

Crisis in the Gulf

TV News Coverage of the Persian Gulf Crisis: Phase I

How have the networks covered the developing crisis in the Persian Gulf? We analyzed all 872 Gulf-related stories that appeared on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts during August 1990. This saturation coverage filled 25 hours 8 minutes of airtime in only 30 days following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on August 2. That makes it the most intensive TV news coverage of any story in the past decade. Future *Media Monitors* will update TV's coverage of the Persian Gulf as the crisis unfolds.

Major findings:

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■ **Big News-** Five out of every six TV news stories in August were about the Persian Gulf crisis. *Page 2*

■ **Seeing Saddam-** Saddam Hussein was quoted in 59 stories, nearly half as often as George Bush. *Page 2*

■ **Zapping Saddam-** More than 100 sources criticized Saddam; 13 called him evil or criminal. *Page 3*

■ **Rally Around What Flag?-** Nearly three out of five sources criticized U.S. handling of the crisis. *Page 3*

■ **Looking for J.R.-** Three out of four sources condemned oil price hikes; 90% criticized business, including the oil industry. *Page 4*

■ **Memories** - America's involvement in the Vietnam War was mentioned nearly once per day. *Page 2*

The crisis in the Persian Gulf generated 872 stories on the network evening newscasts in August, representing 25 hours 8 minutes of coverage, or 84 percent of the entire newshole. CBS devoted the most airtime to the Gulf story - 8 hours 55 minutes, compared to 8 hours 23 minutes on ABC, and 7 hours 50 minutes on NBC.

Crisis Coverage

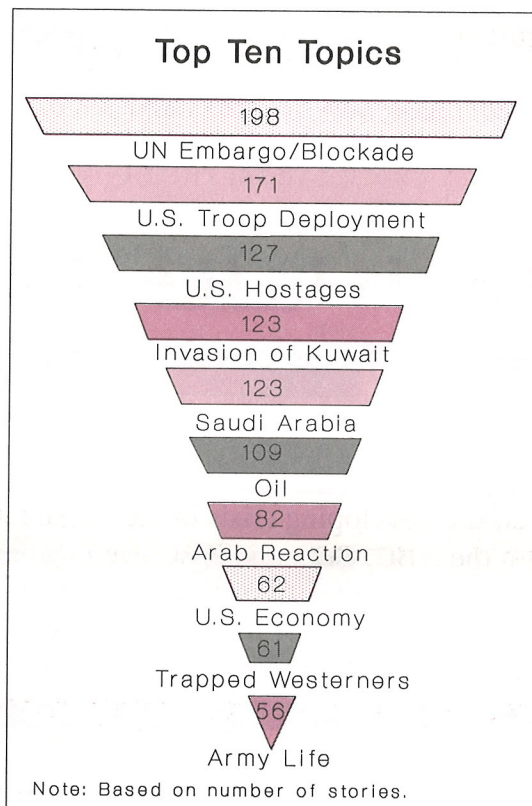
Topping the news were two initiatives designed to thwart Iraq--the UN economic blockade and the deployment of U.S. troops to Saudi Arabia. Nearly one out of every four Gulf stories (198) discussed the blockade, while another 171 were focused on the U.S. deployment. The American hostages were also big news, with 127 stories devoted to their plight.

The plight of Kuwait ranked only fourth among the topics covered, tying with Saudi Arabia as the focus of 123 stories each. Oil, seen by some as a prime motivator of the crisis, was featured in 109 stories, while other aspects of the U.S. economy were discussed in 62 stories.

The specter of past U.S. military conflicts was rarely raised. There were five references to the U.S. intervention in Grenada and six to its more recent invasion of Panama. Both incidents were cited by Iraqi officials in efforts to justify their actions in Kuwait. But America's last major war, Vietnam, was mentioned 25 times in August, nearly once per day.

