

The Instant Replay War

Television News Coverage of the Persian Gulf War

This month's *Media Monitor* examines the biggest news story in television history. During 42 days of armed conflict from January 17 through February 27, the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts broadcast 1,733 stories on the Gulf War with a combined airtime of 53 hours 33 minutes. We analyzed the topics, sources, and the opinion debate on the combatants and their policies. We also examined all "visuals" or camera shots of the conflict and the damage it caused.

Major findings:

Media Monitor (Copyright 1991) is published ten times a year by the Center for Media and Public Affairs, a nonpartisan and non-profit research organization. The Center conducts scientific studies of how the media treat social and political issues. Yearly individual and organizational subscriptions are available.

Editors:

*Dr. S. Robert Lichter
Dr. Linda S. Lichter*

Research Director:

Daniel Amundson

Project Director:

Richard E. Noyes

Research Assistants:

*Stacey Fried
Amy Chazkel
Jessica Mendelson*

Production and Graphics:

Mary Carroll Gunning

Public Affairs Director:

Toni Mann

■ **Cheers for the Troops** 95% of sources praised the performance of the U.S. military. The Patriot missile alone was praised 52 times.

Page 4

■ **Jeers for the Pols** A majority of sources criticized George Bush, and three out of five criticized U.S. government policies in the Gulf.

Page 4

■ **No War is Good War** A majority of sources opposed the war both before and after hostilities commenced.

Page 5

■ **Protest News** Anti-war protests got nearly twice as much coverage as pro-war demonstrations.

Page 5

■ **The Non-Nintendo War** The networks aired more visuals of civilian damage than of air and ground combat combined.

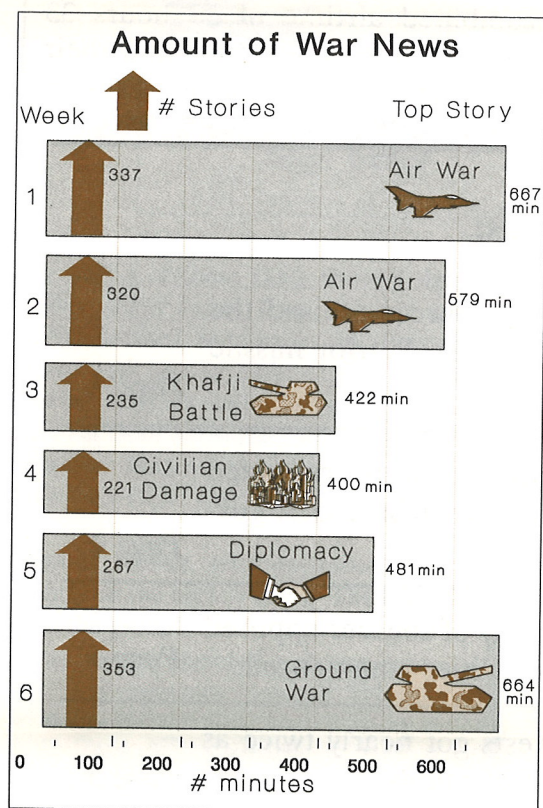
Page 5

■ **Anti-War ABC** ABC was the network most likely to air criticisms of U.S. leadership and policy and to quote Iraqi sources.

Page 6

TV's Top Story

The Persian Gulf crisis triggered more network news stories in a shorter period of time than any event in television's history. From Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on August 2 through the allied cease-fire on February 27, ABC, CBS, and NBC broadcast 4,383 Gulf-related stories on their evening newscasts, with a total airtime of 126 hours 29 minutes. Thus, the three major networks together averaged about 20 Gulf stories lasting 36 minutes per night over a seven month period. By comparison, the 1988 Presidential campaign yielded only 2,301 news stories over 22 months.



Coverage of the war itself produced 1,733 stories lasting 53 hours 33 minutes during 42 evenings of scheduled newscasts, not including the many special broadcasts at other times. War coverage averaged 14 stories lasting 25 minutes per network per night, more than the entire normal network evening newscast. (Many wartime broadcasts were expanded to an hour.) The leading news topic was the air war (339 stories), followed closely by reports about ground action (303 stories). Other major topics included discussions of Allied war strategy (205 stories), diplomatic efforts to end

"Sanitizing the war (to keep)... support for the war high is almost criminal."

-Walter Cronkite
CNN, 1/25

"The networks... have been covering this conflict as if it were a miniseries. Order a pizza and watch a building disappear."

