

Media Coverage of Iraq and Iran:
Decoding the Warpath of a Democracy

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It may be hard to pinpoint the moment a nation chooses to follow a course that culminates in war, but what if media analysis could be used to identify the signs? World events, often in hindsight, seem to have some measure of predictability. But, is it possible to predict war, one of the most unpredictable events in the international system? Today the media is inundated with reports of conflict that could lead to potential hostility, but this spotlight always seems to fall upon The Islamic Republic of Iran. This sets the stage to test the warpath theorem—the point when rhetoric becomes reality—with an expectation of two results: either the Obama administration is gearing up for a future conflict with Iran or it is diligently working to avoid being drawn into another Middle East conflict. Using scholarly methods may open the possibility to gauge the probability that the U.S. heading towards war; consequently, providing a means for identifying states on the warpath. This paper presents analysis of the tone, quantity, and sources surrounding the reporting on Iraq in 2003 and Iran today—taken from *The Washington Post* across finite timeframes—and suggests that while the world is arguing over what direction to take with Iran, President Obama may have a different focus.

The media is stirring with wars and rumors of wars, but none is more divisive than the heated rhetoric surrounding Iran.¹ The stage is set, and the Obama administration may use the invasion of Iraq and 9/11 as a cognitive frame, in order to support engagement with Iran. Both Iraq and Iran were labeled by the Bush administration as a part of the "axis of evil," supporters of terror, and producers of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD).² The level of focus on these states has shaped a flurry of political choreography which is currently surrounding Iran. However, this does not justify an argument that the United States is interested in pursuing another Middle East conflict.³ A reasonable question exists as to whether the current situation with Iran is being similarly framed by the Obama administration as Iraq was by President Bush. The analysis of media reporting on each state suggests that while Iran is on a similar path as Iraq—facing harsh sanctions, increasing levels of political rhetoric, and building international isolation—the media representation of the two are entirely different. The overall surrounding tone and sources of reporting are substantially different. This may be contrasted due to reactions of the media today, in response to increased pressure from citizens, to not simply regurgitate the party line.⁴ It is also of note that the overall quantity of reporting amidst the Obama party line is considerably different from that of the Bush presidency prior to the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

One key area where the Obama administration is notably different from its predecessors exists in the lack of communication supporting actions against Iran, which is made apparent by the sheer volume of non-government sourced dialogue. The Obama administration routinely delivers a consistent stance: Iran with nuclear weapons is unacceptable. The policy is just as concrete as President Bush was in 2003, yet it has not reached the level of hyperbole that was present prior to the Iraq invasion. Obama is not nearly as decisive with what actions will follow, and is instead allowing for open discourse with increased communication on each side of the issue even though

he has clearly stated "it is all on the table."⁵ A partial result of these factors may make it possible to predict whether Iran is on a similar path as Iraq, and understand if there are quantitative disparities across the stories within the traditional media. The volume of news reports covering Iraq show far more positive coverage than reports on Iran, and include decreased source disparities between the government line and opposition. The less positive coverage of Iran may not be as decisive as it would appear; increased political dialogue and the overall volume of news stories show a media that is aggressively voicing its opinion and a presidency that may be working harder to avoid war.

The Drumbeat of War? Or the Avoidance of Conflict?

Presidents increasingly utilize their monopoly of the media to create a "bully pulpit," and during times of increased sympathy may take advantage of the lack of opposition to push agendas that may normally be considered controversial. In doing so, political leaders and the media, destabilize the system of controls put into place by the constitution of the United States.⁶ The practice of governing through polarizing rhetoric and the abuse of international sympathies offers mixed results. This may work for a period, but in the end can lead to increasing negative associations—weakening the U.S. image—and may also damage future administration attempts to frame similar events. Ultimately, this may increase the overall distrust of the government, from both its citizenry and the international system.⁷ The presidential strategy of capitalizing on the passion of citizens and nationalistic tendencies surrounding military conflict is nothing new. However, the comparative analysis of Bush and Obama presidencies, and two divisive foreign policy issues within a decade of each other, may show if the pulpit is still the "noisy corner." This overuse of the pulpit by President Bush could be a contributing outcome of the Obama administration's inability to frame events surrounding Iran.⁸

The wide-ranging effects of 9/11 did more than just tame opposition to presidential frames, rather they had the ability to effect the media directly. They felt the same convictions as all Americans: a primal need to right the wrong that had been done in the attacks. Ordinarily, it could be expected that the nationalistic emotion surrounding wartime presidents leads to an increase in positive news coverage, as shown by Farnsworth and Lichter.⁹ Essentially, presidents can count on this increase in positive coverage when the nation is whipped into a frenzy, which occurs without regard to the party in power. The reliance on this by the Bush administration may have depleted American sentiment for future Middle East operations.¹⁰ It is possible that, considering our nation's recent history, the Obama administration would not receive this historic jump in ratings if it pursued operations against Iran—a direct result of a nation growing weary of the ways of war.

