

**The George W. Bush Administration and the News Media:
the
Unfolding of a Turbulent Relationship**

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Summary

In the post-9/11 atmosphere, a number of things changed in American society, including the relationship between the presidential administration and the news media. The Bush administration openly stated that it did not believe in the “check-and-balance” function of the Fourth Estate, an alarming assertion that turned out to be true. The press quickly realized that it had to be cautious when commenting the administration and its policies, because reporters who published critical stories experienced scrutiny attacks from administration officials. The justifications for the scrutiny were based on patriotism, loyalty to the president and national security. The fact that the White House regarded opposing views and criticism as hostile elements that needed to be counterattacked, and even censored, was not the only result of the post-9/11 era.

In addition to a higher lever of scrutiny, the press also faced an extremely disciplined White House administration in regard to information. In fact, this discipline bordered to pure secrecy at times, as the administration began reversing the country’s information laws and delayed the scheduled release of presidential papers. The record low number of press conferences with President Bush was another aspect that disappointed the press. ‘Secret’ tendencies were displayed during times of war as well, a factor that was deeply connected to the “Vietnam syndrome” theory.

Although members of the news media faced scrutiny attacks, criticism and an administration unwilling to share information, some forces in the national news media initiated a self-reflection process. One of the main arguments of the self-analysis was that the national news media failed to fulfill their “watchdog” duties, especially in the lead up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. As numerous examples illustrated, the administration’s pro-war arguments were most often placed on the front pages, while articles that challenged those arguments ended up in the back sections of the newspapers.

The thesis’ conclusion will sum up the main arguments, and propose solutions that the media and the White House could attempt to apply. These solutions might improve the future correspondence between two of America’s most significant institutions.

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Introduction

“Congress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of the press...”

Constitution of the United States of America, First Amendment

Thesis and Structure

In the post-9/11 period there have been indications that the Bush administration launched a stricter and more rigorous policy toward the American news media. Those in the press who posed critical questions and wrote critical stories about the administration and its policies were quickly scrutinized by administration officials. Many in the news media quickly realized that the Bush White House had a low tolerance threshold for opposing views and that questioning the national security policies could have potentially risky consequences. Some reporters lost their jobs, while others received ‘warnings’ that implied it was un-American to criticize the president as the nation faced the terror threat. In addition to a higher level of scrutiny, the news press also faced a disciplined White House administration in regards of information. Fewer press conferences by the president and a restricted information flow led a number of individuals in the media to view the administration as a secret administration.

Due to this background setting the thesis will therefore analyze the relationship between President George W. Bush Jr’s administration and the media from 9/11 and up until his second term, in an attempt to reveal the causes of government scrutiny, criticism and secrecy toward the American press. The specific timeline was chosen because it is from September 11 and toward the end of 2004 that the administration initiated historically crucial actions such as the War on Terror, the Patriot Act and the creation of Homeland Security Department. Although plenty books and articles have already been written and published about Bush’s second term, it is still

difficult to estimate advantages or disadvantages of the policies originating from that term because they are still active and unfolding.

It is only reasonable that the first chapter starts with a short historical overview of the presidency-media relationship, beginning with Franklin D. Roosevelt and continuing with the most pivotal presidents of the century. As will be shown, every president cultivated his own specific relationship with the media, some of them could be described as functional, and some dysfunctional. Further illustrated will be the Bush administration's critique and scrutiny aimed at specific media organizations and individuals. As it constitutes one significant part of the thesis, it is important to put forth this aspect as soon as possible.

The second chapter will analyze the secretive aspect of the administration. As already mentioned, a number of individuals and journalists believe that the degree of discipline from the Bush administration toward the media has at times edged to pure secrecy, which makes this aspect an essential part of the thesis. It will accordingly be demonstrated with specific examples. The media coverage in the wars of Vietnam, the Gulf and Iraq will as well be a central issue, with focus on press access to the troops and embedding of reporters. As will be illustrated, Pentagon has behaved differently toward the media in times of war by applying both restrictive and unrestrictive regulations when it came to reporting from combat zones. Political theories such as the "Vietnam syndrome" and "collective security rules" will also be presented because they analyze and attempt to explain complex issues such as warfare strategies and wartime presidencies.

In the third and final chapter, failure of professional journalism will be the central issue. Although there was an increasing distrust between the mainstream media and the administration due to limitation on information, there is currently an increasing belief among some academics and journalists that the American mainstream media itself failed to fulfill its duties. These individuals point to aspects of the Iraq war, such as the failure of starting a more critical debate as the Bush administration was preparing for the invasion in 2003. As is known today, the still ongoing war was initiated on false grounds, such as the alleged weapons of mass destruction (WMD) that Iraq's dictator Saddam Hussein was supposed to possess. Therefore questions arise: did the media fail to be the "watchdog" in that crucial period? If that is the case: why?

The paper will end with a conclusion that not only sums up the chapters, but also attempts to propose solutions for a more improved relationship between the presidency and the American media in a post-9/11 era.

Sources and Methods

In order to detect relevant information and knowledge, a variety of sources will be evaluated and applied. The classic media will be included, such as some of the major television networks along with newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*.

The primary sources intended to be used are press statements from the White House, the State Department and the Department of Defense, transcripts from press briefings and presidential speeches. In hope of an interview, the White House and the State Department were initially contacted, and so were the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and Fox News Network. However none of the mentioned responded, except of the automatic reply mail. On the other hand, the Information Resource Center at the American embassy in Oslo did respond, offering their help and guidance. Nevertheless, the university library, electronic databases and the Internet became the most important research tools for the thesis.

Included with the classic media will also be Internet, because the public is turning more and more to this media outlet as a primary source of information. After all it was on the World Wide Web that the first photographs of U.S. casualties in Iraq were posted, and consequently censored.¹

As secondary sources numerous books have been helpful, such as David Dudge's *Casualty of War: The Bush Administration's Assault on a Free Press*. Perhaps the title itself indicates what Dudge's position is toward the president, however it was the first book that initiated the long process from an idea outline to this final thesis. After reading and examining Dudge's work countless thoughts and notions were emerging, because his findings were both surprising and shocking. The attempted censoring and interference in the work of the *Voice of America* network was stunning, however the list of similar cases only continued. The commotion regarding Pentagon's so-called Office of Strategic Influence was alarming, where the actual purpose of the office was to spread disinformation to foreign media organizations. After the revelation of the dirty tactics, the OSI was quickly dismantled,² yet the thought that the powerful office with a multi-million dollar budget could have existed is scary. *When the Press Fails: Political Power*

and the News Media from Iraq to Katrina by Bennett, Lawrence and Livingston was also useful as it offered a number of interesting arguments about the mainstream media's role in the build-up toward the Iraq War. As the book progresses it appears that the reporters, along with the executive editors, did not live up to their calling which was to provide a balanced and equal overview of all opinions in the spectrum. Instead, the focus of the coverage remained mostly on the administration's assertions that were in the end left to stand unchallenged.

After an examination of the various sources the decision was made that the turbulent relationship between the Bush administration and the American mainstream press needed to be explored.

Other secondary sources of great value were the archives at the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. The two prominent newspapers were unavoidable as sources because they traditionally dictate the news agenda on a nationwide basis, and as a result many of the country's local newspapers and news stations look toward the two giants when setting the headline of the day. Furthermore, a number of *Post* journalists have been in unpleasant encounters with the administration officials, which makes this secondary source even more relevant for the thesis. As will be illustrated, *Post's* White House correspondent Dana Milbank faced difficulties in the White House after writing critical articles about the president's administration.³

Scholarly journals such as *Columbia Journalism Review* and the independent media watch group FAIR (Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting) have as well been useful. Their balanced and objective articles contributed with in-depth analysis that not only showed the direction to further new sources, but also helped me to comprehend some aspects of the thesis. The international JSTOR database must not be forgotten, as it also provided insightful and reflective academic articles.

Historiography

In the United States, freedom of the press has traditionally been perceived as necessary in order to have a functioning democratic society. As John Adams wrote in the Massachusetts Constitution: "The liberty of the press is essential to the security of the state."⁴ The media are also often referred to as the Fourth Estate, implying that their role is a part of the system of checks and balances in that the media have the right to investigate and hold government officials accountable for their actions. In the political history of the United States there have been a number of incidents of media holding government officials accountable, and many would say

that the most famous event among these was the exposing of the Watergate affair and the release of the Pentagon Papers, followed by the resignation of former president Nixon in 1974. In the case of *The New York Times Co. v. U.S.* when the U.S. Supreme Court rejected the right of the Nixon administration to prevent the publication of the Pentagon Papers, Justice Hugo L. Black noted that “only a free and unrestrained press can effectively expose deception in government.”⁵ With these words Justice Black approved the media’s duty to watch over government, and since then there have not been prior restraint cases in the Supreme Court that have involved the federal government.⁶

However, many critics of the George W. Bush administration claim that his administration is far worse when compared to Nixon’s in regards of the authoritarian self-image it contains and the secrecy levels it displays in both domestic and foreign policy spheres. One such critic is John W. Dean, Nixon’s former White House Counsel who became deeply involved in the Watergate scandal cover up. Since that time Dean has become an author and columnist, and most notably a strong critical opponent of the Republican Party and conservatism. He applies strong terms when describing the Bush administration:

George W. Bush and Richard B. Cheney have created the most secretive presidency of my lifetime. Their secrecy is far worse than during Watergate...Their secrecy is extreme- not merely unjustified and excessive but obsessive...It (the White House) has given us a presidency that operates on hidden agendas.⁷

Dean claims throughout his study that the current administration has so-called “Nixonian traits” referring to its attempts to control the media and the use of the executive privilege. When it comes to its relations with the media, the Bush administration has from the start been highly disciplined in its information flow to the media, whether national security policies were concerned or domestic policies.

Historian Michael Beschloss has compared the current presidency with the presidencies in the late part of the 19th century, “when often the occupant of the White House did not have much to say in public.”⁸ The current chief-executive himself stated early on that he does not feel obliged to appear on television shows “every hour of every day.”⁹ When a young black man was shot dead by the police in Cincinnati in April 2001, riots soon broke out. However it was not the

president who made public statements about the crucial event, but Attorney General John Ashcroft.

Holding press conferences has as well been another dislike of Mr. Bush, who by late April 2001 had held only two press conferences, both on very short notice.¹⁰ Although press conferences are one of the most important channels through which presidents communicate to the media and public, they represent an “uncontrolled setting” where there is no time to prepare well-thought out answers to tough questions. Therefore some presidents attempt to avoid this communication method.¹¹ However statistics of some of Bush’s predecessors indicate that they were not trying to avoid this area of their presidency. By March 2003 Bush held his eight news conferences in total, while President Clinton had held 30 at the same time in his first term, and the first president Bush was even busier with his 58 news conferences.¹² Dan Bartlett, counselor to Mr. Bush put it simply when explaining president’s low number on press conferences: “At press conferences, you can’t control the message.”¹³ Although Bartlett’s argument sounds logical, other factors must not be discounted. Both domestic and foreign observers have emphasized Bush’s inarticulateness and his frequent misstatements as possible reasons for the reduction of press conferences. Jacob Weisberg at *Slate* magazine is one of those observers who has collected and published a majority of the president’s accidental mishaps, and despite their comic and entertaining character it becomes apparent why the Bush administration chose not to prioritize live conferences with reporters.

In the period since the September 11 attacks, the administration altered its policies in many areas, including an even tougher and stricter policy toward the media than earlier. If a journalist or a news organization frequently questioned the administration’s policies on terrorism, that individual or organization was met with verbal attacks and criticism. The justifications for the critical scrutiny were based on patriotism and loyalty to the president. As will be shown, television commentator and comedian Bill Maher found himself at the center of attention shortly after the terrorist attacks when he made controversial statements about President Bush in his talk show. With the White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer striking back, the situation escalated even further and ended with Maher’s show being cancelled by the ABC network.¹⁴ As the hostile public outcry at the commentator intensified and advertisers initiated a withdrawal from the show, the president’s press secretary nevertheless seemed to believe that another critical

remark needed to be made. Fleischer's response certainly cleared up any doubt about the administration's standpoint toward Maher and acted as an indirect, yet powerful element concerning the future of the show.

Another journalist who faced criticism was the *Washington Post's* White House correspondent Dana Milbank who wrote critical articles about the administration from the very start. There are reports in some news media circles that administration officials demanded that the paper reassign Milbank even before president Bush had taken office! The *Post* however rejected the demand and supported its correspondent.¹⁵

Not only did some of the Bush administration's officials criticize the media, but there were even attempts at censoring news stories. The interference in the work of the *Voice of America* network, which was prompted by an interview with a Taliban leader led eventually to the loss of several journalists' jobs.¹⁶ Journalism became more closely scrutinized by the presidency which also attempted to control the media to a greater extent than the previous administration. It was obvious that the control on the information flow was tightened and it seemed that a concealing curtain increasingly separated the White House from the rest of the media. Some commentators viewed the post-9/11 period as a "censorious environment" however the Bush administration did little to reverse the negative atmosphere. In fact, more fuel was added to the fire with statements by high-ranking officials such as "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality.." and "I don't believe you (the media) have a check-and-balance function".¹⁷

The White House press corps soon noted that they could not remember a White House that was so little approachable or responsive to the press. Their complaints ranged from the modest number of presidential press conferences as already mentioned, to instances where some reporters believed they were being "frozen out" by administration officials when they asked questions considered unacceptable.¹⁸ Mr. Fleischer on the other hand, argued that the press had "plenty of access" and that he did not think it was a "matter of withholding information," but rather of "withholding gossip". With his new approach Fleischer intended to break away from what he termed a tradition of "gossip-mongering in the press."¹⁹ He even got support from a surprising hold. Bill Clinton's press secretary, Michael D. McCurry, viewed Fleischer's strategy as more effective than the accommodating method he was applying. He believed his fellow

Republican's approach was perhaps the right formula: "To be very, very disciplined and treat the press like caged animals and only feed them on a regular schedule."²⁰

The longstanding Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) policies that were reversed by Attorney General Ashcroft must not be forgotten either. The so-called Ashcroft Memorandum invited all the departments of government to "carefully consider FOIA requests" and in case of deciding to withhold records- the Department of Justice would support their decision.²¹

A Wartime Presidency

President Bush's presidency has often been defined as a wartime presidency, and this does not come as a surprise because following the 9/11 attacks, Bush and his closest team initiated a global war on terrorism, also called the War on Terror. The main goal of the war campaign was to destroy the terrorist network Al-Qaeda along with other similar terrorist organizations. Military operations soon followed in Afghanistan and Iraq. But not only did the administration launch military actions, it also established new communications structures in the White House. As Pika and Maltese point out, the Coalition Information Center (CIC) was created, which was a continual, never-ending White House communication effort to build public support abroad for the war on terrorism, especially among the Arab population in the Middle East.²² In January 2003, this around-the-clock operation turned into a permanent office at the White House, named Office of Global Communications. As the White House itself stated, the office was to work "closely with the State and Defense Departments to ensure rapid response to allegations and rumors in the war on terror."²³

It is interesting that the administration mentions "allegations" and "rumors" in its statement since those elements turn up quickly when the release of information shuts down to a minimum. For example, the Pentagon, with Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld at the front, imposed a tight lid on military news and operations in the lead-up to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. At a time when the United States was about to intervene by sending hundreds of thousands of its troops overseas, the media along, with the public, was left with minimal information after press briefings with military officials. As several Pentagon correspondents maintained, their usual sources interpreted Rumsfeld's instructions regarding leaks seriously and were accordingly restrained in their cooperation with reporters.²⁴ In an atmosphere like that the press was left to mainly guess and predict.

The two other significant events that took place in Bush's wartime presidency were the signing of the Patriot Act and the creation of the Department of Homeland Security. The Patriot Act was overwhelmingly passed by Congress, and signed as law on October 26, 2001. Although it became law only six weeks after the terrorist attacks, the president argued that the act was "carefully drafted and considered."²⁵ He further argued that this piece of legislation would give intelligence agencies "better tools" in tracking down and capturing terrorists, such as allowing surveillance of e-mail and cell phone correspondence. As Pika and Maltese more importantly point out, under the act the FBI could spy on U.S. citizens and the Department of Justice could detain people without presenting any evidence of a crime.²⁶

More than a year later the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) came into existence. The so-called "superagency" embraced twenty-two agencies and various units, making it the third largest department in the government. As its mission statement declared, the new department would "prevent terrorist attacks" within the U.S., "reduce the vulnerability of the United States to terrorism" and "minimize the damage, and assist in the recovery, from terrorist attacks that do occur within the United States."²⁷ The DHS was important to Bush as a wartime president because as he announced, the creation of DHS was "historic action to defend the United States and protect our citizens from the dangers of a new era."²⁸

Despite the powerful words from the First Amendment, the executive branch has frequently attempted to regulate the press and the media, and the Bush administration is no exception. However, if there is a belief that a free news press is essential to a democratic society, then attempts at censoring and restricting it could pose as a potential danger to society. This is worrying. If the leader of the free world and his administration are involved in incorrect and dishonest behavior toward the Fourth Estate, then serious actions need to be taken, especially when matters such as FOIA information laws and the War on Terror are concerned. It is the public's right to have an insight in their country leader's affairs, and the media is the only institution that can fulfill that task. As has been witnessed previously, former president Nixon and his closest advisers were involved in political scandals that were not only a disgrace to that specific administration but to the entire American nation. In what way President Bush's legacy will be judged remains to be seen, although there is already a rising number of both domestic and

international political strategists who point to the current presidency as a catastrophe for the United States and its people. Could the turbulent relationship with the mainstream media be part of that negative judgment? The following chapter takes a closer look at the scrutiny and criticism certain reporters and news organizations encountered in the tense post-9/11 era.

