

# George Bush's Postwar Blues

## TV News Coverage of President Bush Since the Iraq War

### Major findings:

#### ■ **What Domestic Issues?**

Iraq has gotten 10 times more coverage than unemployment, crime, the environment, and education combined. *Page 2*

#### ■ **From Bad...**

Since the Iraq war ended, George Bush's press has been 2 to 1 negative. *Page 3*

#### ■ **...To Worse**

Support for the administration's policies dropped to 3 to 1 negative, a 50% decline from wartime levels. *Page 3*

#### ■ **From Best to Worst**

CBS had the most positive war coverage but the most negative post-war coverage of Bush. *Page 5*

#### ■ **Praising Presidents**

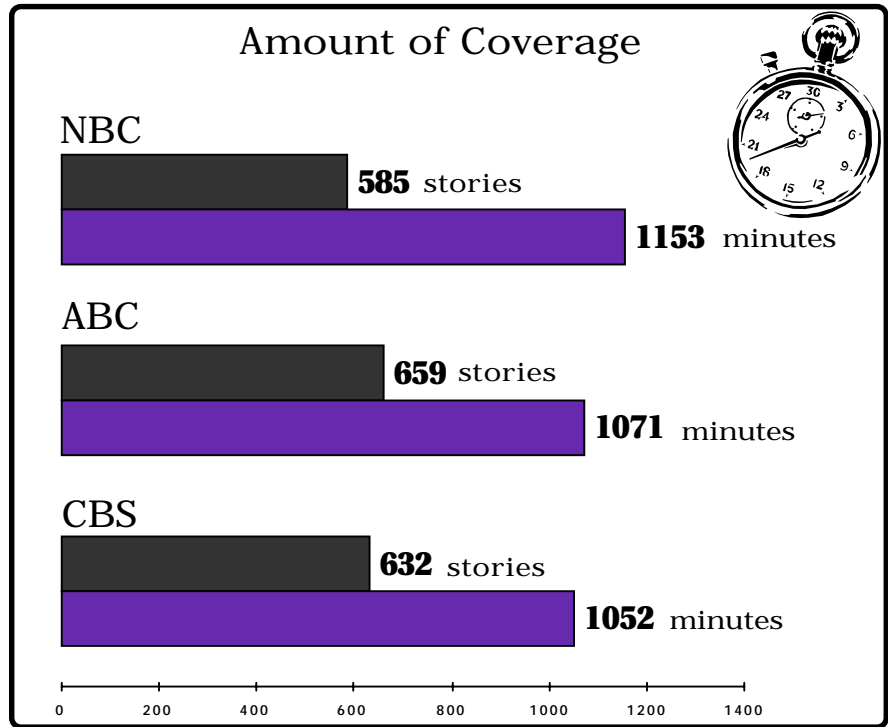
George Bush's levels of good press in wartime matched those of Bill Clinton and G.H.W. Bush. *Page 5*

News coverage of George W. Bush's presidency has been punctuated by charges of bias from those who complain that the coverage is too soft as well as those who see the media as overly harsh. Criticism of the media surged during the Iraq War in March and April. This issue of *Media Monitor* looks at news coverage of the Bush presidency on the broadcast network evening news shows following this polarizing event, during the six months from May 1 to October 31. We also draw comparisons to our previous studies of the Bush Administration and of previous administrations in wartime.

