

1 **Constructing the Enemy:**
2 **War, Words, and the Press-A Thematic Analysis of**
3 **Media Complicity in Early Wartime Rhetoric**
4

5 *This study investigates how wartime conditions erode the media's critical*
6 *distance from official discourse, focusing on the early phase of the War on*
7 *Terror. Drawing on Media System Dependency theory and the Propaganda*
8 *Model, it analyzes eight speeches by President George W. Bush and 112 USA*
9 *Today articles published between September 11 and October 12, 2001.*
10 *Thematic analysis reveals how media coverage mirrored presidential rhetoric,*
11 *reproducing themes such as moral absolutism, civilizational binaries,*
12 *dehumanization, and retributive justice. The findings suggest that in moments*
13 *of national crisis, heightened public reliance on the press, combined with*
14 *structural constraints, facilitates media alignment with official discourse. This*
15 *convergence highlights the vulnerability of journalistic autonomy in times of*
16 *war.*

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18
19 **Introduction**
20

21 In times national crisis, public reliance on mass media intensifies as
22 individuals seek to make sense of rapidly evolving events, assess risks, and
23 understand the implications for their lives and communities. Media System
24 Dependency (MSD) theory, developed by Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976),
25 provides a framework for understanding this heightened reliance, positing that
26 media exert greater influence during periods of social disruption when traditional
27 interpersonal or institutional sources of information are insufficient. In such
28 contexts, the media become not only conduits of news but also central architects
29 of public understanding, shaping the meanings attached to conflict, security, and
30 identity.

31 However, media institutions are neither independent of nor insulated from
32 the broader political, economic, and ideological systems in which they operate.
33 On the contrary, as Herman and Chomsky (1988/2008) argue in their Propaganda
34 Model, the media operate under powerful structural constraints—most notably,
35 concentrated ownership, dependence on advertising revenue, reliance on official
36 sources, disciplinary flak, and dominant ideological frameworks. These
37 constraints systematically narrow the range of perspectives that can be publicly
38 articulated, often aligning journalistic output with the priorities of political and
39 economic elites. Moments of national crisis tend to intensify these dynamics,
40 further consolidating media alignment with dominant interests and curtailing
41 critical scrutiny.

42 The democratic theory positions the press as a vital check on institutional
43 power in liberal democracies. Under normal circumstances and in some
44 emergencies—such as natural disasters or economic recessions—news media
45 may be able to perform its democratic function by retaining their critical posture
46 to a degree and continue to interrogate official narratives. War, as study will

1 demonstrate, presents a distinct case. War cultivates an atmosphere where
2 journalistic independence and public debate are subordinated to the perceived
3 need for national unity. It creates conditions where dissent can be construed as
4 disloyalty, and places unique pressure on journalists to demonstrate solidarity
5 rather than encouraging critique. Consequently, under wartime conditions—
6 precisely when public dependence on media reaches its peak— the media’s
7 critical distance from power often diminishes.

8 This essay advances the argument that the convergence of heightened
9 audience dependency and structural media constraints during wartime enables
10 the press to operate as a powerful instrument of consent. In such contexts, news
11 organizations often internalize or mirror official discourse, legitimating
12 government’s perspectives and policies. Focusing on the War on Terror and its
13 coverage in a national newspaper (*USA Today*), this study examines how the
14 national crisis precipitated by the 9/11 attacks facilitated a narrowing of the
15 press’ critical distance from government narratives, resulting in news stories that
16 frequently echoed official rhetoric. Far from serving as neutral arbiters, the press
17 functioned as conduits of state discourse and ideology, shaping public perception
18 of both the conflict and its designated enemy.

21 **Media System Dependency Theory and Wartime Crises**

22
23 Media System Dependency Theory posits that during periods of severe
24 social disruption, individuals experience heightened informational and
25 psychological needs—particularly for sense-making, guidance, and reassurance.
26 In such contexts, dependency on news media intensifies, as mass media are
27 uniquely positioned to meet these needs through rapid dissemination of
28 information and privileged access to institutional and expert sources (DeFleur &
29 Ball-Rokeach, 1989).

30 Existing research on media dependency has primarily examined the degree
31 of media reliance, its psychological and behavioral effects, and how these
32 dynamics differ across media platforms. However, because large-scale national
33 crises are both infrequent and complex, much of the empirical work in this area
34 has focused on more localized, community-level disruptions.