In the flooded media environment of today it is easier than ever for government officials to frame events using the media—along with the growing social media—to push the administration line.¹¹ Additionally, officials are able to ratchet up rhetoric and the volume of coverage through the same media channels, and due to an ever increasing news hole—the space available for news coverage—administrations can overwhelm the citizenry. This dominance in coverage effectively leaves little room for opposition story lines and in doing so limits counter responses and salient counter-frames.¹² New media outlets are able to provide a constant source of stories. But, due to limited budgets, they may also represent ideal vehicles for attacking mainstream resistance

through constant reruns of the administration dictum, and in doing so they may also diminish critical responses to administration missteps. Despite citizen pressure, for many media outlets, it is not worth the possibility of being labeled a terrorist supporter in an increasingly competitive environment.¹³ While this appears to have occurred in 2003, prior to the invasion of Iraq, it is important to identify whether this is occurring today with Iran.

If the administration is planning an engagement with Iran, then it would pursue policies that are focused by an effective use of "attention frames," which can create a direct link between two events, and build interdependent associations, even if they did not previously exist.¹⁴ Studies of the months prior to and during the Vietnam War found that a lack of purpose in the framing created a public backlash, and led to a breakdown in the governability of society.¹⁵ Conversely, coverage of the first Gulf War was able to directly frame the operation, and by doing so it increased public opinion of the administration's policies which led to greater support for military action.¹⁶ The previously developed support for engagements in the Middle East may have carried over and provided a link for the intervention in 2003, but as the Bush administration faltered, this was quickly lost.¹⁷ The exceedingly partisan acrimony towards Iraq the month prior to the 2003 invasion suggests that much remained of the international good will after 9/11, and the administration took full advantage of the sympathies of the system to frame stories on their terms, even in the face of increasing opposition.¹⁸

Studies focusing on the Bush administration in 2003, and its policies leading up to, and during, the early stages of the invasion are quite telling. They provide a direct look at how the Bush administration framed the news and the methods used to support military action, when compared with the Obama administration and the framing of Iran, shows that Obama is not relying on direct political hegemony—the ability to drive the conversation from the "bully pulpit," and flood the media with information.¹⁹ Rather, the Obama administration is remaining quiet. It also appears that the media has become leery of administration lines exceeding the limits of the accepted dominant frame: the public may have finally had enough of war.²⁰ Reviewing the framing of the two presidencies, correlates the current dichotomy between the paths of Iran and Iraq, and the former may escape direct action due to the overzealous framing of Iraq and terrorism.²¹ The elements that created the relationship between the two are most highly visible in the quantity of coverage and types of sources.

The above factors, combined with historically misrepresented coverage of Muslims, may have increased the ability of former President Bush to frame Iraq as a supporter of terror and link it to 9/11. But, with that frame no longer accepted as the dominant analysis, the Obama administration is left with finding new ways to outline the issue with Iran. In addition, he excludes the pedestrian method of linking all Muslims—Iran being Persian and not Arab—and terrorism. This may no longer be an effective frame, and was something the Bush administration was trying to use as well.²² Coverage of Iran may not be equally positive across all issue areas in comparison to Iraq due to this less dominant frame, but an increase in non-government sources may show a progression away from the dominant party line. Therefore; the motivation for Obama is apparent, to avoid creating a highly charged environment that could lead to war—though scholarly analysis has shown this may actually help him get elected.²³

Presidents traditionally have had more success in shaping foreign than domestic policy, but the increase in available opposition sources and sensitivity to being seen as following the lead of the bureaucracy may have a direct effect on the ability of an administration to utilize the bully

pulpit to persuade citizens in the future. The Obama administration not only wants to avoid an Iranian conflict, but it must also be careful not set off a firestorm of political maneuvering by taking a dominant stand on the issue.²⁴ While a detailed study of the news management strategies in the Bush administration found that the White House had a far greater ability to control the political and media discourse on the Iraq war.²⁵ The Obama administration, on the other hand, has attempted to distance itself from the rhetoric of the Bush presidency, while maintaining pressure on Iran to come to the bargaining table. Obama appears to be less worried with the ability to defeat counter frames and more concerned with not becoming focused in another fight he does not want, while also repairing the loss of American soft power in the Middle East.²⁶