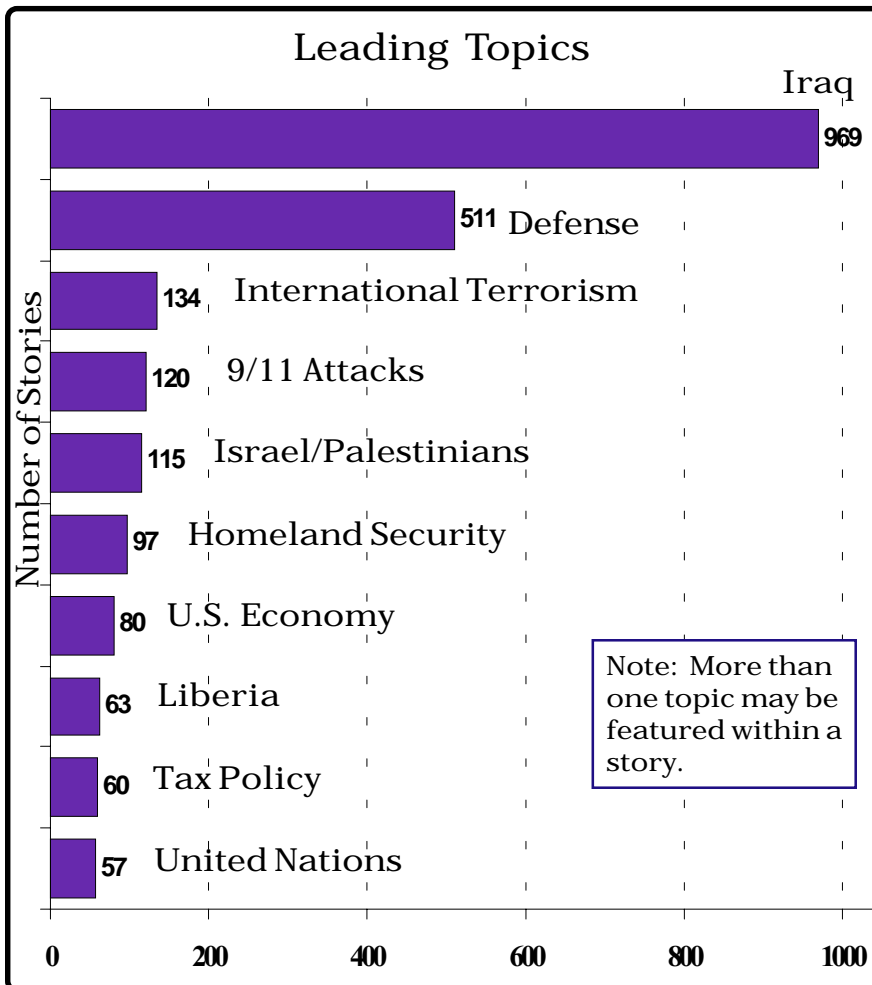
In the wake of the U.S.-led coalition's military victory in Iraq, critics here and abroad argued that the American media had been insufficiently independent and aggressive in their coverage of the war, reporting the conflict mainly from the American government's perspective. (CMPA's analysis found that the story was more complicated, e.g., there were sharp differences among the individual networks.) When the occupation and reconstruction of Iraq began, journalists were urged to reassert their independence and probe into issues such as the failure to locate weapons of mass destruction, the continued armed resistance, and difficulties in reestablishing order and rebuilding Iraqi infrastructures and institutions. By the fall, Bush administration officials (including Vice President Cheney) were complaining that the media coverage had become overly hostile toward the government. In September Media Monitor presented our findings on coverage of the war. This month we examine coverage of the Bush administration during the postwar period, with comparisons to Bush's coverage earlier in his term of office.

## Amount of Coverage

From May 1 through October 31, the three broadcast network evening newscasts aired 1,876 stories featuring the Bush administration, representing 54 hours and 36 minutes of airtime. ABC ran the greatest number of stories (659), followed by CBS (632) and then NBC (585). However, NBC provided substantially more airtime than the other two networks, with 19 hours and 13 minutes of coverage vs 17 hours and 51 minutes for ABC and 17 hours and 32 minutes for CBS. The reason for this disparity is that the average story was over 30 percent longer on NBC than elsewhere -- one minute 58 seconds, compared with



one minute 28 seconds on ABC and one minute 30 seconds on CBS.



## Topics

Iraq dominated the coverage by generating 969 discussions, nearly twice as many as any other topic. Defense issues came in second with 511 discussions, followed by international terrorism with 134 discussions. When the 9/11 attacks and homeland security are added to this list, terrorism and national security issues accounted for five of the ten most discussed topics, and a majority of all issues discussed (58%). No other foreign or domestic topic exceeded four percent of the coverage.