Chapter 1

Every modern American president in the 20th century has been aware of the notion that they need the media to communicate to the public, because it is through the media they can most effectively reach to their countrymen. But as the news media industry has grown and expanded its power and financial position, it has turned out to be more than just a communication tool and the 20th century president has realized that. As the president speaks to the public he not only conveys his message, but attempts to influence the public's opinion on policy objectives he believes are important. The White House press team works therefore constantly to make sure that favorable images and news of the chief executive get presented in the media in order to gain both public and congressional support. However, the historical relationship between the White House and the press has been a mixed one; in fact, some have even labeled it as a curse. For example, a mutual respect was enjoyed between FDR and the Washington-based reporters, but the same can not be said for Clinton who was practically chased by the press at the height of the Lewinsky-affair. Nevertheless, every modern president knows that the investigative nature of a professional reporter is a permanent element that automatically follows the leader of the free world. Each president therefore is forced to create, and maintain a somewhat stabile relationship with the media in order for his presidency to function properly.

FDR

As political scientist Mark J. Rozell claims in an article written originally for Pfiffner and Davidson, there has never been a greater master of the media than the New Deal and wartime president Franklin D. Roosevelt. First of all, FDR achieved stabile and respectful relations with the White House press corps that lasted throughout his long presidency. Flattering the reporters by using their first names, asking their advice on national matters, and even inviting some of them to join his family dinners at the White House were some of the tactics applied by the president.²⁹ Yet he did establish a number of exceptional rules for the correspondents at the

White House: he decided what information was on-background, off-the-record, or not-for-attribution. As Rozell points out, reporters who did not follow the president's rules risked being cut off from access to the White House.³⁰ Secondly, FDR was a master when speaking to the public on the radio. His very well prepared speeches, performed with precision and enthusiasm every time, captivated an entire nation and helped the president get support for his domestic and foreign policies. Thirdly, he created the White House Press Office in 1933, which became an important institution as its primary task was to provide information from the White House itself, and assist the Washington-based reporters. James E. Pollard suitably described FDR's presidency over sixty years ago:

[in] sum, here was an administration with a concept of public relations far beyond that of any predecessor. The times called for candor and frankness with the public. Much of the early success of the New Deal was undoubtedly due to the constant steady stream of organized information from the White House and to the fact that most of the working correspondents were on the side of Mr. Roosevelt. He played their game and very often they were inclined to play his.³¹

It can be safely asserted that FDR became one of the most important presidents throughout US history, and not only because of his outstanding policy achievements but also because of his unforgettable, one-of-a-kind relationship with the media.

JFK and LBJ

John F. Kennedy has often been called America's "first television president." As Rozell suggests, JFK's televised appearances gave him the electoral push that he needed in the presidential race in 1960. He appeared youthful, modern, elegant and articulate, and he used the popular television medium for all it was worth "to promote himself and his presidency."³² He allowed cameras to film both him and his family at the White House in order for Americans to see their chief executive in his private element. But what he conducted most skillfully were the televised live press conferences. According to Theodore Sorenson, who was a Kennedy aide, the purpose of live coverage was meant "to inform and impress the public more than the press," and to provide "a direct communication with the voters which no newspaper could alter by interpretation or omission."³³ Kennedy's press conferences were serious and entertaining simultaneously, and they seemed to impress most of the American public because his popularity

ratings increased steadily. However, this media friendly president could occasionally get outraged by news stories. According to David Dudge, the president once tried to get reporter David Halberstam of *The New York Times* removed from his position because of his critical reporting in Vietnam.³⁴

During the Lyndon B. Johnson administration a so-called “credibility gap” emerged, which implied “the distance between reality and government projections about the progress of the Vietnam War.”³⁵ In other words, the administration’s views and prospects of the Vietnam War did not correspond with the actual situation which displayed high death tolls on both sides and no solution in sight. As Rozell indicates, LBJ was “combative with reporters,” which was a complete contrast to his predecessor. Despite his troublesome relations with the press, LBJ became more and more engaged with the media. In fact, he had television screens and wire service feeds installed in the Oval Office so that he could better supervise the news coverage,³⁶ which was often critical toward the administration’s military escalations in Vietnam. George Christian, who served as the White House Press Secretary from 1966 to 1969, emphasized the same notion and added: “President Johnson lived and breathed the news...Not many people get up at five or five-thirty and start reading half a dozen newspapers, then tune in all three morning news shows on TV, and watch all of the Sunday interview programs and the news documentaries, and monitor the AP and UPI tickers in [their] office all day, and tune in the CBS radio news every hour on the hour.”³⁷

Nixon and Watergate

The relationship between the White House and the media hit a record low point during the Nixon years. From the very start the president made it clear that he thought of the press as ‘the enemy.’ When problems started to pile up on his desk, the White House Chief of Staff H. R. Haldeman argued these were caused “by the determined opposition of a large number of the press corps and establishment media who, because of their past efforts to write Nixon off, had a vested interest in his ‘unsuccess.’”³⁸ Nixon resented the media to the degree that he resorted to unusual tactics to reverse negative news coverage. Most importantly, he created the White House Office of Communications in 1969, and according to political scholar John Anthony Maltese “every president after him has ultimately felt compelled to embrace it.”³⁹ Nixon’s primary motivation in creating the office “was to install a mechanism for bypassing the critical filter of the White

House press corps,”⁴⁰ and one of the efforts was to reach out directly to local media. However, the office was, and still is mainly engaged in long-term public relations management. The goal is, as Pika and Maltese claim, to set the public agenda, coordinate the news flow from the entire executive branch, and to “aggressively promote that agenda through a form of mass marketing.”⁴¹ But it was the uncovering of the Watergate affair that fundamentally changed the White House-press relationship, and brought about increased skepticism and distrustfulness toward the information flow from the administration.

The Reagan Era

The president who adopted most of Nixon’s methods was Ronald Reagan. He copied the “line-of-the-day” practice, which implied that one theme was selected each day and spread to the entire executive branch in an attempt to set the news agenda for the press. Polling data was used when choosing the daily theme, which in the end helped to enforce a consistency among the statements of various spokespersons. Maltese maintains that “television was paramount to Reagan,” and reveals that “the White House set up a tracking system of network newscasts to see how many minutes were devoted to each of the stories that the White House was promoting.”⁴² This tracking system in return, made it possible for the White House to alter and adjust its communication tasks. Reagan was named the “Great Communicator” due to his media skills and ability to communicate directly to the public, and the fact that he was a former movie actor might have been an advantage in his relations with the press.

Clinton

Bill Clinton and his communications director, George Stephanopoulos, managed to alienate much of the White House press corps already during Clinton’s first days of the presidency. One of the initial decisions was to limit the corps’ access, such as closing off the upstairs foyer in the West Wing, where the offices of Stephanopoulos and the press secretary were located. As Pika and Maltese argue, reporters had been free to move around in the foyer for more than twenty years, where they were able to engage in informal conversations with communications officials.⁴³ With the new rearrangement however, reporters felt the administration was not making much of an effort to provide them with information. They felt they were not being treated with respect, and Clinton consequently got off to a bad start with the White House correspondents. It is important to note the rise of the new media at the time, such as cable,

internet and satellite technology. Pika and Maltese suggest that once Clinton took office, he and his advisers planned to use the new media in order to bypass the traditional White House press corps.⁴⁴ However, it is simply impossible to entirely circumvent the old media and Clinton discovered that by the time he left office.

It is obvious that each president above had his own strong personality, and clashes with the news media were at times inevitable as they constantly covered and analyzed the presidency. But in each of the cases it seems that the president accepted the role of the media and the media that of the president. However, the current Bush administration operates with a different mindset. After an examination of some of its actions toward the media in the wake of 9/11, the Bush White House gives the impression that it views the media not as the Fourth Estate, but as a special interest group, or in some cases even as its worst enemy.

“Watch What You’re Saying”

According to David Dudge, the first victim in the post-9/11 climate was Bill Maher, the frequently sarcastic host of ABC’s show *Politically Incorrect*. On his September 17th, 2001 show, Maher made controversial statements about whether the terrorists who had flown the airplanes into the World Trade Center towers had been cowards: “We have been the cowards lobbing cruise missiles from 2000 miles away. That’s cowardly.” He further continued: “Staying in the airplane when it hits the building...say what you want about it, [it’s] not cowardly...”⁴⁵

The reactions on the comments came instantly. FedEx Corporation proclaimed it was withdrawing its advertising commercial on the same day the show was aired, and two days later Sears, Roebuck and Company cancelled their advertisements as well after receiving complaints from customers. The spokeswoman of the latter specified that “Bill and his guests have every right to voice their freedom of speech and we applaud that. However, we have the right to air our broadcast advertising where we feel it’s appropriate to reach out to our customers.”⁴⁶

In its press release, ABC sought to repair the situation by saying that the show “celebrates freedom of speech and encourages the animated exchange of ideas and opinions. While we remain sensitive to the current climate following last week’s tragedy and there needs to remain a forum for the expression of our nation’s diverse opinions.”⁴⁷ Maher’s defense was that his

comments were meant for “politicians who, fearing public reaction, have not allowed our military to do the job they are obviously ready, willing, and able to do, and who now will, I’m certain, as they always have, get it done.”⁴⁸ But with this statement Maher illustrates that he does not fully comprehend the situation. His real crime was that he displayed criticism at a time when many Americans viewed it as inappropriate.

The White House viewed it as inappropriate as well and reacted accordingly. In his daily press briefing, the White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer made an infamous statement that the press recited and debated in the period to follow. Fleischer declared that “[Maher’s comments] are reminders to all Americans that they need to watch what they say, watch what they do. This is not a time for remarks like that; there never is.”⁴⁹ Fleischer’s words generated controversy, and columnist Maureen Dowd at the *New York Times* responded in a rather personal article. She recounted how policemen, firemen, the military and the American flag were “icons” in her family long before September 11, and declared that she does not need “instructions from Ari Fleischer...on the conduct of a good American. Patriotism, it seems, is the last refuge of spinners.”⁵⁰ She concluded that “this is a time when questions and debate are what patriotism demands. Even the most high- minded government is not infallible.”⁵¹

Even with Dowd’s support, Maher was forced to apologize in the end. His show however did not live for very long. On May 14, 2002, the Associated Press announced that *Politically Incorrect* had been cancelled by ABC. Although it was the network’s decision to cancel the show, the effect of Fleischer’s statement must not be disregarded. Since the function of a White House press secretary is to actively communicate to the media, and at times participate in media debates, it is no surprise that Fleischer made a statement. However, his harsh statement was interpreted by many as a ‘warning’ to the media, telling them that critical views were not tolerated, which is not an everyday event. As an official spokesperson for the White House, Fleischer expressed the views of the administration he represented, thereby acting as an indirect, yet powerful element in the controversy around Maher.

VOA vs. the State Department

On the surface, the *Voice of America* (VOA) network may appear like any other broadcasting organization, except for one fact: its creator was the federal government of the United States. Ever since its first air broadcast in 1942, the State Department has been a constant influence in the VOA's work and management. In 1960 a charter was drafted in order to avoid too much political influence and protect the integrity of this network. In 1976 it was signed into law by President Gerald Ford. The charter says, among other things, that "*VOA will serve as a consistently reliable and authoritative source of news. VOA news will be accurate, objective, and comprehensive.*"⁵² In 1998, Congress passed the Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act that removed VOA from the State Department and placed it under the oversight of the BBG (Broadcasting Board of Governors), an independent federal entity with oversight authority over all non-military U.S. government international broadcasting.⁵³ The BBG, however, was also meant as a "firewall" between the VOA and the State Department, which was, and still is, supposed to reduce the political pressures on the news organization.

Although the VOA charter states that the news will be "objective and comprehensive," it has not always been easy for the working correspondents to live up to that statement. The relationship between the federally supported media organization and its owner has at times been complicated, and clashes have occurred. One of those clashes occurred, not surprisingly, shortly after 9/11.

The news that the VOA's Pashto service in Afghanistan had managed to interview Taliban's leader Mullah Omar, presented the network with a dilemma when it reached the headquarters in Washington. The fact that one of the world's most wanted men at the time had given an exclusive interview to the VOA was stunning; however, would the interview be broadcast with no objections or protests? The case was discussed at an editorial meeting on September 21, 2001, which was attended by then acting director of the VOA, Myrna Whitworth, head of the News Department, Andre DeNesnera, and the heads of the regional departments. As Whitworth pointed out, there was no doubt that the interview would be balanced by placing it into context of a background story.⁵⁴ As the planning of the exclusive news story continued in the editor's room, critical reactions arrived from the State Department. According to the *Washington Post*,

Deputy Secretary of State Richard L. Armitage and senior National Security Council officials contacted members at the BBG to show their concern about broadcasting the interview, proclaiming it would be giving “a platform to terrorists.”⁵⁵ In his daily press briefing on September 24, 2001, State Department spokesperson Richard Boucher said that “we didn’t think it was right. We didn’t think that the American taxpayer, the Voice of America, should be broadcasting the voice of the Taliban.”⁵⁶ Regarding Mullah Omar’s message, Boucher commented:

...carrying the interview would be confusing to the millions of listeners to what is essentially a US Government broadcast, paid for by the US Government. So we...talked to other Board of Broadcasting governors...and indicated that we felt...that Voice of America shouldn't be making these broadcasts, putting this man's voice on our radio. And we think, whether it was the Board of Governors or the Voice of America that ultimately made this decision, it was the right decision, and we think good sense prevailed.⁵⁷

On the question whether he still claimed that VOA had editorial independence, Boucher responded that he did, however, he emphasized that the VOA works for the BBG, and that the State Department has a seat on that board. He also repeated several times that Mullah Omar’s interview was not “newsworthy,” and that the US taxpayers “shouldn’t be broadcasting his propaganda.”⁵⁸

The staff at VOA was stunned by Boucher’s statements. An unnamed staff member told the *Washington Post* that “if this is an indication of the gag order they’re going to impose on us, we can’t do our jobs...How can you talk about what we’re fighting against if you don’t give these people voice?”⁵⁹ With the mounting pressure, DeNesnera e-mailed his news department regarding the government’s interference: “(Their) decision is a totally unacceptable assault on our editorial independence, a frontal attack on our credibility...and I urge you not to fall under the spell of ‘self-censorship’. If you do, ‘they’ have won.”⁶⁰

The Mullah Omar interview was finally aired on September 25, 2001. The consequences however, were far-reaching. The acting director Whitworth lost her job when Robert R. Reilly was appointed as the new director of VOA. Spozhmai Maiwandi, the head of the VOA’s Pashto service in Afghanistan also lost her job. On October 26, 2001, she was notified that she was

being given a “temporary promotion,” when in practice it was a reassignment from the daily running of the service.⁶¹

What is significant about this case is that the State Department was not the only actor that pressured the VOA. As mentioned earlier, unnamed senior members of the National Security Council (NSC) contacted the BBG to convey their concerns on the matter, a move that illustrated the Bush administration’s aspiration to control the media. For those who are not politically aware, the NSC is part of the executive office where national security and foreign policy issues are discussed. The council consists of high-ranking officials such as the vice president, the secretary of state and secretary of defense, and the president as the chairman. The fact that NSC members contacted the BBG in an attempt to influence the work of the broadcast network consequently places Bush and his closest advisers as active participants in the VOA controversy.

When VOA celebrated its sixtieth anniversary on February 26, 2002, President Bush was the guest of honor at the ceremony. In his speech he said that “tyranny cannot survive forever in an atmosphere of truth. The Voice of America is not neutral between America and America’s enemies, between terrorism and those who defend themselves against terror...”⁶² The president however, did not specify what an “atmosphere of truth” signifies or in what manner it was to be achieved. Nevertheless, it is beyond doubt that the VOA did attempt to present at least a part of the truth by airing the Mullah Omar interview, but was initially obstructed due to the powerful influence by certain members from the president’s team.

