

## News in a Time of Terror

### TV News Coverage of President Bush Since 9/11

#### Major findings:

- **What Bully Pulpit?** Since 9/11, George Bush's TV coverage has dropped by 38%. *Page 3*
- **Terror Turnaround...** Evaluations of George Bush went from 2 to 1 negative before 9/11 to 2 to 1 positive since then. *Page 3*
- **...Within Limits** On his foreign policies apart from those related to terrorism, Bush's press is still 2 to 1 negative. *Page 2*
- **Third Time's the Charm** Bush's good press exceeds the level of his father during the Gulf War and Bill Clinton during the Kosovo fighting. *Page 4*
- **Clinton Beats Bush Again** Former President Clinton was the butt of more jokes on late night TV this year than freshman President Bush. *Page 5*
- **Second Only to Osama** Since 9/11, Osama bin Laden is the top joke target, but Clinton is second, ahead of the Taliban. *Page 5*

History will doubtless divide the Bush presidency into the periods before and after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The previous issue of *Media Monitor* examined the first phase, from George Bush's inauguration on January 20 through September 10, as it was portrayed on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts. This issue examines the second phase, after the attack, from September 11 through November 19. We also compare the current president's media ratings with those of his two predecessors during their respective periods of military intervention – Bill Clinton during the 1999 Kosovo crisis and the elder George Bush during the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

From the terrorist attacks on September 11 through November 19, the last day covered by this study, George W. Bush received the most positive coverage that we have ever measured for a president over an extended period of time. Supportive sound bites toward Mr. Bush outnumbered critical ones by a margin of two to one – 64 percent positive evaluations to 36 percent negative. The results were virtually identical on the three networks – 64 percent positive on ABC, 65 percent on CBS, 69 percent on NBC. For example, NBC interviewed a small town shopkeeper who said, "People come in and they want to tell us they're proud of how President Bush is doing and that they're standing behind him." (11/19)

Mr. Bush's coverage was most positive in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, but it has been slowly declining since then. His evaluations were 77 percent positive during the remainder of September, 67 percent positive in October and 59 percent positive in

(continued on page 2)

November. A major reason for this decline was the increasing presence on television news of foreign sources, particularly the supporters of the Taliban and other critics of the American military presence in Afghanistan. For example, ABC's Peter Jennings reported "Osama bin Laden's partner in ... al-Qaeda said today that President Bush is a liar when he claims to have destroyed al-Qaeda and broken the Taliban." (11/9) Three out of four domestic sources consistently supported President Bush throughout the entire study period, while the majority of foreign sources (56%) were critical; only 44 percent were supportive.

Evaluations of Mr. Bush also varied according to the particular issue on which his performance was being assessed. His direction of the war in Afghanistan drew 69 percent positive appraisals and evaluations of all other anti-terrorism measures were even higher – 77 percent positive. The administration's controversial plan to create military tribunals to try suspected terrorists garnered a somewhat smaller majority of support from on-air sources – 58 percent positive.

The coverage of Mr. Bush's other foreign policy initiatives, apart from those related to terrorism against America, provides a reminder that favorable news coverage is the exception rather than the rule for any White House. Evaluations of such policies as missile defense, the Middle East peace process, arms control, etc., were nearly two to one negative – 35 percent positive versus 65 percent negative. For example, on November 11, NBC's Andrea Mitchell reported, "Arafat and other Arab leaders still feel snubbed. They say Bush is not doing enough to resolve the Arab/Israeli crisis."

