

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY  
FOLLOWING TRAGIC EVENTS

BY

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## **ABSTRACT**

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When large-scale tragedies occur in the United States, the national identity is shaken. Immediately after the event, as well as on anniversaries of the tragedy, the media work to reconstruct that identity in their editorial pages. I analyze several sets of editorials written immediately after and on the anniversaries of three American tragedies: the Oklahoma City bombing, the September 11 attacks, and Hurricane Katrina. In this project, I argue that the media use several methods of identity reconstruction following national tragic events. The analysis demonstrates that the media reconstruct national identity by using language to bind citizens to one another, by separating “real” Americans from everyone else, by affirming American values, by reprimanding those who stray from American ideals, and by sustaining the belief in American Exceptionalism.

## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to my sweet husband, Jaron,  
and our little boy, Henry.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

On the evening of September 11, 2001, members of the United States Congress gathered together on the steps of the Capitol and spontaneously began singing “God Bless America” (“Congress vows unity,”). The same day, Wal-Mart sold 116,000 American flags, nearly 20 times more than its normal rate (“9/11: For the record,” 2002). And in the year after the terrorist attacks that occurred that day, American citizens donated approximately \$2.7 billion to charities benefiting the victims of the attacks (“9/11: 45 questions,” 2002). These events are all related to, and caused by, the same concept: national identity.

Over the last few decades, consensus has emerged that national identity is a rhetorical construction that provides “equipment for living,” a phrase Kenneth Burke used to describe literature (1974, p. 253). Using Burke’s language analogously, national identities can essentially be described as “strategies for dealing with situations” that are “typical and recurrent in a given social structure” (p. 253). In *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, Burke (p. 253) acknowledged that a better word for “strategy” might be “attitude,” and thus national identity can be summarized as the citizens’ attitude for dealing with recurring situations. National identity is a rich area of study, and therefore we now know a great deal about how collective identity is sustained and how the identity is used to serve a variety of functions. Despite the breadth and depth of national identity research, a significant gap remains in

understanding how national identity is reconstructed during a time of great crisis.

This project uses the tools of rhetorical criticism to illuminate how nations reconstruct their national identities in the face of crisis, what makes national identities so resilient, and how the media participate in identity reconstruction efforts.

When large-scale tragedies occur in the United States and the national identity is shaken, the media work to reconstruct that identity. In this project, I argue that the media use several methods of identity construction, depending on the nature of the tragic event. When a nation is struck a blow by foreign entities, the reconstruction effort focuses on binding American citizens to one another, distinguishing Americans from other people—particularly the enemy—and reaffirming their positive characteristics. An attack by a domestic source, however, calls for a different response. In these cases, the identity reconstruction effort focuses on characterizing the perpetrator as not a “real” American, therefore effectively separating him or her from regular citizens, who are described in the most glowing terms. And finally, when the nation faces a tragedy caused by natural forces, the media reaffirm the national identity by arguing that the identity of a nation resides in its citizens and not the government or other entities, and that only by returning to its values will the nation regain its standing in the eyes of its citizens, and ensure its continued existence in the future.

### **National Identity and Tragic Events**

Early national identity and collective identity research focused on the shared attributes of group members and “approached these attributes as ‘natural’ or



‘essential’ characteristics—qualities emerging from physiological traits, psychological predispositions, regional features, or the properties of structural locations” (Cerulo, 1997, p. 386). However, as Cerulo noted in her assessment of identity construction research, more recent research has argued forcefully that collective identities are socially constructed rather than intrinsic. Essentially, a social collective is an “entity molded, refabricated, and mobilized in accord with reigning cultural scripts and centers of power” (p. 387). Because national identity is a social construction, it is also a rhetorical construction, in that national identity is created through language and interaction. Bruner (2002, p. 1) argued, “national identity is incessantly negotiated through discourse” and therefore, there is “a never-ending and politically consequential rhetorical struggle over national identity.” The question of whether national identity is a social construction seems to have largely been settled, as Bruner (p. 2) noted, “almost all scholars recognize the essential role of discourse in the construction of collective identity.”

One large gap in the national identity literature regards our understanding of how a national identity is reaffirmed or reconstructed, especially after a national tragic event. Most national events are fleeting in nature, making the headlines for a day or two, but then disappearing into the ever-quickenening daily news cycle. However, occasionally, an event occurs that fundamentally shakes the foundation of the country. These events are nearly always tragic in nature, and their effects are far-reaching in both space and time. Depending on the extent of the damage—physical, psychological and economic—tragic events can cause a rupture in the identity of a

country (Foot, Warnick, & Schneider, 2005). Foote (2003, p. 10) argued that “in the aftermath of tragedies, great tensions can arise,” as it is the “traumas of nationhood” that “have given shape to the national identity.” He argued that “disasters often fragment communities,” leading to a need for reunification (p. 10).

A useful metaphor for categorizing national tragic events can be found in the language of literature, particularly the three types of conflict. Crow (1951, p. 155) noted that “The element of conflict is essential to all first-class prose fiction, and conflict may be of three kinds: man versus man, man versus nature, man versus himself.” While admittedly not gender-neutral, the types are still quite illustrative of both fictive and nonfictive narrative conflicts. The first type, *Man Versus Man*, refers to a person’s conflict with another person. He or she confronts or is confronted by the opposing person and must attempt to win the battle. The second type is *Man Versus Nature*, in which a person must manage the blows handed to him or her by much greater natural forces. And the third type, *Man Versus Himself*, refers to a person’s fight with his or her own inner demons. The person essentially must battle conflicting thoughts or destructive actions that he or she commits.

It is intriguing that these narrative conflict types directly mirror the types of tragic events that face nations. During its existence, the United States has encountered a wide variety of national tragic events, and most can be categorized as one of three distinct types. First, there are those tragic events that occur due to the workings of some external organization or force. The corresponding phrase is *Nation Versus Nation*, as the conflict is between the United States and a country or other

group of organized individuals who are not *of* the United States. Examples include the Pearl Harbor attacks committed by Japan in 1941, and the September 11, 2001, attacks by Al Qaeda operatives. This type of tragic event leads Americans to question why someone would want to threaten or hurt our country—as *Newsweek*'s Fareed Zakaria asked following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, “Why do they hate us?”

The second general category of national tragic events includes those events that occur due to the whims of Mother Nature. Hurricanes Andrew and Katrina are perfect examples of these natural, but devastating, events. The 1906 San Francisco earthquake, as well as its resulting fire, is another national tragedy that pitted America against nature. Again turning to the language used above, these tragic events can be described as *Nation Versus Nature*. This type of tragic event leads Americans to question how nature can be so powerful and what we can do to better avoid its wrath.

Then there are those tragic events that occur due to the workings of domestic organizations or individuals. Adapting the language of literature, these tragic events could be described as *Nation Versus Itself*. The most obvious example is the Civil War, in which the nation literally fought itself. However, on other occasions, one or more Americans has attacked the country in such a way as to cause great harm. The 1995 Oklahoma City bombing was committed by American citizens, as were the Columbine school shootings in 1999. The assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 was, depending on the source, committed by a single American or by a nefarious American conspiracy. This type of tragic event causes Americans to

question why other American citizens would want to do such great harm to their own country.

When tragedy strikes, whether inflicted by Americans or foreigners, by humans or by nature, questions quickly arise about how such a thing could happen in America. Immediately following the shootings on the Virginia Tech campus in spring 2007, the nation's airwaves filled with voices asking what was wrong with our culture and how something so senseless could take place in "the sweet serenity" of a college campus ("The slaughter," 2007). Editorials across the land asked questions such as these from *The Oregonian* ("Today our nation," 2007, p. B08): "Why are campus massacres almost entirely an American phenomenon?" and "What role does our culture play?" Several days after Hurricane Katrina struck shore in fall 2005, it became apparent just how awful the situation was in New Orleans and just how inadequate the government response was to the disaster. The size and nature of the tragedy left Americans questioning what most had long believed about our country: that if tragedy should strike, the government would immediately come to the rescue. As one letter to the editor said, "We are supposed to be the richest, strongest nation in the world, and to think that we can't take care of our citizens in a disaster is ridiculous" ("Country is still," 2005, p. 47). Comments such as this one demonstrate that national tragic events lead members of a nation to question the national identity, and therefore necessitates a reaffirmation of the national identity.

When tragic events occur, they have the power to shake a country's national identity to its very core, much as a personal trauma can cause one to question his or

her own personal identity. Niermeyer (2005, p. 124) argued that “traumatic life events” “are so radically incoherent with the master narrative of our lives that they cannot be emplotted or integrated into the framework of meaning that it confers.” Essentially, traumatic events have the ability to shatter a person’s beliefs about the larger world, for example, of “human or divine benevolence, justice, safety, and trust” (p. 124). Traumatic events at the national level lead to the same type of questioning of the national identity. As Foote (2003, p. 10) notes, the “traumas of nationhood” are what “have given shape to national identity.” In this project, I argue that certain tragic events threaten the identity of the nation. When the national identity is shaken, it must be symbolically reinforced or reaffirmed. This reconstruction begins almost immediately after the event, then slackens, and then is reignited on the anniversaries of the event. One primary means of reaffirming the national identity is through rituals of identity construction, both immediately following the tragedy, and then through the commemoration of anniversaries of the tragic events. The goal of this project is to explain how the media rebuild the national identity following tragic events.

### **Preview of Chapters**

#### *Chapter 2: Literature Review, Rationale and Methodology*

This chapter begins with a review of the national identity and national narrative literature. First, I define national identity and identify its prominent components, before discussing how national identities are established by members of a country. I then discuss rhetorical approaches to national identity along with the gap in the

literature regarding identity reconstruction. The second part of the chapter discusses the methodology of the project. The section begins with a justification of the selection of the case studies, followed by the rationale for studying national identity through national tragic events and their anniversaries. After justifying the selection of rhetorical texts, I close the chapter by describing and defending the narrative and thematic analysis approach used in this project.

*Chapter 3: Identity Construction Following National Tragic Events Cause by Domestic Forces—The Case of the Oklahoma City Bombing*

In the third chapter, I focus on national tragic events that have been caused by internal forces. These types of tragic events create an intense response in the country, and the identity reconstruction methods differ from those used following an external attack. As a case study, I focus on the national and local response to the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. The terrorist attack was committed by American citizens and remains the worst case of domestic terrorism in American history.

*Chapter 4: Identity Construction Following National Tragic Events Caused by External Forces—The Case of 9/11*

In the fourth chapter, I focus on the particular needs and methods of national identity reconstruction following a national tragic event that was carried out by external forces. As a case study, I examine the national response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Analyzing newspaper editorials provides an understanding of the ways in

which the citizens of the United States work to reaffirm the country's national identity.

*Chapter 5: Identity Construction Following National Tragic Events Caused by Nature—The Case of Hurricane Katrina*

The fifth chapter includes a discussion of national tragic events that cannot be blamed on people, either foreign- or American-born. Instead, these tragic events occur when what our nation has built is destroyed by water, wind, earthquake, fire or some other natural disaster. The case study for this chapter is the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina in August 2005.

*Chapter 6: Conclusions and Implications Regarding National Identity Reconstruction Following a National Tragic Event*

In the final chapter, I will review the important implications that can be gleaned from this research, as well as summarize the theoretical and practical contributions of this dissertation to the discipline.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review, Rationale and Methodology

National identity is an important and sometimes difficult-to-decipher phenomenon. The most significant decisions made by any nation—whether decisions about the internal workings of the nation or its relation to the outside world—are shaped by the national identity (Vitell, Nwachukwu, & Barnes, 1993). While the concept of national identity has been studied in political science, sociology, philosophy, critical studies, and other disciplines, much is still missing from our knowledge of the subject. In the words of M. Lane Bruner (2002, p. 1), “because characterizations of national identity have various effects on human community, the services of rhetorical critics are also required.” The tools of rhetorical criticism provide a useful method for understanding the work that a national identity does for a society, as well as the work that a society must do to support the national identity. In this section, I define national identity, identify its prominent components and societal functions, and then turn to a more general discussion of national identity and its connection to national narrative.