It seems that the staff at the VOA can be proclaimed as the winner in a difficult situation as this one. The journalists and editors stood firm by their actions, but there were casualties as illustrated. Individuals were removed from their positions, and the news organization recognized that it was not completely secluded from external political pressure. One anonymous VOA journalist said to the *Washington Post* that debates like these would emerge, until VOA gets its total independence. “We’re still the Voice of America”, he continued, “our paycheck still comes from the Treasury Department. So it’s a fine line.”⁶³ Indeed it is a fine line, yet it is clear that there must be room for journalistic objectivity and balance without the concern of pressure and scrutiny from higher ranks.

“Unacceptable” Criticism

Washington Post's White House correspondent, Dana Milbank, was logically enough not a popular man within the Bush administration when he started writing critical articles in 2002. There are reports that administration officials demanded from the paper to reassign him even before president Bush had taken office! The *Post* however rejected the demand and supported its correspondent.⁶⁴ What is also interesting is Mr. Bush's tradition of nicknaming reporters at the White House, and the nickname given to Milbank, was according to the reporter himself “not printable in a family publication.”⁶⁵

One of Milbank's articles that caused a great deal of outrage within the White House was “For Bush, Facts Are Malleable” which appeared on October 22, 2002. The piece criticized Bush at several areas, from Iraq-policy to proposed education policy. Milbank emphasized the inaccuracy between certain presidential statements and facts, such as facts presented in a 1998 report by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on Iraq's ability to build nuclear weapons. At the time, Bush claimed that Iraq had been six months away from developing a weapon, while the IAEA report never made such assertion.⁶⁶

Milbank wrote that Bush's statements had “taken some flights of fancy in recent weeks” and that “a president who won election victory underscoring Al Gore's knack for distortions and exaggerations has been guilty of a few himself.”⁶⁷ The accusations made the White House Press Secretary, Ari Fleischer, strike back and argue that “the president's statements are well documented and supported by the facts...We reject any allegation to the contrary.”⁶⁸

In the aftermath Milbank himself has said that he felt the administration was frequently trying to “freeze” him out, and refused to assist him in his research writing as well. According to David Dudge, the journalist also experienced difficulties with matters such as travel schedules.⁶⁹

Milbank however, was not the only reporter who experienced heavy criticism from the administration. Another *Post* reporter, Thomas Ricks, faced critical comments from the Department of Defense chief spokesperson Lawrence DiRita in 2003. During his time in the department, DiRita became one of the closest assistants to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and because of his high-ranking position there is a strong possibility that he was influenced by the White House policies.

Ricks on the other hand, was the military reporter for the newspaper, who on March 2, 2003 published a piece about the U.S. military preparations for the Iraq invasion. Although the article mainly reported on military tactics based on congressional testimony and briefings by the Defense Department, it also briefly mentioned some of the concerned retired military officials, such as Marine Col. Gary Anderson. Anderson, a retired expert in urban warfare, argued that the U.S. high-tech, airpower-oriented war-fighting strategy had become “familiar” over the past decade, and asserted that there was a chance it could fail when employed in Iraq. Another retired Marine, Lt. Gen. Paul Van Riper pointed to the logistical issue, claiming the army’s supply lines could become troublesome as they would be several times longer than in the Gulf War.⁷⁰

DiRita immediately sent a letter of complaint to the newspaper headquarters, but was not content with the reply he received. Therefore he arranged for a personal meeting with the paper’s executive editor Leonard Downie Jr., who was joined by editors Steve Coll, Liz Spayd and Mike Abramowitz.⁷¹ After the meeting, Downie and the rest of the *Post*’s management gave their full support to Ricks, while DiRita commented only that he had a “good meeting with the editors at the *Post*,” but wouldn’t “discuss the specifics. It was very constructive, very professional.”⁷² These two cases demonstrate the administration’s several ‘styles’ of action when it detected something it did not approve of, especially when it was a critical article in a national newspaper. Letters of complaints, face-to-face meetings and “freezing out” tactics were some of the practices officials applied in order to put pressure on a media organization. However, these practices contained the risk of leaving the impression of a dominant and censorious administration. In both cases the journalists could also safely count on their editors’ support and confidence, but what happens when they lose that network of support?

Dan Guthrie and Tom Gutting, two local journalists, discovered soon that the conditions had changed after 9/11. Guthrie, who was a columnist for the little *Daily Courier* in Grants Pass, Oregon, wrote on September 15, 2001, that president Bush had “skedaddled” after the terrorist attack. He further indicated that “most of his aides and Cabinet members split for secret locations, too.”⁷³ Guthrie also mentioned the brave airline passengers who put up a fight with the hijackers: “They put it all on the line. Against their courage the picture of Bush hiding in a Nebraska hole becomes an embarrassment.”⁷⁴ After the publication of the column, there were

strong reactions from readers, and Guthrie even received a death threat. He was instantly removed from his post by the enraged paper's publisher, who later made the editor-in-chief apologize to the readers. In the apology, the editor-in-chief argued that criticism of the president and his administration should be "responsible", and that calling Bush a coward was "neither responsible nor appropriate."⁷⁵

Tom Gutting faced similar dilemma at his newspaper, *Texas City Sun* which has since merged into today's *Galveston County Daily News*. In a September 2001 column, Gutting accused Bush of "flying around the country like a scared child seeking refuge in his mother's bed after having a nightmare."⁷⁶ He added a contrasting parallel between the president and New York City's mayor Rudy Giuliani, who was "highly visible, not hiding underground in Nebraska." Gutting concluded that "because of W.'s lack of experience and failure to lead since Sept. 11, I feel nervous our future. But we should have known better than to trust someone who wasn't capable. You get what you vote for."⁷⁷

As in the previous case there was a large public outcry, and *Sun's* publisher apologized on the next day's front page: "I offer an apology for this newspaper's grave error in judgment in allowing such a disruptive piece as Tom Gutting's 'Bush Has Failed to Lead U.S.' to make it to print...May God bless President George W. Bush and other leaders. And God bless America."⁷⁸ The case ended with Gutting's dismissal from the *Sun*. In an online article couple of weeks later, Gutting asserted that "the outraged citizens of Texas City are better off" because of his column, and if his criticisms of Bush were right, then "they heard a truth they needed to hear." He further argued that in order "to be convinced of our beliefs, we must hold them up against the strongest arguments of those who disagree with us,"⁷⁹ because that will reinforce and fortify the principle of the argument.

The treatment of these journalists was a clear indication to the rest of the news media that dissent or criticism of the Bush administration was simply unacceptable. In the initial cases the publication of a critical story was quickly followed by scrutinized responses from administration officials. In the last two cases however, the enraged public's protests turned out to be the decisive factor, and although no response was detected from the administration itself, one can logically presume that the White House was not pleased with Guthrie's and Gutting's

descriptions of the president. In fact, it is highly possible that the administration would have reacted if it was not for the fierce public protests. In the end, all of these incidents display one clear message: journalists risked verbal attacks, difficulties in their work routines and not least their jobs when writing and publishing a critical story.

It is significant to note that the scrutiny attacks continued into the Iraq War. In the fall of 2003, it was the straightforward Defense Secretary Rumsfeld who directed sharp accusations toward a group of reporters during a visit in Iraq. After he implied that critics at home only encouraged the terrorists abroad and thereby complicated the ongoing U.S. war on terrorism, he elaborated: “We know for a fact...that terrorists studied Somalia and they studied instances where the United States was dealt a blow and tucked in and persuaded themselves they could, in fact, cause us to acquiesce in whatever it is they wanted us to do.”⁸⁰ Rumsfeld further stressed that the U.S. would not give up the fight against terror: “The United States is not going to do that. President Bush is not going to do that. Now to the extent terrorists are given reason to believe he might, or if he is not willing to, the opponents might prevail in some way...and they take heart in that, and that leads to more recruiting...that leads to more encouragement, or that leads to more staying power. Obviously that makes it more difficult.”⁸¹ The Defense Secretary specified that he was referring not only to critics in the U.S., but also to international media such as the Al-Jazeera network.

These comments confirm yet again the main argument that criticism was not welcomed by the Bush camp and that the media should instead advocate the president and his war. But what stands out even more is the fact that Mr. Rumsfeld also ‘warned’ the foreign media organizations about their coverage. His act did not accomplish what he wanted since no international media network let it dictate itself by the administration officials. However, the act did accomplish to portray the Pentagon and the Bush White House as two commanding, controlling and dominating institutions with no tolerance for opposing views.

The outspoken Rumsfeld proceeded with stunning remarks even at a time when it was clear that the situation in Iraq was deteriorating and a new course needed to be installed. In August 2006 the Defense Secretary spoke at the annual American Legion’s national convention where he

blamed the U.S. media, along with Amnesty International, for spreading “myths and distortions...about our troops and about our country.”⁸² As an example he presented a database search of the country’s leading newspapers, where the name of a soldier punished for misconduct produced ten times as many mentions than the mentions of Sgt. Paul Ray Smith, the first recipient of the Medal of Honor in the War on Terror. Rumsfeld further warned the media and other opponents of the war that “any kind of moral or intellectual confusion about who and what is right or wrong, can weaken the ability of free societies to persevere.”⁸³ “Moral or intellectual confusion” is how the Defense Secretary chose to describe criticism against the Iraq war, which was a statement that displayed his misunderstanding of the entire situation. It seemed that he did not realize that one of the characteristics of a healthy society is precisely when various factors join a debate and voice their arguments over an issue. When the issue is a ‘hot-button’ such as a global war on terrorism, it is only logical for both agreeing and disagreeing opinions to arise.

No Pictures, Please

The censorious post-9/11 atmosphere did not affect just television and newspapers; it reached the World Wide Web as well. The prime example is the case of Yellowtimes.org, an alternative news site which was shut down on March 24, 2003, after it posted photographs of U.S. prisoners of war and Iraqi civilian casualties. The hosting company Vortech Hosting explained in an e-mail that the account had been “suspended because of inappropriate graphic material.”⁸⁴ According to Yellowtimes.org’s editor Erich Marquardt, Vortech considered the pictures as a breach of the contract terms that gives them wide discretion when defining graphic or adult content.⁸⁵ Later, the hosting company clarified its position: “As ‘NO’ TV station in the U.S. is allowing any dead U.S. soldiers or POWs to be displayed and we will not either.”⁸⁶ Clashes between hosts and websites will certainly occur more frequently in the future, but it is relevant to note that there are no established policies regarding such conflicts, except the actual agreement between the two parties. In order to resolve similar disputes, federal regulations need to be set, because there are millions of Vortech Hosting’s out there that have the power to screen and censor material as they wish.

A year later, pictures of dead American soldiers in Iraq were again at the centre of attention.

50-year-old Tami Silicio had no idea how much attention she was about to get because of her two snapshots portraying coffins of dead US soldiers on a jumbo jet at Kuwait International Airport. After the two pictures were e-mailed to a friend back home, who again sent it further to Silicio's hometown newspaper, the *Seattle Times*, the brave cargo worker was soon caught up in a national debate about whether photographs of coffins carrying deceased soldiers should be allowed to be published or not. Pentagon officials stood in defense of the already existing ban, arguing it was consistent with the wishes of the grieving families.⁸⁷ President Bush backed the ban as well, which came as no surprise. The war he and his administration had fiercely advocated started to increase American death tolls, and it seems therefore that the ban served as a tool to keep the dark side of the war out of public sight. On the other end of the spectrum there were politicians such as Senator John Kerry, at the time the Democratic presidential candidate who praised Silicio for her deed.⁸⁸

After finally giving the newspaper the permission to publish one of the photos on its front page, Silicio's intention was never to put focus on herself but direct focus at the photo and the ultimate price many brave young soldiers had to pay. As she explained: "The picture is about them, not me, about how they served their country, paid the price for our freedom, and the respect they receive on their way home from our military personnel at our air terminal."⁸⁹ Explaining the reasons why she took the pictures, she recalled: "I guess my feelings were so built up- my heart was so full of grief. And it came out in the picture."⁹⁰

Silicio lost her job soon after the publication of the pictures. So did her husband, who also worked for the same contract company operating out of Kuwait International Airport. The president of the contract company said in a statement that "the couple had violated company and Defense Department policies, and that the military had identified very specific concerns."⁹¹ The "specific concerns" were however not detailed, therefore one is left to wonder and guess. As mentioned earlier the Pentagon did not welcome the publication of the coffin images due to families' feelings, which is an understandable argument. However that does not explain the department's policy of allowing coffins and wounded soldiers arrive at Dover Air Force Base only at nighttime.⁹² The fact that these planes land at the mortuary base during the night creates the impression that certain government circles attempt to minimize, or even hide the rising war

casualties from the public. As already mentioned, President Bush supported the prohibition of releasing coffin images, and in order not to drain Americans' tolerance for the war it is also easily assumed that he supported the policy where fallen soldiers arrive in the dark.

There must have been a number of family members who would have wanted for their loved ones to receive the respect and honor they deserve on their return home. After all, these young men and women paid the ultimate sacrifice for their homeland. But where is the respect and honor as they land at U.S. soil in the middle of the night?

As seen throughout the chapter, news organizations and journalists at both national and local newspapers discovered that making remarks or writing critical articles about the president and his administration was a costly and risky task. In the post- 9/11 atmosphere one had to be cautious when commenting the administration's policies and it is interesting to note that in some cases a part of the American public proved to be more sensitive than the administration itself. A possible reason for this could be that the nation was still in shock after the attacks, and was not in the mood for dissenting views or opinions. The president of CNN Walter Isaacson commented from a network executive's perspective that "in this (post-9/11) environment it feels slightly different...If you get on the wrong side of public opinion, you are going to get into trouble."⁹³ He was right.

Chapter 2

Secrecy- the first refuge of incompetents-must be at bare minimum in a democratic society, for a fully informed public is the basis of self-government. Those elected or appointed to positions of executive authority must recognize that government, in a democracy, cannot be wiser than people.

House Committee on Government Operations, 1960 Report

Another characteristic that has dominated the Bush administration's relationship with the media is secrecy, which will be the main focus of this chapter. The secret aspect has displayed itself frequently through domestic issues, but has risen to new heights as a consequence of the War on Terror. With the American troops entering Afghanistan and Iraq the press followed, however, strict regulations imposed by the Pentagon resulted in few news stories getting published. In order to understand the causes of wartime policies toward the press, other cases will be presented, such as the Vietnam War and the Persian Gulf War.

As will be shown, numerous reporters and political science scholars have described the White House under President Bush as extremely disciplined and coordinated in its affairs, especially when dealing with the press in the post-9/11 period. This discipline has often bordered to pure secrecy, and not rarely has the White House Press corps complained on the issue. The *Time* magazine Washington correspondent has proclaimed that the current administration is "the most closed-mouthed, more closed-door than any in memory".⁹⁴ Professor James Pfiffner on the other hand indicates that the Bush administration has been disciplined and loyal from the very start. He points out the lack of internal conflicts and leaks, elements that were present in other administrations, including Bush Senior's.⁹⁵ As possible reasons for the strict press policy, he suggests the sincere affection between the White House staffers and President Bush, but also Bush's "high premium on loyalty and the willingness of his top staffers to aggressively enforce

discipline.”⁹⁶ One anonymous Bush senior assistant once commented: “This is not a presidency under which there’s a lot of freelancing within the cabinet. It’s a very tight team, very regimented, very tight message discipline, and I think the cabinet officers realize a large part of their job is to be shields.”⁹⁷ And they certainly do. After examining the loyal team Bush has surrounded himself with, it does not come as a surprise that the administration has acted in the disciplined and often, secretive way that it has.

The White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card has been a central figure in holding the White House on a tight leash. Even the conservative *Wall Street Journal* remarked Card’s tactics toward the media when it referred to a “tightly centralized power inside the White House’s West Wing” and “a nearly leakproof system to shield the president from scandal and distraction-keeping secrets from the media, Congress and even cabinet members until Mr. Bush decides to reveal them, if ever.”⁹⁸ The *Journal* more importantly pointed out that such a system has had a negative impact on Bush, because it steered him further and further away from reality.⁹⁹ According to *The Nation*’s journalist Eric Alterman, the chief executive himself has on several instances informed reporters that “he does not read their work,”¹⁰⁰ a habit that has most likely made Bush very dependent on his closest team players. Andrew Card has additionally become famous for his controversial statements regarding the news media and their role, claiming that the media “don’t represent the public any more than other people do...I don’t believe you have a check-and-balance function.”¹⁰¹ With these alarming words, Card’s actions toward the press come as no surprise.