35 Research on MSD has focused on three primary dependency goals:
36 understanding, orientation, and play (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989; Loges,
37 1994; Morton & Duck, 2000). Understanding is aimed at gaining knowledge that
38 helps individuals make sense of themselves and the unfolding crises; orientation
39 is about finding cues to guide behavior and choices; and play includes activities
40 that offer distraction, enjoyment, stress relief, and connection to cultural
41 experiences. While each goal plays a role, evidence suggests that in times of
42 crises, people tend to depend most on media for comprehension and guidance.

43 Empirical studies of local crises—such as natural disasters and public
44 emergencies—have shown that different media platforms serve distinct
45 informational and psychological needs. During community-level disruptions,
46 television use typically increases as individuals seek to interpret their

1 environment and make sense of personal experiences (Hirschburg, Dillman, &
2 Ball-Rokeach, 1986). Radio, by contrast, becomes more central for fulfilling
3 practical needs, such as receiving safety updates and locating resources (Ball-
4 Rokeach et al., 1999; Loges, 1994). Perceived threat levels have also been found
5 to heighten reliance on newspapers and television, particularly for cognitive and
6 social orientation (Loges, 1994). Additional research further links increased
7 newspaper readership with heightened needs for both self-understanding and
8 social understanding (Loges & Ball-Rokeach, 1993).

9 Research within the Media System Dependency (MSD) framework also
10 indicates that media reliance is not uniform but shaped by a range of individual
11 and contextual factors. Among these, perceived threat consistently stands out as
12 a strong predictor of increased media dependency, even when demographic
13 variables are controlled (Ball-Rokeach, 1985; Loges, 1994). Other factors, such
14 as community identification and perceived social cohesion, have also been found
15 to influence media use—particularly increasing reliance on radio during natural
16 disasters (Hindman & Coyle, 1999). Collectively, these findings highlight how
17 media dependency intensifies under conditions of uncertainty, fear, and the
18 search for shared meaning.

19 While much of the empirical literature on MSD has focused on localized
20 crises such as floods, earthquakes, or public emergencies, the theory's
21 explanatory power becomes especially pronounced in the context of war. War
22 represents a uniquely disruptive form of crisis—one that not only magnifies
23 uncertainty and perceived threat but also elevates the symbolic and political
24 significance of information itself. Unlike natural disasters, which are often
25 temporally and spatially contained, war implicates broader questions of national
26 identity, state legitimacy, and moral order. As a result, it generates a particularly
27 acute form of media dependency, wherein the public turns to mass media to
28 interpret complex geopolitical developments, absorb state-sanctioned narratives,
29 and navigate rapidly shifting sociopolitical landscapes. It is under these
30 conditions—when the need for orientation and reassurance is most intense—that
31 media institutions exert their greatest ideological influence.

32 33 34 **Propaganda Model: Herman and Chomsky**

35
36 The Propaganda Model (PM) developed by Herman and Chomsky's (1988/
37 2008) helps explain the above dynamic. The model remains a foundational
38 framework for understanding how structural forces shape the operations and
39 outputs of mainstream media, particularly in liberal-democratic societies. At its
40 core, the model challenges the idealized view of the press as an independent
41 watchdog tasked with informing a democratic public. Instead, Herman and
42 Chomsky (1998/2008) argue that media institutions function within a
43 constrained economic and political environment that privileges elite interests,
44 ultimately serving to manufacture consent for prevailing power structures.

45 The PM identifies five interlocking “filters” that systematically condition
46 news content: media ownership, advertising dependence, sourcing, flak, and

1 dominant ideology (Herman & Chomsky, 1998/2008). These filters do not
2 operate through overt censorship or direct state control, but through market-
3 based and institutional logics that subtly and persistently shape what gets
4 reported, how, and by whom. As Kristin Comeforo (2010) notes, this results in a
5 media system where “freedom of expression is both bounded by, and reserved
6 for, the elite interests of capital” (p. 220).

7 The first two filters—concentrated ownership and advertising
8 dependence—reflect the structural integration of media into the market system.
9 Deregulation, cross-ownership, and media consolidation have allowed a small
10 number of transnational corporations to dominate global content production and
11 distribution (Comeforo, 2010; Bagdikian, 2004; Herman & McChesney, 1997).
12 These corporations share overlapping interests not only with one another, but
13 also with the state, which influences their profitability through regulatory policy.
14 As a result, content that threatens political or corporate power is marginalized,
15 while narratives favorable to elite consensus are amplified.