Before I continue, however, it is important to note that national identities and narratives are always contested, as they never completely reflect each member’s identity and personal narrative. Many argue that the concepts of national identity and nationhood are fictions, yet it is clear that the concepts have enormous power over the behavior and beliefs of the citizens of a country. Hutcheson et al. (2004, p. 29)



argued that while their research “takes as a given the argument that specification of a singular American national identity is a challenging, perhaps impossible task,” that “such a conclusion does not mean the concept of national identity is irrelevant to the ways in which politics and mass communication play out in the United States.”

Various individuals and subgroups within the United States will necessarily have their own perception of the national identity. For example, Rahn and Rudolph found a strong generational pattern in American attitudes toward national identity, noting that younger Americans are “less satisfied with U.S. democracy, less proud of the way it works, and, importantly, attribute less personal significance to their American identity” (p. 459). Hauser, on the other hand, argued that a society’s active members form what he called “publics,” which are “interdependent members of society who hold different opinions about a mutual problem and who seek to influence its resolution through discourse” (1999, p. 32). While certainly all Americans will not closely identify or agree on a national identity or national narrative, it is clear that a large percentage of the American people have a strong sense of identity as an American. Even if this identity is a fiction, it is a strongly held fiction, a point that is emphasized by how commonly ordinary people and political elites talk about what it means to be an American. For example, in a column about the 2008 presidential election, Frank Rich commented that “Americans are sick of a national identity defined by arrogant saber-rattling abroad and manipulative fear-mongering at home” (Rich, 2008). Examples such as this one demonstrate that the concept of national identity is widely used and understood in American culture.

Clearly, it is important to attempt to understand how national identity and national narrative are communicated and reaffirmed in a society, along with variations in the sense of shared identity and narrative.

The most uniformly expressed definition of national identity is that it is a group of people's "sense of self" and that it is the belief of members that the group possesses "distinct qualities as an entity that differentiates" the group from other groups (Huntington, 2004, p. 21). Hutcheson et al. (2004) defined national identity as a "constructed *and* public national self-image based on membership in a political community as well as history, myths, symbols, language, and cultural norms commonly held by members of a nation" (p. 28). Johnston (1991, p. 39) defined it as "a form of consciousness, consciousness of belonging to a nation-state that knows how to articulate its reasons for existing by invoking continuity between past and future."

Critical scholars frequently define national narrative more cynically, for example, as "the collection of myths, ideas, and narratives used by a dominant group or coalition to maintain power in a society" (Price, 1995, p. 40). Whether viewed as a positive or negative occurrence, the importance of national identity is rarely discounted. In fact, Bloom (1990) argued that a nation-state can only be sustained if the members of that nation form a psychological identification with the nation, and Rivenburgh (2000) noted that national identification must be strong so that the citizenry will suppress identification with smaller subgroups and fight for the nation when it is threatened. Cohen (1999) argued that citizenship is composed of three

primary dimensions: the legal status of a person, the participation by the person in political institutions, and the person's membership in a political entity that provides the person with a sense of identity. This third component of citizenship—this sense of identity provided by citizenship in a nation—is of the greatest interest in this project.

A notable national identity scholar, Anthony D. Smith, offered a component-based definition of national identity. He argued that it is composed of several “fundamental features,” including “an historic territory, or homeland,” “common myths and historical memories,” “a common, mass public culture,” “common legal rights and duties for all members,” and “a common economy with territorial mobility for members” (1986, p. 14). Smith's enumeration of the components of national identity gives some sense of what things must be present in order for national identity to occur.

Another method of understanding the nature of national identity is through looking at its functions, rather than at its formal components. Smith (1991) argued that national identities have several internal and external functions. Externally, national identities provide members with “territorial, economic and political” separation from other entities (p. 16). Internally, national identities provide “the socialization of the members as ‘nationals’ and ‘citizens’” (p. 16). National identity also “provides a social bond between individuals and classes by providing repertoires of shared values, symbols and traditions” (p. 16). The final internal function of national identity, according to Smith, is the provision of a “powerful means of

defining and locating individual selves in the world, through the prism of the collective personality and its distinctive culture” (p. 17). Price (1995, p. 42) argued that national identity provides “the community with a sense of who belongs and who is differentiated, what is the norm and who is the ‘other.’” Schlesinger (1991, p. 301) noted that the national identity is an identity that is “one of inclusion that provides a boundary around ‘us’ and one of exclusion that distinguishes ‘us’ from ‘them.’” This sense of citizenship is key in conveying “a state of democratic belonging or inclusion” that is “rationed” and almost “unfailingly positive” in valence (Bosniak, 2006, pp. 1, 2, 12). National identity, then, fulfills several internal and external functions, both binding members of a nation to each other, while separating those members from other nations.

Now that national identity has been defined—and its components and functions identified—it is important to turn to the question of how national identities are created in the first place. National identities are created and sustained through language and our interactions with others, and only exist within language (Joseph, 2004). Handler (1994, p. 29) described the changing understanding of national identity: “Many scholars now agree that there is no unchanging ‘essence’ or ‘character’ to particular cultures; indeed, that cultures are not individuated entities existing as natural objects with neat temporal and spatial boundaries.” Instead, “identities are constructed and reconstructed through historical action” and through language (Handler, p. 29). Anderson (1983) called nations “imagined communities”

as they only exist within our minds and through our language. Indeed, Joseph (2004) argued that “language and identity are ultimately inseparable” (p. 13).

National identities are created and recreated by members of the nation based on their collective memory about their collective history. The collective memory and collective history work to shape the citizens’ understanding and beliefs about the world and their own nation. The collective memory of a nation allows “for the fabrication, rearrangement, elaboration, and omission of details about the past, often pushing aside accuracy and authenticity so as to accommodate broader issues of identity formation, power and authority, and political affiliation” (Zelizer, 1998, p. 3). While the national identity is based on collective memory, that memory may not necessarily be accurate, and therefore the national identity is also likely to be formed around false assertions. What is important then is for the national identity to have rhetorical truth, while not necessarily having historical truth. That is, while the details of the collective memory could likely be disproved under close examination, the larger rhetorical or narrative truth feels right to the members of the nation.

National identity is clearly intertwined with the national narrative of a country. Hall (1996, p. 613) argued that “national cultures construct identities by producing meanings about ‘the nation’ with which we can identify; these are contained in the stories which are told about it, memories which connect its present with its past, and images which are constructed of it.” In other words, the culture of a nation, along with the stories that culture tells, create the nation and the national identity. The national narrative is constituted by the nation’s collective history, and in the retelling

of that history. Niebuhr (1967, p. 40) used different language to identify the same phenomenon when he argued that all nations develop a “social myth” that helps the nation separate itself from other nations, to help justify the existence of the nation, and to defend the nation’s interests by framing events in a positive light and affirming a sense of superiority over other nations.

National narratives are stories told about a nation by the citizens of that nation. Yadgar (2002) explained that the national narrative is “the story that a (national) collective tells about itself. It tells the individuals constituting the nation (and anybody else who is interested) who they are, what comprises their past (the national, common one), the structure of their characteristics as a collective, and where they are heading” (p. 58). Hall (1996) described national narratives as being “told and retold in national histories, literatures, the media, and popular culture” (p. 613). He added that this retelling provides “a set of stories, images, landscapes, scenarios, historical events, national symbols, and rituals which stand for, or represent, the shared experiences, sorrows, and triumphs and disasters which give meaning to the nation” (p. 613).

National identity and national narrative are fundamentally intertwined and interdependent, and can be viewed as opposite sides of the same coin. As Said (2000) argued, “National identity always involves narratives—of the nation’s past, its founding fathers and documents, seminal events, and so on” (p. 177). Ram echoed this point when he argued that “nationality is a narrative, a story which people tell

about themselves in order to lend meaning to their social world” (as cited in de Cillia, Reisigl, & Wodak, 1999, p. 155).

The national narrative of the United States is certainly based upon and dependent upon the national identity, and vice versa. Hackett and Zhao (1994, pp. 533-534) provided a short version of America’s national narrative. They described America as a promised land—“a moral and democratic exemplar”—filled with “rugged” and “competitive” individuals. America will bring light and democracy to the world, as it is a righteous nation. America is thoroughly good and can be seen as the opposite of those evil nations who oppose “capitalism, God and elections.” America is the best nation in the world, and “no other nation or supra-national body can be allowed to take on that godlike role in place of the US.” And finally, because America is superior, “Americanization of other countries is in the natural order of things.” According to Hackett and Zhao’s version of the national narrative, America is unique in the world, and its citizens have opportunities that no other citizens of the world have. Huntington (2004, p. 46) described America as “a people defined by and united by their commitment to the political principles of liberty, equality, democracy, individualism, human rights, the rule of law, and private property embodied in the American Creed.”

The most basic and most critical way in which the national identity and narrative are communicated and reaffirmed is through the media. The media play a key role in the creation and maintenance of the national identity and national narrative. Pye (2004, p. 50) noted, “It is the emergence of the mass media that play a

critical role in the development of a national language” and “where the mass media are underdeveloped there will be a missing element in the building of a shared sense of national identity.” The existence of a strong mass media are a fundamental aspect of a shared national identity, as the media “serve vital functions in helping the people create a sense of national belonging” (Pye, p. 50). Furthermore, citizens rely upon the media to contextualize events in a way that makes sense with what is known about the past and future. Le (2006, p. 708) described,

In their presentation of the news, and the necessary interpretation of facts required to make a “story,” journalists contextualize narrated events by referring to a historical framework in order to help their readers make links between new events and events of the past that are already stored and organized in their background knowledge. It is this integration of new facts within a framework of “old” knowledge that allows for these new facts to become knowledge and then be remembered.

In some ways, citizens of a nation rely on their news media to contextualize events for them. We expect a news story about a current event to link it to past events in a way that makes the new event more meaningful. There is no doubt, however, that this is a subjective process, and it requires the journalist to choose which pieces of the story to tell and which to omit in order to effectively frame the new event.

Hutcheson et al. (2004, p. 31) noted that “as members of the national in-group, journalists are likely to possess many of the same cultural values and beliefs that other members of the nation possess—values and beliefs that act as a filter through which news content is produced.” Because members of the media tend to reflect similar values and beliefs as the rest of the nation, media coverage is likely to reflect the national identity of a nation, especially when it is threatened. Hutcheson et



al. (p. 31) argued that news coverage “seems likely to reflect nationalist themes in crisis situations in which there is a perceived threat to national interests or national security.”

There is perhaps one time, above all others, that Americans turn to the media for help in making sense of current events, and that is immediately following a national tragic event. In the hours and days following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the majority of Americans were glued to their televisions, watching as the news media attempted to first make sense of the attacks, and then shape what they knew into a narrative. In her study of newsmagazine coverage of the 9/11 attacks, Kitch (2003) found that the news coverage created a unified narrative that replaced feelings of fear with feelings of heroism and national pride. Kitch argued that one function of journalists is to make sense of “senseless” news events by incorporating them into a broader narrative about resilience and hope. In essence, within one month of the terrorist attacks, the “story of September 11” had been created by journalists and their readers.

This rush to narrativize a tragic event makes sense, as narrative is a critical part of human nature. Walter Fisher (1978, 1984, 1985) thoroughly established that narratives are crucial in human communication as a way of explaining the world. Fisher argued, for example, that “symbols are created and communicated ultimately as stories meant to give order to human experience” (1984, p. 6). One rationale behind MacIntyre’s (1984) comment that “man is in his actions and practice, as well as his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal” is that “the human brain has a

natural affinity for narrative construction” and that people “tend to remember facts more accurately if they encounter them in a story than in a list” (Carey, 2007, p. F1). Fulford argued that “the story has established itself as the most comfortable, the most versatile—and perhaps also the most dangerous” way that humans communicate (p. ix). Narrative, then, is an essential component of human sensemaking.

Narrative in human sensemaking appears to be particularly important in the wake of tragic events. Neimeyer (2005, p. 23) argued that “to understand the impact of tragic loss on people’s lives, it is helpful to begin with an understanding of the structure of those lives, a structure that a good deal of contemporary scholarship suggests can be understood in *narrative* terms” (emphasis in original). Thus, in order to understand how a culture reaffirms or reconstructs its national identity in the wake of a national tragic event, this narrativization of the event must be explored.