-Philip Caputo,
New York Times,
2/24

the war (189 stories), and the war's effect on Israel and the Palestinians (173 stories). A summary of coverage for each week of the war:

Week One: January 17-23 The outbreak of war pre-empted the evening newscasts on January 16 and set off an unprecedented 42 continuous hours of war news. During the first week's scheduled evening newscasts alone, the networks broadcast 337 war-related stories lasting more than 11 hours. Most of the coverage focused on the start of the air campaign (120 stories) and on Israel's role in the war following Iraq's Scud attacks (72 stories).

Week Two: January 24-30 The coverage remained heavy (320 stories) but the focus became more varied. Leading topics were the air war (56 stories), civilian damage within both Iraq and Israel (33) and the oil spill in the Persian Gulf (26).

War Topics		
1.	Air War	339
2.	Ground War	303
3.	Strategy & Tactics	205
4.	Diplomacy	189
5.	Israel & Palestinians	173
6.	Civilian Damage	141
7.	USSR	137
8.	Iraqi Military	133
9.	USA Home Front	126
10.	USA Weapons	107
Based on number of stories.		

Week Three: January 31-February 6 As war news became more routine, network coverage dropped to 235 stories. The ground fighting in Khafji generated the most attention (42 stories).

Week Four: February 7-13 The Baghdad bunker bombing on February 13 helped to make civilian casualties the top news topic of the week, with 44 stories out of a total of 221.

Week Five: February 14-20 Iraq's offer to withdraw from Kuwait, coupled with mediation efforts by the Soviet Union, made diplomacy the week's leading topic with 71 stories. The focus of air war stories became battlefield

preparation; 39 stories were devoted to war strategy.

Week Six: February 21-27 The war's final week was also its most intensively covered--353 stories, an average of nearly 17 per network broadcast. The week began with furious attention to diplomacy (85 stories), followed by 131 stories on the hundred hour ground war that began February 24.

War Sources

Military spokesmen and troops were by far the most frequent sources on TV news. Their 1,653 comments accounted for two out of every five American sources. More than 40 percent of the military sources (713) were the enlisted men and women and junior officers who presented a grunt's-eye view of the conflict. Another 360 statements came from senior officers in the field or at the Pentagon. The remainder were

Rating the Players

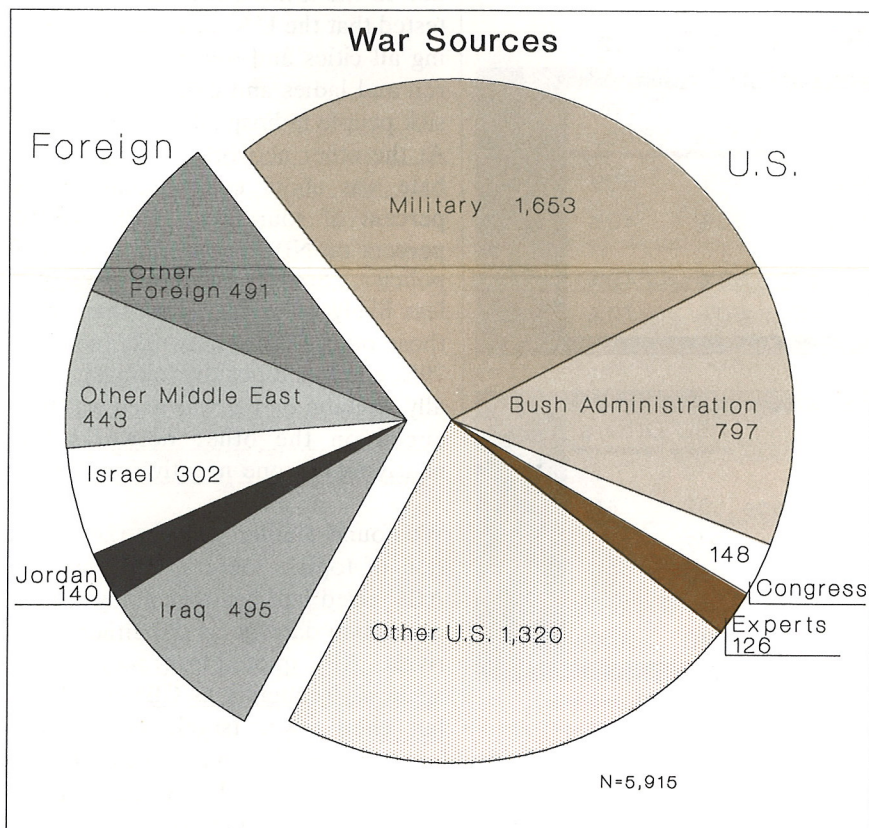
	Percent Positive	Number of Sources
George Bush	56%	70
Saddam Hussein	12%	138
Israel	74%	57
Soviet Union	50%	42
United States	41%	249
Iraq	37%	115
Coalition Allies*	30%	40
Germany/Japan	0%	19