16 The third filter, “sourcing,” further reinforces this alignment. News
17 organizations, driven by profit imperatives, minimize costs by relying on
18 “official” sources who are readily accessible and presumed credible. This
19 structural reliance privileges governmental and corporate voices and sidelines
20 alternative or oppositional perspectives. According to Comeforo (2010), this
21 process enables powerful actors to “manage” media narratives and manipulate
22 them “into following a special agenda and framework” (Herman & Chomsky,
23 1998/2008, p. 21).

24 The final two filters—flak and dominant ideology—function as disciplinary
25 mechanisms. Flak refers to the negative consequences media outlets face when
26 they challenge dominant power structures, including threats to advertising
27 revenue and reputational attacks by corporate-funded watchdog groups such as
28 Accuracy in Media and Freedom House (Comeforo, 2010). Meanwhile,
29 dominant ideological currents—such as Cold War anti-communism in earlier
30 eras, or contemporary discourses around national security and terrorism—
31 establish the boundaries of legitimate discourse. These ideological filters help
32 “mobilize the populace against an enemy,” often using ambiguous or fear-laden
33 terms to delegitimize dissent (Herman & Chomsky, 2008, p. 27).

34 Importantly, Herman and Chomsky (1998/2008) do not suggest a top-down
35 conspiracy but rather highlight how media conformity to elite narratives emerges
36 naturally from structural incentives. The result is a media system that, despite
37 formal press freedoms, systematically reproduces the perspectives of those in
38 power.

39 While the PM has drawn considerable criticism—particularly for
40 privileging structural forces over journalistic agency—its relevance becomes
41 especially clear in the context of war. Scholars such as Sparks (2007) and Boyd-
42 Barrett (2004) contend that the model overlooks the capacity of journalists to
43 challenge institutional pressures or act independently. Sparks (2007) argues that
44 the model is “blind to some of the important ways in which the dictates of the
45 model are contested by journalists themselves” (p. 80), while Boyd-Barrett
46 (2004), referencing the Church and Pike Committee findings, suggests that the

1 model underplays direct state manipulation, such as CIA infiltration of media
2 organizations.

3 The emergence of digital and independent media has also raised questions
4 about the model's continued applicability. Though alternative platforms may
5 offer space for oppositional voices, they remain shaped by structural constraints
6 such as algorithmic curation, monetization pressures, and state surveillance
7 (Comeforo, 2010). These forces often replicate the same systemic patterns the
8 model critiques.

9 Yet it is during wartime that the explanatory power of the Propaganda Model
10 becomes most apparent. As this study's findings will demonstrate, the practice
11 of sourcing is especially central to understanding how the media operate under
12 such conditions. In times of war, media reliance on official sources intensifies in
13 parallel with the public's growing dependence on the press. As audience needs
14 for information, reassurance, and coherence increase, news organizations tend to
15 amplify official narratives, marginalize dissenting voices, and collapse complex
16 geopolitical realities into simplified moral binaries. As other scholars have
17 observed, mainstream war reporting frequently reinforces oppositional
18 framings—good versus evil, us versus them—while omitting historical context,
19 peace-building efforts, and alternative perspectives (Galtung, 1990). In such
20 moments, the media's structural embeddedness within existing power relations
21 and its privileged access to political elites become more than a theoretical
22 concern; they operate as mechanisms of consent, legitimizing state narratives,
23 perspectives, and policies.

24 25 26 **Method**

27
28 This study explores how wartime conditions contribute to the erosion of the
29 media's critical distance from official power by examining the convergence
30 between presidential rhetoric and mainstream news coverage during the early
31 phase of the War on Terror. Specifically, it investigates how *USA Today*, a widely
32 circulated national newspaper designed to appeal to a broad, general-interest
33 readership, absorbed, reflected, and at times reinforced the discursive boundaries
34 established by state actors—particularly those articulated by President George
35 W. Bush in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks.

36 The research proceeds in two stages, both guided by thematic analysis. In
37 the first stage, the study analyzes eight major public statements delivered by
38 President Bush between September 11 and October 7, 2001. These include: 1)
39 Remarks at Emma Booker Elementary School (September 11); 2) Address to the
40 Nation from the Oval Office (September 11); 3) Remarks with the National
41 Security Team (September 12); 4) Remarks on the National Day of Prayer and
42 Remembrance (September 13); 5) Radio Address to the Nation (September 15);
43 6) Remarks upon Arrival on the South Lawn (September 16); 7) Address to a
44 Joint Session of Congress and the American People (September 20); 8) Address
45 to the Nation from the Treaty Room (October 7). These speeches were retrieved
46 from the official White House archives available online and analyzed to identify

1 the dominant themes used to frame the War on Terror and construct the figure of
2 the enemy.

