

## News Before the Deluge

### TV Political News on the Eve of the War on Terrorism

#### Major findings:

##### ■ **Where's Osama?**

Despite news of bombing investigations, bin Laden got less airtime before Sept. 11 than this summer's shark attacks.

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##### ■ **Bush's Bad News**

Opinions about George Bush's policies were almost two to one negative in 2001 before the terrorist attacks. *Page 2*

■ **Strange Bedfellows** The amount and tone of Bush's early coverage resembled Bill Clinton's in 1993. *Page 3*

##### ■ **No Laughing Matter?**

David Letterman has told 83 percent fewer political jokes since the attacks. But Jay Leno has picked up the slack with a slew of Taliban jokes. *Page 4*

##### ■ **Hearty Perennial**

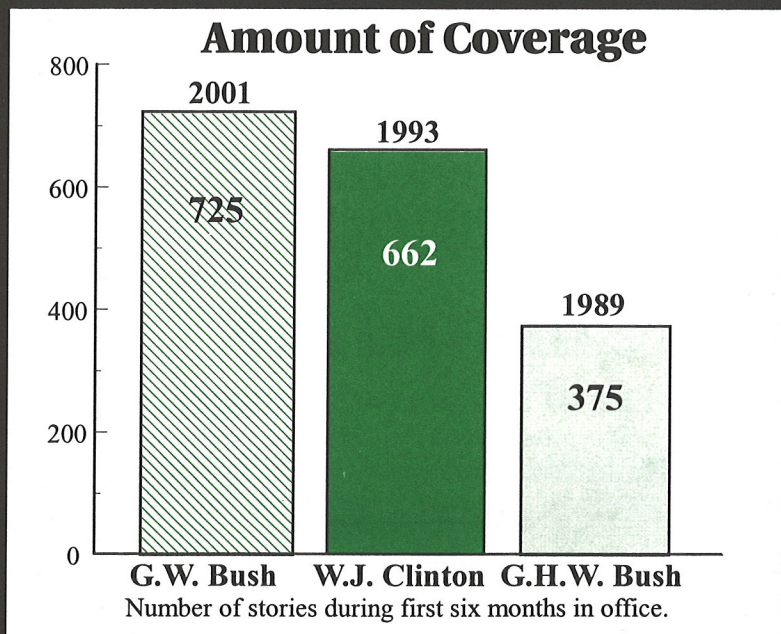
Bill Clinton was the third leading joke target before Sept. 11; then rose to second after the attacks. *Page 5*

History will doubtless divide the Bush administration into the periods before and after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. This issue of *Media Monitor* examines the first phase of the Bush presidency from his January 20 inauguration through September 10, as it was portrayed on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news. We also compare coverage of the president and his policies with those of his predecessor, Bill Clinton, during a similar time period. And we examine the amount of attention Osama bin Laden received this year prior to the September 11 terrorist attacks. Finally, we chart the changes in the jokes that late night TV comedians directed at public figures both before and after the terrorist attacks.

From Inauguration Day on January 20 through September 10, the three broadcast evening news shows aired 843 stories on President Bush, representing about 26 stories per week or nine per week per network. There was a significant disparity among the three networks, however, with NBC airing only 222 stories compared to 306 at CBS and 315 at ABC. This reflects in part NBC's greater reliance on "soft news" than traditional "hard" political news. For example, NBC aired more coverage of the Gary Condit/Chandra Levy story than ABC and CBS combined (*Media Monitor* July/August 2001). During his early days in office it was frequently observed that President Bush kept a lower profile than his predecessor Bill Clinton, who seemed to thrive in the media spotlight. However, CMPA studies suggest that this was not the case. Comparisons of the first six months of each man's first term (running through late July in 1993 and 2001 respectively) show that Bush actually surpassed Clinton by 725 stories to 663. Further, coverage of Bush *files* was almost double that of Bush *pere* during his father's first six months of office in 1989 – only 375 stories.