*Includes Egypt, France, Great Britain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, and UAE.

references to unidentified "Pentagon sources." Among the services, Marines were quoted the most often. Their 306 appearances outranked the Army's 262, despite frequent sound bites from Army Generals Powell (36) and Schwarzkopf (80). Air Force personnel were quoted only 159 times, and the Navy's only 75 times. The Bush administration was the source of another 797 statements, including 183 from President Bush and 62 from Secretary of Defense Cheney.

Among foreign sources, Iraqis were quoted most frequently, more than all of the United States' coalition partners combined (495 to 447 citations). Saddam Hussein was quoted 68

times, making him the third most frequently cited individual source, after Bush and Schwarzkopf. In contrast to the 495 quotes from Iraqi sources, television viewers heard from only 302 Israeli, 112 Kuwaiti, and 79 Saudi sources.



Rating the Combatants

Despite his visibility, TV news coverage of Saddam was highly negative. Only one out of eight sources who evaluated the Iraqi President provided words of praise, and those sources were predominantly his fellow Iraqis or Jordanians. For example, a Jordanian woman told CBS that, "Saddam Hussein is good....I love Saddam Hussein." (1/24) George Bush received a slight majority of positive comments (56%), with most of his support coming from Americans. More than ninety percent of U.S. sources had praise for Bush, while three out of four foreign sources criticized him. Much of the criticism of Bush was voiced by Iraqis, such as a government official who charged, "Bush is like Hitler and is a war criminal." (ABC, 2/14)

Israel's decision not to respond to Iraq's Scud attacks earned it praise from three out of four

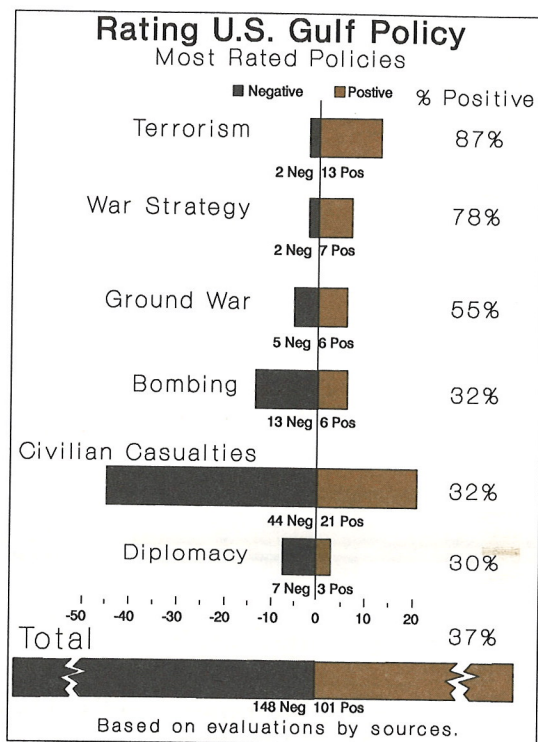
TV news sources, the most positive profile among the Gulf War players. The Soviet Union, in the spotlight for its mediation efforts, received evenly balanced evaluations. The worst press of the conflict went to the Germans and the Japanese. They received unanimously negative evaluations for allegedly failing to support the coalition.

Surprisingly, the U.S. government fared little better than its Iraqi counterpart in the sound bite battle. Nearly three out of five sources (59%) criticized U.S. government policies during the war. Evaluations of the U.S. centered on the bombing campaign and the civilian damage it was causing in Iraq. More than a third of all evaluations of U.S. policy focused on those two categories, and 68 percent of those statements were critical. After the Iraqi bunker bombing, one Jordanian stated, "the U.S. people running this war are either liars or very stupid people. They may have smart bombs but they don't have very smart minds." (CBS, 2/12) Iraqi policy received even greater criticism - 63 percent negative comments from sources. The Iraqis were most often criticized for their Scud attacks on Israeli cities, the release of oil into the Persian Gulf and alleged atrocities in Kuwait.