The View from Over Here

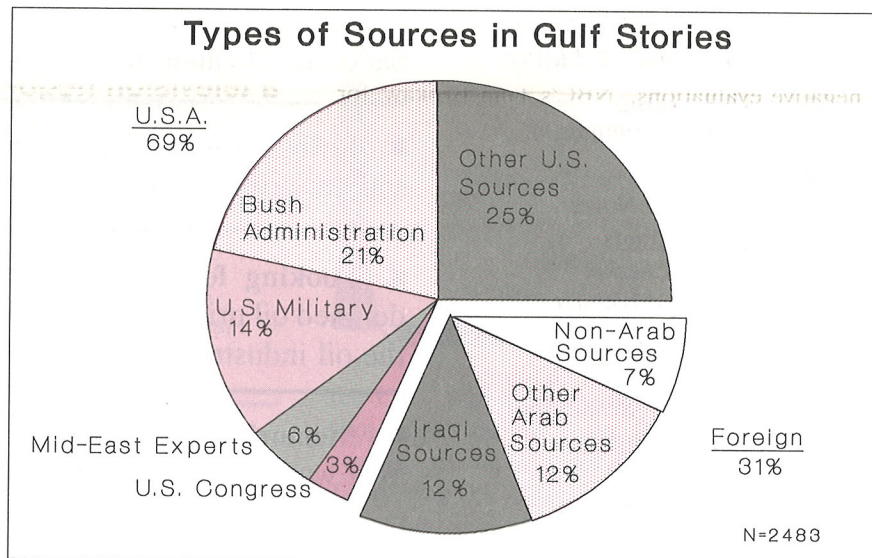
Despite the international cast, two out of every three sources cited (1701 out of 2483) were identified as Americans. One out of every



five sources were U.S. government officials, led by President Bush (124 citations) and Defense Secretary Cheney (31). The U.S. military also had a high profile, accounting for one in seven (14%) source citations. Congress, which was in recess for much of August, accounted for only 3% of all sources.

Iraqi nationals, usually officials of the Iraqi government, were quoted 298 times. Saddam Hussein was quoted 59 times, nearly half as often as George Bush. Arabs (including Iraqis) accounted for one out of every four sources quoted on the evening news.

With reporters barred from Iraq, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia during the early phases of the crisis, interviews with Middle East and military experts became a vital part of news gathering. There were 132 experts quoted on the nightly news, an average of more than four per night. The most visible experts were often paid consultants to the network on which they appeared. Retired General George Crist led the pack, appearing on CBS 10 times over the course of the month. Other regulars were: former Ambassador Richard Murphey, seen 6 times on NBC; Judith Kipper and Anthony Cordesman, 5 times each on ABC; and retired Admiral William J. Crowe, who was in 4 stories.



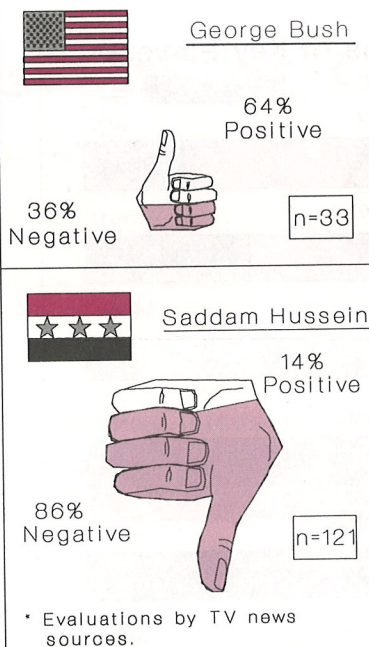
Spotlight on Saddam

In many ways, the crisis has been presented as a personal struggle between Saddam Hussein and George Bush. By dominating the Gulf story, both became targets for extensive praise and criticism. Bush received 33 clearly positive or negative evaluations. But debate over his role was dwarfed by the focus on Iraq's leader. Saddam Hussein was the target of 121 evaluations, almost four times as many as the American president.