(continued on page 2)





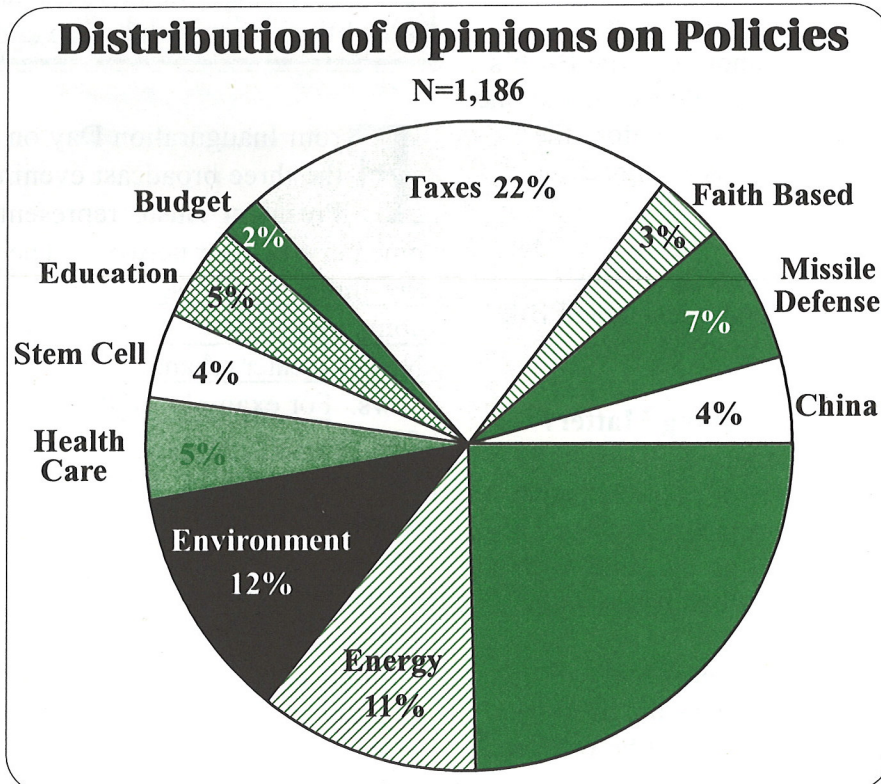
apiece, stem-cell research and China policy at 4 percent apiece, and the president's faith based initiatives, which attracted only 3 percent of all opinions.

### Bad News for Bush

The tone of President Bush's coverage was predominantly negative, with criticism outweighing praise by a margin of nearly two to one – 64 percent negative to 36 percent positive. Although these included occasional opinions about non-substantive matters such as his personal conduct or political skills, the vast bulk of all evaluations (88%) were directed toward Mr. Bush's policies. Moreover, the proportion of positive and negative comments were precisely the same toward both substantive and non-substantive matters. Therefore we focused on the

### The Policy Debate

Coverage of the new administration focused on a number of policy issues which were either part of the president's own agenda or were raised by his opponents. We noted 1,186 on-air opinions that sources or reporters voiced on various issues, averaging nearly a dozen per day. The dominant topic of debate was President Bush's proposal to cut taxes, which accounted for 22 percent of all opinions about Bush's agenda. This represents nearly twice the amount of debate on the next two most prominent issues – Bush's stance on the environment and his energy policy – which made 12 and 11 percent of opinion debate respectively. Mr. Bush's plans for a missile defense system accounted for 7 percent of the opinions expressed. Collectively these four issue areas accounted for a majority (52%) of the opinion debate. They were followed in turn by assertions about education and health care policy at 5 percent





debate over policy issues. With one exception a majority of opinions were critical of Bush administration policies on every issue that attracted 50 or more evaluations. The exception was the president's faith-based initiatives, which eked out a bare majority of 51 percent positive comments. For example, a pastor told ABC, "Faith-based organizations ... can cure people, through their faith, that psychiatrists and institutions can't." (1/25/01) This was followed in terms of support by the president's China policies which received 47 percent favorable coverage and his stance on the federal budget which was supported by 44 percent of all comments. It should be noted, however, that these three issue areas were very rarely discussed, amounting to only 117 opinions combined, or less than the amount of debate over either environmental or energy issues. In both these areas Mr. Bush's coverage was criticized by margins of about three to one. Much of this criticism was linked to the lingering effects of California's energy crisis and high oil prices combined with Bush's refusal to sign the Kyoto Treaty on global warming and proposals for increased drilling in Alaska and the Gulf of Mexico. For example, Alden Meyer of the Union of Concerned Scientists told NBC, "The Bush energy plan is bad for the environment, does nothing for consumers, jeopardizes our economic competitiveness and worsens global warming." (5/17/01)