Karen Hughes has also been another prominent figure within the president’s inner circle. After working with Bush during his Texas governance and his 2000 presidential campaign as director of communications, Hughes became one of the most powerful counselors in the White House, along with senior adviser Karl Rove and the already mentioned Andrew Card. Bush has reportedly said that he wants Hughes “in every meeting where major decisions are made.”¹⁰² This veteran aide is probably the main reason why White House staffers largely refuse to recognize both obvious and not so obvious shortcomings of the second President Bush. With her dominant protective style, she feels that she has a “duty to let people know the things” that she knows about the president, “which are good things.”¹⁰³ Although Hughes left the White House

already in July 2002, she remained in contact with the Bush camp, and became active again in Bush's 2004 reelection campaign.¹⁰⁴

The fact that Card, Hughes, Karl Rove, and a number of other high-ranking officials contained rather negative views on the media could not result in anything else but strict discipline, restrictions and control. However, the 9/11 attacks rushed the White House into further escalations of its information policies. The announced War on Terror caused the administration to slowly turn off one information channel after another, and the case of the FOIA became an example where the administration believed considerable alterations needed to be implemented.

FOIA- "Official Secrets Act"

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) was initially enacted by Congress and signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1966. The act was historical because it allowed for full or partial disclosure of previously unreleased information and documents controlled by federal government agencies. However, the act was even more strengthened when Congress overrode President Ford's veto and passed the Privacy Act Amendment in 1974 with the aim to regulate government control over documents that concern not only federal government, but individuals and citizens as well.¹⁰⁵ As a result, one could demand from the government to see records about oneself. But when the notorious Ashcroft memorandum was released matters took a different turn.

On October 12, 2001, Attorney General John Ashcroft issued a memorandum that effectively reversed the longstanding FOIA policies, reminding initially the heads of all federal departments and agencies about the exemptions included in the FOIA. He then instructed them:

...when you carefully consider FOIA requests and decide to withhold records, in whole or in part, you can be assured that the Department of Justice will defend your decisions unless they lack a sound legal basis or present an unwarranted risk of adverse impact on the ability of other agencies to protect other important records.¹⁰⁶

Ashcroft's decision completely contrasted with his predecessor's policy. In 1993 President Clinton's Attorney General, Janet Reno, obliged the departments and agencies to disclose any government information when demanded, unless it was "reasonably foreseeable that disclosure would be harmful."¹⁰⁷ As Dudge emphasizes, the new manifesto contained a negative rather

than a positive tone, bearing a resemblance to the standard Reagan's Attorney General William French Smith once applied.¹⁰⁸

However, the release of memorandums did not end with Mr. Ashcroft. Five months later a new manifesto was issued by Chief of White House Staff Andrew Card. Card's directive not only instructed federal agencies to preserve classified information already exempted, but also to classify material that could "reveal information that would assist in the development or use of weapons of mass destruction,"¹⁰⁹ even if that material happened to be more than ten years old. He further pointed out the importance of loopholes in the FOIA, telling the agencies they were free to use these if material was more than twenty-five years old.¹¹⁰

It is interesting to note that the Bush administration began withdrawing thousands of already published documents and records even before the publication of Card's memorandum. The spotlight centered on scientific and technical documents that might have been relevant in the making of chemical weapons. As Tom Ridge, then-director of homeland security said: "We're working hard for a set of guidelines so terrorists can't use information that this country produces against us."¹¹¹ However, some scientists critical to government's measures raised their voices, saying the chances were bigger for scientific and medical progresses to be lost than for the information to get into the hands of terrorists.¹¹²

The USA Patriot Act

On October 26, 2001 the "Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001" was signed by the president, and became soon known as the "USA Patriot Act". Although it was signed into law merely six weeks after the 9/11 attacks, Bush reassured the skeptics and opponents that the act was cautiously devised and studied.¹¹³ He further argued that the new piece of legislation would provide intelligence agencies "better tools" in tracking down and capturing terrorists, and one of the "tools" was allowing surveillance of e-mail and cell phone correspondence. In reality, however, the new act authorized the Attorney General and the Justice Department to secretly and indefinitely detain both U.S. and non- U.S. citizens if there were "reasonable grounds to believe"

that these individuals might be terrorists.¹¹⁴ Another part of the Patriot Act that caused a great deal of controversy was the one that authorized FBI to search and inspect libraries and bookstores in order to obtain reading patterns of its suspects. The striking aspect is that in the aftermath, it was illegal for those librarians and bookstores to notify anyone about the occurrence of the inspection.¹¹⁵

As John Dean points out, opposition to this piece of legislation was detected throughout the entire political spectrum, even among the conservative ranks. Known not only as the former Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives during the Clinton presidency, but also for his conservative political views, Newt Gingrich said that he “strongly believes Congress must...limit its (Patriot Act’s) use to national security concerns and prevent it from developing ‘mission creep’ into areas outside of national security.”¹¹⁶ Republican Richard Armey, at the time the House Majority Leader and chairman of the House Select Committee on Homeland Security reportedly told Bush that he thought “his Justice Department was out of control.” Armey did not stop there: “Are we going to save ourselves from international terrorism in order to deny the fundamental liberties we protect to ourselves?...It doesn’t make sense to me.”¹¹⁷ From the Democrats’ side there was a somewhat successful attempt by Senator Patrick Leahy and several others at modifying the Patriot Act, and more alterations would have perhaps taken place if one of president’s loyal team players, Attorney General Ashcroft had not influenced the work of Congress. Ashcroft strongly maintained that further terrorist attacks were expected and that Congress would get blamed if the president’s legislation was not approved. The Democrats obeyed, and the controversial bill encountered consequently no significant floor debates or hearings.¹¹⁸

In his testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee shortly after, Ashcroft was strict in his view of the criticism directed at the administration’s anti- terrorism legislation: “To those who scare peace-loving people with phantoms of lost liberty, my message is this: Your tactics only aid the terrorists, for they erode our national unity and diminish our resolve. They give ammunition to America’s enemies, and pause to America’s friends.”¹¹⁹ It is not difficult to identify the real message between these lines: the criticism is not welcomed by the White House, and whoever produces it risks becoming an enemy of the state. Not only was the assumption

made by Attorney General controversial, but also scandalous for a country that leads the free, democratic world. When such a prominent administration official associated dissent with terrorism, and depicted opponents as traitors, it put not merely the Bush administration and the Justice Department in a bad light, but it contributed to a bigger polarization of opinions on the administration's War on Terror. It is impossible to see how Ashcroft's hysterical statement achieved something useful when it indirectly attempted to discourage a rationale debate. Jacob Weisberg in *Slate* magazine concluded that "if there is any real threat to them (national unity and resolve) at the moment, it comes from Ashcroft's excesses, not from the critics of those excesses. Indeed, to contend that it is somehow the defenders of civil liberties who threaten our national unity takes some chutzpah. It's the mugger blaming his victim for contributing to crime."¹²⁰

New Department- Improved National Security?

What ensued the signing of the Patriot Act was the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) through the Homeland Security Act in November 2002. As the new department embraced twenty-two agencies and various units, such as the Coast Guard, Immigration and Naturalization Service and Customs Service, it consequently became the third largest department in the government. With national security on the top of the administration's priority list, the main goals were therefore to "prevent terrorist attacks" within the U.S., "reduce the vulnerability of the United States to terrorism", and "minimize the damage, and assist in the recovery, from terrorist attacks that do occur within the United States."¹²¹ The DHS was important to President Bush since it was another significant product of his wartime presidency, and as he announced, the creation of it was "historic action to defend the United States and protect our citizens against the dangers of a new era."¹²² The making of the new department was certainly historical in terms of the structure of the federal government, because it was the largest, single government structural change since the creation of the Department of Defense in 1947.¹²³ However, as challenges started emerging shortly after there were concerns about the efficiency of the department.

Paul Light, an expert in government organization, indicated that an enormous assignment awaited Tom Ridge, at the time chosen secretary of DHS. He regarded Ridge's task as "the most difficult bureaucratic reorganization since the Roman Empire tried to take over the

administration of Egypt.”¹²⁴ Light pointed to the functions some of the involved agencies held, such as the functions of the Coast Guard that were not directly related to the counter- terrorism effort. The main intelligence agencies that obviously carry essential counter- terrorism functions, such as the FBI and the CIA, were in contrast kept outside the department’s jurisdiction. Light also emphasized possible coordination issues, remarking “it would be difficult to coordinate 22 separate agencies under the best of circumstances”. He further pointed out the “great unevenness” among the agencies, referring to several of them as “damaged goods” due to large technology- quality differences.¹²⁵

Even a White House official observed the complex administration system: “88 congressional committees and subcommittees have jurisdiction over issues related to homeland security, and...that gives the Homeland Security Department a lot of congressional bosses to work with- and answer to- in its drive to make America safer.”¹²⁶ In addition, the various agencies and units brought with them their own organized interests, which expected a continuity of the existing relationships.¹²⁷

Due to the large structure of the DHS struggles were inevitable, yet whether these bureaucratic struggles will obstruct the department’s mission of preventing terror attacks in the U.S. is still difficult to say. Both the department and the Bush administration have been prudent with releasing concrete results, therefore it is even more important that the media stays alert.

The Homeland Security Act did not however only relocate the agencies under one umbrella; it also included the controversial “critical infrastructure” provisions. The provisions’ intent was to protect private companies that gave information to the government concerning “vulnerabilities in the nation’s critical infrastructure.” The protection, or better said the ‘award’ these companies would receive, was an exemption from the FOIA.¹²⁸ The “critical infrastructure” provisions or the ‘loophole,’ as they also were quickly named, gained attention in the media. The director of the Heritage Foundation’s Center for Media and Public Policy, Mark Tapscott, argued in an editorial piece for the *Washington Post* that “one need not be a Harvard law graduate to see that...this loophole could be manipulated by clever corporate and government operators to hide endless varieties of potentially embarrassing and/or criminal information from public view.”¹²⁹ As he criticized the Bush administration for being too secretive toward the public and Congress,

Tapscott presented an ironic case when back in 1966 a young Illinois Republican congressman strongly advocated the passage of FOIA:

Disclosure of government information is particularly important today because government is becoming involved in more and more aspects of every citizen's personal and business life, and so access to information about how government is exercising its trust becomes increasingly important.¹³⁰

This congressman was no one else but Donald Rumsfeld, the former Defense Secretary who, as will be shown later, was deeply involved in various administration cover-up incidents.

After a close examination of the Homeland Security Act, another important detail related to the news media became of interest. Title II, section 201(d) (5) specifically required the DHS to “develop a comprehensive plan for securing the key resources and critical infrastructure of the United States including ... information technology and telecommunications systems...”¹³¹

Although the term “information technology” was not specified, it is commonly applied when referring to the broadcast networks and the newspapers. This provision clearly instructs the department to devise a plan that will enable a steady take-over of the country's information channels. Such a conscious attempt by the administration to obtain total control of the media in the name of “national security,” uncovers the true intention behind some of the post-9/11 policies implemented by the Bush White House.

What Presidential Papers?

After the Watergate scandal followed by Nixon's resignation, the legislative branch recognized the importance of presidential papers and the rest of the material produced in the White House during a presidency. As a result the Presidential Records Act (PRA) was enacted in 1978 that changed the legal ownership of the presidential records from private to public. The new law obliged that the records (exempting the most sensitive material) become available to the public twelve years after a president leaves office, or sooner if it was the wish of the former White House administration.¹³² It also allowed a thirty-day consultation for the incumbent president to employ if he and his administration wanted to double-check and review the records one final time before their release. On January 20, 2001, 68,000 pages from the Ronald Reagan presidency

were ready to be dispatched, containing mainly notes from meetings and internal White House memos. Prior to 2001, millions of Reagan pages had been routinely released and the remaining 68,000 pages were going to follow the same procedure. However, the Bush White House employed the thirty-day clause in order to reexamine the “many constitutional and legal questions” relating to these pages.¹³³ From that point the thirty-day extension was prolonged several times, and a year after the scheduled date release only 6,000 documents had been dispatched.¹³⁴

The White House behavior raised suspicions among the news media and scholars. As *The Nation* pointed out, the most sensitive documents were already exempted by the PRA and delaying the rest for allegedly national security reasons seemed odd.¹³⁵ Anna Nelson, an American University history professor, said that the precautions the Bush White House was taking on “national security” were “extreme” emphasizing the fact that the remaining 68,000 pages “are not the Iran-Contra papers.”¹³⁶ More significantly, she recalled that a number of officials in the current Bush administration, such as Richard Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld and not least Bush’s own father, George H. W. Bush served in the Reagan administration, making them the “authors” of the stalled papers: “They probably don’t remember what they said, and they are feeling iffy about it.”¹³⁷

The long delay of the “Reagan pages” was most definitely furthered by a controversial Executive Order issued by Bush on November 1, 2001. Order no. 13233 named “Further Implementation of the Presidential Records Act” established new rules for management of presidential papers by declaring that not only could former presidents keep their papers sealed indefinitely, but also that vice presidents gained the right to invoke the executive privilege.¹³⁸

But most notably was the section declaring that an incumbent president could block papers of a former president, even if that former president had already confirmed their dispatch.¹³⁹ On the day of the signing Ari Fleischer argued that because of the new executive order “more information will be forthcoming. And it will be available through a much more orderly process.” He continued that the order would “lay out the terms of that process, and it will help people to get information.”¹⁴⁰ Fleischer’s words however, did not assure too many people, especially not historians, archivists and librarians. Lawsuits were filed by a number of public interest groups and organizations, such as the American Historical Association, the Society of American

Archivists and the Public Citizen. Steve Hansen, the president of the Society of American Archivists expressed his concerns in a letter to the House Subcommittee on Government Efficiency saying that order 13233 “has the potential to seriously restrict the unfettered flow of information upon which our nation depends.” He further urged the Congress “to take immediate action to overturn this action.”¹⁴¹ Although Congress did react by holding several sets of hearings and debates in an attempt to overturn Bush’s executive order and restore the original law, those debates however never saw floor action and consequently failed.

The obstructions of the release of the presidential papers, along with the Executive order no. 13233 were two classic examples of the secretive aspect of the Bush administration. They displayed the administration’s unwillingness to share information with the public, even though that information was not directly related to the president himself. Critical voices were yet again ignored and the concealing curtain remained in its place.

The commotion surrounding the access to presidential papers did not end with Executive Order 13233. It was elevated to a new level in April 2004 when the Bush administration quietly removed the head archivist at the National Archives, Clinton appointee John Carlin, and nominated Allen Weinstein instead. *The Nation* describes the national archivist position as crucially important in a democratic society: “He preserves our history and makes government records available to the public. He should also serve as an advocate for greater openness.”¹⁴² But Weinstein has been known for anything else but openness. His record displays troublesome features, especially on access issues, and many archivist and historical organizations view him as unqualified for the position. They refer to Weinstein’s 1999 book, *The Haunted Wood: Soviet Espionage in America- Stalin Era* that according to them breached the ethic code of International Council of Archives, which calls for “the widest possible access” to documents.¹⁴³ What happened was that the book’s publisher, Random House, reportedly paid 100,000 dollars for exclusive access to the KGB archives. However, this “exclusive” access was never granted to anyone else, and shortly after the Russian government shut down its secretive archives. As a result it became impossible for other scholars to examine and confirm the content and sources of Weinstein’s book.¹⁴⁴ Sam Tanenhaus, the senior editor of the *New York Times Book Review*, criticized Weinstein for failing to document his sources acceptably, an aspect he ascribed to

Weinstein's "weakness for mystification", which is, as *Nation's* Jon Wiener sharply points out "not a quality you want in the archivist of the United States."¹⁴⁵

The remarkable aspect of this story is that the nomination actually violated a law from 1984 which attempted to depoliticize the national archivist position. The archivist was not to work according to the president's wishes, would serve an indefinite term and could be removed only if the president provided a reason to Congress.¹⁴⁶ The nomination of Weinstein was therefore regarded by numerous archivist and historical associations as a strategic political move.

Although a registered Democrat, it was no secret that he had his close relations with Republican members in Congress. He served on Reagan's transition team in the 1980s as well, and the board of his Center for Democracy foundation included people such as Henry Kissinger.¹⁴⁷ Since it was presidential election year, there was a presumption that Bush might lose the reelection, which made it significantly important to have the "right man" at the National Archives. In addition, the scheduled release of records from Bush senior's presidency the following year established Weinstein's nomination as an even higher priority. A year after he was removed from the national archivist position, Carlin had yet not received an explanation for his dismissal from President Bush. Still confused about the incident, he said: "I was assured they had no problem with what I was doing."¹⁴⁸

Although the illustrated use of secrecy in the Bush administration might seem alarming, it is nevertheless not unique. Restrictive information policies have been applied in the past, especially during wartime, and the media coverage in foreign conflict zones has consequently been affected by strict regulations imposed by the Department of Defense. It is a fact that the United States has employed its military forces in other countries countless times, but the next section will compare the media coverage in only four of these conflicts: the Vietnam War, the Persian Gulf War and the initial phases in the still ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The specific four are chosen because they simultaneously resemble and differ when it comes to the press- Pentagon relationship.