Coverage of Iraq vs. Iran

This paper uses content analysis of *The Washington Post* from the month prior to the 2003 invasion of Iraq (February) contrasted to the same month of reporting on Iran in 2012 (February), in order to determine whether America is on a path to war. The levels of support Bush received immediately after 9/11 carried through the invasion of Afghanistan and his first year in office, and eventually dipping just prior to invading Iraq and plummeting steadily thereafter as the U.S. realized it was mired in a counterinsurgency battle.²⁷ If Obama attempts to utilize these same frames it may have the opposite effect for the administration and be met with increased resistance from both the citizens and the media. This analysis attempts to answer the following questions: Do the unusually supportive structures that formed after 9/11 continue to today? Or have the highly hegemonic news reports given way to aggressive opposition? Has the Obama administration framed Iran similar to Iraq and do the media and public support the administration line?

To answer these questions, I first performed a quantitative analysis of the data over the month prior to the 2003 Iraq invasion and content analysis of the second week of that same month. The purpose behind separating out one week from the month of each quantitative analysis was to ensure my ability to explore all facets of the content itself within the timeframe requirements of this study. In addition, the use of February 2003 may have been too far along in the military buildup process and it would be prudent to verify my findings with a similar analysis across other months prior to the invasion. This would involve possibly looking at the reporting following the first UN resolution, which may be a more viable candidate for comparison.

This data is assessed in-light of comparable analyses of the month selected for 2012, and covering recent military engagements and policy diversions of the United States is based on an examination of the reporting in a quantitative fashion. This allows for a possible answer to claims that America is again on the path to war. The comparison of the current media coverage of Iran with coverage of other military engagements—specifically Iraq in 2003—may provide the ability to predict the tipping point of when states choose to go to war, and show if there is a direct correlation between tone and quantity of news reports prior to the committal of U.S. forces.²⁸

Detailed analysis of the two administrations shows that the policies of president Obama received more positive coverage than those of President Bush, but the increase in positive coverage may not be enough to provide Obama the span of support garnered by Bush after 9/11, and thus affect his ability to frame Iran in the traditionally accepted method.²⁹ Given the perceived importance of the ability for the president to frame foreign policy issues for the American public,

this may create a vacuum filled with incompetent sources and require direct attempts to stabilize the trust between the presidency and the citizens before the White House can again provide the dominant framing expected by the media.³⁰

To determine the types of media frames that exist in the coverage of Iraq and Iran, I performed content analysis, examining coverage for a single month. I also distinguished a select week in 2012 (Month: February; Week: 12-18). I looked at: tone, area associations, subject associations, key words, sources, and types of sources. The analysis compared the factors with the month prior to the invasion of Iraq (February 2003) and the second week of the month (Week: 16-22). This was done to identify if the U.S. is indeed beating the drums of war. These data, were generated by utilizing the online journal finders: Factiva, ProQuest, and Newspaper Source Plus along with the searchable newspaper index. I utilized the multiple indexes to fact-check each other and ensure that each reported the same number of stories and had the same breakout of sources, key words, and content for my given period.

I expected to see results showing 2012 similar to 2003, especially considering the overall coverage of Iran's nuclear ambitions, and due the fear that proliferation evokes in citizens and bureaucracies around the world. I looked for dominant frames being driven by the administration and worldwide links of the stories themselves. Given the significant decline in acceptance of the presidential frame the possibility seemed greater that there would be additional sources outside of the government to provide increased discourse. In addition, I was looking to see if the current administration is linking Iran to the War on Terror.

It is worth noting that while my analysis of the timeframe is substantive within *The Washington Post* during the periods identified, it is by no means a definitive conclusion of overall media representation at the time. Nor does this study take into account the variety of possible divergent interactions that could occur if looking at a larger selection of media sources. The scale of this analysis severely limits the range of possible conclusions, but does provide for a singular historical comparison of how *The Washington Post* covered both Iraq and Iran. This can assist in ascertaining if the U.S. has really "put it all on the table."