### **Methodology**

The citizens of a nation, particularly its media and other public figures, create and recreate the national identity through communication. In fact, during a state of relative normalcy, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly how citizens sustain the sense of national identity. As long as status quo is maintained, there is no perceived need to reconstruct or reaffirm the national identity. Perhaps a colloquialism better explains the situation: *If it ain't broke, don't fix it.*

However, there is one time period in which a country must actively reconstruct the national identity—immediately following a national tragic event. After a national tragic event, there is a rupture in the national identity that must be

healed in order for the national identity to fulfill its societal and rhetorical functions (Foote, 2003). This reconstruction of the national identity occurs in numerous ways: through the media, prayer vigils, moments of silence, private conversations, and many others. Huntington (2004, p. xv) argued that tragic events work to bring the national identity into the forefront of citizens' minds, and therefore, "so long as Americans see their nation endangered, they are likely to have a high sense of identity with it." In his discussion of publics, Hauser maintained that national identity is often splintered based on such issues as "age, gender, region, ethnicity" and "class." However, he also argued that there are exceptions to this splintering, especially regarding the "most transcendent causes and problems, such as natural disasters, epidemics, or national emergencies" (Hauser, 1999, p. 30). Because the reconstruction of national identity is so active immediately following a tragic event, it is apparent that this time period offers an unmatched window through which to view national identity and its construction. In these pages, I am not arguing that there is a singular national identity; rather, I argue that the news media speak in a more unified voice when describing and promoting the American national identity following a tragic event than in other circumstances. Undoubtedly, the media's identification and promotion of national identity varies widely when the nation is not threatened; however, in the wake of a tragic event, there is remarkable cohesion regarding the character, needs, fears, and values of Americans that are described and promoted by the news media.

As I discuss below, due to the importance of ritual and anniversaries in American society, additional windows appear each year on the anniversaries of tragic events as citizens attempt to make sense of the event and repair the damage done to the national identity. Understanding the ways in which national tragic events are ritualized further clarifies the methods by which a nation reaffirms its identity.

Earlier I argued that national identity is a nebulous matter and it is hard to identify, much less analyze. I believe this is the case because while society is moving along its path, there is little need for the citizenry to concern itself with national identity. Most daily events and news coverage of those events do not cause the sort of long term quest for understanding and explanation that follows a national tragic event. National identity is much like other taken-for-granted aspects of American life: one does not think very much about it unless it is threatened in some way (Huntington, 2004). This is likely as true for ordinary citizens as it is for the news media. However, during times of crisis or when America's national interests or security are threatened, newspaper reporting tends to become more focused on national identity than usual. For example, "in the case of the Sept. 11 events and subsequent war on terrorism, it seems probable that U.S. journalists' sense of national identity—like that of many other citizens—became heightened, and that this increased sense of American-ness would be reflected in subsequent news coverage, including editorials" (Billeaudeau, Domke, Hutcheson, & Garland, 2003, p. 169).

One way to get a closer look into how a country sustains its national identity is to examine it immediately following a national tragic event, as the usual low-level

buzz of national identity is amplified. The window of time in the days following a national tragic event is an ideal opportunity for viewing how the media work to reaffirm and bolster national identity in a time of crisis.

In addition to this immediate window, additional windows appear each year on the anniversary of the national tragic event. Anniversaries are important in our society, and they are quite significant in the reaffirmation of national identity and narrative following tragic events. Johnston (1991, p. 58) noted that traumatic events such as the Civil War “intensified a need for holidays and anniversaries that bind regions of the nation together.” On the anniversaries of tragic events, the media revisit the narrative of the tragic event, adding new details and measuring how American life has changed since the event.

Anniversaries function as ritual in American society, and in so doing, they help reaffirm a nation’s narrative and identity. Johnston (1991) argued that anniversaries are one of the driving forces behind the propagation of national identities. Imber-Black (2004) noted that “authentic rituals have the capacity to embrace our human need for continuity, connecting us to that which has come before, while offering us a vision of change and a bridge to a transformed future” (p. 274). In a sense, this description of anniversary rituals could be used to describe national narratives, as well. It points to the conclusion that anniversary rituals fill a large role in shaping our national narratives; of course, this makes perfect sense, because those events important enough to warrant being memorialized are also important enough to be included in a national narrative. In addition, “an anniversary is a ritual celebration

of the community who observes it, serving to strengthen its identity and values through the remembrance of an event” (Kitch, 2002, p. 48). Davis (1988) noted that anniversaries “assert the sense of time as passing and human life as ephemeral, but make a counter assertion: human institutions within the flow of time are permanent” (p. 134). In other words, through national anniversary rituals, we are reconnected to our nation and are assured that our nation will continue. Kitch (2002) echoed this point when she argued that anniversaries are “occasions to remind us—journalists and audiences alike—that we are part of something, in terms of place and time, greater than ourselves; they are also occasions to assess our progress” (p. 48).

One likely reason that anniversaries are so prominent in our culture is the prevalence of what psychiatrists call “anniversary reactions” in people who have suffered some sort of trauma. In essence, those who suffer anniversary reactions feel badly on the anniversaries of the traumatic event (Morgan III, Hill, Fox, Kingham, & Southwick, 1999), perhaps because their identity is again threatened. It is likely that for national events as dramatic and frightening as the September 11 attacks, many people across the country suffer from anniversary reactions. In fact, Jordan (2003) argued that millions of Americans experienced anniversary reactions due to the September 11 attacks. She explained that one did not have to actually be in New York City to experience the trauma of the event—rather, “People across the country saw the attack on television and people jumping out of the windows with no chance of survival, others running for their lives, and finally the collapse of both buildings. These images, repeated over and over on television and captured in photos, have

traumatized many people” (p. 111). There is an additional likelihood for anniversary reactions because of the name the media chose for the event. Schonfeld (2002) argued that “The date itself, September 11, has taken on such strong symbolism for many children and adults that we should expect an even stronger anniversary reaction than we might otherwise” (p. 293).

Anniversaries work to help us cope with and understand an event, and help to reaffirm the event’s place in the national narrative. In addition, national anniversaries are an important way of reconnecting with a larger collective and providing security that the collective will continue to exist into the future.

To illustrate the arguments outlined above, I use three case studies. Each of the case studies corresponds with one of the main types of national tragic event: domestic, external and natural. In selecting case studies to investigate, I used three primary characteristics to narrow the options. First, because this project focuses solely on the American national identity, I only selected those events that occurred in America with primarily American victims. So while the 2004 tsunami that killed more than 230,000 people is certainly a much larger tragic event than any discussed in these pages (Gelling & Mydans, 2007), it could not accurately be described as an *American* national tragic event.

Second, I narrowed the events to those that occurred in the past several decades. This was necessary for two major reasons. First, in order to fully understand the nature of national identity construction following a national tragic event, one must have access to a wide variety of primary sources regarding the

American response to the event. It is without question that the rise of the role of the media, particularly the electronic media, in the last few decades has transformed the way in which news of an event, as well as the public's response to that event, are communicated.

Another reason for choosing more recent events is that memory of the events, and therefore the ritualization of those national tragic events, appears to fade over time. There are several possible reasons for this, including the fact that the sheer number of tragic events that have befallen our country since it was founded would require weekly or even daily memorialization of events. It may also be that as the number of victims or first-hand witnesses declines and then eventually disappears, the public and private need for memorialization also disappears. For example, the 1886 Charleston earthquake was a huge event at the time. The earthquake devastated Charleston, S.C., and remains the "deadliest earthquake in the history of the eastern United States" (Finn, 1995, p. B01). It was felt as far away as Boston, Chicago and Cuba. Yet, no one who witnessed, heard about or was directly affected by the event still lives, and while it was dramatic and terrifying at the time, the earthquake did not greatly affect the American identity after a few decades had passed.

The third characteristic I used to choose the case studies for this project is the relative importance of the event in American history. It is probable that the larger and more tragic the event, the more the American national identity will need to be reaffirmed by its citizens. For example, while the Columbine school shootings were indeed horrific, unfortunately, there have been many other school shootings in recent



decades, one of which (the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings) was greater in size. School shootings, and other similar tragedies, appear to be more localized in nature, and after the initial media frenzy, it is the immediate community, rather than the entire nation, that must heal from the event.

After eliminating the majority of tragic events for one or more of the three reasons discussed above, one obvious tragic event remained in each of the three tragedy types. The three national tragic events examined here are the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing as a case of an event caused by domestic forces, the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack as a case of an event caused by external forces, and Hurricane Katrina in 2005 as a case of an event caused by nature.

The Oklahoma City bombing occurred on April 19, 1995, at the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, which was a U.S. government office complex located in downtown Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. The bombing was committed by a handful of anti-government militia members, primarily Timothy McVeigh, Terry Nichols, and Michael Fortier (Blumenthal, 2006). The attack killed 168 people, injured 853 others, and orphaned 30 children (Jones, 1998). Until the 9/11 terrorist attack in 2001, the Oklahoma City bombing was the worst terrorist attack in United States history (Axtman, 2006, p. 2) and continues to rank as the “nation’s worst case of domestic terrorism” (Bazinet, 2005, p. 38). The attack threatened the central tenets of the national identity of the United States; one editorialist wrote the following week that “If the suspects in the horrific Oklahoma City bombing are guilty, they will be convicted not only of a cold-blooded mass murder but also of striking a blow against

the very cause they profess to revere: American freedom” (“Bombing's cost includes freedom,” 1995, p. 3B). Because it is the worst case of domestic terrorism, the Oklahoma City bombing is an ideal case study with which to examine the response to a national tragic event caused by domestic forces.

The attack by Al Qaeda in New York, Washington, D.C., and in the skies above rural Pennsylvania on September 11, 2001, is certainly the most devastating attack from external forces that the United States has faced in recent decades. After hijacking four passenger jets, 19 Al Qaeda operatives steered the planes toward symbols of American capitalism, military strength, and democracy: the World Trade Center Towers, the Pentagon, and, had the fourth hijacking been successful, probably the White House or Capitol building (Savage, 2004). The 9/11 terrorist attacks are considered to be “the worst attacks ever on the continental US” (Grier, 2003, p. 1), with 2,974 known dead and 24 still missing. The psychological and emotional costs of the attacks are incalculable; however, the economic cost of 9/11 is estimated to be between \$70 billion (Nussbaum, Arnst, Port, & Weber, 2005) and \$75 billion (Thorpe, 2004). The 9/11 attacks stunned the nation and shook its sense of identity. One editorialist wrote immediately following the attack that “Nothing like this has ever happened to our nation before. Pearl Harbor comes close. But in magnitude, the attacks today eclipse even the bombs dropped on our fleet on that historic Day of Infamy in 1941” (“Editorials about terrorist attacks,”). These lines demonstrate the sense of bewilderment and wonder that followed the attack, creating a need for the reaffirmation of the nation’s identity. Without a doubt, the 9/11 terrorist attacks are

among the most important and powerful events in recent American history, and thus serve as an ideal case study for the examination of national tragic events caused by external forces.

In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina swept along the gulf coast, ultimately causing the deaths of at least 1,836 people, as well as destroying more property than any natural disaster in American history. According to the United States Department of Commerce, the estimated total economic cost of Hurricane Katrina ranges between \$80 and \$100 billion, making Katrina “the costliest hurricane in U.S. history and one of the five deadliest hurricanes to ever strike the U.S.” (Johnson, 2006). The hurricane made many question their assumptions about the sanctity of American soil. As one columnist wrote, “Scenes of people fleeing areas ruined by disaster hold a drama that seems the stuff of National Geographic. The images usually come from Africa or Asia or Eastern Europe—not the United States” (“Calamity on a rare scale,” 2005, p. A18). While it is true that some of the death and destruction could likely have been mitigated by a quicker and more effective government response, ultimately, this was a national tragic event caused by natural forces, and thus serves as the case study for that category.

The methodology used in this dissertation includes several components. Each of the case studies focuses on multiple separate time frames: first, the days immediately following the tragic event; and second, the exact date in subsequent years when the anniversary is acknowledged. In order to discover the dimensions of the narrative shaped by the media immediately following the event, I trace the

creation of the stories, and then the commemoration of the events' anniversaries, through newspaper editorial coverage.