Vietnam

Press access in combat zones has been an everlasting issue for both the media and the government. How much should the U.S. government allow, or limit the presence of the press in war conflicts where U.S. troops are involved? The advocates of imposing limitations maintain they are needed in order to protect national security, while opponents argue that American citizens should be kept informed about military operations. A natural starting point for this discussion is Vietnam, because the press access granted in this case was never repeated again. Vietnam was America's longest war in the 20th century, and as well the first conflict where television cameras were used to show and depict the war in a realistic manner. Injured, tired soldiers in the jungle, dead Vietnamese civilians and body bags became everyday images on TV sets back home. Reporters were given the liberty to move around the country as they wished, and the reason for this was the cooperative military administration.¹⁴⁹ One reporter called the Vietnam War as "a notably convenient war to cover,"¹⁵⁰ and many maintained the same. It was simple for a correspondent to get out to Saigon's airport, jump on a helicopter that was heading for a location with action and then follow the ground troops wherever they were moving.

Barry Zorthian, the U.S. Mission's Minister-Counselor for Public Affairs in Vietnam from 1964 to 1968, assisted the Saigon correspondents and sought to maintain good relations with the press. Representing the military, he said they "had no real problems with the media giving away information that would harm the troops."¹⁵¹ Media critic Robert McChesney on the other hand, disagrees and views the news coverage of Vietnam as a "classic example of the "big lie" of all war propaganda." As he contends, the coverage of the rising opposition did not occur because of the media's duty to report every voice on the opinion spectrum, but because of the Wall Street and Washington elite influence. As the war intensified, this powerful U.S. elite soon realized that the price tag was too high for any potential benefits in the future, and supported therefore a pull-out strategy.¹⁵²

Whatever point of view one holds on the media coverage, there is one certain aspect that stands out when analyzing Vietnam: the prolonged, never-ending duration of the war. The fact that the brutal war lasted for so long was a crucial element that ultimately defined Vietnam in the American collective memory. The ten-year long conflict became more and more unpopular as

the anti-war movement increased at home. This led, eventually, many government officials to believe that the opposition on its own caused the ultimate failure of the war. The term “Vietnam syndrome” which originated in the aftermath defines therefore several notions. Firstly it points to the notion of national failure and powerlessness, implying that the messy and brutal war that cost the lives of 58,000 American soldiers and millions of Vietnamese civilians was initiated on weak grounds. The Johnson administration started a large-scale involvement in Vietnam after the Gulf of Tonkin incident, where North Vietnamese boats allegedly attacked two U.S. naval ships, however reports later illustrated that the incident was based on intelligence errors, and that it was highly possible that there was no North Vietnamese attack at all. Secondly, the syndrome refers to the notion that systematic public criticism of a war leads to discouragement of the troops and results in failed mission in the end. Therefore it is essential that public support does not fade away until ‘victory’ is achieved, so that another “Vietnam” does not get repeated. As will be presented further in the chapter, President Bush Jr. and his advisers attempted to use Vietnam in order to show the important role public approval played during times of war. The goal was to win back some of the lost support for the Iraq war.

Another popular theory among some historians indicates that since Vietnam occurred between World War II and the Persian Gulf War it could be treated as an “anomaly” which referred to “a unique case of failure whose mistakes might be “corrected” the next time.”¹⁵³ This theory, according to historian John Carlos Rowe, supports and justifies arguments of those scholars who believe that the failure in Vietnam was not caused by U.S. foreign policies, but rather by congressional interference. As Rowe points out, the rhetoric subsequently became an essential part of the “re-legitimation” process of post- Vietnam foreign policies, such as policy during the Persian Gulf War.

Persian Gulf War

Walter Cronkite, the legendary broadcast journalist, once stated that the difference between military media control in previous wars and in the Persian Gulf War was “pre-censorship”- “telling you what you can’t see. I’d rather have post- censorship, where you could argue it out after you get the story.”¹⁵⁴ Cronkite’s “pre-censorship” implied that the strict restrictions imposed on the press caused the loss of valuable data and reports about the Gulf War, turning

the war into a blank space in historiography. One imposed restriction was the notorious “pool system”, where pools were small groups consisting of selected reporters who were escorted on guided tours chosen by the Pentagon. In practice however, the majority of reporters never got the opportunity to spend time out in the terrain with the troops. Those few that did reported of intrusive and controlling Pentagon officials, supervising question-and answer sessions between press members and the visited unit. Nevertheless, military officials appeared to be mostly concerned about TV-cameras. Conferences were at times staged purely for television, while at other times interviews would be interrupted when the story was not portrayed according to their wishes.¹⁵⁵

When the inevitable contract with the military was signed, reporters agreed for their news stories to be submitted for a “security review” by Pentagon officials before publishing them. However, due to the fact that many stories never made it back home, a collective sense of frustration soon erupted. *Los Angeles Times* correspondent John Balzar described the press atmosphere at the end of the war:

One journalist said he could get nothing past military censors at one headquarters until officers first heard the same information on the radio. ‘I don’t think anything I wrote ever got back,’ said another reporter. One wire service correspondent said only seven of 27 stories he filed made it to his editor.¹⁵⁶

Pentagon’s tight media control was explained by military and national security reasons; however the press corps was skeptical to that argument. In fact, there was a widespread notion that the censorship of news stories only served the Pentagon’s public relations campaign, and as Norris points out, a central part of that campaign was “the control of necrology.” The control of the casualty statistics, both of the U.S. soldiers and the enemy was essential to Pentagon as it was trying to portray the image of “the military as a technological wizard that can win war without killing, with minimal killing, and with visually and viscerally innocuous killing.”¹⁵⁷ General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, the commander-in-chief of the U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf had on several occasions stated that that he thought body count statistics were “not only meaningless but misleading” when measuring military success.¹⁵⁸ Being a Vietnam veteran, it must have been extremely important for Schwarzkopf’s military administration to try to escape the ghosts of Vietnam. As Norris suggests, escaping the haunting Vietnam syndrome always

signified the accomplishment of a “double power”: a military and moral victory. A military victory implied a “clean” victory “by full use of American technological superiority” while a moral victory implied a “clean” victory “by full use of the Pentagon’s virtually absolute control over martial necrology.”¹⁵⁹

Only six weeks after entering the Persian Gulf, both the executive branch and military officials concluded that *Operation Desert Storm* was a success, and President Bush Sr. famously declared: “The specter of Vietnam has been buried forever in the desert sands of the Arabian peninsula....and, by God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.”¹⁶⁰ With minimal American and coalition casualties and the use of modern technology, victory was swift and “clean”. Or was it? Rowe counter argues the alleged victory in the Gulf, stating that the same errors were repeated there as in Vietnam. These errors were disregarded by both the government and the public, especially the casualty statistics that general Schwarzkopf viewed more or less as insignificant. The reality was that American casualties during nine years of battles and combat actions in Vietnam were exceeded by the civilian and Iraqi troop casualties by two to three times.¹⁶¹ Shocking information, however it was information the president and the Pentagon generals attempted to downplay. One individual who did not downplay the dark details of the “clean” victory was CNN correspondent Peter Arnett. Not only was he one of the few remaining reporters in Baghdad during the U.S. air strike campaign, but he was the only one with the opportunity to broadcast live. His news stories frequently showed destructed buildings and injured Iraqi civilians, but the culminating point was reached when Arnett obtained an exclusive interview with Saddam Hussein, the man who at the time was portrayed as the villain of the war.¹⁶²

The “re-legitimation” process or idea that view Vietnam as an isolated and “unique case of failure” in history and which upholds the consistency of government’s foreign policies, resembles Arthur Schlesinger Jr’s and David Halberstam’s well-known “quagmire thesis” developed in the 1960s. Historian Robert Divine elaborates: “Schlesinger’s quagmire thesis, while condemning American involvement, nevertheless excused American leaders of any real responsibility. It was all an accident, a tragic series of mistakes, but not one that called for a reconsideration of American Cold War policies or for a searching reappraisal of men and

decisions.”¹⁶³ Even though Divine’s study was written at a time when the Cold War was still alive, the thesis nevertheless fails in its attempt to rationalize Vietnam as a one-time accident, especially when it is analyzed from a 2008 standpoint. President Bush Sr. strongly believed that Vietnam ghosts were buried in the Arabian Desert sands. Those ghosts however, would rise up from exact same sands twelve years later.

Afghanistan and Iraq

As the War on Terror was about to be initiated shortly after 9/11, many members of the media were becoming concerned whether access to information and to U.S. troops would be restricted. They had every right to be concerned, since the Bush administration made it clear that the released information about the war would be scrutinized carefully. As President Bush told the press: “Any sources and methods of intelligence will remain guarded in secret...My administration will not talk about how we gather intelligence, if we gather intelligence and what the intelligence says. That’s for the protection of the American people.”¹⁶⁴ Press secretary Fleischer did not differ much from his commander-in-chief. When the White House press corps asked about what evidence existed on Osama Bin Laden being the main force behind the 9/11 attacks, Fleischer responded: “You have the right to ask those questions, I have the responsibility not to answer them.”¹⁶⁵

The president’s and Fleischer’s statements do not only confirm their administration’s philosophy of guarding everything as a secret, but display ignorance as they proclaim that their secretive approach to the war is for the protection of the American people. It is amazing that the administration does not, or will not realize that the only reasonable way it could protect its citizens is by informing them, especially in crucial wartimes.

As much as reporters were dissatisfied with the work conditions during the Gulf War, their experiences were to become insignificant as the first bomb raids began in Afghanistan in early October 2001. Access to land and sea bases from which air attacks were launched was severely restricted, and thereby were chances to interview returning pilots reduced. Neither were reporters granted the permission to interview Special Operations Forces in order to check and verify their missions’ advancement, and to attain most importantly the number of possible casualties. Those few soldiers that were interviewed were not to be identified by name and

hometown. Out of reach were also U.S. troops in neighboring countries such as Pakistan, Tajikistan and Oman. A month and a half would pass before the Pentagon for the first time allowed a press pool to accompany a Marine operation in southern Afghanistan.¹⁶⁶ It is ironic that the American media was granted such a restrictive access to its troops, because reporting on Alliance operations and even the Taliban was no problem. This aspect was further emphasized by Sandy Johnson, the Associated Press bureau chief in Washington: “Imagine this, there is a war being fought by Americans and we’re not there to chronicle it. We have access to the Northern Alliance, we have access to the Taliban, we have practically zero access to American forces in the theater.”¹⁶⁷

It could be speculated who in Pentagon was responsible for keeping the media at arm’s length, and whoever it was must have been a high-ranking official. This speculation was confirmed after a number of factors pointed to the same man: former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. CNN’s Pentagon correspondent, James McIntyre said that Rumsfeld issued a directive “essentially telling everybody not to talk about anything.” ABC’s Washington bureau chief, Robin Sproul agreed, adding that the Defense Department is “very much controlling access” to low-ranking generals and other officials who in the past have had productive relations with the press.¹⁶⁸ As a result, the old, usual sources at the Pentagon interpreted Rumsfeld’s instructions regarding leaks seriously and were restrained in their cooperation with reporters. It is interesting to note that the same Rumsfeld also commented to reporters that “defending the American way is what the war in Afghanistan is all about, and that certainly includes freedom of the press.”¹⁶⁹ Obviously the Defense Secretary holds a different definition of what freedom of the press means, and should perhaps check what is written in the Constitution.

When the war in Iraq was initiated, press conditions were drastically altered. What was introduced was a policy of embedding, where 500-600 journalists, many of them foreign, signed on to be embedded, that is assigned to a specific unit with no possibilities to move around freely. Embedding could be viewed as an improvement when compared to Afghanistan, however the contract journalists were obliged to sign did contain a list of prohibitions. Reporting about ongoing missions and on specific results of completed, future or even canceled missions was prohibited due to “operational security” reasons. So was reporting specific

numbers of troops and journeying around in one owns vehicle, as one could not move around without a unit. Some press members regarded the rules as too general and expansive, creating thereby a slight confusion over what exactly could be covered, and when.¹⁷⁰ Especially the “operational security” element became debatable as it risked of being interpreted differently by individual reporters. To add further confusion to the matter, specific ground rules were to be outlined as journalists got to their units. These ground rules would, according to Major Tim Blair, the military’s media contact on embedding “change from mission to mission and location to location.”¹⁷¹ The steering mantra on embedding was so-called “security at source”, which basically implied that the individual unit commander would have significant influence over his or hers unit’s coverage. Charles L. Lewis, the Washington bureau chief for Hearst Newspapers was a pool correspondent in the Persian Gulf War and suggests how a “security at source” inspired conversation might look like:

The local commander will say to the correspondent: ‘You can come into our tent and look over our shoulder, and we will be very up front with you and show you what we are going to do. But in return for that access I need to look at your copy before you file. Now, if you don’t want to do that, you can stand over there and when we have something that we want to tell you, we will.’¹⁷²

As Lewis points out, this system could work in the favor of the correspondent if his or hers unit commander is reasonable and open- minded toward the media, and the media’s purpose. Bushell and Cunningham at *Columbia Journalism Review* also recognize the advantages of embedding to a certain point. While one Pentagon correspondent stated that the secretive, no access- policy in Afghanistan might have led to “black holes in history” (as did Walter Cronkite’s warnings about ‘pre-censorship’ in the Persian Gulf War), Bushell and Cunningham argue that the censored information stands good chances of getting published in the aftermath in media places such as magazines, books and documentaries. Embedding may additionally function perfectly for so-called “soldier-in-the-sand” stories reminiscent of Ernest Pyle’s informal, folksy stories and Bill Mauldin cartoon drawings during World War II.¹⁷³

Journalist Paul Friedman addresses embedding in Iraq from a rather interesting perspective: the TV perspective. His main criticism is forwarded to the unsatisfied results of embedding, such as the “not very special” images and video-clips from the first days of the war-campaign. The

reasons for the useless, short footage “slices” are according to him the stressful fast pace of the armed forces units and, not surprisingly, the military’s restrictions due to correspondents’ safety (Pentagon’s concern over their safety may be one possible reason, but it is certainly not the only one.) Friedman further stresses the logistical aspect, pointing to the reporters’ focus on live transmissions that take up time and energy, two elements that could have been spent on research for “more complete stories.”¹⁷⁴ It is these “complete” stories that were produced in Vietnam, and that were able to deliver the public a thoroughly researched and well-balanced narrative. Friedman describes them as “the up-close and detailed stories with beginnings, middles, and ends; the gritty, gripping stories about people and courage and fear and heroism”, and views the absence of these “timeless” pieces as the biggest flaw of embedded reporting in Iraq.

The Iraq Syndrome?

As the Iraq war tragically marked its fifth anniversary, it is impossible not to wonder whether it will turn into “another Vietnam”. Many will say it already has. With the U.S. invasion slowly spiraling into a full-scale civil war with no end in sight, thoughts run immediately to Schlesinger Jr’s and Halberstam’s “quagmire” theory. As the war is escalating with its daily suicide bombings and street battles followed by more casualties, Iraq starts to resemble a “quagmire” for each day that goes by. This brutal reality therefore counter strikes the “quagmire” assumption that Vietnam was a tragic, one-of-a-kind mistake in American history, when obviously a new tragic scenario is playing out in front of the entire world.

What is striking is that even the commander in chief has declared a Vietnam-Iraq analogy in a sad attempt to reach out to the indecisive politicians about war funding. The White House has witnessed a steady decrease in general support for the war, and has realized that using the Vietnam case might help its war policy. Vietnam was therefore applied in order to simultaneously renew the war debate and warn of the catastrophic consequences for Iraq’s people and the entire region if a withdrawal would occur. The risky analogy backfired not surprisingly among Democratic senators such as Edward Kennedy and John Kerry, who were, and still are, fierce opponents of the war. Many historians dissented with president’s predictions as well, arguing that America’s involvement in Vietnam only worsened the situation in Southeast Asia.¹⁷⁵ It could safely be asserted that the administration’s tactic of comparing Iraq

with Vietnam was destined to strike back. As mentioned earlier, Vietnam is, and will perhaps always be defined as the ultimate failure in American collective memory and comparing anything with it is a catastrophic move.