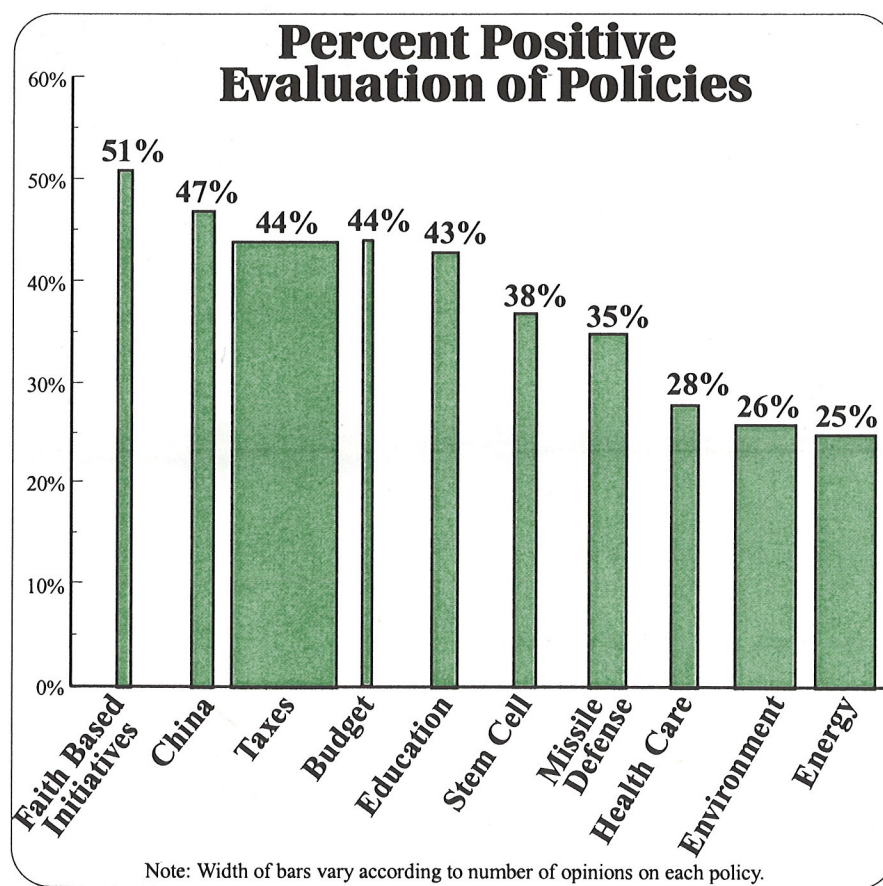
The one area in which the president's policies attracted relatively balanced coverage and also received a great deal of attention was his call for tax reductions, which attracted 44 percent support and 56 percent opposition from 257 sources. For example, NBC's Lisa Myers noted that "African-American businessmen, most of them Democrats, side with Bush" on eliminating the estate tax. (4/4/01) Of course the key word here is

"relative," since four out of seven sources expressed opposition to Mr. Bush's proposals. As a voter told ABC, "I appreciated the \$600 he gave me, but I know it's going to cost me thousands in the long run." (9/3/01). All other issues that stimulated a noticeable amount of debate attracted strong majorities of criticism that ranged from roughly two to one to three to one opposed.

### **Bush v. Clinton**

If Mr. Bush's coverage was largely negative, he was hardly unique in this respect. Public officials of all parties and ideologies have long

complained of network negativity. But our long-term tracking of political news permits a systematic comparison in this case. CMPA's study of Bill Clinton's first six months in office, found that President Bush actually fared slightly better this year than his predecessor did in 1993. Mr. Clinton received only 34 percent positive evaluations compared to the 36 percent we recorded for Mr. Bush. (For clarity we used the data for President Bush cited above for the eight months through September 10; these figures are virtually identical to those for his first six months in office. A comparable figure for George H.W. Bush in 1989 was not available.) Thus network news coverage of the two most recent presidents was about equally negative during their early