3 In the second stage, the study applies a parallel thematic analysis to *USA*
4 *Today's* news coverage during the same period. A total of 115 articles published
5 between September 11 and October 12, 2001 were retrieved from the ProQuest
6 U.S. Newsstream database using the keywords “World Trade Center,” “attack,”
7 and “terror.” After removing duplicates, 112 unique articles were included in the
8 final dataset.

9 The articles and speeches were cleaned, organized, and imported into NVivo
10 14 qualitative analysis software. Two coders conducted iterative, line-by-line
11 coding of the dataset to identify recurring patterns. The coding categories
12 emerged inductively from close reading, with emphasis on how the language
13 framed the conflict, articulated the U.S. response, and constructed the image of
14 the enemy. The analysis examined whether and how the news coverage echoed,
15 reproduced, or internalized the themes identified in Bush's speeches.

17 18 **Findings**

19 20 *The war and enemy in president's speeches*

21
22 In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, President Bush's rhetoric
23 undertook the urgent task of constructing a coherent and morally charged enemy
24 figure. This enemy was not merely a geopolitical adversary but an ontological
25 threat: “the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century” who
26 followed “the path of fascism, and Nazism, and totalitarianism” and would
27 ultimately end up “in history's unmarked grave of discarded lies” (Bush, 2001,
28 September 20). Through such framing, Bush established a symbolic and
29 metaphysical dichotomy that positioned the enemy outside the realm of political
30 contestation.

31 The thematic analysis of Bush's speeches revealed a discursive structure
32 anchored in militarized resolve, moral absolutism, and emotional appeal. Among
33 the most prominent themes was militarization and national security, with
34 frequent references to “campaigns,” “conflicts,” “operations,” and “missions”
35 that framed the War on Terror as a long-term global struggle requiring decisive
36 action. This militarized framing was reinforced by calls for national unity and
37 perseverance, with the president urging Americans to remain united, resolute,
38 and unwavering in the face of adversity (Appendix F1).

39 This rhetoric was steeped in binary oppositions: good versus evil,
40 civilization versus barbarism, freedom versus tyranny. Terms like “evil-doers”
41 and repeated references to “evil” essentialized the enemy, rendering them
42 irredeemable and unworthy of negotiation. In his address to the nation on the
43 evening of September 11, Bush stated: “Today, our nation saw evil, the very
44 worst of human nature” (Bush, 2001, September 11). As Mills-Knutsen (2011)
45 argued, the use of “evil” in his speeches was not merely descriptive but
46 functioned as a theological and apocalyptic trope that displaces rational

1 engagement in favor of righteous military response. Bush reinforced this with
2 proclamations such as, “We will rid the world of the evil-doers,” elevating
3 military action to a moral imperative (Bush, 2001, September 16). This moral
4 absolutism enabled a shift from justice to retribution. As Robert Ivie (2007) has
5 noted, Bush's rhetorical frame substituted pragmatic foreign policy discourse
6 with the ritual language of redemption. He portrayed America as an agent of
7 divine justice on a mission to cleanse the world. In his address on September 20,
8 Bush declared, “Our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these
9 attacks and rid the world of evil.”

10 The emotional tenor of Bush’s speeches intensified the public’s affective
11 investment in the unfolding conflict. Grief, fear, and anger were channeled
12 through rhetorical strategies that positioned the United States as both victim and
13 redeemer. Bush’s invocation of Psalm 23 during the National Cathedral
14 memorial service sacralized national grief, transforming mourning into a
15 spiritual mandate for war: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow
16 of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me” (Bush, 2001, September 14). He
17 further declared, “Our nation is deeply grateful to the men and women of our
18 military, who are standing watch for freedom in this hour of danger.” As
19 Bostdorff (2003) argues, such rhetorical moves functioned as a form of
20 “covenant renewal,” binding national trauma to a redemptive mission and
21 framing the military response as both divinely sanctioned and morally necessary.

22 Bush’s discourse also engaged in strategic dehumanization. The Taliban
23 were described as “barbaric criminals who profane a great religion,” while
24 terrorists were labeled “traitors to their own faith” (Bush, 2001, October 7). This
25 rhetorical move allowed Bush to isolate radical actors while preserving a
26 normative distinction between Islam and terrorism. In doing so, he projected an
27 image of religious tolerance that simultaneously obscured the broader
28 civilizational binaries embedded in the discourse.