Apart from homeland security, the American economy and tax policy were the most discussed domestic issues — but even the economy generated only 80 stories, about one story per network per week on average. (By contrast, Iraq averaged

12 discussions per network per week.) Other issues that received minimal coverage during these six months included unemployment (24 discussions – roughly one discussion per week for the three networks combined), crime (23), the environment (21), energy policy (21) and education (14).

### President Bush

The coverage of President Bush and his administration was consistently negative, with criticism that spanned all networks, administration policies, and executive branch departments and agencies. Evaluations directed toward President Bush ran over two-to-one negative (68% negative vs. 32% positive). CBS carried the most

critical portrayal (77% negative), followed by ABC (67% negative) and NBC (62% negative).

Some of this negativity can be traced to the choice of sources. Among sources who evaluated the president, there were 73 percent more Democrats than Republicans. In addition, 97 percent of Democrats who expressed opinions criticized Mr. Bush, while a smaller proportion (82%) of Republicans supported him. This reflects a tendency for the networks to solicit comments on the administration from the Democratic presidential candidates. For example, when NBC asked Rep. Dick Gephardt (D-MO) about the president's economic plan, he replied, "He's really asking now to do more of what's already failed. It makes no sense." (5/2) Among "non-partisan" sources (those not identified as being

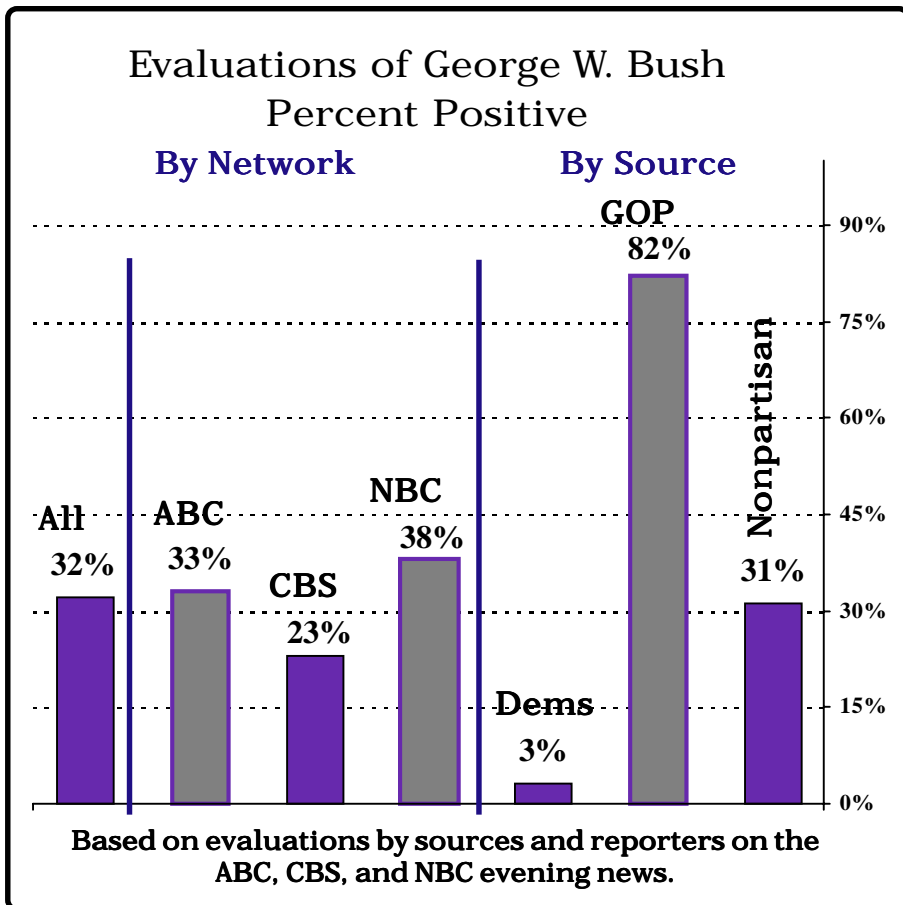
affiliated with either party), 31 percent voiced support for Mr. Bush, a figure almost identical to the overall total.

