

## **Conflict Framing: The Effect of Media and Culture on Foreign Policy**

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### **Abstract**

In December 2005, in light of revelations that the Bush administration may have orchestrated one of the most effective misinformation campaign's in modern history, Dinesh D'Souza, an ardent Bush supporter and staunch defender of the Iraq war remarked during a speech at Oberlin College: "In retrospect, [the war on] Iraq should have been done differently,"(Oberlin Review, 2005). By most estimates, D Souza concession was a gross understatement. However, the American public seemed to accept this over simplification of what would turn out to be a foreign policy blunder that would compromise the United States international relationships and undermine its national security interests. Perhaps for the average American it was all too much to bear, the thought of being a co-conspirator in the perpetration of such a high crime. Were the American people victims of their own self-reliance on popular media? Does culture shape perception so severely that it warps reality? It seems clear that contemporary conflict is presented to the public by subjective forces capable of agenda-based mass manipulation.

**Key Words:** Propaganda, Media, United States, Iraq, George Bush, Afghanistan, Conflict, Culture, Globalization, Democracy

### **Introduction**

In today's media rich information age presentation is everything. The many benefits of globalization and the technological impact on information dissemination often camouflage the damage that can occur when agendas and biases effectively shape public perception and opinion. Contemporary warfare is extremely complex and therefore especially vulnerable to media's influence. Internal conflict within the state is no exception, as a multitude of factors often influence and define the nature of these engagements. Universal definitions for "insurgency", "revolution" and "civil war" are non-existent creating a void that is willingly filled by politicians, media outlets, and consumers. Ultimately, opinions on conflict are arbitrary and influenced by cultural, political, and personnel dispositions. This subjectivity is often used to manipulate the masses which appear more susceptible to coercion than ever before. The consequences are significant, particularly in democratic societies where popular

opinion often drives foreign policy. The absence of objective analysis by government representatives and media sources when defining modern day conflict greatly influences public perception and results in serious foreign policy implications.

First, it is important to examine contemporary warfare today, acknowledging the real threats to international global security. These small scale conflicts (or at least small in comparison to major wars in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries) are now significant international events as their effects can be far reaching given the interconnectedness of today's global society. Secondly, the fundamental differences between Eastern and Western cultures will be examined along with any correlations between these cultural divides and the two sides' views on warfare. Finally the research will consider the role of media and its ever increasing place in shaping mass opinion, often serving as a conduit for government manipulation.

### **The Emergence of Intra-State/Internal Conflict**

Since the end of the Cold War, there has been a decline in the large scale conventional wars that were a constant during much of the twentieth century. With the end of major multi-state conflicts, intra-state conflict i.e. civil war, insurgency, and revolution are now the most significant disturbances to peace and stability in the world today and highlighted by Richard Sandbrook and David Romano: "Our current era is certainly not a peaceful one. Civil wars, insurgencies, ethnic/religious strife, riots, rampant urban crime and terrorism, often abetted by the weakening or collapse of state power, have marred the post-cold war era" (Sandbrook & Romano, 2004). It is important to acknowledge the increase in these intra-state conflicts and the impact they have on hopes for international stability. The emergence of non-state actors as major players on the international stage adds a complexity to these internal conflicts. Many of these groups are empowered by their new found effectiveness and have taken advantage of the interconnectedness in today's global environment.

Sandbrook and Romano emphasize the effects of globalization and the role it has played in perpetuating conflict throughout the globe. They argue that the liberalization of economic markets leads to an increase in inequality particularly in third world countries, setting the conditions for uprisings by the disenfranchised. The collapse of Socialism in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century led to a much more open and connected global economic environment. Free trade allowed for previously untapped markets to assimilate into the world economy and immediately achieve success. The impoverished were often the victims of the newly liberalized state (Sandbrook & Romano, 2004). Reducing labor costs, limiting subsidies, and reducing inflation all had disastrous effects on the working class. A spike in migration from rural lands to the urban cities further compromised the standard-of-living for the lower class. Now that the entire world is connected and co-dependent on a single international economy, fluctuations in the market can have disastrous and far-reaching consequences. In summary, economic liberalization has led to a very unstable and volatile global economic system where states no longer have direct control over their economic success as they are susceptible to a multitude of factors beyond their control.