## Tone of Coverage (Percent Positive)

**George W. Bush    Bill Clinton**

<b>Total</b>	<b><u>36%</u></b>	<b><u>34%</u></b>
<b>By Network</b>		
<b>ABC</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>36%</b>
<b>CBS</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>31%</b>
<b>NBC</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>34%</b>
<b>By Source Type</b>		
<b>Partisan</b>	<b>48%</b>	<b>41%</b>
<b>Non-Partisan</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>29%</b>

Note: Evaluations for Bush Jan. 20 to Sep. 10, 2001

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the bombings of the USS Cole and US embassies abroad, bin Laden and allied terrorist organizations received only 58 minutes of air time, less than one-third the air time given to missing Washington intern Chandra Levy (two hours 59 minutes). In fact the flurry of shark attacks in the latter part of the summer attracted 50 percent more air time (one hour 30 minutes) than bin Laden garnered all year long prior to September 11.

### Nervous Laughter

In the wake of the terrorist attacks a great deal of media attention was devoted to the response of the entertainment industry, as the makers of Hollywood films and prime time television series worried over what kind of fare audiences would find both appropriate and appealing. Nowhere was the contrast sharper than on the late night TV talk shows which canceled all programs for the remainder of the week after September 11. These shows, particularly the industry leaders – NBC's "Tonight Show" with Jay Leno and CBS's "Late Night" with David Letterman – begin with stand-up comedy monologues that are often treated as ad hoc barometers of national moods and tastes. To determine the effects of September 11 on the nation's sense of humor, we examined the number and targets of political jokes on the Leno and Letterman shows immediately before and after the terrorist acts, along with the entire year of late night political humor.

months in office. Both men also received very similar coverage from all three networks. They differed somewhat, however, according to the types of sources who evaluated them. We differentiated between partisan sources, i.e., those identified with one of the two political parties and non-partisan sources such as voters, pollsters, pundits and reporters. Although they received about equally negative press overall, Bush fared better among partisan sources by 48 percent to 41 percent positive, while Clinton fared better among non-partisan sources by 29 percent to 22 percent positive. Research shows that non-partisan sources are more effective in changing public opinion, presumably because the audience regards them as more trustworthy. In terms of network negativity toward the office of the presidency, it is worth noting that the combined soundbites from politicians supporting their own party's president and criticizing the

other's was only slightly more negative than positive overall (45% positive to 55% negative for Bush and Clinton combined). But the opinions that the networks chose to air from voters, pundits, and their own reporters were about three to one negative (25% positive vs. 75% negative) toward the two presidents – one a Democrat and the other a Republican – combined.

### Osama Who?

In 2001 the most pressing question about the focus of media coverage was not who was covered but who wasn't. It is not surprising that the American public had little knowledge of Osama bin Laden, al Qaeda, or the Taliban prior the September 11 terrorist attacks. Despite being named in connection with the ongoing investigations into

Leno typically includes more political humor in his monologues than has Letterman. (Letterman's political joke totals early in the year were temporarily inflated by some "top ten" lists related to controversies over Bill Clinton's departure from the White House, e.g., allegations about taking



furnishings, trashing offices, etc.) In 2001, prior to the September 11 attacks, Leno was averaging 10 political jokes a night, compared to six for Letterman. During the shows that aired from September 18 (when talk shows resumed broadcasting) through the end of September, the number of jokes on Leno's "Tonight Show" fell by almost exactly half to 5 per night. After this brief pause in political humor, however, they surged once again in October, exceeding the annual average and reaching 11.9 per show through October 10. On "Late Night" the impact of September 11 was much stronger and more lasting. The number of political jokes told by Letterman dropped by 93 percent to only one every third show during the rest of September and recovered only slightly, to two per show in October, still barely one-third of his annual average prior to September 10. For the entire period from September 18 through October 10, Leno's average joke totals fell by 20 percent, from ten to eight, while Letterman's plummeted from six to one, a decline of 83 percent. Perhaps it was easier to return to political humor in a show



## Top Joke Targets



### August 14 - September 10

Gary Condit	71
George W. Bush	49
Bill Clinton	25
Janet Reno	10
Hillary R. Clinton	7