The unusual nature of the current highly positive coverage is immediately evident from a

## Tone of Bush's Coverage Since Sept. 11

(Percent Positive)

|                       |            |
|-----------------------|------------|
| <b>Total</b>          | <b>66%</b> |
| <b>By Network</b>     |            |
| ABC                   | 64%        |
| CBS                   | 65%        |
| NBC                   | 69%        |
| <b>By Source Type</b> |            |
| Domestic              | 75%        |
| Foreign               | 44%        |
| <b>By Month</b>       |            |
| September             | 77%        |
| October               | 67%        |
| November              | 59%        |
| <b>By Issue</b>       |            |
| War in Afghanistan    | 69%        |
| Other Terrorism       | 77%        |
| Military Tribunals    | 58%        |
| Other Foreign Policy  | 35%        |

comparison of Mr. Bush's post-attack coverage with his pre-attack coverage from inauguration day through September 10. Prior to the terrorist attacks, nearly two out of three comments about Mr. Bush's performance had been negative (only 36% positive versus 64% negative evaluations). His only major policy initiative to receive a majority of favorable comment was that of faith-based initiatives. Mr. Bush's stance on the federal budget and his call for tax reductions received slightly more negative than positive comments, and his environmental and energy policies

drew criticism from about three sources for every supportive one. (See *Media Monitor*, Sept./Oct. 2001)

Thus, September 11 brought a complete turnabout in Mr. Bush's media profile. The tone of his coverage went from nearly two to one negative prior to September 11 to two to one positive ever since that date. And once again, these results were generalized across all three networks, with little variation from one to another in either time period.

## Changes in Tone of Coverage (Percent Positive)

|              | Pre-Attack<br>(1/1 - 9/10) | Post-Attack<br>(9/11 - 11/19) |
|--------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <b>Total</b> | <b>36%</b>                 | <b>66%</b>                    |
| <b>ABC</b>   | <b>38%</b>                 | <b>64%</b>                    |
| <b>CBS</b>   | <b>33%</b>                 | <b>65%</b>                    |
| <b>NBC</b>   | <b>38%</b>                 | <b>69%</b>                    |

Note: Based on evaluations by sources and reporters on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news.

## Where's W?

Although not quite as dramatic as the change in tone, the change in the amount of coverage directed toward Mr. Bush is more surprising. Prior to September 11, he averaged 26 stories per week. Since the attacks, his coverage has dropped to an average of only 16 stories per week, a decline of 38 percent. (These figures refer only to stories focusing on Mr. Bush personally, rather than those that focus more generally on his administration's other members, departments, and policies.) It seems difficult to imagine a president yielding the spotlight to other members of his administration once a war begins, but this seems to have been the acid test of Mr. Bush's managerial style of delegating authority and visibility to his cabinet and staff.

For the first time, we also found some interesting differences among the networks. Prior to the attacks, ABC and CBS were each running about double the number of stories on Mr. Bush that NBC was. NBC was known for its focus on "softer" news related to social trends, lifestyles, etc. Since

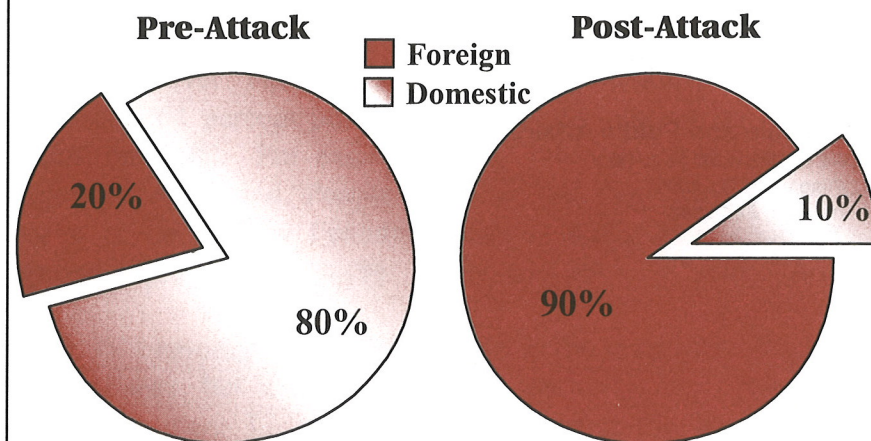
## Going Global

Just as striking as the change in tone of Mr. Bush's coverage was the change in its focus. If government authorities were caught inadequately prepared for terrorist attacks, so was the American public. Our findings illustrate the paucity of foreign policy discussion prior to September 11. Prior to the attack, 80 percent of all policy evaluations concerned domestic policies and only 20 percent dealt with foreign policy. Moreover, many of those concerned the one-time event of a surveillance plane that was shot down in China. Since the attack, the picture has been completely reversed, with 90 percent of all policy evaluations directed toward foreign policy issues.