Rating the Warriors

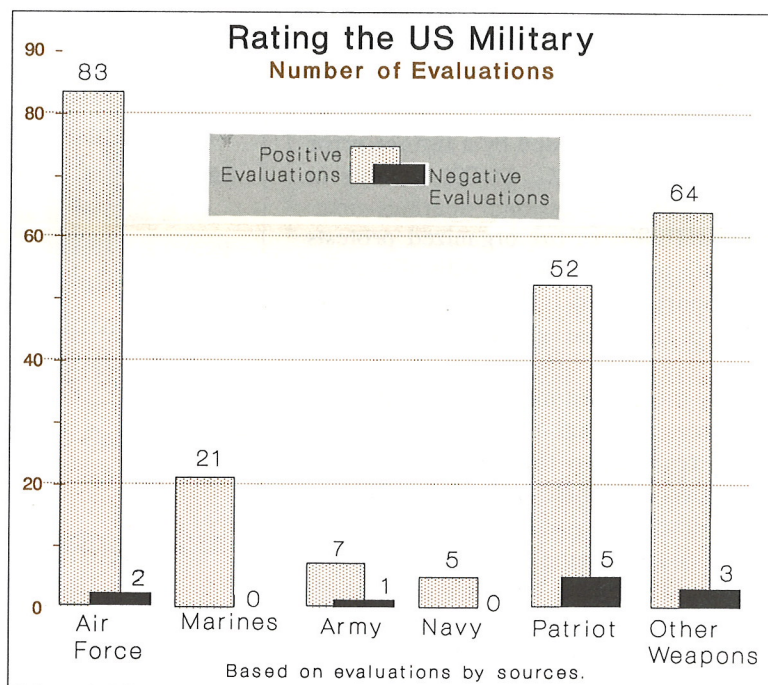
The performance of the American military in the Gulf War yielded almost universally good press: 95 percent of the more than 300 sources who discussed this area praised the military's effectiveness in the war. CBS's Dan Rather summarized the first full day of the war: "In sports page language--this is not a sport, it's war--but, so far, it's a blowout." (1/17)

As the workhorse for much of the air war, the Air Force received the largest dose of praise (83 positive and only two negative evaluations). The Marine Corps, which acquired the media spotlight during the ground war as the Army vanished into the western Saudi desert, re-



ceived unanimously positive ratings. Among weapons systems, the Patriot missile was the media darling, with 91 percent positive ratings. One U.S. serviceman called the Patriot "the king of air defense artillery right now, not only for the United States, but probably in all the free world." (NBC, 1/21)

The Iraq military also got fairly good ratings early on, but its reputation slid as the weeks passed. Four days into the war, a U.S. military briefer stated that the Iraqis possessed "some of the most formidable air defenses ever encountered." (ABC, 1/20) During the first week of the war, more than three out of five such estimations of Iraqi strength (61%) were positive. By the final week of the war, Iraq's military power had become the butt of jokes. "That an entire battalion would surrender to a bunch of helicopters," NBC military analyst James Dunnigan noted wryly, "certainly writes a new chapter in military history." (NBC, 2/21)



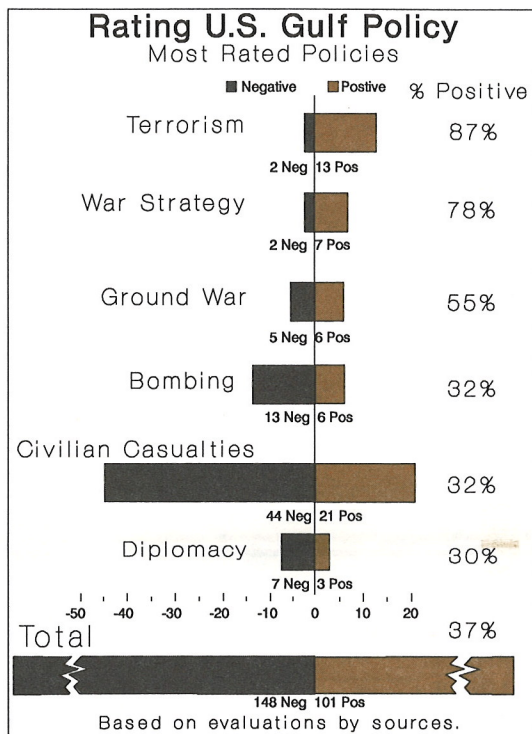
TV news sources, the most positive profile among the Gulf War players. The Soviet Union, in the spotlight for its mediation efforts, received evenly balanced evaluations. The worst press of the conflict went to the Germans and the Japanese. They received unanimously negative evaluations for allegedly failing to support the coalition.