Newspaper editorials are important to the national discourse about tragic events because editorial pages are charged with “bringing meaning out of the jumble of news and events and...keeping in view the central values of our age despite the tides of passion and propaganda that swirl about and obscure them” (Hulteng, 1973, p. 14). Editorials help a nation create and recreate its national narrative through solidifying a common story of its past. In essence, “we are forging through the media a common recollection of the national past” (Nerone & Wartella, 1989, p. 85). In the immediate aftermath of tragic events, editorials help readers make sense of the event, discuss how the event connects to the past and future, and how Americans should feel about that event. On anniversaries of tragic events, the editorial pages of the nation's newspapers again help readers chart the waters. Ben-Aaron explained that “from its footing as an authority and general critic, the newspaper defines a standard of public behavior for anniversaries” (2005, p. 691). In addition to their role in helping the nation recreate a sense of national identity, they also reflect identity reconstruction efforts that occur elsewhere by discussing public commemorations that occur on the anniversaries of tragic events. Thus, newspaper editorials are ideal texts to use in the discovery of how the news media help reconstruct the national identity through discourse in the wake of a national tragic event.

For each of the tragic events discussed in the case studies, I have drawn a sample from LexisNexis of major American newspaper editorials that focus on the

event. The sample newspapers are from multiple regions of the United States, including the region and city in which the disaster occurred, along with three national papers (*USA Today*, *The New York Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal*). The newspapers I have chosen have an online presence in addition to the print version, and thus the editorials are accessible to a large number of people beyond subscribers and purchasers.

With each case, I begin with a narrative and thematic analysis of primary documents disseminated by the media immediately following, and then on the anniversaries of, the tragic events. This analysis allowed me to identify themes that were prevalent throughout the sources, and seek out the ways in which the sources define and/or redefine the American national identity. Regardless of the fact that there are always dissenting views of the national identity, the newspaper editorials were generally cohesive in the way in which they depicted the American identity: its positive and negative attributes, how it informs our relationships with other citizens and the citizens of other countries, and how Americans seek to both use and protect the national identity in a time of great public crisis. Critical cultural scholars, as well as many others, insist that there is no singular national identity, and that is undoubtedly true. However, the editorials reviewed in this project not only spoke with a unified voice in the face of national tragic events, but they explicitly called for similar beliefs, feelings, and actions from American citizens. While many citizens will not agree with the content of the editorials, it is nonetheless important to analyze

how the media attempts to reconstruct the national identity for the majority of the citizens.

The national identity literature provides a wealth of categories that serve as a starting point for this analysis. The initial review of the newspaper editorials looked for several sets of themes. The first set of themes identified in the literature focuses on the functions of national identity. I analyzed how the American character is described and how the American character is affected (or not affected) by a national crisis. In operationalizing a definition of national identity and its construction, I focused on shared identity and shared values in order to discover whether the editorials used language that attempted to bind members to one another, whether the editorials called upon “repertoires of shared values, symbols and traditions” (A. D. Smith, 1991, p. 16) to increase this social bond, whether they attempted to rhetorically separate the victimized nation from other nations, and whether the editorials attempted to establish (or re-establish) the norm for the national culture.

The second set of themes focused on the American national narrative and how the tragic event fit into that narrative, as well as how the event itself was narrativized by the media. As noted earlier, all scholars of national identity agree on the importance of narrative and myth in its construction. The final set of themes were the more general patterns that appeared in the editorials that did not directly relate to national identity and national narrative.

Out of these categories, I developed a rhetorical pattern explaining how in these three cases, newspaper editorialists worked to rhetorically rebuild the sense of

what it meant to be an American. The editorials clearly suggested the view that absent identity reconstruction, we would not be able to adequately confront the crisis.

### **Conclusion**

The narrative and thematic analysis of the American response to the three national tragic events discussed above illuminates the ways in which a culture attempts to reaffirm or reconstruct its national identity after it has been shaken. Only by examining the discourse immediately following and on the anniversaries of tragic events can we understand how a nation actively reconstructs its national identity and national narrative through the media. During the more than two centuries since its independence, the United States has faced a variety of serious, and at times devastating, national tragic events. It is unlikely that the country will become immune to domestic, international, and natural disasters in the future, and therefore it is important that we learn how the United States reconstructs its national identity when it is threatened. This project is a critical first step toward that goal.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Identity Construction Following National Tragic Events Caused by Internal Forces—The Case of the Oklahoma City Bombing**

At 9:02 a.m. on April 19, 1995, a 5,000-pound bomb packed inside a Ryder truck was detonated in front of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. At the time, the bombing was the worst terrorist attack in United States history. After the events of 9/11, the Oklahoma City bombing still ranked as the most devastating case of domestic terror on American soil. The bombing killed 168 people, injured more than 800 others, and tore a hole in the heart of downtown Oklahoma City ("The bombing," 1995).

To assess how the media reaffirm the national identity of the United States in the wake of a domestic terrorist attack, I analyzed sets of newspaper editorials from three different time periods: the day after the attack, the one-year anniversary, and the ten-year anniversary. These sets of editorials provide an excellent sample from which to draw conclusions about how the media work to reaffirm the national identity in the days and years after a case of domestic terrorism.

For each of the three groups, between 15 and 25 editorials pertaining to the bombing were selected from the LexisNexis database for a total sample of more than 65 editorials. In those cases in which more than one editorial was published in a given newspaper on the same date, only those related to the Oklahoma City bombing were chosen. The newspapers were from a range of locations and market sizes,



including newspapers as small as West Virginia's *Charleston Gazette* (circulation of 25,000) and as large as *USA Today* (circulation of 2,278,000). In addition to a wide variety of newspapers from around the country, this set of editorials included national, regional, and local newspapers. Nearly every editorial was published without a byline, indicating that the opinions expressed in the editorials were largely representative of the viewpoints of the editorial staffs of the newspapers.

In the sections below, I discuss editorials published on the day after the Oklahoma City bombing, as well as those published on the one-year and ten-year anniversaries. It appears that for the Oklahoma City bombing, the one-month, six-month, and five-year anniversaries were less poignant for the entire nation, and therefore were not memorialized in the same way as the one-year and ten-year anniversaries.

Each group of editorials was reviewed in order to determine how the media reaffirmed the national identity in the face of a terrorist attack from a domestic source. Specifically, I determined how the editorials reaffirmed the national identity and values, while at the same time distinguishing the majority of American citizens from the few who would commit such an attack. I looked for references to shared values, norms and traditions, the national narrative, and for language that worked to bind the majority of Americans to one another while characterizing the villains as un-American or opposed to American values. In the following sections, I discuss several key themes related to national identity that emerged from the analysis.

The bombing shocked the nation, creating a new sense of vulnerability and a loss of innocence. Most Americans had long believed that the United States was immune to this type of attack, and the fact that it occurred in America's heartland led citizens to question their most basic beliefs about life in America. A year later, the initial shock had worn off and the nation was in the midst of attempting to rationalize the fact that the attack was committed by Americans. The idea of an American turning against his own people contradicted what many believed about the values and characteristics of American citizens, and the editorials solved this dissonance by charging that McVeigh was not a "real" American. This rationalization of the threat to identity helped Americans cope with the harsh realization that a monster such as McVeigh could be created by a country as great as the United States. By the ten-year anniversary, the events of Oklahoma City had been put in perspective by other disasters, such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks and Hurricane Katrina. The bombing was no longer viewed as a threat to the nation's identity, but rather as a terrible tragedy to be mourned and from which to recover. This gradual transition from shock to rationalization to acceptance is depicted in the editorials published immediately after and on the anniversaries of the Oklahoma City bombing.

#### **April 20, 1995 — Day One**

On the day after the Oklahoma City bombing, several dozen newspapers across the country published editorials regarding the event. At this time, little was known about the victims, the villains, and the motivation behind the attack. The editorials speculated that between 17 and 26 people were killed in the bombing, far

fewer than the final count of 168. The first bodies recovered were those in a daycare center, and so most people believed at this point that nearly all of the victims were young children. It would be days before a more accurate estimate of the death toll would be reached.

As for the culprit, there was only speculation. No one yet realized that the person who had detonated the bomb, Timothy McVeigh, had been arrested for gun possession after being stopped for driving without a license plate 90 minutes after the bombing. Because the 1993 World Trade Center bombing had occurred just two years before, and because the attack was committed with a similar device—a car bomb—many believed the two cases were connected. Therefore, the first assumption was that the bombing was the work of a Middle Eastern terrorist organization or nation. Others speculated, more accurately, that the Oklahoma City bombing was related to the events at Waco, as the bombing occurred on the two-year anniversary of the end of the siege at the Branch Davidian compound, when David Koresh and 75 of his followers were killed in a fire.

Twenty editorials published the day after the attack were analyzed to discover how the media reconstructed the national identity in the immediate aftermath of the tragic event. The editorials, though they were from a variety of regions and market sizes, were similar in tone and content. On the day after the bombing, the editorials told a story of a nation under attack by forces unknown. The editorials expressed shock that a bombing such as this one could take place at all in the United States and expressed bewilderment at the choice of Oklahoma City for the worst terrorist attack

thus far in American history. Just one day after the event, the media already had begun the work of reaffirming the national identity, commenting on the American love for democracy, a free society, and justice.

The story told by the editorials began with the shattered illusion that America was immune to this type of attack. The editorials described an America that had long believed that terrorist attacks only happened in other countries, effectively distinguishing America from other nations. *The Albuquerque Journal*, for example, said that “Compared to Europe and other parts of the world, America has been relatively unscarred by terrorist acts within our borders until the World Trade Center bombing in February 1993” (“Oklahoma bombing,” 1995, p. A18). Using very similar language, *The Boston Globe* said, “Until the World Trade Center bombing, Americans felt isolated from the kind of attack visited upon Oklahoma City yesterday. These visions of agony carried electronically across the globe used to be from somewhere else—mostly the Middle East. No longer” (“Beirut in Oklahoma,” 1995, p. 18). *The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* echoed this sentiment when it said, “It should be clear by now that scenes of carnage aren’t restricted to Northern Ireland, or Israel. Welcome to the world, America” (“Close to home,” 1995, p. 8B). And *The Saint Paul Pioneer Press* concluded, “The illusion was that we were immune to the world’s problems .... we like to think we are above it all, safeguarded by distance and by the strength of our society” (N. Coleman, 1995, p. 9A). Thus, the editorials uniformly expressed shock that a terrorist attack of this nature could or would be perpetrated in the United States. The idea that America was exceptional, that it would

not face the same problems that other countries faced, was implicit in these discussions. Historically, the United States had suffered through just a handful of terrorist attacks, and so this sense of immunity had some basis in the past experiences of most citizens.

To give a point of reference to a nation so unaccustomed to terrorism, many of the editorials drew a comparison between the events in Oklahoma City and events in Beirut or elsewhere. For example, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* began its editorial by saying, “Hold it. We don’t live in Beirut. We’re not living in Bosnia or any other war zone, are we? Tell us, please, that we don’t have to wake up in the mornings and worry that someone will throw a bomb at our kids or poison gas on our commuter train...” (“America isn't about bombings," 1995, p. 16A). *The San Jose Mercury News* began its editorial by saying, “A U.S. government building is blown apart. Rescue workers carry mangled bodies out of the rubble, some of them the bodies of children. Survivors sit stunned and bleeding on the sidewalk. It looks like Beirut in 1983. But it is Oklahoma City in 1995” (“Sheer terrorism," 1995, p. 12B). Comparing the scene to those in Beirut provided a point of reference, as well as continued to differentiate America from other nations. This separation of the United States from other nations was a central component of the national identity, and losing any portion of that separation was disturbing to many Americans.

But the specific location of the attack was even more disturbing. Accepting the fact that a terrorist attack of that magnitude could happen in the United States was less difficult than accepting that an attack could or would happen in a medium-sized

city in Oklahoma. The fact that the bombing took place in Oklahoma City caused many of the editorials to argue that the attack proved that no one in America was safe. The idea that “if it happens in Oklahoma, it can happen anywhere” (N. Coleman, 1995, p. 9a) was dominant throughout the editorials. As *The Albuquerque Journal* said, “Any man, woman or child in America could have been the target of the cowards who apparently left a bomb in a car outside the building and then fled the scene” (“Oklahoma bombing,” 1995, p. A18). *The Buffalo News* began its editorial by saying, “Who would want to blow up Oklahoma City? It’s Oklahoma’s state capital and its biggest town, but it hardly rates as one of America’s major urban centers or any kind of political hotbed.” The editorial continued, “That’s why here [in Buffalo, NY] and in a lot of other towns that thought terrorist violence was a faraway, big-city thing, Wednesday’s devastating bombing is reverberating with uncomfortable force” (“Terror in the heartland,” 1995, p. 2). Just a day after the attack, one of the most troubling aspects of the bombing for many citizens was the location.