29 Bush’s speeches also employed fear to construct and reinforce rhetorical
30 unity. This fear was amplified through metaphors that emphasized the enemy’s
31 shadowy omnipresence. “This is an enemy who preys on innocent and
32 unsuspecting people... But it won't be able to hide forever,” Bush warned
33 (September 12, 2001). Such imagery cultivated a perpetual state of alertness,
34 contributing to the formation of a securitized public sphere in which dissent
35 could easily be framed as disloyalty (Lee, 2017). Emotional binaries further
36 polarized the discourse: “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists”
37 (Bush, 2001, September 20). As Ivie (1980) and Galtung (1990) have shown,
38 such rhetorical constructions collapse political nuance into moral dualism—a
39 pattern common to wartime justifications.

40 Repetition of mythic language, such as “we will not tire, we will not falter,
41 and we will not fail” (Bush, 2001, September 20), reinforced an ethos of
42 righteous perseverance. Bush also emphasized a redemptive arc: “This will be a
43 monumental struggle of good versus evil. But good will prevail” (Bush, 2001,
44 October 7). This rhetoric of resolve parallels what Mills-Knutsen (2011)
45 describes as the apocalyptic logic of violence: the enemy must be eradicated not
46 merely for security, but as a sacred act of purgation. Smith (2005) similarly

1 argues that Bush's post-9/11 rhetoric constituted an “enthymeme of evil” in
2 which “evil” was not merely invoked but functioned as an unstated premise
3 grounding all justifications for war (p. 33).

4 Taken together, these rhetorical strategies constructed a war that appeared
5 inevitable and an enemy who was ontologically evil, existentially threatening,
6 and morally irredeemable.

7 8 *The war and the enemy in the news articles*

9
10 The key themes and patterns in *USA Today*'s coverage in the immediate
11 aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks reveal the dominant frames that
12 shaped public perceptions of the enemy, the character of the conflict, and the
13 legitimacy of the U.S. response. The findings further demonstrate how the
14 news media mirrored, amplified, and at times internalized the Bush
15 administration's official rhetoric, thereby contributing to the construction of a
16 morally charged, dehumanized, and symbolically saturated image of the enemy
17 (Appendix, 2)

18 19 *Establishing the crisis: Fear, shock, and national vulnerability*

20
21 The emotional architecture of *USA Today*'s post-9/11 coverage was built on
22 the language of shock, dread, and uncertainty. These affective frames gave the
23 crisis its urgency and justified the extraordinary measures that followed.

24 Fear was not simply reported—it was enacted in the narrative. In the days
25 following the attacks, the newspaper ran a series of reports under the byline
26 “Under Attack: Terror Brought Home,” immersing readers in the raw immediacy
27 of unfolding trauma. Eyewitness accounts contributed to the visceral tone. “It
28 was like the building had been hit by an asteroid,” one witness recalled. “Fire
29 was shooting out of the side. . . . I saw at least 15 people jump out of the first
30 building. Two were holding hands. I looked away. I couldn't take it anymore”
31 (Willing & Drinkard, 2001, p. A.03). The emotional impact was not limited to
32 civilians. “The televised images were horrific and the shock and fear were
33 palpable, even on President Bush's face,” reported Judy Keen in the special
34 edition published on September 12, 2001 (p. A.03).

35 In the days that followed, articles described workplaces evacuated, city
36 centers turned into ghost towns, and ordinary citizens confronting the fragility
37 of daily life, as New Yorkers were said to be “gripped by fear,” bracing for
38 another possible attack. “Eight million panicked New Yorkers sought to flee the
39 horror of the World Trade Center tragedy Tuesday,” read one headline
40 (McCarthy, September 12, 2001, p. B.04). The atmosphere of apprehension
41 persisted across reports, many of which emphasized that the attacks were
42 followed by widespread fear and uncertainty over where and when terror might
43 strike next. “America on alert: Washington making preparations,” declared one
44 article under the headline “National Nightmare Keeps Many on Edge:
45 Government Steps Up Security Amid Continued Threats” (Drinkard, September
46 14, 2001, p. A.05). Another article observed, “Tuesday's deadly terror attacks are

1 taking a psychological toll as the entire USA deals with fear, grief and anxiety”
2 (Brady, 2001, p. B.13). The fear was real, but it also functioned rhetorically,
3 laying the groundwork for a moral binary and framing the national response as
4 a matter of righteous, spiritual, and civilizational resolve.