Surprisingly, the U.S. government fared little better than its Iraqi counterpart in the sound bite battle. Nearly three out of five sources (59%) criticized U.S. government policies during the war. Evaluations of the U.S. centered on the bombing campaign and the civilian damage it was causing in Iraq. More than a third of all evaluations of U.S. policy focused on those two categories, and 68 percent of those statements were critical. After the Iraqi bunker bombing, one Jordanian stated, "the U.S. people running this war are either liars or very stupid people. They may have smart bombs but they don't have very smart minds." (CBS, 2/12) Iraqi policy received even greater criticism - 63 percent negative comments from sources. The Iraqis were most often criticized for their Scud attacks on Israeli cities, the release of oil into the Persian Gulf and alleged atrocities in Kuwait.

Rating the Warriors

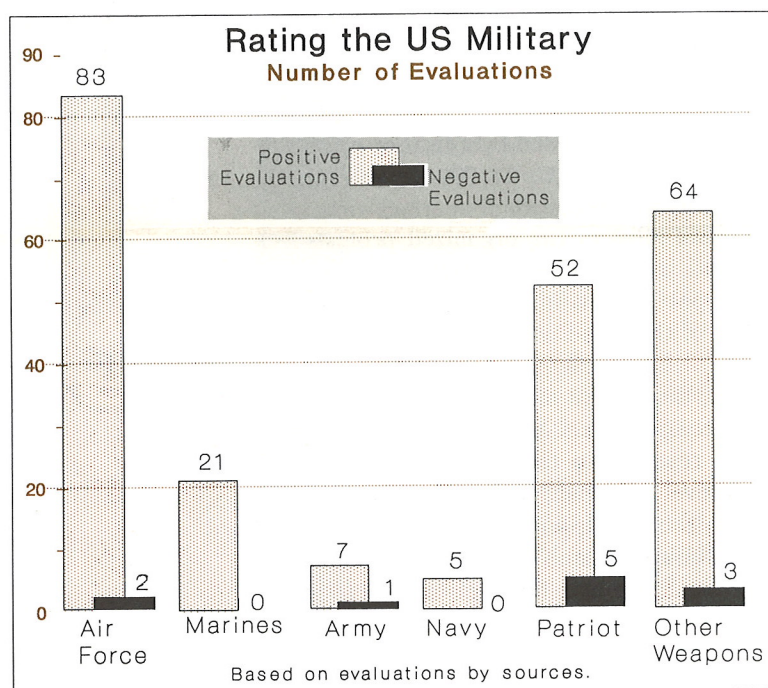
The performance of the American military in the Gulf War yielded almost universally good press: 95 percent of the more than 300 sources who discussed this area praised the military's effectiveness in the war. CBS's Dan Rather summarized the first full day of the war: "In sports page language--this is not a sport, it's war--but, so far, it's a blowout." (1/17)

As the workhorse for much of the air war, the Air Force received the largest dose of praise (83 positive and only two negative evaluations). The Marine Corps, which acquired the media spotlight during the ground war as the Army vanished into the western Saudi desert, re-