The data provided by Sandbrook and Romano is eye opening, as they cite a rise in inequality in a majority of the 73 countries from which statistics were compiled:

“A detailed study of 73 countries for which high-quality data were available revealed that inequality rose in 48 cases (accounting for 59% of the sample’s population), remained constant in 16 countries (although inequality rose in two of them, Indonesia and Bangladesh, in the late 1990s), and fell in only nine countries, accounting for 5% of the total population. Other studies confirm this general trend” (2004).

This inequality has no doubt intensified existing ethnic and social tensions increasing the likelihood for intra-state conflict. “Most of the more than 30 violent conflicts that raged within the countries of what were formerly known as the Second and Third Worlds in the early 1990s had a communal basis” (Sandbrook & Romano, 2004). The two necessary conditions cited by Sandbrook and Romano for the peaceful liberalization of a state are seldom met; the first being the increase of “general prosperity” and the second being the presence of effective political institutions to prevent any misuse of power.

Beyond economics, *Globalization, Extremism and Violence in Poor Countries*, examines the role culture plays in fueling internal conflicts. The effects are particularly apparent when you look at the export of Western culture throughout the globe over the past thirty years. Global media outlets promote Western ideals that conflict with the local government, values, and traditions of foreign societies. Rebellion and violence can often ensue caused by those demanding Western reforms or by those on the other side who wish to expel Western influences that conflict with their traditional way of life. Either way, the state is further weakened by liberalization and vulnerable to chaos (Sandbrook & Romano, 2004). The rise of Islamic extremism is a direct result of the cultural effects of globalization. These influential non-state actors have thrived off the backlash caused by invasive Western influences. They have also achieved success by providing social services to the people, filling the void created by ineffective governments. This activity forms a wedge between the people and their government, creating an unnatural bond linking the general population and non-state actors.

Although Sandbrook and Romano’s extensive argument tying globalization and inner-state conflict is compelling, there are alternative views citing other factors as the driving force behind today’s widespread instability within the state. Jonathan Fox, in *The rise of Religious Nationalism and Conflict: Ethnic Conflict and Revolutionary Wars, 1945-2001*, makes a persuasive argument naming religion, not modernization and globalization, as the primary factor influencing contemporary conflict. Fox focuses on ethnic conflict and revolutionary wars, two of the most common problems within the state today. He notes that with the advent of advanced technologies and global modernization, many thought religion would play a lesser role in social conflict.

“Rather than having a theory as to why religion was not important, international relations tended to focus on factors that did not include religion. Paradigms like realism, liberalism, and globalism placed their emphasis on military and economic

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factors as well as rational calculations, all of which left little room for religion” (Fox, 2004).

Only now Fox argues, that in the wake of September 11th, alternative approaches to the study of international conflict been developed that point to religion as a pivotal factor causing conflict. In fact, nearly every significant conflict from the second half of the twentieth century to today can be attributed at least in part, to religion.

“Such events, to name a few, include: the acts of Osama bin Laden’s Al-Qaeda, including the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001; the Iranian revolution; the worldwide rise of religious fundamentalism; religious rebellions and opposition movements throughout the Islamic world including, but by no means limited to, Egypt, Algeria, and Afghanistan; religeo-political movements like the liberation theology movement in Latin America; and etho-religious conflicts like those in Chechnya, East Timor, Tibet, Sudan, and Sri Lanka” (Fox, 2004).

Religion, for most, proves to be the most driving force behind their political and social decision making process, as most cultures throughout the world are built upon religious traditions and influences. As far as why there seems to be a sudden increase in religiously motivated acts of aggression, Fox points not to the spread or rise of religious belief but the decline of other influencers. The failure of many modern political ideologies during the twentieth century led to disenchantment with politics (Fox, 2004). Individuals no longer look to government institutions as their foundation for formulating opinions and have instead returned to religion. Globalization and the spread of foreign culture is seen as a threat by many, causing a rejection of invading ideas and reinforcing traditional religious ideals (Fox, 2004). This willingness to protect and preserve national and cultural identities causes extreme reactions by many and fuels religious extremism. Fox’s data shows religion as the core factor behind an increasingly violent world.