5
6 *Framing the war: A cosmic struggle between good and evil*
7

8 From the outset, the official rhetoric framed the attacks not as a political
9 conflict, but as a cosmic struggle—a clash between light and darkness, freedom
10 and tyranny, civilization and barbarism. USA Today adopted this binary through
11 the frequent citation of officials whose language was saturated with moral
12 absolutism and Manichean contrasts.

13 The coverage relied especially heavily on President Bush’s statements and
14 national addresses to characterize the events. His words were often reproduced
15 uncritically and without commentary. “Freedom itself was attacked this morning
16 by a faceless coward,” Bush declared upon landing at Barksdale Air Force Base
17 (Keen, September 12, 2001, p. A03). That evening, in a nationally televised
18 address, he invoked Psalm 23: “Even though I walk through the valley of the
19 shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me” (Willing & Richard,
20 September 12, 2001, p. A03).

21 News articles echoed this spiritual and civilizational framing. Under the
22 headline “A day that changes America’s view of terror,” one article reflected that
23 “when the twin towers of the Trade Center crumpled to the ground like so much
24 dust, at a cost of countless lives, something less tangible was lost as well—a
25 uniquely American sense of freedom and security” (USA TODAY Staff,
26 September 12, 2001, p. A18). In another report, Bush insisted, “This was an
27 attack on freedom. And we’re going to define it as such and we’re going to go
28 after it and we’re not going to lose focus” (Keen, September 14, 2001, p. A04).

29 The moral dichotomy was further sharpened in Bush’s September 20
30 address to Congress, where he proclaimed, “Freedom and fear, justice and
31 cruelty, have always been at war.” He promised that “we will rid the world of
32 evildoers” (Drinkard, September 17, 2001, p. A01). His rhetoric positioned the
33 American public as morally resolute: “We are a country awakened to danger and
34 called to defend freedom” (McQuillan, September 21, 2001, p. A03), and “We
35 will not be terrorized so that our hearts are hardened... We are too great a nation
36 to allow the evildoers to affect our soul and our spirit” (Drinkard, September 19,
37 2001, p. A01).

38 These moral pairings elevated the war beyond politics—it became a sacred
39 duty. Bush’s famous declaration, “Either you are with us, or you are with the
40 terrorists,” found its journalistic echo in headlines and commentary that erased
41 nuance and demanded allegiance. In this discursive environment, military action
42 became not only legitimate but inevitable.

43
44

1 *The enemy: Criminal and Moral Framing*

2
3 The most frequent descriptors used to characterize the attackers were
4 “terrorist” (883 uses), “Bin Laden” (745), and “Taliban” (484), indicating that
5 the official discourse of war on terror has found a reflection in the news. These
6 descriptors were not used in isolation but were surrounded by morally charged
7 labels such as “evil,” “evildoer,” and “thug.” This dual framing cast the enemy
8 as both legally culpable and morally reprehensible, aligning with the
9 administration's narrative of justice and righteous retaliation.

10 “As the enormity of the toll of Tuesday's terrorist attack on New York and
11 Washington became clearer, President Bush said the onslaught had launched ‘a
12 monumental struggle of good vs. evil,’” reported one article (Drinkard,
13 September 13, 2001, p. A03). Another piece noted that “he has become the face
14 of evil to the American people,” referring to Osama bin Laden (Moniz,
15 September 20, 2001, p. A02). A front-page editorial reinforced this framing,
16 asserting that the nation would not rest until “those who committed this evil act
17 are brought to justice” (USA TODAY Editorial Board, September 13, 2001, p.
18 A01).

19 The recurrence of the word “evil” across news and editorial content
20 positioned the attacks not merely as criminal acts requiring legal remedy but as
21 moral transgressions demanding righteous retribution. The convergence of legal
22 and moral vocabularies—justice and evil—produced a discursive framework in
23 which war became the logical and ethically sanctioned response against an
24 irredeemable evil.