Another noteworthy theory that requires to be presented is the theory of collective security rules that is very much related to 9/11 and Iraq. In his study, political scientist Brian Frederking suggests that 9/11 did not fundamentally change world politics, but that it instead intensified already existing tensions about a suitable implementation of post-cold war collective security rules. Frederking firstly recognizes the notion that a number of individuals in the Bush administration firmly believe and continue to maintain that 9/11 was a historical day that changed the political balance in the world and that automatically gave a right to the United States to apply its preemptive foreign policies. However, he quickly disagrees with this notion and states that a terrible terrorist event such as 9/11 can not automatically alter the rules of global security, emphasizing that U.S. aggressive foreign policy can not “unilaterally construct a war social arrangement through declarations of a “war on terrorism” or even by invading Iraq” because these types of actions weaken collective security rules. As he further points out, the international community with the UN Security Council at the front prefers the set of collective security rules over a unilateral U.S. war on terrorism, as has been shown through the various authorization acts passed in the Council and the frequent veto struggles. The War on Terror would immediately lead to more accomplishments if the U.S. embraced and not disregarded the emerging collective security standards and norms on the world political scene.¹⁷⁶

Although Frederking’s argument makes sense, it is not a likely scenario while the current White House administration is in charge. President Bush and his team have throughout the years made their standpoints clear, steering an aggressive, one-way foreign policy while pretty much ignoring objections and criticism from other holds. In order for a dramatic shift to take place in American foreign policy, a new, fresh presidential administration needs to occupy the White House. The American people are more than ready for it, and so is the rest of the world.

Chapter 3

As has been presented in the previous chapters, the relationship between the Bush White House and the media has been a struggle from day one. Reporters and correspondents have often felt scrutinized and criticized in their missions, and have been restricted in their coverage of U.S. wars conducted abroad. In addition, the high secrecy level at the White House has not exactly contributed to an improvement of the strenuous relations. Despite the distrust and the lack of confidence between the two actors, some forces in the national media have started to analyze themselves and their actions. A number of journalists, newspapers and academics have during the last four years discussed whether the mainstream media have failed to fulfill their duties, especially in the lead up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Some of the key points these media members point to are the absence of a thorough investigation of the administration's arguments and the absence of a more critical debate. In the aftermath, the world has realized that Iraq's dictator Saddam Hussein did not possess the alleged weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and that the entire war was initiated on false grounds. Did the national media fail to be the "watchdog" in that crucial period before the invasion? If that is the case, what were the causes?

What Happened To Skepticism?

In his State of the Union speech on January 29, 2002, President Bush put forth powerful claims about his War on Terror. He famously argued that countries such as North Korea, Iran and Iraq constituted a severe threat not only to the United States but to the rest of the free, democratic world:

States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic.¹⁷⁷

He further made a promise: “I will not wait on events, while dangers gather. I will not stand by, as peril draws closer and closer.”¹⁷⁸ It is quite clear that he did not wait, because the administration, along with the country’s intelligence agencies, was already devising a battle plan for Iraq. Not only was the administration planning a campaign where it would be claimed that Iraq possessed the required tools for production of WMD, but it would also assert that there was a connection between Iraq, Al- Qaeda and 9/11. An investigative *Washington Post* story (that was not researched any further by the *Post* staff or other news organizations) revealed that a White House Iraq Group (WHIG) was created in August 2002. The group’s mission was to device a media campaign which would promote and ‘sell’ the upcoming Iraq war. However, the planned publicity events did not begin until September, which was a carefully calculated move due to the summer vacation. Andrew Card, one of WHIG’s members, commented the chosen launch date as following: “From a marketing point of view, you don’t introduce new products in August.”¹⁷⁹ Card’s statement was striking because it signaled that the campaign was no different than any other public relations campaign. In other words, the mission was to promote, and ultimately sell a product. Only in this case, the product was a war.

As he sent out a warning to the world’s “evil” nations through his State of the Union speech (the term “evil” was used five times), Mr. Bush failed to mention the important fact that Osama Bin Laden and the rest of the Taliban leadership were still at loose, or the fact that the country’s economy was suffering from a soaring budget deficit and high unemployment. Media theorist Douglas Kellner argues that the 2002 State of the Union address illustrated a dangerous demagogue side of the president, and that the controversial “axis of evil” rhetoric demonstrated “a desperate willingness to say and do anything to assert U.S. power and to justify U.S. aggression.”¹⁸⁰ While the international community was stunned by Bush’s aggressive speech, the American mainstream media applauded it. CBS’s Dan Rather proclaimed it as “a solid, even eloquent address,” and NBC’s Andrea Mitchell reported it as “amazing.” In his *USA Today* article, Walter Shapiro commented on Bush’s “awe-inspiring popular support,” concluding that the president was “more than entitled to enjoy this moment.” Former political columnist William Safire went as far as cheering on the commander-in-chief to strike Iran, Iraq and North Korea.¹⁸¹

The Iraq war campaign continued to roll. Although the evidence demonstrating the connection between the Saddam Hussein regime and Al-Qaeda was minimal, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld insisted that “as we sit here, there are senior Al-Qaeda in Iraq. They are there.”¹⁸² Rumsfeld apparently chose to ignore a great amount of evidence revealing that Osama Bin Laden in fact denounced Saddam’s regime, and referred to it as a secular threat to Islamic fundamentalism. Saddam, on his hand, carried a fear toward Islamic fundamentalist groups, and that these would someday attempt to remove him from his throne. These two factors alone contradict a possible Al-Qaeda and Iraq connection, and they were therefore disregarded by high-ranking officials who were determined on military action.¹⁸³

Another well-known performance from the administration’s campaign was Colin Powell’s presentation at the U.N. Security Council in February 2003. The former Secretary of State opened his speech as if he was presenting an already established truth: “My colleagues, every statement I make today is backed up by sources, solid sources. These are not assertions. What we are giving you are facts and conclusions based on solid intelligence.”¹⁸⁴ As he displayed statistics and satellite photos of alleged Iraqi weapons sites and mobile laboratories, the world watched and the press reported. However, a growing number of people and media watch groups claim that objectivity in journalism failed immensely when the press reported on Powell’s presentation. FAIR (Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting) is one of those groups. According to FAIR, many journalists treated the presented arguments as though they were facts, such as William Schneider at CNN and the patriotic Dan Rather at CBS. In one of his news introductions, Rather described the arguments not as allegations but as facts: “Holding a vial of anthrax-like powder, Powell said Saddam might have tens of thousands of liters of anthrax. He showed how Iraqi jets could spray that anthrax and how mobile laboratories are being used to concoct new weapons.”¹⁸⁵ Bill Schneider went as far as rejecting any doubts that might exist about Powell’s evidence: “No one disputes the findings Powell presented at the U.N. that Iraq is essentially guilty of failing to disarm.”¹⁸⁶

FAIR pointed out the importance of reporting such claims with precautions, because recent history has demonstrated that satellite photos and other intelligence data could be false. Before the Persian Gulf War in 1991, the Bush Sr. administration used satellite pictures as well to

support its case for going into Kuwait. The classified photos allegedly displayed the mobilization of the Iraqi army on the Saudi Arabian border; however, they were dismissed as evidence in the aftermath when the *St. Petersburg Times* got hold of commercial satellite photos which displayed no such military activity. During the Clinton administration, a cruise missile attack on Sudan was also reasoned with classified intelligence information. The target at the time was an alleged chemical weapons factory, but subsequent investigation showed the target to be a pharmaceutical factory.¹⁸⁷

When the president revealed his reasons and arguments for an invasion, the media failed to challenge these as well. At a press conference in March 2003 Bush justified his pro-war policy, mentioning Al- Qaeda and the 9/11 attacks fourteen times in almost an hour. What followed would be remembered as a scandalous performance by society's "watchdog": not a single question was asked about the coming war, a fact that shocked even some of the reporters who were present at the conference. ABC News White House correspondent Terry Moran referred to the press corps as "zombies", while another Washington-based reporter remarked to the *American Journalism Review* that it "just became an article of faith among a lot of people: Look at this White House press corps; it's just abdicated all responsibility."¹⁸⁸

Elizabeth Bumiller from the *New York Times* offered her explanation on the matter one year later, implying it was meaningless to dispute with the president at a point when it was clear that there was no turning back:

I think we were very deferential, because in the East Room press conference, it's live. It's very intense. It's frightening to stand up there. I mean, think about it. You are standing up on prime time live television, asking the president of the United States a question when the country is about to go to war. There was a very serious, somber tone that evening, and I think it made- and you know, nobody wanted to get into an argument with the president at this very serious time. It had a very heavy feeling of history to it, that press conference.¹⁸⁹

In defense of the reporters, they did land at a difficult spot when considering the secretive and restrained approach by the Bush administration toward the media. How should have the reporters examined the alleged claims? In what way were they able to check the administration's evidence when the evidence, deriving from classified intelligence sources, was not available to public? When there is limited time and space, how should the press report on complex issues such as war and international terrorism? It is not easy to determine however, the fact that not one reporter

dared to challenge the president's arguments at the crucial news conference just before the invasion is incomprehensible. The opportunity was certainly present, but where was the skepticism?

McCarthyism Comeback?

David Dadge suggests an interesting parallel between the Bush administration's campaign for the Iraq war and Senator Joseph McCarthy's communist witch hunt in the 1950s. After his notorious Wheeling speech in Wheeling, West Virginia where McCarthy claimed that he was in possession of a list of names of alleged communists working in the State Department, the media started to devote him more attention. Persistent in his mission, the senator tirelessly travelled the country and held speech after speech, often accusing the Truman administration for being too soft in its efforts to combat communism in America. His accusations received wide publicity and won him a large national audience. However, many newspapers and television networks failed to check McCarthy's accusations and reported instead ambivalently on his crusade. One of the reasons for this were, according to Dadge, the senator's dirty tactics which obstructed "good reporting", especially the tactic of constantly changing the facts whenever the press closed in. One such example occurred in February 1950, when the number of alleged communists shifted several times, causing confusion about how many suspects there were and who precisely was informed about the 'infiltrators.' First, the secretary of state knew about the involved individuals, then he did not, and again he did. On other occasions McCarthy would further complicate matters by simply holding back information. When asked for a copy of the crucial list of names, he avoided handing it out by saying that the list was "in a suit on a plane", or only for the secretary of state or President Truman to study due to 'national security' concerns.¹⁹⁰ As a result, it became stressful to keep up with the senator and his changing statements. The extraordinary aspect is that McCarthy managed to manipulate the media into broadcasting his message all over the country, which was a crucial factor that gained him the needed momentum for his anti-communism activities.

Dadge's parallel is noteworthy because there is a striking resemblance between McCarthy's media strategy and the Bush White House war promotion. The current presidential administration counted heavily on national newspapers and networks to convey its pro-invasion

arguments. First, administration officials would hold key speeches that were mainly reported uncritically, as seen through Powell's speech at the U.N. Another pivotal example was the president's State of the Union speech in January 2003, when Bush intentionally used fear to gain the American people's support for going to war. Not only did he paint a grim future for America if action was not taken, but there was yet another attempt at connecting 9/11 with Iraq, which was an argument applied in his State of the Union speech already the previous year.

The second step in the process was to expand and strengthen these key speeches. Administration officials, such as National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice and Vice President Cheney appeared on television news shows and participated in interviews, using inflated language to reinforce the administration's arguments. One central illustration is Rice's appearance on CNN's *Late Edition* with Wolf Blitzer in September 2002. In an attempt to explain the risk of whether Iraq's dictator possessed the required tools for production of WMD, she stated: "The problem here is that there will always be some uncertainty about how quickly he can acquire nuclear weapons, but we don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud." Finally, the statements would get published and broadcasted in the local and national media, and the promotion of a war was completed.¹⁹¹

As mentioned earlier, it is not always simple to check claims and arguments when these are based on classified intelligence data or national security reasons. It is not always easy for reporters to break through the wall of secrecy. In the case of Senator McCarthy and his intense chase for communists, it took the media four years to reveal his fabricated lies. In the case of the Iraq war, the WMD had not been detected at all which crushed Bush's theory about Saddam's nuclear threat against America. Moreover the news media faced a dilemma: if they chose to disregard the administration's Iraq policy then they gambled losing readers or viewers. On the other hand, if they chose to publish or broadcast the statements they compromised presenting them with a lack of context. In a competitive industry such as the media, not many editors or directors wished to reduce their audience ratings. As a result, they opted to simply report and remain silent instead of activating the public and start a debate. In order to discover the causes for the media's post-9/11 behavior it is necessary to journey back in history of American journalism.

Decline of Professional Journalism

The greatest achievement in the history of American journalism was most probably the publishing of the Pentagon Papers and the revealing of the Watergate affair in the 1970s. In the historic case of *New York Times Co. v. U.S.* in 1971 the U.S. Supreme Court rejected the Nixon administration's right to prevent the publication of the Pentagon Papers. The 47 classified volumes contained insightful information on how the U.S. slowly, but steadily got engaged in Southeast Asia. Collecting the documents was an idea that originated with former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and resulted in a process stretching over several decades, starting from 1945 and into the Vietnam War. The documents contained a number of embarrassing facts about the U.S. foreign policy, a factor that caused nervousness and agitation throughout the executive branch. Speaking for the Supreme Court majority, Justice Hugo L. Black concluded that:

In the First Amendment the Founding Fathers gave the free press the protection it must have to fulfill its essential role in democracy. The Press was to serve the governed not the governor...Only a free and unrestrained press can effectively expose deception in government. And paramount among the responsibilities of a free press is the duty to prevent any part of the government from deceiving the people and sending them off to distant lands to die of foreign fevers and foreign shot and shell. In my view, far from deserving condemnation for their courageous reporting, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and other newspapers should be commended for serving the purpose that the Founding Fathers saw so clearly. In revealing the working of government that led to the Vietnam War, the newspapers nobly did precisely that which the Founders hoped and trusted they would do.¹⁹²

The *Times'* victory over the presidential administration in the court, and the exposure of the Watergate affair were regarded as collective triumphs by the entire journalistic community. The golden age in American journalism reached consequently an all-time peak. However, the sweet triumphs carried with them side effects. The self-satisfaction and the self-content that rose among journalists in the following period quickly edged to arrogance and egoism. Bob Woodward, one of the Watergate- reporters/investigators, witnessed that members of the news industry not only received honors and recognitions, but were suddenly invited to the "right" parties and embraced by the political and economic elite. According to James Carey, this was a break dealer because at that moment "the vaunted progressivism of journalism was abandoned." He further clarifies that "journalists accepted the role of progressive intellectuals with a mission to participate in the management of society," but that they "simultaneously abandoned the

populist wing of progressivism with its dictate to “afflict the powerful and comfort the afflicted.””¹⁹³ Carey continues to argue that the press had lost “credibility and respect” in the aftermath of Watergate, and that the public viewed the media as a self- ruling institution, independent not only of partisan politics but of democracy itself. He compares the atmosphere in the 1970s to a Werner von Braun type of journalism: “We just send the rockets up; we don’t know or care where they come down.”¹⁹⁴ As the media were turning into a ‘special institution with special rights’, so were the golden years of American journalism slowly losing their glory. A new decade was approaching, and with it came the rise of media empires and powerful corporations.

The 1980s experienced a massive technological restructuring. Personal computers became more and more accessible and cable television was detectable in almost every American home. In fact, most of the broadcasting sphere was deregulated, but that is no coincidence because the structural changes occurred simultaneously with the implementation of ‘Reaganomics.’ The Reagan administration became known for its conservative fiscal policies which were dominated by hefty tax cuts, immense defense spending and deregulation. Deregulation was meant to weaken the government’s interference on the free market, and thus favor private interests over public interests. It was also meant to encourage competition however, that competition was accompanied by both advantages and disadvantages. One illustrative example dates from 1982, when a federal judge issued an order instructing the telephone giant AT&T to be divided into one long-distance company and twenty-two separate local phone companies. The division resulted in confused customers stuck with multiple phone bills. At the same time new companies, such as MCI and Sprint, emerged on the market and offered lower prices, creating tougher competition and greater diversity on the market.¹⁹⁵

Another consequence of the technical changes was that a phase of merging was initiated. Due to extra capacity in the information industry, merging was regarded as an alternative solution next to deregulation and privatization. The news media searched for coalition partners, and these consolidations resulted ultimately in large global enterprises. Carey highlights that old-fashioned news broadcasting was slowly ‘lost’ within these enterprises because it was exposed to heavy cost-cutting in order to earn a profit.¹⁹⁶ The news sector that suffered the largest cuts was the

international coverage sector, which has traditionally been viewed as expensive and costly. A significant reduction of foreign bureaus and international correspondents stationed abroad ensued over the years, resulting in superficial and poorer forms of coverage back home.¹⁹⁷ As CBS News foreign correspondent Tom Fenton chronicles, coverage of foreign affairs in U.S. newspapers and television news plummeted by shocking seventy to eighty percent in the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁹⁸ With this unfortunate development, the mainstream media directed their focus at sensational news more than ever. Who could forget the Clinton- Lewinsky scandal, or the O. J. Simpson murder trial that rolled on millions of TV sets for months?

