through the March 24, 2003, issue, a total of thirty-four issues.<sup>4</sup> I chose September 2002 because it marked the start of a new effort by the Bush administration to promote support for its Iraq enterprise. In his September 12 speech to the United Nations, President Bush (2002) began by mentioning the September 11 terrorist attacks of the year before and then cited “the dangers, in their most lethal and aggressive forms” posed by Iraq. The first months of 2003 marked the final run-up to war.

The major newsmagazines face business challenges but are still substantial providers of news to the American public. According to the 2003 Annual Report of the Washington Post Company, over the past five years, *Newsweek’s* magazine “average weekly domestic circulation rate base” was 3.1 million copies. *Newsweek* also publishes several international editions and an online version that generates 180 million page views per month.<sup>5</sup> *Time* has led in circulation and, in 2001, had 928,000 more in circulation than *Newsweek*. *Time’s* circulation fell 13 percent from 1998 to 2002, while *Newsweek’s* has been considerably more stable.<sup>6</sup> In addition, while both *Time* and *Newsweek* continue to provide a good deal of news, they have shifted their attention toward entertainment, health and lifestyle concerns, business, and other sorts of soft news. However, during 2003, newsmagazines turned back toward their core mission and revitalized and enhanced their coverage of global and international affairs, as well as domestic matters.

The newsmagazines were read in their entirety in paper form, so that I could note cover art and themes (presented in Table 1), graphics within news stories, and the inclusion of Iraq and terrorism stories in a variety of magazine locations. As Entman (2004: 96, 100) argues, “Visual information [is influential] in the construction of frames.” “Newsmagazine covers are particularly useful because they typically summarize the dominant framing of major foreign and domestic policy issues.” Such a strategy enabled a more complete picture of the magazines’ texts, read either in paper or obtained through a database search.

**Table I**Cover stories of *Time* and *Newsweek*, September 2002 and January 2003 through March 24, 2003

Cover Date	<i>Time Magazine</i>	<i>Newsweek</i>
September 2, 2002	What Really Makes You Fat	Dr. Phil
September 11, 2002	9/11	A Year Later—9/11
September 16, 2002	Are We Ready for War?	Target: Iraq
September 23, 2002	Al Qaeda Terrorist	How We Helped Saddam and Can We Fix Iraq after He's Gone?
September 30, 2002	Abraham	Should You Buy Organic?
January 6, 2003	Persons of the Year	Who's Next Issue
January 12, 2003	Kim Jong Il—Bigger Threat?	Kim Jong Il—Bigger Threat?
January 20, 2003	Mind-Body Healing	Perfect Diet
January 27, 2003	Donald Rumsfeld's Blueprint for War	Affirmative Action
February 3, 2003	CIA's Secret Army	Hell Bent on War—Will Attack- ing Iraq Make Us Safer?
February 10, 2003	Space Shuttle	Space Shuttle
February 17, 2003	Mysteries of DNA	Powell at U.N.
February 24, 2003	America the Anxious	Anxiety and Your Brain
March 3, 2003	Do You Want This War?	Black Women
March 10, 2003	Life after Saddam	Bush & God
March 17, 2003	Bound for Baghdad	Counter Attack—Bio Weapons and Urban Warfare. How Saddam Might Fight Back
March 24, 2003	When Mom Goes to War	Why America Scares the World

## Contexts of Coverage

### September 2002

September 2002 marked the beginning of a new phase of Bush administration efforts regarding Iraq. In an emotional month, which included the one-year anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks, President Bush addressed the nation on September 11 and spoke to the United Nations on September 12. Rhetoric and political efforts to promote the president's Iraq policy had been relatively scarce over the summer because, as White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card told a *New York Times* reporter, "From a marketing point of view, you don't introduce new products in August." White House officials sought "to use Mr. Bush's speech on Sept. 11 to help move Americans toward support of action against Iraq . . . [in part by placing President Bush] at "Ellis Island, where the Statue of Liberty [was] seen aglow behind Mr. Bush." "Mr. Bush's Sept. 11 remarks, about 10 minutes in length, [was] to serve as the emotional precursor

for a tougher speech about Iraq that the president [was] to deliver to the United Nations General Assembly the following day.”

*Time*'s and *Newsweek*'s coverage of Iraq policy was framed by the September 11 context, as well as stories about terrorism in general. As Table 1 shows, the September 16 cover stories about Iraq were preceded by cover stories about September 11 and then followed by a *Time* September 23 cover about al Qaeda terrorists. *Newsweek*'s cover in September 23 emphasized Iraq, with a main title “How We Helped Create Saddam and Can We Fix Iraq after He's Gone?” and a large picture of Saddam Hussein's face taking up most of the cover. Within the issue, just before the cover story, was a four-page photo spread focused around September 11 commemorations, including flags, a kneeling police officer at Ground Zero, flowers, and President Bush's words from his speech of commemoration, spread across two pages, “What our enemies have begun, we will finish.”