25
26 *Dehumanizing Language*

27
28 Although used less frequently than criminal labels, dehumanizing metaphors
29 played a significant rhetorical role in shaping the public's understanding of the
30 enemy. Terms such as “hunt,” “trap,” “track,” “cave,” and “lair” invoked a
31 predator-prey dynamic that positioned the terrorists not as political actors but as
32 subhuman beings to be pursued and eliminated. “Make no mistake—the United
33 States will hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts,”
34 Bush was reported saying on the day of the attacks (Willing & Drinkard,
35 September 12, 2001, p. A01). The metaphor was echoed in headlines as “Special
36 forces hunt for bin Laden” (USA TODAY Staff, September 28, 2001, p. A01)
37 and “FBI hunts conspirators” reinforcing a vision of justice rendered through
38 relentless pursuit (Johnson & Morrison, September 14, 2001, p. A01). Articles
39 announced that the administration launched a “world-wide hunt for Bin-laden”
40 (Cox, October 1, 2001).

41 Descriptions of the enemy's physical concealment further accentuated their
42 dehumanization. They were said to be “hiding” in remote “caves” (Slavin,
43 September 12, 2001, p. A05), and moving through the terrain “like rats” (Ritter,
44 September 20, 2001, p. A02). One physician, quoted in a moment of emotional
45 candor, captured the sentiment starkly: “The only way to rid the world of terror

1 is to hunt down these animals before they destroy us all” (Kalman, September
2 13, 2001, p. A09).

3 These frames stripped the enemy of political identity and recast them as
4 prey-like targets. As one article described it, “Elite U.S. forces” were pursuing
5 “their prey” across an inhospitable landscape and “waging war in shadows”
6 (Stone, September 18, 2001, p. A07). Such language normalized the logic of
7 elimination, preparing the public to accept war not only as strategic necessity but
8 as a morally justified response.
9

10 **Civilizational Binaries and Symbolic Contrasts**

11
12 The analysis uncovered more than 1,000 instances of symbolic or
13 civilizational contrasts in *USA Today*’s post-9/11 coverage (Appendix, 2). Terms
14 such as “freedom,” “justice,” “civilized,” and “values” routinely appeared in
15 opposition to descriptors like “barbarism,” “chaos,” and “darkness.” These
16 binaries often surfaced in the quoted remarks of government officials and in the
17 voices of ordinary citizens interviewed by reporters “We’re facing a new kind of
18 enemy—somebody so barbaric that they would fly airplanes into buildings full
19 of innocent people,” Bush was quoted saying, “We’ve never seen this kind of
20 evil before. But the evildoers have never seen the American people in action
21 before either, and they’re about to find out.” He continued, “We’re a nation of
22 resolve. We’re a nation that can’t be cowed by evildoers. . . . We will rid the world
23 of the evildoers. We will call together freedom-loving people to fight terrorism”
24 (Keen, September 17, 2001, p. A10). Speaking before the United Nations, New
25 York Mayor Rudy Giuliani echoed the same logic: “Look at that destruction, that
26 massive, senseless cruel loss of human life,” he urged. “There is no room for
27 neutrality on the issue of terrorism. You’re either with civilization or with
28 terrorists” (Drinkard, October 2, 2001, p. A01). Such framing was not limited to
29 political leadership. A headline proclaimed, “We are all on the front line now—
30 where civilization confronts barbarism” (Freedman, September 13, 2001, p.
31 A13).

32 These discursive pairings reflected a polarized worldview—one that
33 distilled a complex political crisis into a stark moral opposites. This pattern was
34 not only thematic but quantifiable (Appendix 2) These binary descriptors
35 appeared with striking frequency across the dataset, reinforcing the symbolic
36 polarity that underpinned the public narrative of the war.

37 Taken collectively, the findings indicated that during the early phase of the
38 U.S. War on Terror, the newspaper’s heavy reliance on official sources
39 significantly reduced its critical distance from the dominant political narrative.
40
41

42 **Discussion**

43
44 The findings outlined above underscore the extent to which *USA Today*’s
45 early coverage of the post-9/11 crisis both mirrored and reinforced the official
46 discourse. The newspaper’s framing strategies—centered on civilizational

1 binaries, moral dualism, and the dehumanization of the enemy—indicate not
2 merely a reflection of public sentiment, but an active role in constructing a
3 national narrative that legitimized war. The following discussion situates these
4 findings within relevant theoretical frameworks and examines the broader
5 implications of media complicity in the discursive production of wartime
6 consensus.

7 Media System Dependency Theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976)
8 provides a useful lens for understanding the press’s role during times of national
9 crisis. As public reliance on media intensifies in moments of uncertainty, so too
10 does the media’s capacity to shape belief systems and behavioral responses. In
11 the case of *USA Today*, heightened media dependency appears to have correlated
12 with a reduction in journalistic distance from official narratives. Rather than
13 offering critical perspectives or alternative voices, the coverage often mirrored
14 the administration’s framing of events, elevating moral clarity over political
15 complexity.