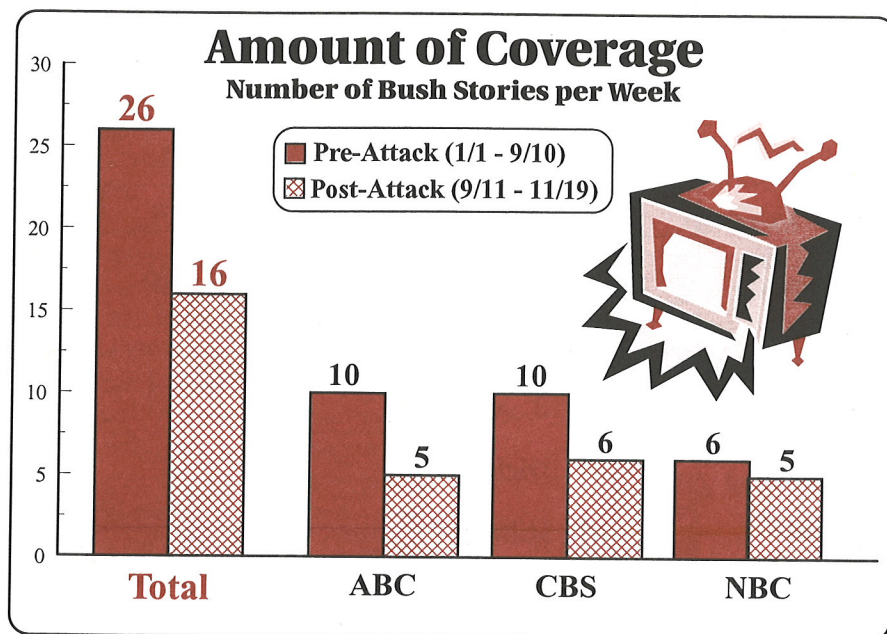
The earlier portrait was far more typical of American political discourse. During last fall's general election campaign, 96 percent of all evaluations of George Bush and Al Gore combined were directed toward

domestic policy, leaving only 4 percent for any foreign policy issue. Late-breaking charges of George Bush's 24-year-old drunken driving arrest generated more stories in the last three days before the election than all foreign policy issues received throughout the entire campaign. (See *Media Monitor*, Nov./Dec. 2000)

## Focus of Evaluations



Note: Based on evaluations by sources and reporters on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news.



With his 62 percent positive rating, Bill Clinton received some of the best press of his entire presidency during the Kosovo hostilities. Unlike the current incumbent, Mr. Clinton held center stage. Thus, nearly half of the positive on-air evaluations of the president came from Mr. Clinton himself. As usual, most of the criticism came from foreign sources, especially after the Chinese embassy was bombed. But there was also domestic criticism, aimed at the military tactics that were employed. For example, NBC quoted Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) saying, "Ruling out ground troops may be smart politics... but it is inexcusable and irresponsible leadership." (5/3/99)

the attacks, NBC has kept up the same level of coverage on Mr. Bush, while ABC and CBS have dropped to NBC's level. Thus, NBC reached hard news parity by simply holding its ground while its competitors dropped to NBC's level of coverage.

the networks featured a higher proportion of mostly critical foreign sources during the Gulf War than they are currently doing. Much of the criticism of George H.W. Bush was voiced by Iraqis, such as a government official who charged, "Bush is like Hitler and is a war criminal." (ABC, 2/14/91)

### Comic Relief

Late night TV comedians Jay Leno of NBC's "Tonight Show," David Letterman of CBS's "Late Show with David Letterman," and Conan O'Brien of "Late Night with Conan O'Brien" all made use of

### First in War...

So far we have compared George W. Bush's wartime coverage to his treatment by the networks earlier in his administration. We previously collected the same information for the military action in Kosovo from March 24 through May 25, 1999 during Bill Clinton's second term in office, and during the Gulf War from January 17 through February 27, 1991, during George H.W. Bush's administration.