### September 18 - October 10

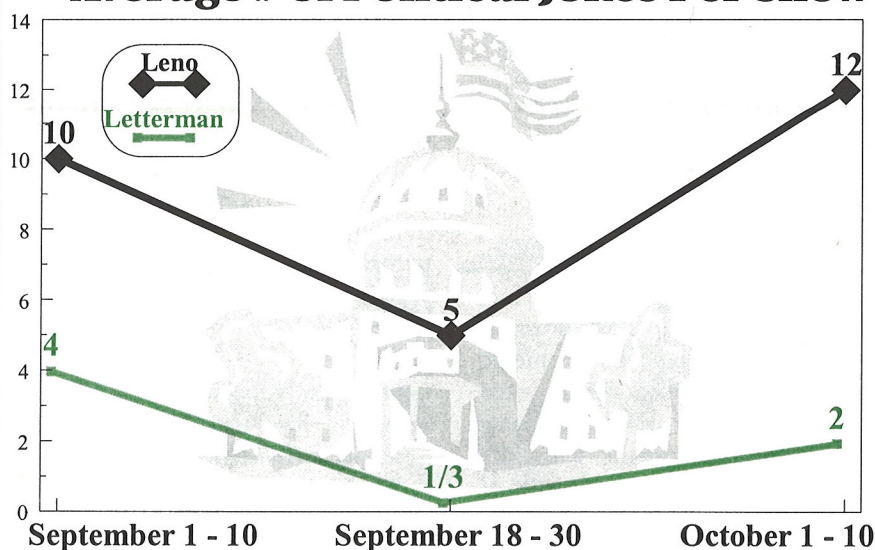
Osama bin Laden/ Taliban	44
Bill Clinton	33
Jesse Jackson	8
Al Gore	7
George W. Bush	4

based in Los Angeles than on one based in New York City.

Not surprisingly, the leading targets of Leno's barbs changed dramatically after September 11. Leading targets Gary Condit and George Bush all but disappeared from the list and were

replaced by Osama bin Laden and the Taliban. Jesse Jackson also made an appearance for his on-again-off-again plans to visit Afghanistan. But one change that did not occur was notable. Bill Clinton remained one of the top joke targets both before and after September 11, with many jokes about his sex life linked to current news about the war on terrorism. It appears that TV's late night comics have established a kind of Clinton franchise for sexually oriented jokes the way that Dan Quayle became an all-purpose target for jokes about stupidity.

## Average # of Political Jokes Per Show



## Sample Jokes :

■ "Bin Laden, who's supposed to be so religious, had an affair with a married woman. So not only is he a terrorist, he's also a cave wrecker."

■ "Bin Laden's brother is a lawyer. So apparently terrorism runs in the family."

■ “Bin Laden’s six foot five inches tall. That must be tough, living in a cave, banging your head all day. In fact, that’s not a turban he wears, it’s gauze.”

■ “Bin Laden is a real hypocrite. He announced, that if he dies in the attack, he wants a traditional Muslim burial. But if he’s only wounded, he wants a Jewish doctor.”

■ “There’s a rumor that Jesse Jackson was going to Afghanistan to talk with the Taliban. Apparently they were having trouble rhyming the word *jihad*.”

■ “Jesse changed his mind about going when he found out the Taliban doesn’t allow TV cameras.”

■ “President Bush’s approval rating is 90 percent. You realize that’s higher than the approval rating Clinton has in his own family?”

■ “You know bin Laden never sleeps in the same place two nights in a row? Just like Clinton.”

■ “Remember the good old days when the only one releasing spores in Washington was Bill Clinton?”

■ “You know what this country needs right now? A good old-fashioned Bill Clinton sex scandal.”

*\*All jokes are from Leno’s “Tonight Show.”*

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Editors: Dr. S. Robert Lichter, Dr. Linda S. Lichter

Research Director: Daniel Amundson

Political Studies Director: Mary Carroll Willi

Project Director: Jasmine Lee Yo

Assistant Project Director: Raymond Shank

Research Assistants: Matt Curry, Josh Douglas, Corissa Kiyan,

Tamara Scott, Kenichi Serino

Production and Graphics: Margie Singleton

Managing Director: Christine Messina-Boyer

Publications Manager: Margie Singleton

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**Center for Media and Public Affairs**

2100 L Street, N.W. Suite 300  
Washington, D.C. 20037  
Phone (202) 223-2942  
Fax (202) 872-4014

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