### The Administration

Although President Bush was the most frequent target of criticism, his appointees and the departments and agencies they run often received even worse press. For example, on-air sources were less favorable towards the Defense Department and Donald Rumsfeld (74% and 78% negative, respectively) and the CIA and George Tenet (77% and 73% negative respectively). The State Department and Colin Powell fared about the same as the president (67 and 69% negative respectively). The only institution that came close to receiving balanced coverage was the Justice Department (56% negative), an unexpected finding in light of controversies over the department's efforts to find a balance between national security and civil liberties in enforcing the Patriot Act. However, that the number of evaluations of presidential appointees was very small compared to those aimed at the president himself.

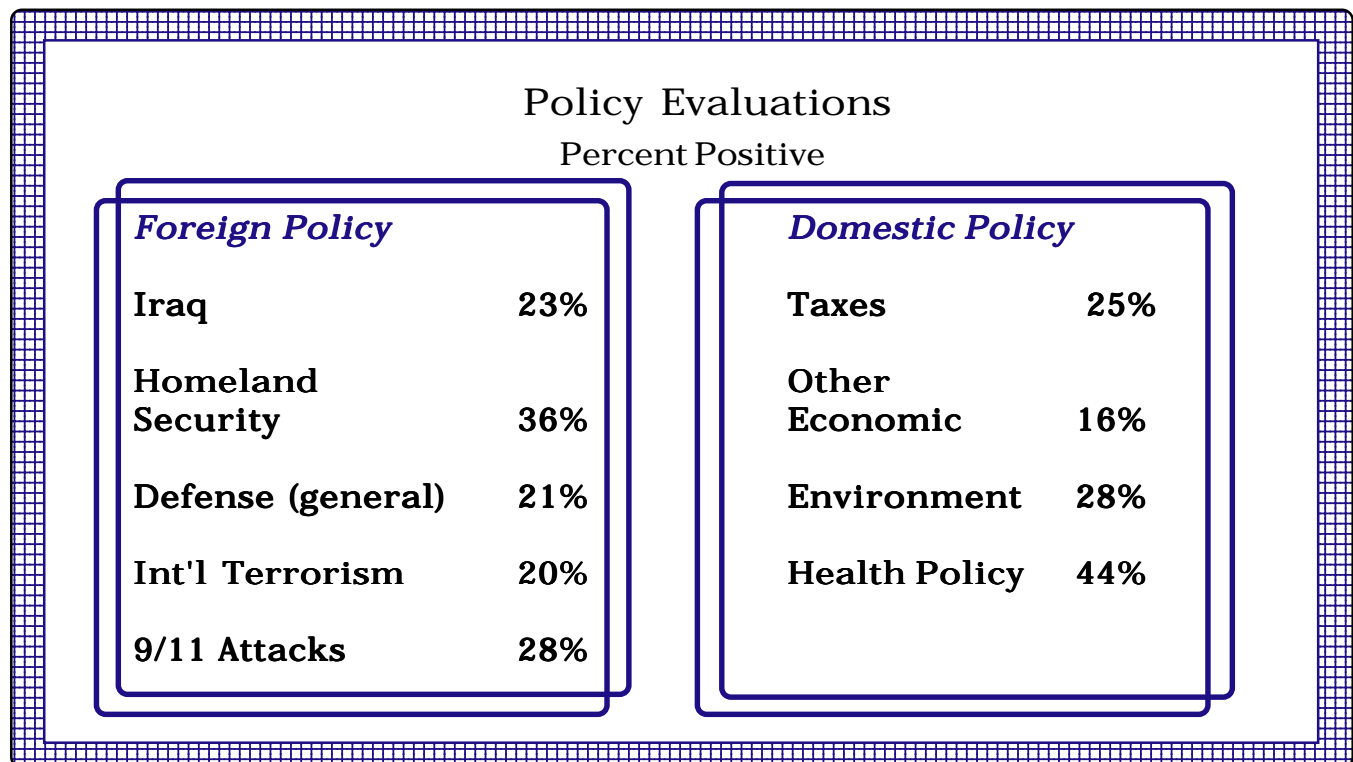
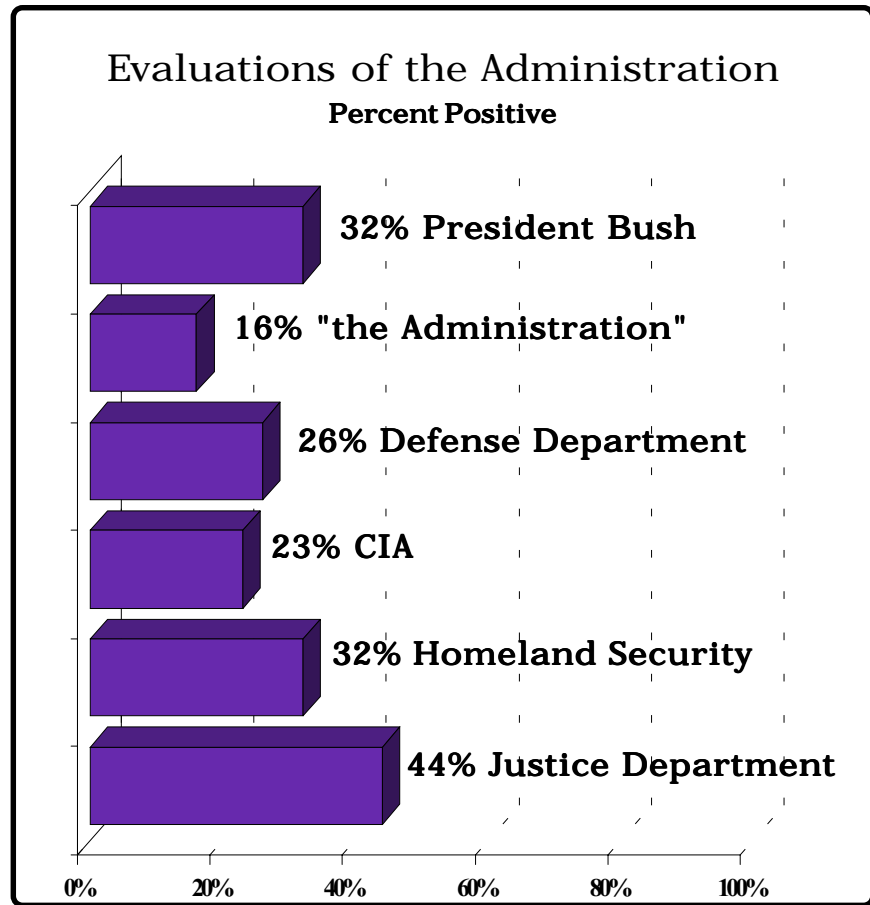
### The Policy Debate