Part of the shock at the attack happening in Oklahoma City was the fact that the city was located in the heartland of America, and the editorials mentioned that it was a mid-size American city far from the nation’s larger and more international cities. *The New York Times*, like nearly every newspaper editorializing on the bombing, called Oklahoma City the “heartland” of America, and said that the attack was “the kind of crisis most residents probably assumed could only happen in New York or Los Angeles” (“Savagery,” 1995, p. A22). *The Albuquerque Journal*

described, “Now, with the explosion that ripped out the entire side of the Oklahoma City federal building, terrorists have targeted the heartland of America—a city far from international centers of government and finance” (“Oklahoma bombing,” 1995, p. A18). *The Omaha World Herald* described the location as “Oklahoma. Sooner country. Where the corn is as high as an elephant’s eye. The home of J.C. Watts and Big Country Reeves. Down-home values and plucky self-reliance. Proud to be an Okie from Muskogee” (“A heinous and cowardly strike,” 1995, p. 24). *The Saint Paul Pioneer Press* published a similar response: “Oklahoma? No way. Cowboys and cheerleaders. Not bombs and bodybags. Sooners, apple pie and kids on tricycles, not trauma centers and triage. The last place you’d pick for this” (N. Coleman, 1995, p. 9A). The location of the bombing—in a seemingly unremarkable place in the center of the country—drove home the truth that no one in America was safe from terrorism.

The fact that no one was safe threatened the national identity of the United States. A country that had long believed in its own safety—a country above the fray in many ways—was proven to be vulnerable, causing a loss of innocence and a shaken sense of identity. This loss of innocence was an immediate result of the terrorist attack, as the predictable and largely peaceful reality of day-to-day life in America ground to a halt. The events of the day before made Americans question their own safety, the safety of their loved ones, and the safety of the United States in general. All that had previously been assumed was now in question by American

citizens, from whether their city was a target, to whether they would be safe at work, to whether they could trust in leaving their children in daycare.

Despite the newfound fear and loss of innocence, a constant refrain throughout the editorials was the notion that Americans would not be cowed by terrorism; that Americans would be brave and unified in the face of this new threat. Many quoted President Bill Clinton's statement delivered a few hours after the event that the United States "will not tolerate, and I will not allow, the people of this country to be bullied by evil cowards" ("Intolerable," 1995, p. A30). *The Albuquerque Journal* suggested that Americans openly express their horror and anger about the Oklahoma City bombing, as it "sends a message to the world, and reaffirms in our own nation, the belief that America will not allow itself to become easy prey for terrorists" ("Oklahoma bombing," 1995, p. A18). *The Houston Chronicle* said, "Americans must take reasonable security precautions, but they cannot and will not live in a fearful state of siege. To do so would hand victory to the terrorists, and America's 'Don't tread on me' history and the nature of the American character forbid that" ("Intolerable," 1995, p. A30). The editorial concluded by saying, "Terrorists who think they can make America cower will find they are mistaken. As the president has promised, the killers who set off the bomb in Oklahoma City can be reasonably certain of their eventual capture and just punishment" ("Intolerable," 1995, p. A30). The editorial published in *The Saint Paul Pioneer Press* said, "In the end, the best revenge is living well. To recognize our place in the world and our



responsibilities. But to keep living like a free people, uncowed, unafraid. Unbroken” (N. Coleman, 1995, p. 9A).

The editorials published the day after the Oklahoma City bombing promised to Americans and the world—to both the victims and the perpetrators—that citizens would not be bullied by such attacks, and that the American identity would remain strong despite the new sense of vulnerability. This bold talk made perfect sense when viewed through the lens of national identity. Immediately after any attack on our nation (for example, Pearl Harbor or 9/11), the first official response is one of bold and confident outrage: a demand for justice, a refusal to admit being afraid. This type of language helps citizens cope with their loss of innocence, while also confronting the enemy.

After forcefully arguing that Americans would not be scared by the attacks and that our identity would remain intact, the editorials mentioned several dominant values to help bolster the national identity. *The Oklahoman* of Oklahoma City said, “In character, thousands of Oklahomans responded, lining up for blocks to donate blood, taking the survivors to hospitals, rescuing those trapped or confused by the tragedy” (“Prayer—and help,” 1995, p. 6). *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* described the American identity in this way: “This is America. This is a country where people care about their neighbors, obey the law, work hard, value human life, mow their grass, pay their rent, take their children to the park, report for work on time. Even pay their taxes grudgingly and dutifully” (“America isn't about bombings,” 1995, p. 16A). *The Dayton Daily News* described the bedrock of

America: “The United States is an open society, vulnerable because of the trust in civility” (“Terrorist outcomes,” 1995, p. 15A). Several editorials reminded readers of the strength and importance of American values during such an emotional time. *The Tampa Tribune*, for example, closed its editorial by saying, “We must fight back against terrorists with all of our power, and with all of our values, with justice and liberty as well as force” (“The danger,” 1995, p. 14). This language described the positive attributes of Americans and sketched a path to begin the work of healing the national identity, reminding readers of who they were beneath the brand-new patina of fear and anxiety.

At the same time that the editorials reaffirmed the national identity and argued that it would not change due to the threat of terrorism, they also mentioned a need to change some aspects of American society. Most notably, the editorials suggested a need for increased security, especially around government buildings. *The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, for example, said “Surely nothing more need be said now about the need to tighten security in this country after first the World Trade Center in New York, and now the Federal Building in Oklahoma City. The explosion, the bodies, the injured—the children!—should say it all” (“Close to home,” 1995, p. 8B). *The Albuquerque Journal* called for American citizens to “adopt some of the ultra-vigilant practices of nations where such acts are more common” such as using metal detectors, reporting suspicious packages, and limiting parking adjacent to buildings (“Oklahoma bombing,” 1995, p. A18).

The editorials published the day after the Oklahoma City bombing told the story of a nation shocked by a terrorist attack in the heartland. Perhaps the most frightening aspect of the attack, noted in nearly every editorial, was the lack of knowledge about the identity of the attacker. While the editorials called for swift justice, they did not yet know who to blame and most importantly, whether the country faced an attack from outside or an attack from within. *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* commented at length on this issue: The editorial noted that “there are numerous terrorist groups, bankrolled by different Middle Eastern regimes” but also reminded readers that “this country is not without its own extremists and crackpots” (“A terror bombing,” 1995, p. 6B). Uncertainty about what exactly America faced was an underlying theme of each editorial, and it reflected the difficulty in reaffirming the national identity until some basic knowledge about the event was understood. Until more was known about who committed the attack—and why—it was difficult for the editorials to differentiate Americans from their attackers.

However, there was no question that the terrorist attack was a great shock to the nation, threatening the innocence of Americans by creating a great sense of vulnerability. The editorials attempted to respond to this new sense of vulnerability by strengthening the will of the people, promising that we would not be bullied by the unknown attackers, and that the American character would remain strong in the face of whatever battle the Oklahoma City bombing was a part. In many ways, the bombing metaphorically produced a heightened response in the same way an infection produces a reaction from the immune system. The attack on a city in the

heartland—seemingly from out of nowhere—caused the media to jolt into action to sustain and repair our national identity, reminding us of our strength and values. At the same time, as demonstrated later, the attack kick-started the government into responding to the attack, leading it to perhaps overcompensate for the anomaly that was the Oklahoma City bombing.

### **April 19, 1996 —One-Year Anniversary**

One year after the Oklahoma City bombing, much was known about the details of the attack except for the motivation behind it. The culprits, Timothy McVeigh, Terry Nichols, and Michael Fortier, were in custody awaiting trial. Their anti-government, pro-gun, and racist viewpoints were well known, but McVeigh had not yet verified that the bombing was revenge for the Branch Davidian disaster that occurred on April 19, 1993. At the time of the one-year anniversary, two other related domestic incidents were underway: an 81-day standoff between the Montana Freeman, an anti-government group, and the U.S. government; and the prosecution of Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, after nearly 20 years of sending mail bombs. Those two incidents, combined with the anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing, caused many newspapers to speculate about what they saw as an increasing problem of domestic extremism.

The bombing in Oklahoma City ripped a hole in the identity of the nation, and the editorials worked to reknit it one year after the attack by reaffirming the national identity, values, and character of Americans, despite the fact that the people who committed the Oklahoma City bombing were born and raised within American

culture. If American culture was so exceptional, then how could it create such deranged individuals? The set of editorials published on the one-year anniversary of the bombing attempted to negotiate this delicate balance, while also taking a moment to mourn those who lost their lives one year before, to question the wisdom of new anti-terrorism measures, and most importantly, to begin the work of reknitting the national identity.

Many of the editorials referenced the importance of the one-year anniversary by mentioning the loss of so many people and reminding readers of the shock and horror that Americans felt that day. *The Post-Standard* of Syracuse, NY, said, “The explosion which shattered that peaceful Midwestern morning brought terrorism to the nation’s heartland, viscerally, indelibly” (“Uneasy anniversary,” 1996, p. A16). *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* said, “America pauses today to remember the 168 people, including 19 children, who died because of a despicable act of terrorism that forever altered the lives of more than 2,000 Oklahomans—close family members and relatives of those who were killed or injured” (“America remembers,” 1996, p. 18A). *The Charleston Gazette* began, “One year ago today, the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City came crashing down in the most repulsive example of domestic terrorism ever in the United States” (“Don’t forget bombing,” 1996, p. 4A). And *The Omaha World Herald* noted the grief experienced by many in the nation: “A hole was torn, figuratively, in the heart of the nation. It, too, has barely begun to heal” (“A day,” 1996, p. 20).

The idea mentioned by the Omaha newspaper of a hole being torn in the heart of the nation is an important metaphor for the Oklahoma City bombing. The shock from a year before, the realization that the attack was committed by Americans, and the profound sense of vulnerability after the bombing, all worked to tear this hole in the national identity. The national identity did not need to be modified or replaced in its entirety in the aftermath of the bombing, because the value or goodness of the identity was not in question. However, the identity was damaged, and had to be reknitted to become whole again. The editorials published one year after the bombing began that work as the nation's citizens continued to recover from its new sense of vulnerability.

The shock of an attack in the heartland of America was the focus of many of the editorials, and nearly every one commented upon the new sense of vulnerability in America. Even a year after the attack, the sense of vulnerability was still resonant in the media. This feeling of vulnerability was likely exacerbated due to the other anti-government events that were currently underway, such as the Montana Freemen standoff, leaving many to wonder in what city the next attack would occur. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* said that the bombing created "a national feeling of vulnerability, a sense that it might have been any one of us" ("America remembers," 1996, p. 18A). *The Daily News* of New York said that the attack, "forever shattered the illusion that somehow Americans would be spared, that we would be safe in our own communities" ("The war without boundaries," 1996, p. 42). *The Oregonian* said, "In a shattering way, the bombing brought domestic terrorism to America"

("Oklahoma on our mind," 1996, p. B06). And *The Saint Paul Pioneer Press* said, "Wounds are scarring over. But the glass shards of insecurity remain embedded, inextricable from a collective psyche pocked with the impact of home-made terrorism" ("Oklahoma City Bombing," 1996, p. 16A).

This sense of vulnerability stemmed from the realization that America was not immune to terrorism as it had believed. The identity of the nation had long included the belief that the United States was somehow beyond the reach of terrorism. Therefore, when an attack such as the Oklahoma City bombing occurred—by an American, no less—a tear was ripped in the national identity. *The Boston Globe* said, "For many Americans, hearing the news of the Oklahoma City bombing a year ago today was similar to contracting a strange and exotic illness, a disease not usually associated with the North American continent" to which "Americans believed themselves immune" ("April 19, 1995," 1996). Not only did Americans believe themselves immune to terrorism in general, but more specifically to domestic terrorist attacks. As *The Charleston Gazette* said, the events of that day "shattered the belief in America that such things could not happen, that Americans would not turn against Americans in such mindless ways" ("Don't forget bombing," 1996, p. 4A). A year after the attacks, the newfound sense of vulnerability continued to pervade the editorials, as they described how the identity of the nation had been damaged. Because the national identity had only been damaged, and not destroyed, only a reknitting of the national identity was needed.