The Data

In this study I used content analysis to examine the tone of coverage in *The Washington Post* concerning Iran for one week and quantitative analysis for one month in 2012 (Month: February; Week: 12-18).³¹ I also looked at the key subject areas including the regions, and types of news linked with Iran e.g., economy, health care, and foreign policy to better understand what issues are linked with the reporting. In addition, I looked at the sources utilized to better understand the driving force behind the discussion. In performing the analysis I attempted to emulate Farnsworth and Lichter's research methods for classifying news reports objectively, as described in "Presidents in War and Peace: Covering Military and Foreign Policy." They state:

The goal is to produce reliable measures of program content and that other investigators who apply similar procedures to the same material should obtain similar results, although their interpretations of those results may differ. Clear rules and standards are set for identifying, measuring, and classifying each news story.³²

My analysis is based on the news story itself and the content contained within. Although

different from the studies conducted by Farnsworth and Lichter, which were based on the time consuming process of sentence-by-sentence analysis of televised news stories, I applied a similar method for a line-by-line analysis of the respective stories within the aforementioned periods of *The Washington Post*, which allowed me to emulate their methods, rather than simply making a personnel judgment call of the entire story. While my overall scale and scope was limited, I believe this produced an overview of the coverage of Iraq and Iran, and allowed me to link sources and understand the tone of coverage.

The Results

Analysis of the 2012 news stories involving Iran compared to those of 2003 involving Iraq, suggest that while there is a significant amount of coverage dedicated to Iran, it does not appear that the discussion is the same. As shown in Table 1, during the month of February (2012) *The Washington Post* covered 126 stories on Iran, and 32 stories over the second week of the month (February 12-18). That month/week timeframe, when compared with the same month/week timeframe of 2003, shows a dramatic difference in the quantity of coverage. Comparing the number of times Iran and Iraq is mentioned is striking: the 756 stories about Iraq in February 2003 and 191 during the second week of the month, is almost four times the amount mentioning Iran in 2012. (February 9-15).³³ The data shows the significant divergence in coverage; Iran in 2012 by no means comes close to the amount of coverage dedicated to Iraq during the same period in 2003. The value of the quantitative analysis is to show the relative focus of each administration

Table1: Amount of Coverage of Iraq and Iran, *The Washington Post* 2003 & 2012

<i>The Washington Post</i>	Iran (2012)	Iraq (2003)
Month	126 (20%)	756 (80%)
Week	32 (17%)	191 (83%)

The next level of analysis I performed was designed to go deeper into the stories and identify regional associations mentioned in connection with each state. These data, as shown in Table 2 and 3, are equally as telling. While coverage of Iran is regionally based, and overwhelmingly linked to states within the Middle East, the coverage of Iraq has worldwide associations. The global reach of the coverage in 2003 is likely attributed to the Bush administration's ability to develop a salient frame. They were able to use the news cycles to create support and deny the ability of another congruent frame to form; the Bush administration wanted to go into Iraq, and made sure there was limited discourse to deter their ambitions.³⁴

Table2: Regional linked associations with Iraq, *The Washington Post* 2003

Region	North America	Middle East	Asia	Europe
Amount	717	389	362	140

Table3: Regional linked associations with Iran, *The Washington Post* 2012

Region	North America	Middle East	Asia	Europe
Amount	82	132	14	11

The volume of coverage in 2003, paired with global associations, shows that while Bush did in fact "put it all on the table"—coverage was typically supported by government sources, showing the high level of bureaucratic influence—Obama is taking a different approach. The lack of global links in 2012 shows that the Obama administration framing of the Iran issue is not the same as the dominant frames developed by the Bush administration, where Iraq was linked directly to 9/11 and indirectly to the axis powers of World War II. Conversely, Iran has not received the same attempts to create a dominant frame. The current situation may be as Robert Entman details, one where when there is not a dominant frame, accepted by the populace, thus the elite—media, senators, congressmen, academics—feel free to argue the issue.³⁵

My analysis on the tone of the coverage shows clear divides between the Iraq (2003) and Iran (2012). These data, as shown in Table 4, represent the percent positive of the total coverage regarding each state. Iraq is again notably different than Iran, where Iraq appears to have dominated coverage, not just in volume and distribution, but also the positive tone—based on the positive support for a US led invasion of Iraq— it received in the buildup of the 2003 invasion. Conversely, the negative coverage of Iran does not reflect upon the White House, but rather is due to an increase in sources outside of the government with varying opinions. Overall, coverage of Iraq was 62% positive, as compared to 33% positive for Iran. Coverage of Iraq dominated *The Washington Post* in 2003, but Iran failed to be more than an afterthought. The 62% positive coverage of Iraq suggests direct framing from the Bush administration, particularly when compared to the percent positive coverage of Iran, and the lack of dominant keyword associations as shown in Table 5.³⁶

Table4: Tone of the coverage of Iraq and Iran, *The Washington Post* 2003 & 2012

<i>The Washington Post</i>	Iran (2012)	Iraq (2003)
Percent Positive	33%	62%

When comparing the keywords associated with the states within their respective timeframes it is worth noting the different types of word associations across the top 10. The keyword analysis further supports the conclusion that the Obama administration is staying far away from this issue, as neither the White House nor Obama is on the list—unlike the Bush administration of 2003.