The 1992 presidential election was yet an example where the sensational prevailed over the serious. What dominated the spotlight were dirty advertisement tricks and commercials, Bill Clinton's extra-marital affairs, and his Vietnam draft status. The result was a low voter turnout, indicating that the public's interest for politics was fading, but also that the media's coverage of the election was on the wrong path.¹⁹⁹ Although it became obvious that the press needed to replace its hunger for sensations with a more serious approach, it has unfortunately still not occurred. The news coverage of presidential elections since 1992 has more or less remained the same, with the intense 'feeding-frenzy' focused on personal, rather political issues.

The average American must have been not only shocked by the 9/11 attacks, but also confused. Who was responsible, and what were the reasons for such a vicious act? The confusion is comprehensible when considering that international correspondence was positioned far down on the priority list for decades, and the dominant presence of profit interests in the information industry. How could have the average, working-class American obtained a balanced picture of the U.S. role in the world, especially in the Arab countries, when many news stories were lacking the proper context and essential in-depth analysis! One demonstrative example is the file footage that was aired in the U.S. media immediately after the 9/11 attacks. The outdated images and film clips from Afghanistan and Pakistan evidenced the long absence of foreign reporters in the region.²⁰⁰ As terrible as the attacks were, they did serve one purpose: they were a wake-up call not only to the nation, but to the American media. Suddenly, newspapers and broadcasting networks started to re-position their correspondents around the world, and international coverage returned on top of the priority list. However, this did not change the fact that corporate owners still remained responsible to their shareholders' needs for profit, and that the news organizations

continued to be exposed to financial cutbacks and commercial pressures. Roberta Baskin, a CBS awarded journalist points out that investigative journalism has been the primary victim of the corporate takeover. As she explains, investigative journalism went from being a “protected and encouraged” element to a suspicious element: “...whereas the lawyers were once sympathetic, playing an advocacy role to the journalists and trying to get their stories on the air, now they’re representing the perspective of the owners, that investigative journalism is a lot of trouble and the less of it the better.”²⁰¹ Charles Lewis adds that most of the present investigative journalism originates from insiders who leak stories to reporters.²⁰²

In 2005, the Pulitzer Prize winner Laurie Garrett took bold action and resigned at *Newsday* newspaper as a protest to the present situation in journalism. In her resignation she wrote that she was leaving the media domain, and further elaborated:

All across America news organizations have been devoured by massive corporations- and allegiance to stockholders, the drive for higher share prices, and push for larger dividend returns trumps everything that the grunts in the newsrooms consider their missions...This is terrible for democracy. I have been in forty- seven states of the U.S.A. since 9/11 and I can attest to the horrible impact the deterioration of journalism has had on the national psyche. I have found America a place of great and confused fearfulness.²⁰³

There are probably many other serious journalists who share Garrett’s opinion, but it is highly unlikely that their protests and opinions will succeed in influencing the powerful media owners anytime soon. As long as the profits are rising and the shareholders are content, the giant media corporations will continue to dominate the decision-making process.

The Power of the Military-Industrial Complex

One element that can not be stressed enough when analyzing the build-up to the Iraq war is the powerful military-industrial complex (MIC). In short, the MIC is an interconnected network of financial capital and resources between the armed services, defense contractors and government institutions such as the Pentagon, the Congress, and the White House. The term was firstly introduced by President Eisenhower in 1961, when he warned the public to not let the great military machine gain excessive influence in American government. That warning turned out to

be ineffective, because the MIC has only strengthened itself and become more powerful since the 1960s.²⁰⁴

In April 2008, *The New York Times* revealed that the mighty Pentagon and the military-industrial complex played crucial roles in promoting the administration's wartime performance. The conducted examination studied 8,000 pages of e-mail messages, transcripts and records, and concluded that the so-called "military analysts" have served as Pentagon's communication tools with one purpose: promote a positive picture of the Iraq war. These analysts, often retired military officers, appeared countless times on all five news networks and radio as field experts to express their 'independent' opinions. According to the *Times* article, the still continuing media effort "has sought to exploit ideological and military allegiances, and also a powerful financial dynamic: Most of the analysts have ties to military contractors vested in the very war policies they are asked to assess on air."²⁰⁵ The fact is that the analysts collectively represent more than 150 military contractors, either as defense industry lobbyists, consultants or board members, which are relations that have rarely been disclosed to the public or the networks. Transcripts and records show that the analysts not only attended private briefings with Pentagon officials and officials such as Mr. Cheney and Alberto Gonzales, but were also taken on tours to Iraq and Guantanamo Bay a number of times. What was expected from them afterwards was to further convey the same message received during the briefings and the tours, even if that message was based on uncertain or false intelligence data.²⁰⁶

There is no doubt about Pentagon's intention with the military analysts, because the disclosed records frequently refer to them as "message force multipliers" or "surrogates." Victoria Clarke, the former public relations executive at the Defense Department, viewed the analysts as "key influential" in constructing a case for war, while reporters received little attention. Don Meyer, an assistant to Clarke, stated: "We didn't want to rely on them (reporters) to be our primary vehicle to get information out."²⁰⁷ The statement confirms again the administration's unwillingness to cooperate with the media and share information. What is interesting is the fact that Clarke's team received help in their search for potential analysts. The article states the White House itself was active in the selection process, requesting lists of names and even suggesting potential candidates.

The military analysts themselves hold mixed feelings about the media campaign they were involved in. Some have showed regret, while others have admitted that they have used the meetings with senior officials to create important networks for possible business adventures in the future. Those who have displayed regret so far are Robert S. Bevelacqua and Kenneth Allard. Bevelacqua, a retired Green Beret and former Fox News analyst, described his thoughts about Pentagon's approach: "It was them saying, 'We need to stick our hands up your back and move your mouth for you.'"²⁰⁸ Allard, a former NBC military analyst, said that the media campaign was a "coherent, active policy," and added: "Night and day, I felt we'd been hosed."²⁰⁹ John C. Garrett on the other hand, felt differently. This Fox News analyst and lobbyist at Patton Boggs lobby firm acknowledged using his special access and information from the briefings and the sponsored trips to facilitate to his clients: "You can't help but look for that... If you know a capability that would fill a niche or need, you try to fill it. That's good for everybody."²¹⁰ Not only did he use the opportunity to create business deals, but he was also eager to help the media campaign. In January 2007 he wrote to the Pentagon: "Please let me know if you have any specific points you want covered or that you would prefer to downplay."²¹¹

According to the *Times* article, the networks paid little, or no attention to the backgrounds and business connections of their military analysts. Mr. Allard, for instance, argued that "none of that ever happened." What is even more incredible is that the networks did not comment on the fact that the analysts' Iraq trips were paid by the Defense Department, which is, according to the article, "a clear ethical violation for most news organizations."²¹² As mentioned earlier, the media effort still continues, and will probably continue as long as the American troops are involved in military actions in Iraq.

In his article, McChesney further explores the role of the MIC, and argues that since the fall of the Soviet Union the MIC has been "seeking a substitute...with which to justify its massive budgets and privileges." He highlights that several options have been proposed at various times, for instance a war on terrorism, a war on drugs and the drug trade from Latin American countries, and humanitarian intervention. However, none of these were regarded as 'satisfactory' causes in order to continue with the enormous MIC budget spending as in previous decades. Colin Powell, at the time a high-ranking general, described the problem in 1991: "Think hard

about it. I'm running out of demons. I'm running out of villains.”²¹³ Nevertheless, the influential military lobby in Washington managed to convince both the Democrats and Republicans to preserve the massive spending. As a consequence, one-third of the world's military expenditures in 2000 belonged to the United States. McChesney strongly maintains that the War on Terror was “a gift from heaven” for the MIC since it excused and authorized irresponsible budget spending and weakened accountability toward Congress. Moreover the war on global terrorism is an “endless” war that can never be won, and will be difficult to keep under surveillance since the enemy is not located at one place, as was the case with the Soviet Union Empire.²¹⁴

Kellner supports as well the notion that the powerful MIC has shaped the Bush administration, and adds that the Bush's aggressive rhetoric was used in an attempt not only to warn the “evil” countries in the world, but also to advance the president's missile defense shield.²¹⁵ However, the shield never became a reality because the funding for wars in Afghanistan and Iraq took, and still take, their tolls on the federal budget.

With powerful factors, such as the military-industrial complex dominating the Bush administration, and the aggressive, well-devised media campaign, one starts to wonder whether the Iraq war really was avoidable. Could the silent news media, that simply reported the administration's allegations and chose to ignore their military analysts' backgrounds, have stopped the rush to war if they had been more proactive? That is a debatable question; however the Fourth Estate started slowly to wake up as the foundation on which the administration based its evidence, started to crumble down.

Confession Time

The first sign of skepticism about the administration's Iraq arguments came from the acclaimed *Columbia Journalism Review* (CJR). An article titled “Voices: The Lies We Bought” appeared as early as two months after the invasion, and posed the important self-analyzing question: “Where was the American Press on September 7, 2002, a day when we were sorely in need of reporters?”²¹⁶ The date Macarthur is pointing to is clearly the launching date of the White House campaign that intensely promoted military action against Iraq's regime. As he refers to the non-existing IAEA report which Bush used as evidence, but which hardly anyone in the media bothered to look into, Macarthur concludes that the American media failed the nation in the

crusade toward war, and suggests: “Perhaps we need to adopt the rapid-response techniques used in public relations, something akin to James Carville’s and George Stephanopoulos’s famous “War Room” ethos: never leave an accusation unanswered before the end of a news cycle.”²¹⁷ What is striking is that an entire year would pass before a number of national newspapers and reporters caught up with Macarthur and CJR.

In May 2004, the editors at the *New York Times* finally published a self-reflecting apology to its readers. But the paper first made the assurance that it had operated in an ordinary manner:

In most cases, what we reported was an accurate reflection of the state of our knowledge at the time, much of it painstakingly extracted from intelligence agencies that were themselves dependent on sketchy information. And where those articles included incomplete information or pointed in a wrong direction, they were later overtaken by more and stronger information. That is how news coverage normally unfolds.²¹⁸

After reviewing hundreds of its articles however, the paper recognized it had failed to further investigate the weak evidence presented by government officials:

But we have found a number of instances of coverage that was not as rigorous as it should have been. In some cases, information that was controversial then, and seems questionable now, was insufficiently qualified or allowed to stand unchallenged. Looking back, we wish we had been more aggressive in re-examining the claims as new evidence emerged—or failed to emerge.²¹⁹

As the *Times* acknowledged that the follow-up of numerous Iraq stories was poor, it simultaneously rejected critics that pointed the finger at certain individuals. Instead it maintained that the problem was a collective one:

Some critics of our coverage during that time have focused blame on individual reporters. Our examination, however, indicates that the problem was more complicated. Editors at several levels who should have been challenging reporters and pressing for more skepticism were perhaps too intent on rushing scoops into the paper...Articles based on dire claims about Iraq tended to get prominent display, while follow-up articles that called the original ones into question were sometimes buried. In some cases, there was no follow-up at all.²²⁰

One reporter that received the majority of the criticism was Judith Miller. While relying heavily on Iraqi exile sources such as Ahmed Chalabi, this prominent and once well-respected reporter frequently delivered first page stories about Iraq’s alleged weapons of mass destruction.

However, Chalabi’s credibility was eventually questioned after it was discovered that he had

cultivated a close relationship with the Bush administration for years, and that his personal drive for a regime change had produced dubious information. In spite of this revelation, Miller did not seem bothered. In fact she defended her work by asserting that “if your sources are wrong, you are wrong.”²²¹ Miller’s view of a journalist’s function was as well interesting: “My job isn’t to assess the government’s information and be an independent intelligence analyst myself. My job is to tell readers of *The New York Times* what the government thought about Iraq’s arsenal.”²²² Miller’s justifications were not tolerated by everyone in the staff. Maureen Dowd, a distinguished *Times* columnist replied that “investigative reporting is not stenography.” When it was found out that Miller wished to return and cover the paper’s national security section, Dowd’s prediction was that “the institution most in danger would be the newspaper in your (the readers’) hands.”²²³

The editors’ apology caused reactions among other staff members as well. The *Times*’ public editor, Daniel Okrent, approved of the self-analytical piece, but disliked its place in the paper: it was back in section A10 with a lack of reference on the front page. Okrent additionally suggested that the newspaper could overhaul and upgrade itself by reorganizing its priorities and reexamine its use of government sources. Dudge concludes that the *Times*’ apology increased its credibility after the publication of Okrent’s responsive article;²²⁴ however, it is more than certain that the credibility rate would have reached the top if the apology had been placed on the front page.

The next month more self-criticism arrived; this time the ‘confession’ came from *The New Republic* magazine. Although the editors of this left-leaning magazine expressed their regrets over supporting Bush in his march to war, their ‘apology’ was halfway successful. The article first stated: “We feel regret, but no shame...Our strategic rationale for war has collapsed.”²²⁵ The editors also recognized the lack of better examination of the administration’s “shaky” allegations and evidence, saying that “in retrospect we should have paid more attention to these warning signs.”²²⁶ However, they justified the war with a “moral rationale”, arguing that the war accomplished in getting rid of one of the “ghastliest regimes of our time.” Several of the magazine’s contributors felt that the editorial was limited, but Martin Peretz, the owner of *The New Republic* at the time, opposed of taking it any further. As a firm advocate of the Iraq war,

Peretz declared: “I don’t think the *New Republic* owes anybody an apology... There were some things we were mistaken about, like believing there were WMDs, but my piece lays out an argument for the war independent of that mistake. These apologies are silly.”²²⁷ Peretz’s type of opinion was, not surprisingly, upheld by the right-wing media machine. William Kristol, one of the editors at the conservative *Weekly Standard* stressed that his political magazine still supported the war, and that it had “no second thoughts about the justice and necessity of the war.”²²⁸ No second thoughts or doubts have been expressed by other conservative members of the media, which is a trend that will most probably continue in the future.

A final big self-reflection came from the national giant *The Washington Post*. It is worth noticing that the reflection did not arrive from the editors, but from one of the paper’s most respected reporters, Howard Kurtz. Kurtz launched an examination of his paper’s coverage of the lead-up period before Iraq, including interviews with staff members and editors. What was quickly discovered was that in the timeline between August 2002 and March 2003, more than 140 stories focusing on the administration’s rhetoric fronted the first page, while articles critical of the administration were simply pushed to the back sections. One example shows senior reporter Walter Pincus as he struggles to publish his article:

Days before the Iraq war began, veteran *Washington Post* reporter Walter Pincus put together a story questioning whether the Bush Administration had proof that Saddam Hussein was hiding weapons of mass destruction. But he ran into resistance from the paper’s editors, and his piece ran only after assistant managing editor Bob Woodward, who was researching a book about the drive toward war, “helped sell the story,” Pincus recalled. “Without him, it would have had a tough time getting into the paper.” Even so, the article was relegated to Page A17...²²⁹

71-year old Pincus was an experienced reporter who possessed long-time acquired expertise on nuclear weapons. He had among other things, spent five years covering the Iran-Contra affair, and was a tireless reader of various committee reports and intelligence documents. His articles however, faced trouble in the editor’s room. There were complaints that Pincus was “cryptic” in his writing, and that his difficult-to-read stories had to be heavily revised in order to make it into the paper. The fact that the veteran reporter constantly scanned government documents and was willing to pursue a story for months, or even years, gained him the reputation as a “crusader”, but it did not seem to bother him: “That’s sort of my reputation, and I don’t deny it... Once I get on a

subject, I stay with it.”²³⁰ It appears that Pincus’ habit of following a story for a lengthy period of time was viewed as a negative feature among some staff members, but it was exactly this feature the *Post* ultimately lacked in order to reveal the actual causes behind the war. Thomas Ricks, the paper’s Pentagon correspondent, who had faced verbal attacks from the administration for several of his critical articles on Iraq, used the opportunity to express critical thoughts toward his own employers:

“The paper was not front-paging stuff...Administration assertions were on the front page. Things that challenged the administration were on A18 on Sunday or A24 on Monday. There was an attitude among editors: Look, we’re going to war, why do we even worry about all this contrary stuff?”²³¹

The executive editor Leonard Downie Jr. acknowledged his share of responsibility concerning *Post*’s failure:

“In retrospect...we were so focused on trying to figure out what the administration was doing that we were not giving the same play to people who said it wouldn’t be a good idea to go to war and were questioning the administration’s rationale. Not enough of those stories were put on the front page. That was a mistake on my part.”²³²

Yet Mr. Downie has somehow managed to misinterpret the situation as he states:

“People who were opposed to the war from the beginning and have been critical of the media’s coverage in the period before the war have this belief that somehow the media should have crusaded against the war...They have the mistaken impression that somehow if the media’s coverage had been different, there wouldn’t have been a war.”²³³

It is clear that the executive editor has missed the main point which is not about “crusading” for or against a cause, but presenting and giving equal importance to all sides of the debate. It is only through this course that the public can obtain a fair and balanced view on a subject and thereby make a sensible and a rationale opinion. Although it was Mr. Kurtz who had initiated the necessary self-reflection and not the editors, recognition still must be given to the *Post* as a media institution that attempted to detect its own mistakes.