The fact that the culprits were American citizens was difficult to rectify with the national identity. *The Post-Standard* of Syracuse, NY, described the perpetrators of the attack as “American-born and bred, young, clean-cut, an ex-marine, even. Timothy McVeigh and fellow suspect Terry Nichols were Midwesterners” (“Uneasy anniversary,” 1996, p. A16). *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* said, “The shock of the bombing was followed by the shock of realizing that the suspects were American citizens, apparently of European ancestry” (Krebs, 1996, p. 19A). This commentary implied that it would somehow be less surprising if the attack were committed by born-and-bred Americans who were *not* of European ancestry. The latent racism in this comment is in one way astonishing and in another way all too predictable of a response in a nation that suddenly felt quite vulnerable.

The response found in many editorials to this sense of vulnerability was to define the attackers as not “real” Americans, thus minimizing the identity conflict posed by the attack. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* editorial included a comment by Senator Orrin Hatch, that “the people who did it weren’t ‘real’ Americans, but the victims, survivors and rescuers were” (Krebs, 1996, p. 19A). This comment reflected a critical move in identity reconstruction, because it responded to the dilemma that faced the nation in the wake of a domestic terrorist attack. If the American character and identity were equated with values such as justice, freedom, equality, benevolence, a love of life, and other positive characteristics, how could that character be rectified with the reality of an attack on Americans by Americans? Identity reconstruction would have been much simpler if a foreign group could have been blamed, as the



nation could easily think in dichotomous terms, saving the positive adjectives for Americans while using their negative opposites to describe the enemy. One way that several of the editorials responded to this dilemma was by asserting that the terrorists were not “real” Americans. This solved the problem because if they were not “real” Americans, then we did not need to question our culture.

Another way in which the editorials differentiated between regular Americans and those Americans who committed the Oklahoma City bombing was by asserting that the culprits were insane. *The Charleston Gazette*, for example, called them “cowardly lunatics” (“Don't forget bombing,” 1996, p. 4A), *The Omaha World Herald* referred to them as “angry, screwloose militia people” with “zany theories” (“A day,” 1996, p. 20), and *The Oregonian* said that they had “twisted minds” (“Oklahoma on our mind,” 1996, p. B06). In labeling the bombers as crazy, the editorialists implicitly argued that the culture of the United States was not responsible for their actions. It was another way of saying that they were not “real” Americans, and therefore they did not represent or reflect true Americans in their actions or deeds.

The editorials commented on several components of the American national identity that were not reflected in the perpetrators of the bombing. *The Charleston Gazette* commented on the power of American democracy, stating, “America is stronger than any terrorist attack. For more than 200 years, the nation has been committed to the ideals of peaceful change through the ballot box rather than violent upheavals. That won't change” (“Don't forget bombing,” 1996, p. 4A). Many touted

the justice system, which *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* called “cursed and criticized, flawed indeed, but standing still as the fairest the Free World knows” (“America remembers,” 1996, p. 18A). Other editorials noted the bravery, decency, and generosity of Americans from all over the country, especially in the days immediately following the bombing. Part of the national identity of Americans is the belief that we are somehow different from the rest of the world because of our values and other characteristics. An *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* editorial made clear the link between national identity and a sense of American Exceptionalism: “Most Americans resist the notion that we are like everybody else. We cling to some image, secular or religious, of ourselves as a chosen people, better and more blessed than people in other parts of the world.” This belief in American Exceptionalism made the events of April 19, 1995, especially difficult for many Americans to absorb, but also provided a path for responding. Faced with the news that the attacks were committed by Americans, the editorials quickly separated those individuals from the rest of the citizenry, and then honored the bravery and compassion of regular Americans. Many of the editorials seemed to say that only Americans could respond so bravely to an attack, that only Americans would react with such generosity, that only in America would justice be so sure and so swift. So while the bombing threatened the belief in American Exceptionalism, the editorials used the concept of American Exceptionalism to help heal the damage.

A last theme that was apparent in nearly every editorial was concern about legislation signed into law on the one-year anniversary. The bill was widely

criticized as doing too little to prevent terrorism, while doing too much to reduce civil liberties. This is an important point, as the editorials made clear that the only way to remain true to our identity as a nation was to protect those values, such as freedom, that we held dear. *The Charleston Gazette*, for example, warned that “the country must take care to not let paranoia and fear lead to restricted freedoms” and then argued that the new legislation was “a prime example” of this (“Don't forget bombing,” 1996, p. 4A). *The Oregonian* said, “An off-key note in the commemoration is a so-called anti-terrorism bill that will help only marginally, and erode what it seeks to protect” (“Oklahoma on our mind,” 1996, p. B06). *The Philadelphia Daily News* said, “The bill, a last-minute compromise arrived at under pressure to meet today’s artificial deadline, has precious little to do with preventing terrorism. Nothing in the bill would have prevented the Oklahoma City bombing” and “nothing in this bill would have made identifying the perpetrators easier” (“What has this,” 1996, p. 34). *The Seattle Times* was even more blunt: “Too much was destroyed in Oklahoma City last year. Vandalizing civil liberties now would do no honor to the dead or their survivors” (“Gutting civil liberties,” 1996, p. B4). These concerns point to a fundamental identity question raised by domestic terrorism: How can a nation protect itself from itself? The concerns about civil liberties expressed in the editorials demonstrated that while Americans wanted to better protect themselves, doing so at the expense of civil liberties went against the identity of the nation.

The only exceptions to the uniformity of the editorials published on the one-year anniversary of the bombing were those published by Oklahoma City’s daily

newspaper, *The Oklahoman*. *The Oklahoman* editorials did not speak in terms of the national identity and what the bombing meant to the nation. Instead, they focused on how it affected the families, friends, and neighbors of the editorialists. Editorial writers remembered where they were when the blast occurred, who they knew who was killed or injured, and how they were recovering. This demonstrates that for those people who were directly affected by a national tragic event, the threat was *not* primarily to the national identity, but rather to themselves and the people they loved.

American Exceptionalism and the corresponding belief that Americans are chosen people in the world made the specter of domestic terrorism in some ways more terrifying and identity-shaking than foreign terrorism. The newspaper editorials chose to solve this dissonance by separating American citizens into two groups: the normal, “real” Americans, and the crazy ones who were not “real” Americans. Separating the two groups allowed the national identity to remain intact, while explaining how a domestic terror event of this nature could occur. In addition, the editorials attempted to reflect the nation’s concerns, for example, that the nation was not, as long assumed, free from the danger of terrorist attacks of the magnitude of the Oklahoma City bombing. The newfound sense of vulnerability—of lost innocence—opened a hole in the national identity that the editorials attempted to fill by reminding readers of the many positive characteristics of Americans, and by reinforcing the American values of freedom and democracy.

### **April 19, 2005 — Ten-Year Anniversary**

Two years after the Oklahoma City bombing, Timothy McVeigh, the primary perpetrator of the attack, was sentenced to death. Terry Nichols and Michael Fortier were convicted the following year, with Nichols receiving a life sentence without parole for his role in building the weapon, and Fortier receiving a 12-year sentence and a \$200,000 fine for not notifying the authorities of the imminent attack. Each year on the anniversary of the bombing, Oklahoma City holds a ceremony in honor of the victims, which includes 168 seconds of silence and the reading of the name of each person who was killed.

On the five-year anniversary of the attack, April 19, 2000, the Oklahoma City National Memorial and Museum was dedicated. The memorial features 168 empty chairs, meant to symbolize the empty seats at dinner tables throughout the city, facing a reflecting pool. The five-year anniversary of the attack received comparatively little media coverage as it coincided with the one-year anniversary of the Columbine school shootings, which took place on April 20, 1999, in Littleton, Colorado. Of the four editorials in the LexisNexis database that discussed the Oklahoma City bombing on its five-year anniversary, three also discussed Columbine and how the survivors were facing similar emotional and physical obstacles. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, for example, said that the Oklahoma City bombing “served to bind [the people of Oklahoma City] in sympathy with those suffering in the aftermath of the massacre at Columbine High School, which marks its one-year anniversary Thursday” (Fish, 2000). *The Star-Ledger* of Newark, New Jersey, mused about the large number of

American tragedies that have taken place in the month of April, including the Oklahoma City bombing, the Columbine shootings, the Waco siege, and the assassinations of Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr. (L. Hall, 2000, p. 15).

The memorialization of the five-year anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing was largely overshadowed in the newspapers by the one-year anniversary of the shootings at Columbine High School in Colorado. This underscores the importance of anniversaries as a way of healing following a national tragic event. While the loss of life was much greater in Oklahoma City than in Littleton, the recency of the school shooting caused it to hold a much larger space in the public consciousness during this time period. The one-year anniversary appears to be the most important anniversary for a national tragic event, as it marks the full passing of the annual cycle of living—birthdays, holidays, seasons, and the rhythms of work and school.

Again, the editorials published in the Oklahoma City daily newspaper, *The Oklahoman*, diverged from the others published on the five-year anniversary, not mentioning Columbine or other tragedies. Instead, the editorials focused on the horror of that day, but more importantly, how the city healed itself. For example, one editorial wrote, “Through it all, Oklahoma and its people endured. We persevere; we learn; we move on” (“I needed,” 2000, p. 9). The editorials spoke of the strength and kindness of Oklahomans, and of the hope they had for their city’s future. The fact that they did not mention other national tragic events affirms the idea that for the

citizens of Oklahoma City, the attacks were a threat to their lives and families, not just a threat to their national identity.

For the survivors and families of those who died and were injured in the Oklahoma City attack, some amount of closure was reached on May 11, 2001, when an unrepentant Timothy McVeigh was executed for his role in the bombing. The focus on domestic terrorism and militia groups in the United States that had been rampant since the siege at Waco came to an abrupt halt exactly four months after the execution, when the Oklahoma City bombing's standing as the worst case of terrorism in American history was replaced by the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

On the ten-year anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing, many newspapers ran editorials commenting on the event itself, the decade that had passed, and how much had changed in the intervening years. The editorials published ten years after the bombing told the story of a nation brutally attacked by one of its own and the damage that had been done, but also spoke of the healing that followed. The analysis of the editorials indicated that while it appeared that the national identity was threatened at the time of the bombing, the passing of time demonstrated that in fact, it was not. The passing of ten years without another domestic terrorist attack such as the Oklahoma City bombing was evidence that the bombing was an aberration perpetrated by someone who was not truly an American. Because it was a single event, and because the editorials could describe McVeigh as something other than a "real" American, this event did not significantly challenge or alter the national

identity in the long term. Immediately after the bombing, a hole was ripped in the national identity, but ten years after the event, the national identity has been reknitted.

The 9/11 attacks were mentioned in nearly every editorial published on the ten-year anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing. The occurrence of a much larger and more devastating attack seemed to change the country's perspective on the Oklahoma City bombing. As *The South Bend Tribune* described, "A lot has happened since April 19, 1995. For many, the memory—and the horror—of Oklahoma City has faded. Or been displaced." Referring to the editorial it published on the three-year anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing, the newspaper said: "In 1998, we wondered if the Oklahoma City tragedy ever truly would be over and concluded that it probably wouldn't be: 'That moment—9:02 a.m., April 19, 1995—changed forever the way America sees itself.' No one knew then what would happen at 8:46 a.m., Sept. 11, 2001" ("Let's never," 2005, p. B4). *The Chicago Sun-Times* said, "The atrocity, so shocking, so staggering at the time, has been eclipsed somewhat in the public mind by the horror of Sept. 11, 2001, whose shock was magnified by the toppling of a landmark, the deaths of thousands, and the fact that it took place in the media center of the world" ("An occasion to remember," 2005, p. 35). *The Tulsa World* said, "Somehow it is no easier being the site of the second worst terrorist act than it was when Oklahoma was the first" ("Remembering the Murrah," 2005, p. A14).

Most of the editorials, however, attempted to convince readers that while 9/11 was a greater disaster, we should not forget the importance of the Oklahoma City



bombing in American history. *The East Valley Tribune* of Scottsdale, Arizona, for example, said, “So much has happened in our nation during the past decade, so many threats to our security that have occupied our current attentions—and yet to forget or even downplay the tragedy of Oklahoma City 10 years ago remains inexcusable” (“Oklahoma City, 10 years later,” 2005). *The South Bend Tribune* said, “It is important for our national well-being that America remember the lessons of Oklahoma City” (“Let’s never,” 2005, p. B4) and *The Chicago Sun-Times* agreed, stating, “we need to remember Oklahoma City” (“An occasion to remember,” 2005, p. 35). The editorials noted that it was important for the nation to remember the Oklahoma City bombing, no matter what other events had rocked our nation. As the nation focused on external threats, such as those from al Qaeda and resulting from the war in Iraq, it was increasingly important to remind readers that threats to the nation’s identity and the values it held dear could also come from within.