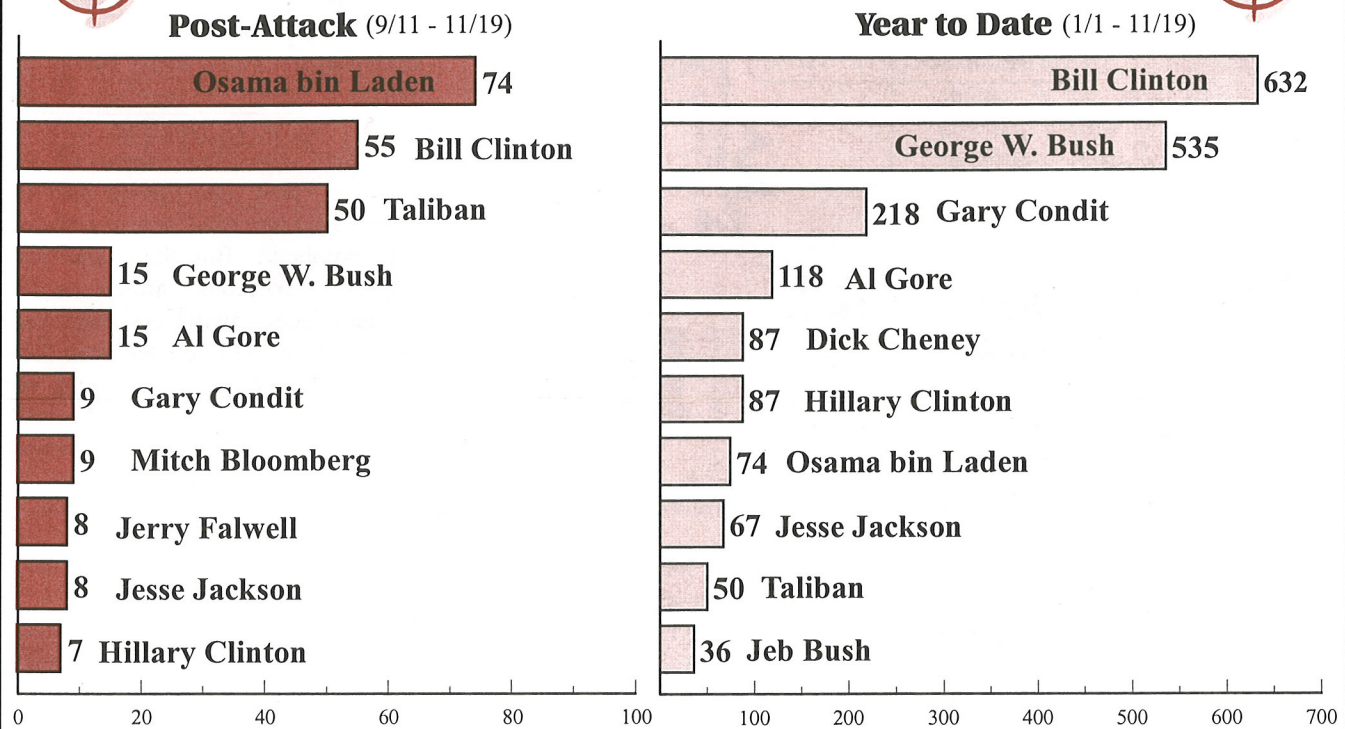
Comparing administrations, George W. Bush's media image is slightly better than Clinton's so far, by 64 percent to 62 percent positive evaluations, and somewhat farther ahead of his father's (56%). The elder Bush received almost unanimous support from domestic sources. But