The administration's policies received even worse press than the president and his appointees -- over three to one negative reviews (74% negative vs. only 26% positive). The pacification and reconstruction of Iraq dominated the policy debate, accounting for nearly 40 percent of all issue evaluations. And three out every four of these evaluations were critical (77% negative). For instance, Sen. Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn, Democratic Presidential Candidate) told CBS, "This administration, when it comes to Iraq, is in the process of giving a bad name to a just cause" (07/15/03).



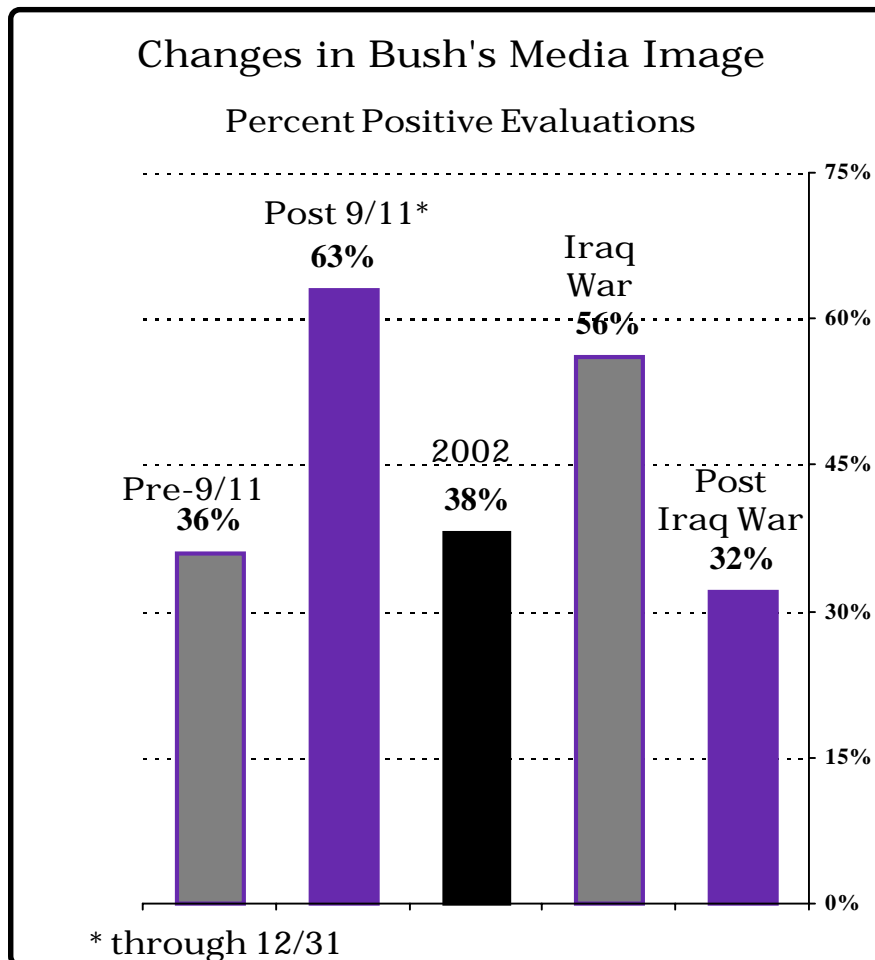
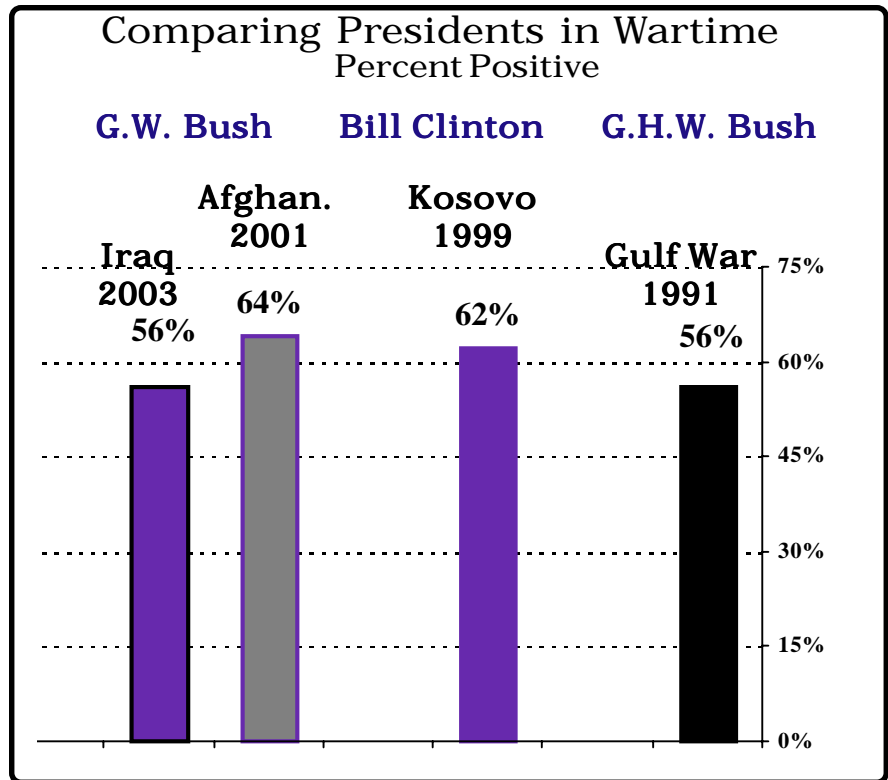
And military analyst William Arkin told NBC, "What the Bush administration still has not come to grips with is that in fact the Iraqis were not in possession of chemical and biological weapons, and therefore pre-emptive use of force was not justified" (9/26/03). The administration received about equally dismal ratings for its handling of international terrorism (80% negative), national defense (79% negative) and the 9/11 attacks (72% negative.)