The research shows that although dissent exists on which specific global condition has *most* contributed to the rise of civil unrest, there does appear to be a consensus on the role of globalization in setting favorable conditions for revolution, civil war, terrorism, and insurgency. It is important to point out a key point that is touched on by Sandbrook and Romano. Individual sovereign states have never been more vulnerable to the effects of conflict within other states. In the past, unrest in a state would likely only influence those neighboring countries in close geographical proximity. That is no longer the case as economies are now intertwined so extensively. Natural disasters in Asia can influence North American economic markets. War in the Middle East can cause a fuel crisis in Europe. A terrorist attack on an airliner in North Africa could disrupt airline industries throughout the world, and so forth. This phenomenon exposes a vulnerability that is capitalized on by groups seeking to cause harm to their enemies or draw attention to their cause. As a result of these vulnerabilities, governments are now invested in the outcome of small scale foreign conflicts. If intervention does become necessary, it becomes crucial that a state justify its actions to their constituents.

## Eastern War Through Western Eyes

Perspective is a crucial element in the study of international law, economics, politics or war. Although objectivity is desired by those attempting to gain an understanding of the international environment, our individual perceptions are inescapable. For some, their experiences have forever cemented their view of the world. While others are able to draw from a variety of life experiences and escape from these confines, thus effectively challenging notions that are reinforced by their own friends, family, media, and culture on a daily basis.

The single most influential mechanism effecting individual perspective is their culture. Patrick Porter in *Military Orientalism: Eastern War through Western Eyes* explores the relationship between war and culture. The perspective from which the West views its Eastern enemies is a principle reason why conflict is often unavoidable and has direct implications on how the U.S. executes foreign policy (Porter, 2009). When conflict is broken down, Porter views it as a cultural act above all else. Culture is the driving factor behind violence and war dating back to Aztecs who cannibalized not because of their religious beliefs, but to violently affirm their culture (Porter, 2009). Such cultural expressions are present today on modern battlefields. Suicide bombings and ritualistic beheadings by fanatical groups are better characterized as cultural acts rather than senseless, irrational deeds (Porter, 2009). The West, unable to relate, misjudges these rational and often strategically logical acts of barbarism. "Orientalism" is described by Porter as the way the West defines itself in relation to the rest of the world. These views are often distorted, self-serving, and shifting. These perceptions can also be imperialistic, intended to reinforce the superiority of Western culture and the righteousness of their causes. No greater example of this was evident from 2001-2003 during the American invasion of both Afghanistan and Iraq. Orientalism served to persuade American citizens that the wars would be easily won, pitting the great might and superiority of the West against an inferior foe (Porter, 2009). Porter notes how this served the Bush administration in gaining popular support for their operations. "War in Afghanistan in October-November 2001 has scattered the Taliban with few American casualties. This created a climate of intoxication, emboldening Bush about invading Iraq. In Bush's triumphal vision, ultimate victory was assured because America was on the right side of God and history" (Porter, 2009). Porter calls President Bush's conception of the war flawed, misinterpreting how Iraqis would perceive the occupation. Saddam Husain, like Bush, incorrectly assessed his adversary, assuming the West was too casualty adverse to launch a ground war against Iraq in 2003 (Porter, 2009). Both leaders were victims of their false perceptions, failing to appreciate or fully understand each other's culture.

The war in Afghanistan in 2001 exposed the limited understanding the West had on this Eastern region. To most Americans, Afghans were nothing more than violent tribesman, incapable of progress or sophistication (Porter, 2009). Western media outlets reinforced and helped shape this view, depicting roughly dressed mountain men with primitive weaponry (Porter, 2009). Motivated by revenge and bloodlust, these terrorists wish for nothing more than the destruction of the American way of life. Likewise, the Taliban offered their assessment of the Western fighter: "The Taliban also talked of a culturally-defined struggle, reinforcing the myth of the hardened warrior fighting a weak, materialistic West" (Porter,

2009). As with Iraq, the U.S. would fail to appreciate or predict the cultural conditions that would lead to the resurgence of the Taliban. Porter comments on “perspective”: “To give perspective, it might help to ask how Westerners have gazed on Eastern war, from morale to morality, tactics to strategy, casualty tolerance to authority, from ancient Persia to the Taliban” (Porter, 2009). It took the West over six years, and thousands of casualties to fully address the cultural factors involved in the asymmetrical warfare that has them pinned down in Asia and the Middle East. The initial East/West cultural gap between the combatants involved proved too great for either side to fully capitalize on, and has perhaps prolonged a conflict beyond what either side had initially anticipated.