(Percent Positive)

### Comparing Evaluations In Wartime

|              | GW Bush<br>(9/11 - 11/19) | WJ Clinton<br>(Kosovo 1999) | GHW Bush<br>(Gulf War 1991) |
|--------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <b>TOTAL</b> | 64%                       | 62%                         | 56%                         |
| <b>ABC</b>   | 64%                       | 62%                         | 44%                         |
| <b>CBS</b>   | 65%                       | 70%                         | 63%                         |
| <b>NBC</b>   | 69%                       | 57%                         | 58%                         |

## Top Ten Joke Targets



Osama bin Laden and the Taliban as fertile new fields for their humor after September 11, although perhaps not as frequently as might be expected. The number one target of late night humor in the two months after the attacks was, of course, Osama bin Laden, with 74 jokes. He was followed by monologue perennial Bill Clinton, whose 55 jokes actually exceeded the 50 that were directed against the Taliban. These three targets have accounted for the lion's share of late night barbs since September 11. There was a sharp dropoff to George W. Bush and Al Gore, who were (appropriately) tied with 15 jokes apiece. No other individual received as many as 10 jokes.

For the entire year to date, Bill Clinton leads with 632 jokes, an average of about 60 per month. He leads President Bush (535 jokes) by nearly 100 jokes. They are followed by the hapless Gary Condit (218 jokes) and Al Gore (118), as the only

other individuals to receive as many as 100 jokes so far this year. It is remarkable that an outgoing president is on the verge of being targeted by TV's humorists more frequently than his successor. For America's joke writers, if not for the general public, Bill Clinton may be gone, but he is not forgotten.

### Sample Jokes:

"Taliban leader Mullah Omar and a handful of bodyguards are on the run in Afghanistan. They're making a movie about this – it's called 'Omar's 11.'" – Letterman

"Over the weekend we attacked the Taliban's military academy. It's a very exclusive school. Tuition is four goats a year." – Leno

"They've captured a guy from California who was fighting for the Taliban. Apparently he's very depressed because he had his heart set on a career as a suicide bomber." – Letterman

"Osama bin Laden has reportedly ordered his wives to fight for him. Oh, yeah. Maybe they'll fetch him a beer, too." – Leno

"They say bin Laden never spends the night in the same place. Wait a minute, that's Clinton." – Letterman

"Bill Clinton's old girlfriend Paula Jones just got married. Jennifer Flowers is married.... The only one of Clinton's women who isn't happily married is Hillary." – Leno

"They say that Mullah Omar is living out of his car. You know things are not going well for the Jihad when your supreme leader is living in his Toyota." – Letterman

“Osama bin Laden is now believed to be in Pakistan. They think he’s been in Pakistan for the past ten days. Why is it every time Geraldo goes looking for something, it’s not there?” – Leno

“More news about this American named John Walker. Turns out he went to a terrorist school in Afghanistan or as we call it over here, pre-law.” – Leno

“Top Ten Excuses of the American Taliban Guy:

10. Terrorist training camps looked a lot nicer in the brochure.

9. I didn’t join the Taliban, I was interning for the Taliban.

8. Lost a Super Bowl bet.

7. Dazzled by the Taliban commercials that aired during one of Kathie Lee’s Ramadan specials.

6. What kid doesn’t grow up dreaming of being the next Mullah Omar?

5. Al Qaeda? Oh man, I thought I was fighting for Ralph Nader.

4. Since when is fighting against your country with an evil terrorist regime considered treason?

3. Got tired of wearing clean clothes and not getting shot at.

2. Like you’ve never joined an international terrorist ring.

1. I thought this was a paintball game.” – Letterman

*Note: Wording of jokes altered slightly for brevity.*

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