Bennett, Lawrence and Livingston argue that the media’s problem goes beyond individuals such as Downie Jr. and Judith Miller, indicating that it might be an institutional problem. There is a tendency among powerful news executives to view “crusaders” as a negative factor in

journalism, and so they attempt to move away from that area by focusing heavily on government officials and their statements. As the media monitors government activity and gets slowly caught up in the Washington consensus (or as media analyst Daniel Hallin terms it, “the sphere of legitimate controversy”), it effectively starts to shape the public opinion along the government’s rationale and fails immediately to be the “watchdog” institution.²³⁴ The inclination to favour Washington officials over voices outside of the capital is according to Bennett, Lawrence and Livingston, a part of the “unwritten rules of the Washington news game” which they define as following:

*In understanding the unwritten rules of the Washington news game... it is important to recognize that what carries a story is not necessarily its truth or importance, but whether it is driven by dominant officials within institutional decision-making arenas such as executive policy circles, or legislative or judicial processes. The advantage generally goes to those officials with the greatest perceived power to affect the issues or events at hand, the greatest capacity to use the levers of office to advance their news narratives on a regular basis, and the best communication operations to spin their preferred narratives well.*²³⁵

The fact that prominent and influential politicians are given most of the time and space in the news media is no secret. But it is worth noticing that the rules of the Washington news game are accompanied by an unpredictable paradox: whereas reporters might be aware of their inside-government sources being unreliable, corrupt or dishonest, they still need them in order to present proper “news” to their editors. Washington journalism has therefore been described as cynical and falsified by numerous media observers.²³⁶ The paradox has been further explored by journalist Kristina Borjesson, who conducted a series of interviews with several reporters and editors, such as Ted Koppel, the former ABC’s *Nightline* anchor. On the matter of the administration’s pro-war arguments and why the media did not stay independent in their coverage, Koppel’s direct response offers perhaps better insight:

Borjesson: You don’t just take their word for it, do you?

Koppel: No, I just don’t take their word for it. But when they tell me why they’re going to war, I certainly have to give proper deference to...if the president says I’m going to war for reasons A, B and C, I can’t very well stand there and say, “The president is not telling you the truth, the actual reason that he’s going to war is some reason he hasn’t even mentioned.” I as a reporter have to say, “Here is what the president is saying. Here’s what the secretary of defense is saying. Here’s what the director of the CIA is saying. Here’s what the members of Congress are saying.” And indeed, when everyone at that point who has access to the classified information is with

more or less one voice agreeing that, yes, there appears to be evidence that Saddam Hussein still has weapons of mass destruction- maybe not nuclear, but certainly chemical and probably biological- are you suggesting that the entire American press corps then say, “Well, horse manure?”²³⁷

Koppel’s direct response indicates that due to Washington power and dominance, and the journalism’s dependence on that power, it simply became too difficult to ignore the administration’s rhetoric for going to war. With the constant presence of commercial pressures and audience ratings the news media chose not to step outside the “pack,” but took instead the safe road and focused most of its coverage on the Bush administration’s assertions. As a consequence, no efficient debate was initiated where opposing views could have been presented and explored. If the influential military-industrial complex is additionally considered, then it becomes debatable whether the press really could have stopped the march toward Iraq. Through his statement earlier, *Washington Post*’s executive editor argued his newspaper could not have accomplished that, however, it does not excuse the mainstream media for not operating more investigative as they theoretically should have done. The apologies and self-reflections did arrive, yet they arrived too late for the American public and the American democracy. When the country’s stakes were at risk, the press ultimately failed to challenge the government and hold it accountable.

There are several solutions for an improvement of the relationship between the press and the White House, which will be outlined in the conclusion chapter. However, here is one proposal that the national mainstream media should pay attention to in the future. Professor and media scholar Robert Entman explains:

The media should provide enough information independent of the executive branch that citizens can construct their own counterframes of issues and events. It is not enough for the media to present information in ill-digested and scattered morsels. Rather, what citizens need is a counterframe constructed of culturally resonant words and images, one that attains sufficient magnitude to gain wide understanding as a sensible alternative to the White House’s interpretation.²³⁸

In other words, the dependence on the White House must decrease in volume and voices outside the capital circles need to gain more attention. After the irretrievable mishaps of Iraq, it becomes

more than essential that the viewpoints of critics and opponents get the equal time and space in the press as the government officials do. After all, one of the main purposes with the media is to present fair and balanced news to the public. Let us only hope that the Fourth Estate has learned its lessons, so that the same scenario, witnessed in 2003, does not occur in the future.

Conclusion

Review

A number of conclusions can be drawn from the thesis, but one thing is certain: the relationship between the Bush White House and the American media has been a turbulent ride from day one. As has been illustrated, the current administration proved it self to be extremely disciplined and coordinated in its affairs, and one on the reasons for this was the loyal staff the president surrounded himself with. However, the 9/11 attacks ushered in a new era. Terms such as scrutiny and secrecy acquired new definitions as reporters soon discovered. A slightly critical article or a comment of the president and his team could produce a storm of verbal attacks. The justifications for the scrutiny were based on patriotism, loyalty to the president and national security.

Talk-show commentator Bill Maher was one of the first victims of the tense atmosphere in the post-9/11 period. After he had referred to the United States as “cowards,” and declared that flying planes into buildings was “not cowardly,” controversy erupted immediately. Advertising companies withdrew their commercials from the show after receiving public protests, and the White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer used the opportunity to remind Americans that “they need to watch what they say, watch what they do.”²³⁹ The statement was widely discussed in the aftermath, and was viewed insulting by some members of the media.²⁴⁰ Maher apologized in order to save his career, but the damage was already done; ABC network cancelled his show the following year. The role of Fleischer’s statement in this case is an important one, because it was the first time a press secretary had expressed an administration’s standpoint in such a straightforward manner: criticism and dissent was not tolerated by the White House, therefore all American citizens should pay attention to what they were saying.

Not only did some of the Bush administration’s officials criticize the media, but there were even attempts at censoring news stories. The main example that illustrated such an attempt was the interference in the work of the *Voice of America* network, where the State Department, along with unnamed National Security Council members sought to stop the airing of an exclusive

interview with a Taliban leader. The interview was temporarily delayed, but was finally aired after an intense struggle between the network's staff and government officials. The consequences however, were extensive, as several staff members lost their jobs or were re-positioned.²⁴¹ It is incredible that reporters lost their jobs because of an interview, but it is even more incredible that the State Department and NSC members did not see the value in what one of America's enemies had to say. The VOA' staff, on the other hand, followed their journalistic instinct and realized the importance of the interview immediately. As one anonymous staff member told the *Washington Post*: "How can you talk about what we're fighting against if you don't give these people voice?"²⁴²

As the first chapter continued to show, several of *Washington Post*'s reporters, such as Dana Milbank and Thomas Ricks, faced criticism from the administration after publishing critical articles. The two reporters enjoyed strong support from their editors, but the same could not be said for Dan Guthrie and Tom Gutting, who ended up being dismissed from their local newspapers. Both reporters had published articles where President Bush had been ridiculed and criticized for his handling of the September 11 situation. Their editors however, were outraged, and so was the public. It all resulted in the editors' apologies on the next days' front pages, along with the dismissals of the two journalists.²⁴³ Although no response was detected from the administration itself, one can logically presume that the White House was not pleased with Guthrie's and Gutting's descriptions of the president.

The presidential administration did not settle with scrutinizing the U.S. media only. Former Defense Secretary Rumsfeld directed criticism at foreign media networks in the fall of 2003, because of their critical coverage of the Iraq war. At the same time, he pointed out that critics, both at home and abroad, encouraged the terrorists and thereby complicated the ongoing War on Terror.²⁴⁴ Analyzing Rumsfeld's maneuver from a 2008 standpoint, it is easy to conclude that his attempt to quiet down dissent did not succeed. The fact that the intense war has reached its fifth year and cost over four thousand U.S. soldiers' lives,²⁴⁵ are factors that have propelled the anti-war movements to rise. What Mr. Rumsfeld's criticism achieved instead, was portraying the Pentagon and the White House as two commanding, controlling and dominating institutions with no tolerance for opposing views.

The second chapter focused on the Bush administration's tendency to shield its affairs from the news media and the public. The unwillingness to share information was explained as an effort to protect national security, even if that unwillingness bordered to pure secrecy at times. The reversal of the FOIA policies by the former Attorney General Ashcroft, the quick passing and signing of the Patriot Act, and the creation of the Homeland Security Department were instances where the administration displayed its 'secret' tendencies. Mr. Ashcroft encouraged the federal agencies and departments to use exemptions in the FOIA legislation in order to prevent release of federal documents. The controversial Patriot Act, signed in the wake of 9/11, indirectly stated that both U.S. and non- U.S. citizens could be secretly and indefinitely interrogated and detained,²⁴⁶ provisions that caused reactions among the entire political spectrum, even among the conservative ranks.²⁴⁷ The creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was also a significant product of Bush's wartime presidency, because the department's main mission was to prevent future terrorist attacks on U.S. soil. However, the Homeland Security Act contained so-called "critical infrastructure" provisions, which granted FOIA exemptions to private companies that provided "critical infrastructure" information to the government.²⁴⁸ These "critical infrastructure" provisions were quickly named 'loopholes,' because they were easily exposed to manipulation by corporate and government officials who wished to conceal undesirable information.²⁴⁹

The delayed dispatching of 68,000 pages from the Reagan presidency was another instance where the Bush administration revealed its dislike for sharing information. Although the most sensitive documents from the Reagan administration had been exempted by the Presidential Records Act of 1978, the White House still found it necessary to obstruct the scheduled release of the remaining pages, which contained mainly notes from meetings and internal White House memos.²⁵⁰ However, a little journey back in history shows that a couple of high-ranking officials from the current administration, such as Richard Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, also served in the Reagan administration, thereby making them the 'authors' of the stalled papers. In addition, Bush's own father, George H. W. Bush, held the vice president position during the reign of Reagan, a factor which most probably pushed the presidential papers issue even higher on the president's priority list.

Since press access in combat zones has been an everlasting issue for both the news media and the government, chapter two continued with a comparison of the media coverage in four conflicts where the United States had been involved: the Vietnam War, the Persian Gulf War, Afghanistan and Iraq. This was done in order to illustrate how Pentagon's unrestrictive, as well as restrictive information policies have affected the work of news reporters out in the field.

The Vietnam War became a unique case in U.S. history because of several aspects. First, reporters were free to move around the country as they wished, and the reason for this was the cooperative military administration.²⁵¹ The fact that reporters were given such free reigns was a 'privilege' that was never granted to the media again, because military officials believed images of dead people and destroyed villages resulted in the anti-war movement at home. Second, historian John Carlos Rowe argued that the "relegitimation" theory, which treats Vietnam as a special case in history "whose mistakes might be "corrected" the next time," led, and still leads to a continuation of justifications for a new war America could fight.²⁵² For instance, the "relegitimation" theory was applied in the Persian Gulf War in 1991, where 'mistakes' from Vietnam were about to get "corrected." One 'correction' implied not granting full liberty to the press, and a number of restrictive rules were consequently established. The most known rule became the notorious "pool system", where pools were small groups consisting of selected reporters who were escorted on guided tours chosen by the Pentagon.²⁵³ In addition, reporters had to sign a contract, agreeing that their news stories had to be submitted for a "security review" by Pentagon officials before publishing them. Although Mr. Bush Sr. declared that the Vietnam syndrome was "kicked...once and for all," that assertion was disputed by historian Rowe.

As much as journalists were dissatisfied with the work conditions during the Gulf War, their experiences were to become insignificant as the first bomb raids began in Afghanistan in October 2001. With severe restricted access to land and sea bases, and no chance to interview U.S. troops, it was frustrating for reporters to produce news stories when there was practically no material to work on. This frustration was understandable when the access was free to the Alliance troops and even the Taliban.²⁵⁴ Not only did the Defense Department impose tough rules out in the terrain, but Rumsfeld even issued a directive, where he instructed all Pentagon's officials not to make statements about military actions.²⁵⁵

With the Iraq war new policies were introduced, the embedding policy being the central one. When reporters signed on to be embedded, they were assigned to a specific unit with no possibilities to move around freely. Embedding could be viewed as an improvement when compared to Afghanistan; however, the mandatory contract journalists signed contained a list of prohibitions. In addition, individual unit commanders held significant influence over his or hers unit's coverage, which was made possible through the so-called "security at source" rule.²⁵⁶ While one Pentagon correspondent stated that the secret, no access- policy in Afghanistan might have led to "black holes in history," Bushell and Cunningham at *Columbia Journalism Review* argued that the censored information stood good chances of getting published in the aftermath in media places such as magazines, books and documentaries.²⁵⁷

Despite the occurrences of scrutiny attacks, criticism and 'secret' behavior between the administration and reporters, some forces in the national news media have started to analyze themselves and their actions. The final chapter focused therefore on the discussion where some journalists argued that the Fourth Estate failed to fulfill its duties, especially in the lead up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The FAIR media watch group maintained that many journalists treated the administration's arguments as though they were facts, exemplified through the State of the Union address in 2002 and Colin Powell's presentation at the U.N. Security Council. A journey through recent history of professional journalism revealed that corporate take-over of the news media, commercial pressures, and restructuring were all factors that left investigative journalism and international correspondence in a poor condition. In 2004, national giants such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* apologized to their readers for not conducting better research of the administration's arguments, and for not placing enough critical stories on their front pages.

In the defense of journalists, it was not always simple to check claims and arguments when these were based on classified intelligence data or national security reasons. It was not always easy for reporters to break through the administration's wall of secrecy. However, the self-reflections and apologies could have perhaps been avoided if only a small dose of skepticism was retained in the first place.

In the end, it is important to point out that not every member of the media failed. We have seen that brave reporters such as Dana Milbank, Thomas Ricks and a number of others dared to criticize and challenge the president and his administration's arguments in the tense atmosphere after 9/11. We have seen that the staff at the VOA dared to challenge its employer and air an interview with one of America's worst enemies. Despite the risk of consequences, these news media individuals attempted to fulfill the Fourth Estate's function: being society's "watchdog."

Possible Solutions

In order for the relationship to improve between the White House and the American press, changes need to take place in both camps. When the press is concerned, there are several issues it could work on. First, it needs to gain back skepticism. As has been illustrated throughout the thesis, there was little or no sign of skepticism in the mainstream media in the post-9/11 period. The administration's anti-terrorism policies and the Iraq arguments were generally reported but not challenged. The "he said/she said" approach should be avoided in the future since it is a mere stenographic approach that fails to provide a full background analysis to the readers and viewers. Second, the press needs to improve its verification methods. As witnessed in the Judith Miller case, relying on one allegedly reliable source resulted in massive inaccurate reporting. Therefore, sources and their veracity need to be thoroughly examined in order for news stories to be as credible as possible. Third, the reliance on Washington political circles must decrease in scope. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Washington officials are often preferred over other actors, which results in an unbalanced and unequal presentation of news. The fourth solution the media should attempt to achieve is independence. Reporters and editors must dare to break from the mainstream "pack" and focus on working toward the public's advantage. Therefore, commercial and financial interests should be placed further down on the priority list. Although the latter process might seem too problematic to implement- considering the fact that powerful corporations are increasingly dominating the information industry- the media ought to remind themselves that one of their missions is to serve the public, and not themselves.

The White House, on the other hand, needs to analyze itself and its treatment of the media, and above all, it needs to embrace the role and function of the Fourth Estate. The media are not there to only report the news, but to 'guard' society and hold government officials accountable. As

illustrated in the thesis, the Bush administration clearly refused to accept the role of the media when it declared that they had no “check-and-balance function.” Instead, it put up a wall of secrecy and responded with scrutiny attacks when journalists attempted to break through that wall of secrecy. Restrictive press policies were imposed even during wartimes, leaving reporters with not many alternative options but to sign Pentagon’s contract and accept the rules of the game. As a result, the American public was left with little information in the crucial post-9/11 period, which was a time when the nation should have been provided with facts so that it could make up its own opinion. At that point, both the press and the president failed the American people. And they failed American democracy.

In order for the same mistakes not to occur again, the White House should consider initiating a transparency process, where openness and honesty would replace secrecy and scrutiny. Perhaps it sounds naive, but a transparency process would help the next administration restore its integrity and regain the public’s, as well as the media’s, trust. However, whether some of the proposed solutions will be implemented remains to wait and see.

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