The editorials in this set continued to distinguish the perpetrators of the bombing from other Americans, calling them “isolated madmen” who exacted “twisted revenge” (“Oklahoma City, 10 years later,” 2005). The notion of the insanity of McVeigh and Nichols dominated the coverage, as did the labeling of the two as “terrorists.” The terrorist label separated the perpetrators from normal Americans, firmly categorizing them as the “other.” *The South Bend Tribune* said “McVeigh put a new face on terrorism in America. He viewed himself as a young patriot and he surely looked the part. In truth, McVeigh was a demented murderer whose vision of America was so twisted that little children looked like the enemy to him” (“Let’s

never," 2005, p. B4). *The Union Leader* of Manchester, New Hampshire, said that "those who take up arms against this representative government in the name of liberty and justice do not carry on the legacy of our forefathers; they soil it" ("Terrorism and heroism," 2005, p. A8). By continuing to characterize McVeigh as not a "real" American, or as one who was insane, the editorials denied that his actions threatened the identity of the nation. Ten years after the event, the bombing was viewed as a tragedy that was painful and shocking, but no longer as something that tore a hole in the fabric of the national identity.

The editorials published 10 years after the Oklahoma City bombing made it clear that the national identity of the United States could not be altered by terrorists like McVeigh and his ilk. *The East Valley Tribune* said that the terrorists "wanted to intimidate and cow by taking innocent blood. They accomplished nothing. They were found, tried, convicted" and "Oklahoma City rebounded" ("Oklahoma City, 10 years later," 2005). The core national identity of the United States, and the many beliefs and values that made up that identity, could not be changed by a handful of madmen. *The Lawrence Journal-World* said, "No matter how divided we are by issues such as gay marriage, abortion or Terry Schiavo, Americans can put it all aside to come together. Oklahoma City helped remind us that in times of need, united we stand" (Zabolski, 2005). *The East Valley Tribune* described it in this way: "The people of Oklahoma City—exemplifying the Midwestern virtues of love of neighbor and community that are perhaps this country's best side—showed that side to the world in their quiet, firm resolve and a deep and abiding faith in the days and weeks

after the attacks.” It concluded by saying, “We Americans pause this week to honor the faith and resolve of the people of Oklahoma as symbols of the faith and resolve that makes us ourselves uniquely American” (“Oklahoma City, 10 years later,” 2005). Finally, *The Daily O’Collegian* of Oklahoma State University in Stillwater said that “in 10 years, despite all we have seen, we as a society never really change” (“10 years later,” 2005). Several of the editorials focused on how the national identity as a free society remained strong. *The Chicago Sun-Times* said that “America, for all its flaws and mistakes, remains the freest nation on earth. We vote, we run for office, we trade opinions in a free press, we take to the streets in protest” (“An occasion to remember,” 2005, p. 35).

At the same time that the editorials assured Americans that the national identity remained intact, they promised that life would go on—that the country was strong enough that even an event as shattering as the Oklahoma City bombing could not stop steady progress. The editorial published in *The Washington Post* touched upon this idea when discussing the national monument at the site of the bombing: “The 168 empty chairs, glowingly lit from below, stand in orderly rows in a green field where the Murrah building used to be. In this environment you can feel yourself breathe, and you can think, yes, life goes on” (Forgey, 2005, p. C01). The resiliency and determination of the American people were important characteristics that the editorials argued made the country such a proud and strong nation.

The editorials published on the five- and ten-year anniversaries of the Oklahoma City bombing made it clear that as more time passes after a tragic event,

the need for public memorialization of the event becomes less imperative. It also sheds light on the commonplace occurrence of past tragic events being eclipsed or superseded by more recent tragic events. As time passes, the need for memorialization of a tragic event shrinks geographically. For example, on the one-year anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing, editorials were published about the event in cities of all sizes from all over the country. However, by the 10-year anniversary, all but a handful of the editorials in LexisNexis for that date were published in cities in the Midwest, such as Oklahoma City, Tulsa, South Bend, Chicago, and Manhattan, Kansas. In other words, an event may start as a national tragic event, but as time passes, it becomes a regional tragic event, and may eventually downgrade to a local tragic event. This changing of the importance of the event is directly related to the emergence of other national tragic events, such as the Columbine school shootings, and to an even greater degree, the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The passing of time changes the way we view events such as this one in another way as well. As a significant amount of time passes, such as a decade in this case, the event is no longer viewed as an overt threat to our identity. Rather, the event is seen simply as a tragedy that killed innocent people and destroyed a part of the city, but in no way threatens or denies who we are as a nation.

### **Conclusion**

The newspaper editorials published on the day after the Oklahoma City bombing, as well as those published on the one-year, five-year, and ten-year anniversaries, demonstrate identity reconstruction following a national tragic event

caused by domestic forces. Beginning with the initial shock and despair at learning that the attack was committed by one of our own, to the sense of closure provided by the completed monument and ten-year anniversary, the editorials showed how a community can heal the wounds caused by national tragedy.

The initial set of editorials published the day after the bombing was filled with bewilderment at the idea that a city like Oklahoma City had been attacked. Many Americans had assumed that smaller cities in the heartland were safe from the risk of terrorism. The editorials compared the attack to terrorist attacks in other countries and to the World Trade Center bombing two years before. But the real focus of the editorials was the fear that swept through America: If a terrorist attack could happen in Oklahoma City, then absolutely no one was safe in America. This newfound sense of vulnerability was apparent in every editorial, as the nation began to come to terms with the idea that America was no longer immune from terrorism. This sense of vulnerability, of a loss of innocence, posed a threat to the national identity of the United States.

At the one-year mark, much more was known about the perpetrators and the victims of the attack. The news that the attack was committed by American citizens, born and raised in the Midwest, was devastating. The country was left to question how our culture could create a monster like McVeigh, shaking confidence in the national identity. The editorials worked to solve this problem by separating McVeigh from the rest of Americans, essentially rationalizing the threat to identity. The majority of the editorials explained his actions by calling him insane, while some

differentiated between “real” Americans and McVeigh. And nearly every editorial repeatedly labeled him a terrorist, which also helped separate him from everyday Americans. By separating McVeigh from other Americans, the editorials rationalized the threat to the national identity. If a crazy person committed the attack, then it followed that the American identity remained intact and the country would not have to engage in a frank conversation about the direction its society was taking.

At the ten-year mark, many of the wounds caused by the Oklahoma City bombing had been healed. The city had rebuilt and memorialized the attack, many of those who were directly affected by the bombing had moved on with their lives, and the nation had come to terms with the events of that day. The country had begun to understand and remember the Oklahoma City bombing not as a significant threat to the national identity, but simply as a terrible tragedy that had occurred in the heartland. Part of this understanding was due to the relative evil of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the reality of the war in Iraq—both of which had come to be much larger threats to the identity of the United States ten years after the Oklahoma City bombing. Ten years later, the national identity of the United States was no longer threatened by the Oklahoma City bombing.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **Identity Construction Following National Tragic Events Caused by External Forces—The Case of 9/11**

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, shocked the nation, grinding its financial, government, transportation, education, and telephone systems to a halt (Eichel, 2001, p. A27). Within hours, nearly every American was aware of the tragedy, although the true scope of the event would not be known for months or even years. As images of the destruction were plastered across televisions, magazines, and newspapers, and millions of words were published and spoken about the attacks, the narrative surrounding the events began to emerge.

In order to determine how the media work to shape the national identity following a national tragic event caused by external forces, this project examines a series of newspaper editorials from several periods of time. It begins with a group of editorials published the day after the terrorist attacks, September 12, 2001, then turns to editorials published one month after the attacks. These two groups of editorials provide an excellent view of how the media shaped the narrative of the event in the days immediately following the attacks, as well as how they worked to rectify the event with our national narrative and national identity. I then examine two more groups of editorials, from the one-year and five-year anniversaries of the attacks. These groups of editorials demonstrate the way in which the media continued to reconstruct the national identity as needed as time passed.

For each of the four groups, 20 editorials were selected from the LexisNexis database on the given date for a total sample of 80 editorials. For many of the sources, more than one editorial ran on each date, but only those editorials that were directly related to the 9/11 terrorist attacks were selected. The newspapers are from every region of the United States and are balanced between large, medium, and small markets. For example, editorials from the first group are from newspapers such as *USA Today*, *The Wyoming Tribune-Eagle*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, and *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. The overwhelming majority of the editorials were published without a byline, indicating that the sentiments expressed within were generally reflective of those of the editorial staff of the newspaper.

Each editorial was reviewed in search of several themes regarding how the American character was defined and whether the editorials attempted to construct/reconstruct the national identity of the United States in the days after or the anniversaries of the 9/11 attacks. Specifically, I looked for descriptions of the American character; indications that the editorials used language that worked to bind citizens to one another; whether the editorials attempted to rhetorically distinguish Americans or America from foreign nationals or nations; whether the editorials called upon shared values, symbols and icons, and traditions; whether the editorials worked to establish (or re-establish) societal norms for the proper way to think, feel and react to the situation; and whether the editorials attempted to fit the tragic event into the larger national narrative. In what follows, I discuss the key themes that emerged from the thematic analysis that are related to national identity.



### September 12, 2001 — Day One

While a handful of major newspapers opted to rush a special edition to print on the afternoon of September 11, 2001, the vast majority began their print coverage of the terrorist attacks the following day. Twenty newspaper editorials printed on September 12, 2001, were analyzed and were found to be remarkably similar in content and style. On the day after the most substantial terrorist attacks in American history, the editorials unanimously discussed the threat to the national identity posed by the attacks and they worked to reaffirm that identity for their readers.

The editorials published the day after the 9/11 attacks told a story of a nation shaken to its core. They expressed the shock, trauma, and grief caused by the events from the previous day, and wondered how something of this nature could happen in the United States. While the editorials normalized these emotions, at the same time, they worked to build up the damaged national identity of the United States. They reviewed many of the most positive characteristics of the American character, and promised that while much would change about day-to-day life in America, the very core of the American character would remain steadfast.

Each of the editorials took note of the tremendous shock to the national identity that the 9/11 attacks created. *The Charleston Gazette* referred to the “astonishment and horror that swept the country” and noted that “the whole nation felt sick, dismayed and bewildered” (“What causes,” p. P4A). *The New York Times* called the attack “unfathomable” and “unimaginable” (“The War Against America,” p. A26). This sense of bewilderment stemmed from the general belief that the country

was protected by oceans at each coast and the friendly neighbors to the north and south, but also by our identity as a strong and free people. In nearly every editorial, the shock was paired with grief. *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* began its editorial by saying, “The dead and wounded have not been counted. The depth of our loss has not been plumbed” (“One nation,” p. B6). *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* said that “Today is a day for grief, for mourning the hundreds of casualties” (“The morning after,” p. A26). And *The Boston Globe* began its editorial by saying, “The loss is unfathomable. Take one death, one family's pain, one rippling pool of grief, and multiply it by thousands. They become a city's loss, a region's tears, a country's terror” (“A war comes home,” p. A16). The full extent of the country's loss had not yet been measured, but the shock and grief were overwhelming.

Another theme that reflected the shock to identity was the judgment that the American way of life had changed forever. *The Herald of Rock Hill, S.C.*, stated, “as in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor, it is likely that life in America has changed forever” (“Worse than Pearl Harbor,” p. 4A). *The New York Times* said, “We look back at sunrise yesterday through pillars of smoke and dust, down streets snowed under with the atomized debris of the skyline, and we understand that everything has changed” (“The War Against America,” p. A26). *The Philadelphia Inquirer* noted, “In ways we can only begin to fathom, our sense of how we fit into this world has been changed forever. For now, all we know is that our collective lives, like the Manhattan skyline, will never be the same” (Eichel, 2001, p. A27). *USA Today* echoed these sentiments, beginning its editorial, “Days that live in infamy are supposed to be found

in dusty history books. Tuesday changed all that. It changed everything. Our world will never be the same” (Brady, 2001, p. 2A). This expectation that the way of life in America was changed forever by the 9/11 attacks was either directly or indirectly mentioned in every editorial examined. Only an event as immense as the 9/11 attacks could cause the national identity of the United States to be so thoroughly shaken.