As with foreign affairs, there was little support for the administration on the domestic front: The most positive coverage came on homeland security issues, with comments running just under two-to-one negative (64% negative). Comments on the president's handling of the economy were five to one (84%) negative. On tax policy, the centerpiece of Mr. Bush's domestic agenda, three out of every four evaluations (75%) were critical. For example, on CBS a low-income worker complained that she won't be eligible for the child tax credit: "I just think it's



ridiculous. I can't believe that they would give money to the rich when the poor need so much." (5/29).

The only bright spot for the administration was health policy, on which the coverage came close to being balanced (44% positive vs. 56% negative). Among these, a majority of comments were supportive of the administration's highly touted prescription drug plan for the elderly (61% positive). For example, NBC News' Campbell Brown described the reaction of one citizen to the plan: "Cathy Ricevuto says it's a good first step, giving her some break on the financial burden she carries now." (07/10). However, health policy was rarely debated, receiving only about one evaluation per week. Similarly, many other important policy debates, such as the Middle East, crime, education, energy and civil rights and liberties



were largely ignored, receiving no more than 25 evaluations apiece, or one evaluation per week for all three networks combined over the course of six months.

### Changes Over Time

The aftermath of the war in Iraq was not the first occasion for a change in President Bush's media image. Incoming presidents may benefit from a brief media honeymoon immediately after their inauguration, but CMPA research has shown that over the course of their first year in office, presidential bad press outweighs the good by a substantial margin. For example, Bill Clinton received only 38 percent positive comments on the evening news in 1993, well before the so-called Clinton scandals soured his relations with the press.

George Bush seemed to be headed for a very similar first year, with 64 percent negative comments through September

10. Then the terrorist attacks dramatically changed the news agenda, and along with it the media's portrayal of our political leaders. During the rest of the year Bush's good press soared from 36 to 64 percent. (Ironically, overall coverage of his administration remained mainly negative, due largely to recriminations with the FBI, CIA, and other departments and agencies over poor intelligence, a lack of preparedness, and the government's unwillingness to release sensitive information on these topics.) However, the media environment quickly returned to normal. During 2002 Bush's coverage dropped back to 38 percent positive, almost down to his pre-9/11 level of good press. (Our studies of Bush's coverage currently stop at the end of 2002 and pick up again at the onset of the Iraq war on March 19, 2003.)

The war in Iraq brought another surge of good press for the president and his policies, at least relative to the negative

profile that is the norm – a majority (56%) of favorable comments about Bush personally and balanced coverage (49% positive vs. 51% negative opinions) of his policies in undertaking and executing the war, which completely dominated news coverage. As soon as the war ended, however, things went back to normal, with heavy criticism of the failure to find weapons of mass destruction, the chaos that followed the war, and the continuation of armed resistance. Support for administration policies was cut in half, from 49 percent positive during the war to 24 percent positive since it ended. For example, former army secretary Thomas White called the administration's post-war efforts "totally inadequate." (ABC, 9/2). The president's nose-dive from 56 percent positive press during the war to only 32 percent positive thereafter is almost the mirror image of his sudden upsurge from 36 percent to 64 percent positive after 9/11.

Thus, George Bush's media image on TV news has been as negative as those of his predecessors, except for two national security crises that may have produced "rally 'round the flag" responses from reporters as well as the general public. In fact he may not differ much in this regard either. Bill Clinton's Kosovo policy received 62 percent positive coverage while it was taking place in 1999, and George H.W. Bush received 56 percent positive press during the Gulf War in 1991. These figures are almost identical to George W. Bush's totals of 56 percent positive during the Iraq war and 64 percent positive during the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan. (These totals would be even more positive, but they include sound bites from representatives and foreign supporters of the enemy in each conflict, who were shown denouncing the U.S. attacks.) In short, the media support the president in times of war, but once the war ends they return to battling the president as usual.

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