*Newsweek* intermixed stories on terrorist threats to the United States with ones on Iraq. For example, in its September 30 issue, one could find “The Hunt for Sleeper Cells” and a story on American mosques titled “A Safe Haven?” near an article on military plans and eventualities in Iraq called “The Fog of Battle.” *Time*'s September 23 issue included a cover story on the capture of a terrorist who planned attacks in southeast Asia and stories on patrols over the no-fly zone and on how Ramzi Binalshibh was seized in Pakistan. Binalshibh, a Yemeni, was involved in carrying out the September 11 attacks.

While coverage typically noted questions about whether Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, the existence of weapons of mass destruction was sometimes assumed. Both newsmagazines used graphics that strongly implied that Iraq posed a threat to U.S. national security. For instance, *Newsweek*'s September 16 issue included a map of Iraq with legends demarcating biological installations, chemical installations, and ballistic missile installations. *Time*, in its September 11 issue, explored possible links between Iraq and al Qaeda. The story showed a map of “suspected al-Qaeda refuges” in the northern, Kurdish area of Iraq and discussed allegations of links between Iraq and al Qaeda.

### January 2003

January 2003 coverage took place in a relatively inactive period in the Iraq war run-up.<sup>8</sup> Only one cover story of the month concerned Iraq, *Time*'s January 27 issue, “Donald Rumsfeld's Blueprint for War.” However, this and other issues brought together stories on Iraq and on the threat of terrorism. *Time* and *Newsweek* both focused on North Korea's Kim Il Jong in the second issue of January. With the turn to the new year, *Time* and *Newsweek* rolled out theme issues that looked back to the previous year, *Time*'s “Persons of the Year” issue, and forward to the next, *Newsweek*'s “Who's Next Issue.” One of *Time*'s Persons of the Year was FBI Agent Coleen Rowley, who had tried to raise the alarm regarding

Zacarias Moussaoui. Considered by some to be the twentieth hijacker, Moussaoui had tried to learn how to fly jets but not how to take off or land.

*Time's* new year's issue dubbed President Bush and Vice President Cheney the "Partnership of the Year" and characterized them in terms of their relationship to fears of terrorism and the Iraq war decision. For instance, *Time* contended,

The American public, awakened to danger but wary of responses that could be more dangerous still, finds itself this winter at war's door, and holding the key are a President and Vice-President who together wield a kind of power that is more than the sum of its parts. (January 6, 2003)

### February 2003

*Time's* and *Newsweek's* February news coverage reflected an acceleration of the case for war. Secretary of State Colin Powell presented the administration's case for evidence of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction on February 5 at the United Nations. Although his presentation impressed many in the United States, it did not increase support appreciably in the UN. In addition, several days after Powell's presentation, the terrorism threat level was raised to red from yellow. During the twenty-day period of threat elevation, "millions of Americans found themselves rushing to hardware stores and supermarkets to stock up on duct tape and plastic sheeting to protect against a chemical or biological attack."<sup>10</sup>

In this month, five of the eight cover stories concerned either Iraq or terrorism, with two of those focusing on Americans' anxiety toward both.<sup>11</sup> For example, *Newsweek's* February 24 cover was titled "Anxiety and the Brain," and its cover story began, "Anthony Lepre started feeling awful almost as soon as Tom Ridge put the nation on high alert for a terrorist attack last week" and went on to contend,

The recent barrage of bad news—nukes in North Korea, snipers in Maryland, a failing economy, an imminent war, a threat of domestic terror—has left this privileged nation feeling unusually vulnerable and uncharacteristically anxious. Gas masks and biohazard suits are selling as briskly as duct tape and plastic sheeting.

In the same week, *Time* also addressed anxiety, with a cover that blared, "America the Anxious."

Newsmagazine readers—as well as people who glimpsed the covers on the grocery store line or on a table or rack while waiting for an appointment—saw pictures and read words on the covers of the "Anxiety" issues that were far from comforting. *Time* showed a person wrapped in duct tape, with one eye showing. Its subtitle to "America the Anxious" was "Bush's March toward War Splits the Nation, While Terror Alerts Leave Many Scared and Confused." *Newsweek's* graphics also tied together terrorism and Iraq. The cover showed a man's head in profile, and inside the skull was a picture of Saddam Hussein on the left, the

terror alert color scheme in the middle, and on the right was Bin Laden and the Twin Towers burning.