Culture is an inescapable human condition that is likely the single most important factor in the development of human beings. The goal should be to acknowledge and embrace differences in cultural identities in the hopes of understand both allies and enemies. Unfortunately, cultural bias will stand as a permanent barrier, often exacerbating differences and encouraging conflict.

### **Modern Media and the Shaping of Reality**

Throughout history, media outlets have frequently been far from objective, often influenced by those in positions of power. Yet in the past there were limitations in the reach and distribution of media which played only a marginal role in shaping individual opinions. The twentieth century redefined the role media played in society. In reference to World War I, Phillip Taylor in *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda* writes: “It was certainly a recognition of how the media were no longer regarded as simple observers of conflict but as actual participants on a new front: media warfare” (Taylor, 2003).

In 1991, the media’s role was further re-defined during the Gulf War. Both the Iraqi regime and the Western led coalition used far reaching and often polarized media outlets as propaganda tools. Saddam Hussein allowed foreign reporters to stay in Baghdad throughout the course of the war, hoping their filming of civilian casualties would have an effect on international support for the war (Taylor, 2003). Meanwhile the U.S. government was careful to coin catchy terms like “shock and awe” when describing the bombing campaign to bolster American confidence in the campaign they were undertaking (Taylor, 2003). CNN and other news organizations, for the first time, put Western military might on display live.

“Many critics argued that this wasn’t a real war at all, but rather a ‘video game war’ staged for the entertainment of a global TV audience which had been primed by months of justificatory propaganda about Saddam Hussein being a ‘new Hitler’ who needed to be taught a lesson by freedom-and peace-loving nations” (Taylor, 2003).

The effects were tremendously positive for the West. Instead of focusing on some estimates that put civilian casualty tolls in the tens of thousands, the American public was constantly shown video of precise missile strikes, even footage from cameras mounted on the munitions themselves (Taylor, 2003). Taylor points out that only 8% of the munitions dropped during the Gulf War were precision weapons, most were conventional bombs

dropped on the Iraqi Army as they were in full retreat from Kuwait in the open desert. A minimal amount of collateral damage was presented as the U.S. appeared to take every necessary precaution to prevent civilian casualties. The U.S. in particular, had learned a great deal from its blunders in foreign conflicts such as Vietnam, where the effects of media coverage were underestimated.

The Gulf War proved to be a particularly easy information front to control for the U.S. government due to the nature of information dissemination. Some journalists as pointed out by Porter, were imbedded with units, but the vast majority were allocated to hotels in Saudi Arabia or Kuwait where they were fed daily progress reports by government officials. Thus the government was able to shape public perception. The Gulf War was the first successful “information war” for the United States (Taylor, 2003). Following the Gulf War, a period of highly media covered intra-state conflicts broke out across the globe. Dramatic news coverage portrayed human suffering where in the past such events would have been effectively hidden from international view. Media has played a role in nearly every global conflict since the Gulf War. Not only have governments seen the value in influencing media, but so have terrorists, revolutionaries, and insurgent groups.

The Iraq war in 2003 offers another prime example of how media can shape public perception. Alexander Nikolaev and Ernest Hakenen comment on the polarizing effect of war and the absence of debate after conflict begins. “The only meaningful time to debate the need for war is before one begins; it is too late once it is under way. History is abundantly clear that the myth of war, once it starts, has the power to overwhelm culture and public discourse, and therefore takes over thought to an extraordinary degree” (Nikolaev & Hakenen, 2006). Furthermore, any debate that does exist must be done through the media, as no other outlet can effect actual change or dictate public policy on a widespread scale. The general public has little interest in gathering, analyzing, or debating the issues of war on their own according to Nikolaev and Hakenen. Here we see Nikolaev and Hakenen acknowledge the power of the media and its role in modern society.