Table5: Top 10 Keywords; Iraq and Iran, *The Washington Post* 2003 & 2012

Iran (2012)	Iraq (2003)
International Relations	United States

Iran (2012)	Iraq (2003)
Weapons Programs	Security Council
Acts of Terror	United Nations
United Nations	Bush
Armed Forces	North Korea
Nuclear Weapons	White House
National President	Saddam
UN Security Council	Tax Cuts
Middle East	Bush Administration

Ultimately, the lack of a dominant frame—relating to Iraq—flowing down from the Obama administration, and clear absence of coverage in the media, may be an indicator that while Iran's ambitions are an issue for some, they are not an issue for all. The content analysis provides a telling example of the state of international affairs. Iran is a contentious issue, but since the U.S does not appear to be on the verge of war, it is in the world's best interest to maintain open lines of communication. With an election year in 2012 the administration appears to be looking for a means of avoiding conflict, and this pause allows time for the international community to discern what is behind Iran's nuclear rationale.

Turning to identifying the source behind the coverage, and looking specifically at whether the source is associated with the administrations of the time, we see in Table 6 that coverage of Iraq was dominated by government sources and coalition partners. On the other hand, coverage of Iran shows a clear lack of framing, with limited government sources. The 46% of coverage on Iraq that was attributed to the White House and coalition partners was well above the 5% associated with Iran. Of particular importance is the shift in foreign sources—all sources outside of the U.S.—whereas 2003 had 1%, 2012 is decidedly more cosmopolitan with over 22% of the total numbers. The single most striking point is the sourcing from each conflict state within the respective time frame. In 2012 the voice of Iran dominates coverage with 26%, while Iraq made up less than 1% of the total voice. The lack of harsh rhetoric, absence of administration framing, and diverse sources fits the Obama administration's proposed policy of multilateral engagement.

Table6: Source of the coverage, Iraq and Iran, *The Washington Post* 2003 & 2012

<i>The Washington Post</i>	Iran (2012)	Iraq (2003)
White House	5%	46%
Congress / Senate	—	13%
Other US Government (state, city, agency)	11%	12%

<i>The Washington Post</i>	Iran (2012)	Iraq (2003)
Unnamed US Government Sources	8%	5%
Non-government	12%	21%
Foreign (conflict state)	26%	1%
Foreign	22%	1%
Israel	16%	—

Conclusion

When comparing coverage of Iraq and Iran, in *The Washington Post*, a consistent pattern emerges: though the discourse is diverse and rhetorical the U.S. does not appear to be on the warpath. Iraq dominated coverage prior to the invasion and was an integral part of the Bush administration's war on terror, but Iran hardly registers as anything more than a regional disturbance at this time in 2012. This variation between Iraq and Iran is consistent with the hypothesis that the Iraq invasion was driven by the administration and that Obama is looking to avoid another conflict. With the relative absence of coverage on Iran, the idea that this president is on the warpath is difficult to support.

When I looked at specific subject areas and regional connections, my expectation of finding Iran to be of global importance and that the U.S. was beating the drums of war was simply not correct. In part, I believe this is due to a calculated avoidance by the Obama administration; though as discussed earlier may be counterproductive during an election year. One key point identified was the lack of foreign source contributions leading up to the 2003 invasion—almost as if the idea of unilateral engagement applied to the media as well—the tone and quantity of coverage in 2012 is drastically different and makes for a clear salient counterpoint to those who feel the U.S. is back on the warpath.

Further conceptual refinement of this idea may show if the same results applied across all news agencies. Perhaps this comparison could be performed on a broader scale, looking at all American conflicts, and a line of inquiry beyond the reach of my data might provide a scientific method for predicting when democratic states are on the warpath. These issues suggest subsequent areas of inquiry that I am interested in further exploring and possibly defining the warpath of a free press democracy.

Notes

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