### **March 2003 (through March 24 Issues)**

Before the onset of war on March 19, military forces continued to be assembled in the region, and war appeared unavoidable. Two days before bombs fell on Baghdad, President Bush (2003a) spoke to the nation and stated,

The danger is clear: Using chemical, biological or, one day, nuclear weapons obtained with the help of Iraq, the terrorists could fulfill their stated ambitions and kill thousands or hundreds of thousands of innocent people in our country or any other. Before the day of horror can come, before it is too late to act, this danger will be removed.

President Bush thus again argued that the Iraqi regime posed a terrorist threat. In these final prewar weeks, did the newsmagazines juxtapose Iraq with terrorism?

*Time* and *Newsweek* devoted considerable attention to Iraq and the coming war. Six of the eight cover stories directly considered the war, and the other two issues included substantial coverage as well. Terrorism was considered little, with most of the content emphasizing the preparation for, fighting of, or aftermath of the war. In contrast to this general pattern and, as part of *Newsweek's* March 17 package of cover stories on how Iraq might fight back, one story considered whether Iraqi forces were capable of targeting Americans in their own land. Several grisly and frightening scenarios were presented in this article:

Outgunned on the traditional battlefield, Saddam is looking to fight back on his own terms. That, according to American officials, could mean any number of terror plots, from isolated assassinations of U.S. citizens overseas to biological or chemical attacks in the American heartland. . . . The Pentagon picked up "credible information" that Iraqi operatives were planning to use botulinum toxin to poison American food and water supplies. . . . One grisly possibility, however remote: "human pathogens." A small team of Iraqi operatives could be injected with smallpox and sent to America. All they'd have to do is hang out in crowds and slowly die.

In addition, *Time's* March 10 story on al Qaeda leader Khalid Shaikh Mohamed's capture was accompanied by pictures of the Twin Towers burning.

March coverage emphasized war strategy and the consequences of war. Both *Time* and *Newsweek* featured large maps of the theater of action and graphics showing American weaponry. Possible effects of war ranged from international to personal impacts. *Newsweek's* March 24 issue featured a long analytical article by Fareed Zakaria regarding the way the world saw the United States. Readers read and saw much about fighters and their families and communities. With war

coming, newsmagazines connected readers in a very personal way to Americans going off to war and those they left behind.

## Conclusion

Terrorism and Americans' fears about it provided a substantial context to coverage of the Iraq before the war. Some terrorism stories focused explicitly on evidence and arguments regarding whether Iraq posed a threat of terrorism to the United States, while other terrorism stories emphasized the ways that Americans could cope with increased perceived and real threats.

This coverage reflected the confluence of events but also officials' decisions to bring various events together in time and space. For instance, the September 2002 issues included much about both Iraq and terrorism because President Bush went to the UN to speak about Iraq then and it was the one-year anniversary of the attacks. But the president's choice to promote his Iraq agenda at that time and place helped him evoke the terrorism of September 11 in making his argument about Iraq. In any case, newsmagazine coverage frequently juxtaposed terrorism and Iraq and used graphics that linked Iraq to terrorism and terrorists.

## Notes

1. Walter Pincus and Dana Milbank, "Al Qaeda-Hussein Link Is Dismissed," *Washington Post*, June 17, 2004:A1.
2. <http://www.pollingreport.com/iraq.htm>.
3. On other aspects of Iraq war and weapons of mass destruction coverage, see Bennett (2003), Entman (2004), and Moeller (2004).
4. The last issue of March 2003 covered the outbreak of the Iraq war.
5. The Washington Post Company, *2003 Annual Report*, 30, 22, <http://phx.corporate-ir.net/phoenix.zhtml?c=62487&p=irol-reportsAnnual>.
6. Project for Excellence in Journalism (2004, "Magazines": 13).
7. Elisabeth Bumiller, "Bush Aides Set Strategy to Sell Policy on Iraq," *New York Times*, Sept. 7, 2002:A1.
8. It followed the October 2002 congressional vote authorizing the president to use force to enforce United Nations' resolutions and to protect the United States as well as the November 2002 congressional elections. The elections had led to Republican gains in Congress.
9. These issues were dated December 20, 2002, through January 6, 2003.
10. Philip Shenon and Eric Lichtblau, "U.S. Lowers Warning Level to 'Yellow,' but Cautions That Serious Threat Remains," *New York Times*, Feb. 28, 2003:A14.
11. Two covers focused on the recent space shuttle disaster.

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### Biographical Note

Amy Fried is an associate professor of political science at the University of Maine. Fried's research primarily focuses on how media and political elites communicate to and characterize the American public. In a number of articles, chapters, and *Muffled Echoes: Oliver North and the Politics of Public Opinion* (Columbia University Press), she has investigated constructions of public opinion in coverage of the Iran-Contra affair, elites' strategic efforts to promote distrust in government, as well as the political and media dynamics of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal.

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