Bush proved relatively popular, receiving about two positive evaluations for each negative assessment (64% positive). By contrast, six out of seven judgments on Saddam (86%) were negative. That left the Iraqi ruler on the receiving end of more than 100 negative assessments. Moreover, one in eight criticisms (13 in all) went beyond the bounds of normal political discourse to portray Saddam as criminal or evil. These condemnations came from both U.S. officials and ordinary people. Thus, NBC quoted Defense Secretary Cheney, "I think he's an evil man." (NBC 8/12). On CBS, an Arab refugee en route to Jordan sounded even more alarmed: "He is not human being! He is killer, he is killer!" (CBS 8/25)

Although a handful of Iraqi and Jordanian sources praised Saddam for standing up to the West, Arab sources as a group gave him negative evaluations 68% of the time. Even network reporters got into the act, providing only one positive assessment of Saddam, compared to 18 negative evaluations. NBC's Tom Brokaw, for example, called Saddam a "ruthless and calculating ruler." (NBC 8/6) Such stark judgments by reporters, while relatively infrequent, further tilted the tone of the coverage against the Iraqi leader.

Evaluations of Bush and Saddam Hussein*



This is becoming a television negotiation: brinkmanship by television.

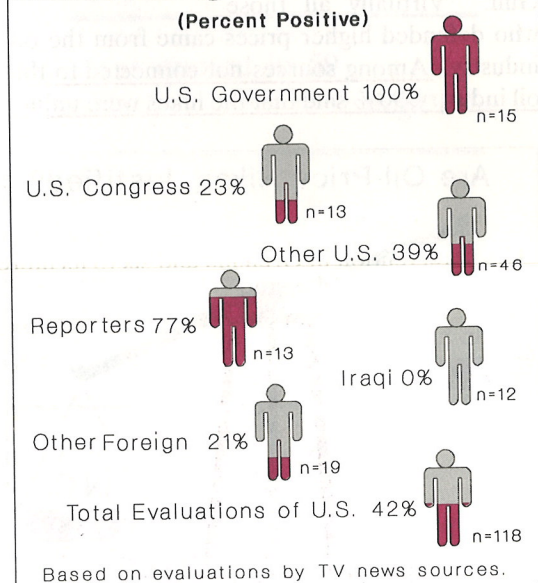
-Dan Rather
CBS, 8/28/90

handled the crisis were negative. The key policy areas for the U.S.--the troop deployment, the blockade, and the hostages--saw approximately equal numbers supporting and criticizing U.S. policies. The main sticking point for the Administration were sources who criticized its handling of overall U.S.-Iraqi relations, especially past support for the Baghdad regime.

Even among domestic sources, only a slight majority (53%) supported U.S. handling of the crisis. Among foreign sources, praise was far more rare; 87% criticized various aspects of U.S. policy. Not surprisingly, Iraqi government sources were the most frequent source of criticism. When the U.S. government expelled most Iraqi diplomats, for example, the Iraqi ambassador called the move "uncalled for, unfair, and unjust. We feel we have been victimized once more." (CBS 8/27) But only one out of five non-Iraqi foreign sources supported U.S. policy.

By contrast, both the U.S. military and the United Nations received mostly favorable press during the crisis. The government of Iraq, however, fared even worse than its

Source Ratings of U.S. Government



leader. Only 9% of the 113 evaluations of the Iraqi government were positive. Many of these criticisms centered on the invasion of Kuwait and the seizure of Western hostages. For example, when Iraq released videotapes of the hostages, White House spokesman Marlin

Rating the Players

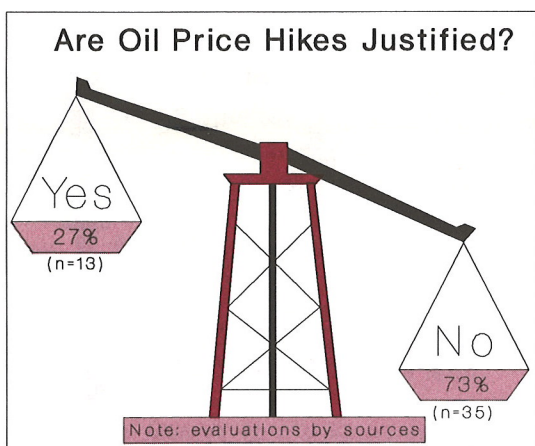
Despite the largely favorable commentary President Bush received, nearly three out of five (58%) evaluations of how the U.S.