16 The official discourse’s invocation of binary oppositions and the press’s
17 uncritical acceptance of them exemplify this dynamic. In the coverage these
18 oppositions were reproduced not only through direct quotations from political
19 leaders but also through similar language attributed to civilians. In doing so, the
20 press helped embed these moral dichotomies into the cultural fabric of the
21 coverage, often without sustained critical reflection.

22 Similarly, the press also adopted the dehumanizing metaphors present in
23 official discourse. By describing the actions of local and federal forces with
24 terms like “hunting,” “tracking,” and “pursuing” their “prey,” news stories
25 contributed to a symbolic economy in which military action appeared morally
26 redemptive and necessary. This framing discouraged dissent and erased
27 complexity.

28 Crucially, this alignment between journalistic and executive discourse did
29 not emerge from direct coercion or pressure, but from institutional routines and
30 narrative conventions. The reliance on official sources, the emphasis on unity in
31 times of crisis, and the need to provide emotional closure all contributed to a
32 media climate that privileged resonance over critique. While this may have
33 served immediate public needs for coherence and reassurance, it also foreclosed
34 opportunities for political reflection and critical engagement.

35 In sum, *USA Today*’s post-9/11 coverage exemplifies how mainstream
36 media can function as a discursive partner in the production of wartime
37 consensus. By reproducing the emotional and symbolic terms of the Bush
38 administration’s rhetoric, the newspaper played an important role in shaping the
39 cultural logic of the War on Terror. These findings raise urgent questions about
40 the limits of journalistic autonomy in crisis contexts and the ethical
41 responsibilities of the press when democracy is most vulnerable.

42

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1 **Appendix 1**

2 Major Themes in President Bush’s Early Post-9/11 Speeches

Theme	Key Descriptors / Phrases
Militarization and Security	Campaign, war, conflict, mission, operation, defense, military response
National Unity and Resolve	United, we will not falter, strength, great people, unwavering, resolve, American spirit
Moral Absolutism	Evil, evildoers, righteous, justice, divine purpose, moral clarity
Fear and Omnipresent Threat	Hidden, shadows, danger, terror, lurking, enemy among us, unpredictable threat
Victimhood and Heroism	Innocent victims, sacrifice, heroes, mourning, first responders, national grief
Divine Sanction and Redemption	Prayer, Psalm 23, Lord, God bless, covenant, spiritual calling
Justice as Retribution	Bring them to justice, rid the world, punishment, they chose, vengeance
Mythic and Apocalyptic Language	Monumental struggle, good vs. evil, grave of lies, history’s judgment, good will prevail
Civilization vs. Barbarism	Barbaric, profane, uncivilized, enemies of civilization, traitors to their own faith

3

4

1 **Appendix 2**

2 The major themes used in USA Today’s post-9/11 coverage, based on
 3 descriptors and frequency analysis:

Thematic Frame	Key Descriptors Found	Interpretive Summary	Approximate Frequency
Fear as a Narrative Force	fear, panic, afraid, terrified	Fear is used to justify urgency, reinforce threat, and unite public opinion around policy.	216
“Most Wanted” Branding	most wanted, wanted terrorists	Frames conflict as law enforcement — pursuing fugitives of justice.	12
Dehumanization and Animalism	killers, beasts, inhuman, barbaric, animal, monster	Strips the enemy of political agency, encourages punitive rather than diplomatic responses.	19
Dichotomies of Civilization	freedom, evil, civilized, dark, justice, tyranny	Aligns the U.S. with civilization and portrays the enemy as a threat to order and progress.	1034
Freedom vs. Tyranny	freedom, liberty, tyranny	Moral high ground and universal appeal of U.S. action	47
Justice vs. Evil	justice, evil, evildoer	Manichean framing of the enemy as evil incarnate	123
Civilization vs. Barbarism	civilized, inhumane, killers, beasts	Enemy coded as uncivilized, justifying intervention	63
Progress vs. Backwardness	cave, mountain lair, tribal	Enemy as stagnant/primitive, U.S. as modernizing force	27
Light vs. Darkness	shadowy networks, dark threat	Conflict elevated to symbolic/mystical dimensions	33
Order vs. Chaos	chaos, stability, endless war	U.S. offers stability, enemy associated with disorder	22

4