The circumstances surrounding the Iraq invasion in 2003 were unique in creating an environment where the American media was more influential than in any other time in modern history. Following the terrorist attacks in 2001, it was the media that dictated the American public’s concerns, and in particular foreign policy concerns. Not only did the media control which conflicts or issues were to be presented to the public, but they told Americans how they were to feel about them.

“The media – especially television news – acts as the daily textbook for most Americans on what is happening in the world. In this sense, it provides the public with an agenda of concerns (e.g., Iraq versus Sudan), a vocabulary (e.g., “freedom fighters” versus “terrorists” or “peace process” versus “negotiated sellout”), and a sense of what dangers we face and from whom” (Nikolaev & Hakenen, 2006).

Of course with Iraq, the international community has found that much of what was conveyed to the public through the media was false or misleading. Nikolaev and Hakenen do defend the U.S. public to a certain degree by calling them “ill-informed” instead of “uninformed”. Either way, the misinformation campaign had far reaching consequences as the relatively popular war likely won an additional term for President George W. Bush. Nikolaev and Hakenen continue their analysis insisting that it is unrealistic for modern media outlets to challenge political administrations outright. In the case of Iraq, the American media very much wanted to get on board with the drum up towards war, recognizing the futility of challenging the status quo so soon after 9/11. “US journalists were far too reliant on sources sympathetic to the administration. Those with dissenting views – and there were more than a few – were shut out” (Massing in Nikolaev & Hakenen 17). The general public was still traumatized by the terrorist attacks and were therefore more vulnerable to manipulation. Even though there was no direct link between Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden, President Bush used shrewd rhetoric to fuse the two together during public addresses. (Nikolaev & Hakenen, 2006). Capitalizing on the emotional vulnerabilities of the U.S. population, Bush was able to shape his own reality (Nikolaev & Hakenen, 2006).

Kull, Ramsay, and Lewis in *Misperceptions, the Media, and the Iraq*, present an equally sinister view of the Bush administration and the media’s role leading up to the 2003 Iraq war. As pointed out by the authors, Iraq proved different from other conflicts because military action was not prompted by overt acts of aggression (Kull, Ramsay & Lewis, 2003/2004). Unlike World War II, Korea, Gulf War I, or even September 11th, Saddam Hussein’s regime may have been menacing, but fell short of directly challenging the U.S. or U.S. interests. This complicated matters for the Bush administration who faced the daunting task of justifying the invasion of Iraq to the American people. Beyond the support of the American public, ideally, the administration wanted the support of allies, forming a coalition similar to the gulf conflict in 1991 as unilateral action was discouraged in the current international climate. The easiest way to accomplish this was by unearthing concrete evidence that Iraq was developing weapons of mass destruction or contributing in some way to terrorist activity abroad. It is clear now that such evidence did not exist. Yet the majority of the U.S. public, on the eve of the Iraq invasion, was in favor of war. Kull, Ramsey and Lewis theorize how such support was garnered. “Of course people do not develop misperceptions in a vacuum. The administration disseminates information directly and by implication. The press transmits this information and, at least in theory, provides critical analysis” (Kull, Ramsey & Lewis 2003/2004). Poll data affirms the public’s misperceptions leading up to the war which appear to be a direct result of their intake of information from media sources. “Reluctant to challenge the administration, the media can simply become a means of transmission for the administration, rather than a critical filter” (Kull, Ramsey & Lewis, 2003/2004). Like Nikolaev and Hakenan, the authors do not absolve the media by implying that they too were manipulated by the administration. The American media’s role in the deception may not have been intentional, but it is clear they were not diligent in their investigative duties (Kull, Ramsey & Lewis, 2003/2004).

The Iraq example is a recent and fairly conclusive example of how the media can influence the general public. Technology has changed the way the average citizen receives and processes information making he/she more readily influenced by media sources.

Historically the West has been comforted in the fact that media is unbiased, detached, and free from exterior influence. Recent events have dispelled this myth and exposed our susceptibility to coercion.