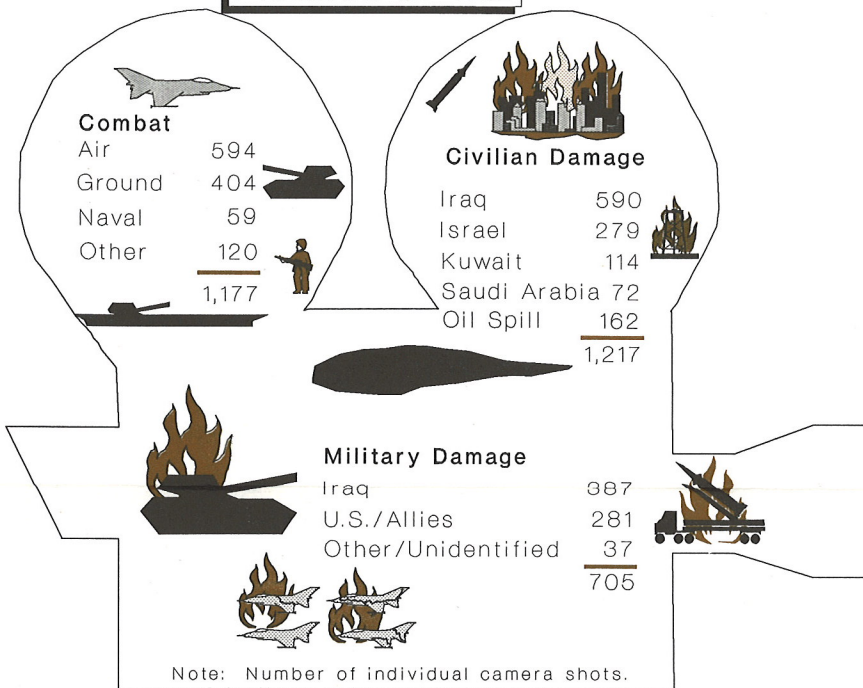


ceived unanimously positive ratings. Among weapons systems, the Patriot missile was the media darling, with 91 percent positive ratings. One U.S. serviceman called the Patriot "the king of air defense artillery right now, not only for the United States, but probably in all the free world." (NBC, 1/21)

The Iraqi military also got fairly good ratings early on, but its reputation slid as the weeks passed. Four days into the war, a U.S. military briefer stated that the Iraqis possessed "some of the most formidable air defenses ever encountered." (ABC, 1/20) During the first week of the war, more than three out of five such estimations of Iraqi strength (61%) were positive. By the final week of the war, Iraq's military power had become the butt of jokes. "That an entire battalion would surrender to a bunch of helicopters," NBC military analyst James Dunnigan noted wryly, "certainly writes a new chapter in military history." (NBC, 2/21)



Pictures of War



half (48%) of these shots showed damage to civilian areas inside Iraq. Under a quarter (23%) focused on images of destruction in Israel, and one in eight (13%) depicted the Persian Gulf oil spill. These pictures were far from antiseptic; 223 (or 18%) depicted human casualties, mostly from Iraq (151) and Israel (66).

Combat visuals also appeared frequently on the nightly news. The brevity of the ground war insured that most visual images depicted airborne combat. The networks featured 594 pictures of the air war, mostly camera shots from Allied planes, or Patriot missile launches over Israel or Saudi Arabia. Ironically, the number of air combat visuals virtually equalled the number of images of Iraqi civilian damage (590). Images of ground combat, mostly from the last days of the war, totalled 404 shots--just over a third of all combat visuals.

Despite the paucity of Allied casualties in the war, a large proportion of the military casualties shown on the networks were U.S. or coalition troops. Of the 130 shots of dead or wounded servicemen, more than two-thirds (91) were Allied casualties; Iraqi troops ac-

counted for the remaining 39. The Iraqis were more often depicted as prisoners; 182 of the 258 visuals of POW's were of captured Iraqi soldiers. Overall, shots of Iraqi military damage (casualties and wreckage such as burning tanks) outnumbered shots of Allied military damage by 387 to 281.

The ABC Difference

Although coverage by CBS and NBC was similar on most of our measures, ABC produced a distinctively anti-war profile. This reflects both the distribution of opinion and the selection of subject matter in ABC's war coverage. In the opinion debate, ABC proved more likely to air criticisms of U.S. policy and leadership than did CBS or NBC. Fewer than half of ABC's sources (44%) provided positive evaluations of President Bush. In contrast, 58 percent of NBC sources and 63 percent of CBS sources praised Bush. Similarly, three out of four evaluations of U.S. policy on ABC

were negative. For example, Peter Jennings talked to the Iraqi Ambassador to the United Nations, who protested that the U.S. was "carpet bombing all cities and towns, killing children and ladies and elderlies and even sick people in hospitals." (ABC, 1/22) At the other networks, the policy debate was about evenly balanced--48 percent of sources on CBS and 50 percent on NBC supported U.S. Gulf policies. Sources on ABC were also less likely to praise Israel than were those on the other networks (60% vs. 79% combined positive ratings). Finally, opinion on the war itself was balanced on the other networks but nearly two to one negative on ABC.

We found similar gaps in the selection of topics, sources, and pictures. ABC aired half again as many stories on civilian damage as did either of its rivals. ABC quoted Iraqi sources half again as frequently as CBS and NBC but cited fewer Israeli sources and showed fewer visuals of damage to Israel from Scud attacks. Finally, ABC broadcast the most stories (20) on anti-war demonstrations.

ABC vs. Its Rivals

	ABC % Pos	Others* %Pos
George Bush	44%	60%
U.S. Policy	26%	49%
Pro-War Viewpoints	36%	49%
Israeli Gov't	60%	79%

	ABC	Others*
Stories on Civilian Damage	62	40
Iraqi Sources	212	142
Israeli Sources	79	112
Pictures of Israeli Damage	80	100

*Combined averages for CBS and NBC.