Fitzwater declared that "to hold men, women, and children as targets for viewing is sick beyond expression." (CBS 8/24)

As the Gulf crisis seemed to portend an economic downturn in the United States, some of the criticism turned against U.S. business, especially the major oil companies. Although discussed less often, criticism of business was proportionally as negative as coverage of the Iraqis. Nineteen of 21 sources (90%) provided negative evaluations of business during the crisis.

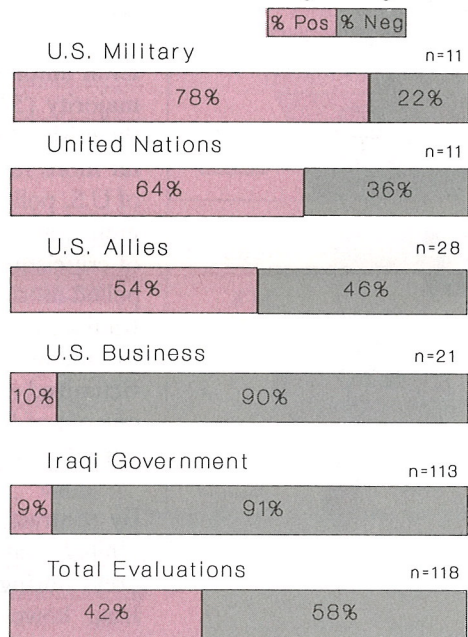
Raising the Price

Criticism of the oil companies focused intensively on rising oil prices. Nearly three out of four sources (73%) argued that price hikes were not justified by events in the Persian Gulf. Virtually all those who defended higher prices came from the oil industry. Among sources not connected to the oil industry, 90% said that the hikes were unjustified.



tified. On one CBS broadcast, Senator Joseph Lieberman (D-CT) charged, "there is no doubt that in the last week American consumers were ripped off on a massive scale"; and consumer activist Mark Green was even more direct: "Big

Evaluations of Key Players*



*Based on number of explicit evaluations aired on TV evening newscasts, 8/2 - 8/31.

Television seems to be not just covering the crisis, but mediating it.

-Tom Shales
Washington Post,
8/29/90

Media Monitor

Oil is using Saddam Hussein to pick consumers' pockets." (CBS 8/7)

Future Shocks

Once the Iraqi seizure of Kuwait was accomplished, much of the coverage became speculative. We coded 522 statements which raised a variety of future possibilities. The most frequent object of speculation was a war between the U.S. and Iraq, a possibility that was raised 125 times. An Iraqi invasion of Saudi Arabia was mentioned 69 times, and the possibility that Iraq might use chemical weapons was raised 30 times. Nearly two-thirds of all speculative statements revolved around highly negative outcomes such as war, other violence, or economic chaos.

Most of these statements simply raised various possibilities without predicting their outcome. When experts and others did venture guesses about the outcome of the crisis, most were pessimistic. Eleven out of 13 sources (84%) predicted an eventual war between the U.S. and Iraq. Moreover, all 22 sources who were quoted on economic scenarios foresaw bad times ahead. Twelve predicted higher oil prices, and another 10 forecast an economic recession in



the U.S. When the possibility was raised that Iraq might retreat from Kuwait on its own accord, all 17 sources rejected the notion. Tempering the general air of pessimism, three out of four sources felt that an invasion of Saudi Arabia would be unlikely, and six out of seven argued that the UN economic sanctions against Iraq would be effective.