### **Justice Based Rhetoric**

The most effective way to persuade is through the use of language and rhetoric. This is no different for politicians or media personalities who rely on rhetoric to invoke certain emotions in their constituents. Michael Butler explores the “just war theory” in *U.S. Military Intervention in Crisis, 1945-1994*. Butler proposes that through justice-based rhetoric, politicians are able to effectively garner support for combat operations and military interventions abroad. Operation Just Cause and Operation Restore Hope are examples of the morally charged language used by the U.S. government (Butler, 2003). “More rigorous assessments of this phenomenon, for instance, in the case of Operation Desert Storm, have demonstrated the extensive efforts on the part of U.S. decision leaders to use justice considerations as legitimizing forces in gathering support for military engagements, in many cases successfully (Butler, 2003).

The Bush administration used morality as its base in building support for military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Americans were inundated with images of oppressed Afghan women and abused Iraqi political prisoners at the hands of tyrants. It was not just a matter of self-defense but a moral obligation to intervene on behalf of the oppressed. Democracy was to be the saving grace for these impoverished and disenfranchised peasants. This tactic effectively removed any reservations the general public had about the impending wars. Once underway, such rhetoric continued to mask the rising civilian death toll and the emergence of effective insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan.

### *Afghanistan 1985 vs. 2005*

From 1979-1989 the Soviet Union intervened militarily in Afghanistan on behalf of the Soviet endorsed government of Afghanistan. This developed into a large scale war between Soviet forces and anti-government forces of the Mujahedeen. From 2001 to present, the United States has been bogged down in an insurgency in Afghanistan following their invasion in 2001 and the toppling of the Taliban-led government. The similarities between the Soviet occupation in the 1980’s and the U.S. led occupation ongoing today are staggering. Both the Soviets then and Americans today were backing government systems that reflect their respective democratic and communist systems of government. Both encountered effective resistant movements from fundamental Islamic groups motivated religious and nationalistic notions. Both wars have destabilized the region and caused widespread destruction and thousands of civilian casualties.

Yet there seems to be a sense (in the West) that these wars are not similar. In the 1980’s the resistance movement was comprised of “freedom fighters” struggling for sovereignty against Soviet tyrants. The U.S. covertly backed the Mujahedeen hoping the Soviet Union would be drawn into a Vietnam-like war that would ultimately weaken their empire. Looking back on the conflict today, no doubt many Americans would feel positive

about U.S. involvement against the Soviets and the role it may have played in the eventually fall of the Soviet Union. Never mind the fact that the U.S. armed and trained the very same fighters it would face a decade later. In 2001, these very same resistance groups would be re-labeled as terrorists and insurgents, mercilessly sought out and destroyed by Coalition forces in their very “just” war on terror. The Afghan phenomenon is a perfect example on how two conflicts, seemingly so similar, can be effectively spun to suit individual needs, and in this case, the needs of a state.

### **Conclusion & Analysis**

The purpose of this research was to highlight three critical assumptions that can be made about contemporary warfare today. First, the effects of internal conflicts within the state are far reaching. Globalization, which has led to the fusion of independent economies and the rapid spread of foreign cultures, makes states more aware, reliant, and dependent on each other. Secondly, given the current level of interconnectedness, the state is more likely to interfere in internal matters of other states. The most pertinent example of this today is the U.S. and their recent foreign policy decisions. Finally, in order to effectively intervene in foreign matters, the state, primarily through the use of media, must shape and in some cases manipulate public opinion to garner the required support for foreign incursions. There is obvious danger in the occurrence of the third practice. Although the relationship described between the media, government, and the general public is far from new, it should be alarming that given the sophistication of today’s information gathering, that these types of blatant deceptions in countries like the United States can occur. There seems to be unwillingness in Western society to acknowledge the extent to which bias exists in media. The notion that media can directly dictate domestic and foreign policy seems unsettling to those in democratic societies. The recent scandal involving the Bush administration and the Iraq war blew over in a matter of months. No indictments, no resignations, and the outcry from the American public ended up sounding more like a whimper. A few media outlets and mid-level government officials have since admitted their failures, but the response was relatively subdued when considering the magnitude of this deception and the resulting implications. At the very least, these events should cause individuals in all societies to re-think their relationship with the press and the way they view the world.

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