The attacks came as a complete shock, leading the American people to feel a sense of bewilderment and overwhelming grief. Fearing that the nation’s way of life had forever changed, the editorials took steps to reaffirm the national identity and what it meant to be an American by outlining positive and negative characteristics of Americans and America. The editorials used language to bind Americans together, speaking of unity or a need to come together as a nation to face the threat of terrorism, while at the same time using language to separate America from other nations or groups of people. And finally, the editorials called upon shared values, traditions and symbols that worked to support the national identity, and established the proper or normal way to feel about and react to the terrorist attacks.

It is apparent in the editorials that tragic events such as this one help define what it means to be an American. *The Grand Rapid Press* summarized this sentiment when it said, “Moments like this are part of what defines America” (“Stunning, devastating,” p. A18). According to the editorials, the American character has several positive attributes which only become fully apparent in the face of a disaster. Many of the editorials described the American character as strong and resolute. *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* argued that “Bloody Tuesday revealed our nation’s remarkable

strength of character. It is a strength not derived from our wealth, nor our political might, nor our military prowess, but from one another" ("One nation," p. B6).

Similarly, *The San Diego Union-Tribune* said, "Americans, as they have at such moments in the past, responded resolutely to the incomprehensible terror" and noted that "if the perpetrators of this horrific onslaught of violence believe Americans are cowed, they are surely mistaken. Quite the opposite" ("An act of war," p. B8). These repeated statements about the strength of Americans helped to reassure people who were afraid that America's character would not be enough to pull the nation through the disaster. In addition, these statements were a message to the country's enemies, in that they forcibly argued that terrorist attacks would not be enough to change the underlying character of the nation.

Additional characteristics of the American national identity identified by many editorials were the American values of a rational response, law, and order. For example, *The Bismarck Tribune* commented that the anger that Americans felt would eventually "be cooled by our belief in law and justice" ("Editorial," p. B6). *The San Diego Union-Tribune* described the scene on the day of the attacks, noting that "scores of volunteers flocked to local blood banks, lining up around the block, to assist the victims on the other side of the continent. That was a characteristically American response, to do something practical and useful in a moment of crisis" ("An act of war," p. B8). *The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* stated that "Already the inexpressible anger felt by every citizen of the Republic begins to concentrate itself in a cold, useful, organized fury. We will bury the dead, tend the injured, solace the

mourners, and clear away the only material losses” (“September 11, 2001,” p. B8). Thus, the editorials described Americans as respecting rational action and order in the wake of a crisis.

In general, Americans were described as people committed to freedom and justice who will not be bullied by any other group or nation. As *The South Bend Tribune* argued, “Underneath the partisan politics, MTV videos, and moronic movies, we Americans are a united and sturdy bunch of folks. We are tied by a common resolve for freedom, a common commitment to justice, and common desire for peace. When our resolve is attacked, we rise to the challenge” (Toth, 2001, p. B6). All together, the American identity was described as one of strength and resolve, a belief in rational thinking and action, and a commitment to freedom and justice.

While the majority of American characteristics outlined by the editorials were positive, they were not entirely so. Several of the editorials touched upon the American proclivity to jump to conclusions (and therefore, take action against) those who are assumed to have committed wrongdoing, or those who are similar in some way to the villains. *The Grand Rapid Press*, for example, told readers that “The nation must not now widen the circle of tragedy by making victims of America’s Arab and Muslim citizens” (“Stunning, devastating,” p. A18). The editorial drew upon a comparison to other tragic events to make its point clear: “At other times, notably the 1995 bombing of the Alfred Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Arab visitors to America were singled out for questioning and harassed. Arab-Americans, then and at other times, were shunned or suspected as though they

somehow had a hand in criminality” (p. A18). *The Herald* of Rock Hill, S.C., warned that “There is also a danger that, in our frustration, citizens will be tempted to strike out at anyone of Middle Eastern descent. People need to differentiate between terrorists and any specific ethnic or religious group” (“Worse than Pearl Harbor,” p. 4A). *The Herald* also reminded readers of the American treatment of Japanese Americans following the Pearl Harbor bombings, stating that “If there was any lesson worth learning from the experience of Pearl Harbor, it is that this nation sinned mightily against Japanese American citizens by imprisoning thousands of citizens whose only crime was that they looked and sounded different from the majority.” It then implored, “Please, let’s not make the same mistake by victimizing Arab Americans” (“Worse than Pearl Harbor,” p. 4A). The fact that several of the editorials warned against the same reaction to the terrorist attacks is striking.

Editorials also warned about the importance of only using a military response against the perpetrators of 9/11. *The Wyoming Tribune-Eagle* cautioned, “What the Bush Administration should not do is jump to conclusions. Those responsible for this horrendous attack want this country to respond in a knee-jerk reaction. This would be wrong” (“Terrorism attack,” p. A13). Other editorials noted that while American citizens want a swift and forceful response to the terrorist attacks, this swiftness should be tempered with great care.

And finally, several editorials warned against the American tendency to turn inward after such an attack. *The Florida Times-Union* noted that “Indeed, one danger now—and probably an intent of the terrorists—is that the nation will overreact and

become a frightened, insular society, living virtually under martial law” (“Tragedy beyond infamy,” p. B6). *The Intelligencer Journal* of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, argued, “we urge the authorities to guard against an overreaction, especially as it applies to American rights and liberties. Yes, greater security is important, but our open society is what makes America so great and terrorists so envious” (“Day of infamy,” p. B6). *The Akron Beacon Journal* noted that President Bush must find a way to bring the villains to justice in such a way “that leaves Americans secure in their daily lives and yet protects, too, the liberties they cherish. To compromise those values would merely add to the destruction of this ghastly deed” (“Day of infamy,”). And *The Boston Globe* noted that “The United States has come far from the days when the FBI spied on citizens with impunity. This tragedy should not be used as a pretext for an erosion of essential American liberties or the scapegoating of foreigners” (“A war comes home,” p. A16). It is an interesting commentary on the culture of the United States that so many of the editorials warned against the removal or lessening of American civil liberties in the face of an external attack.

Another way in which the editorials reaffirmed the national identity was by using language to bind citizens to one another. Some declared that Americans were unified in the face of the attacks, such as the editorial from *The Florida Times-Union*, which said, “There were no Democrats or Republicans, liberals or conservatives yesterday—only Americans resolutely joined in search of justice” (“Tragedy beyond infamy,” p. B6). *The Grand Rapid Press* said that “We are united in common shock at the assault on human life” (“Stunning, devastating,” p. A18). *The San Diego*

*Union-Tribune* noted that “More than anything, the events of Sept. 11, 2001, have united the country in a common stand against this global evil” (“An act of war,” p. B8). *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* structured the entire editorial around the concept of unity, stating “We are one nation in shock,” “We are one nation in grief,” “We are one nation in action,” “We are one nation in resolve,” and “We are one nation in outrage” (“One nation,” p. B6). The majority of editorials mentioned unity in some form, underlining the importance of circling the wagons in the face of a threat from an external source.

Another method of binding American citizens together is through recalling past events that the nation faced together. While nearly every editorial did this to some extent, this concept was especially apparent in the editorial published by *The Saint Paul Pioneer Press*. It began: “The parents of the baby boom generation remember where they were on the morning of Dec. 7, 1941, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. The baby boomers remember where they were the morning of Nov. 22, 1963, when John Kennedy was assassinated” (Hanners & Hughlett, 2001, p. S13). The editorial then makes the case that the children of the baby boomers “have their own Day of Infamy, their own Dealey Plaza” (p. S13). Editorials such as this one rehashed old national traumas, noting how we came together in those times to overcome, and how we will do so with this tragedy as well.

At the same time as the editorials worked to bind American citizens together in the face of the tragic event, they also used language that distinguished Americans and America from other citizens and countries. *The Grand Rapid Press* argued that



Americans are categorically different from their enemies: “America stands apart from its enemies in the world for whom human life is of so little consequence” (“Stunning, devastating,” p. A18). Many of the editorials distinguished between Americans and the heartless terrorists who had no qualms about killing the innocent. *The Florida Times-Union* argued that America must use as much force as necessary to strike back at the terrorists, as “terrorists only understand one thing—brute force” and added that “there can never be peaceful coexistence between terrorists and the civilized world. One must be destroyed for the other to survive” (“Tragedy beyond infamy,” p. B6). And *The South Bend Tribune* described the enemy as a “faceless, unknown cabal of cowards, murderers and fanatics. Their attack on civilians was a disgusting example of their disregard for life” (Toth, 2001, p. B6). Thus, the editorials distinguished Americans as different—and superior to—other groups.

Other editorials distinguished the United States from other countries by noting the historical lack of terrorism in America. *The Herald* said that “other nations have lived with the constant threat of terrorism, and in many ways it transforms the tenor of daily life. This is something new for the United States, where we are used to being able to move about freely without fear of suicide bombers, chemical weapons or other forms of terrorism” (“Worse than Pearl Harbor,” p. 4A). Similarly, *The Las Vegas Review-Journal* observed that the “mindset of America” is that “terrorism is something that happens overseas, in Israel, in Lebanon, in Northern Ireland even, where war-ravaged countries fight battles that we’ll never understand.” The writer stated “Only in movies does America suffer terrorist attacks, and even then the

Americans always win in the end” (Sebelius, 2001, p. 7B). This editorial, as did many others, spoke to the “innocence” of Americans—that they had not known terrorism such as this before, and that this perceived safety had effectively separated them from the realities of other nations.

Nearly all of the editorials drew upon a shared value system and traditions, or discussed important symbols of the nation or national culture. Many noted the symbolic nature of the buildings that were targeted by al Qaeda, specifically the economic and military centers of the United States. *The Saint Paul Pioneer Press*, for example, noted that the World Trade Center towers were the “110-story symbols of this country’s financial dominance” and that “New York City represents the zenith and nadir of America rolled into one” (p. S13). One value mentioned repeatedly was justice. In fact, one editorial noted that this American value is a prime reason the 9/11 terrorist attacks were such an affront to our culture: “The terror of Sept. 11, 2001, leaves us frustrated because we are a country accustomed to instant diplomacy, swift justice and rapid response,” but because the attacks were “evil without a return address,” there was no possibility of quick justice (Hanners & Hughlett, 2001, p. S13). *The Bismarck Tribune* announced that the “perpetrators will be found and brought to justice” and that “America will be committed to this cause” (“Editorial,” p. 6A). The call for justice was repeated throughout this group of editorials.

Many of the editorials echoed the words that President Bush delivered on the evening of 9/11, noting the American love for freedom. *The South Bend Tribune* said: “America. It is strong, passionate, and freedom-loving. For Americans, freedom

isn't merely a word; it is a national credo. Liberty is a national calling. We are what we purport to be—the land of the free and the home of the brave” (Toth, 2001, p. B6). *The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* said, “Across the harbor from the twin towers that are no more, away from the screeching sirens and hospital emergency rooms, the Statue of Liberty still holds her torch aloft, and if you look closely, you can see the eyes narrow, the great hand clench into a mighty fist: Liberty Aroused” (“September 11, 2001,” p. B8). Thus, the editorials reaffirmed the national identity of the United States by calling upon shared values such as justice and freedom.

To aid in reaffirming the national identity, many of the editorials attempted to place the events of 9/11 into the national narrative of the United States. This narrative, as depicted by the editorials published the day after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, was of a country that had experienced terrible tragedies in its past, all of which Americans overcame through their bravery and sense of justice. But these tragedies were just that—in the past—and therefore, Americans in recent years believed they had reached a state of relative safety and normalcy. Many of the editorials described this state as one of innocence, which the 9/11 attacks destroyed. *The Herald* of Rock Hill, South Carolina, for example, said that “we have collectively lost our innocence, our confidence that the nation’s security apparatus—the FBI, the CIA, the military and other law enforcement agencies—could protect us. We have lost the sense that it can’t happen here” (“Worse than Pearl Harbor,” p. 4A). The editorials used a variety of methods to fit the 9/11 attacks into the national narrative of the United States.

Perhaps the most effective method of placing the tragic event within the national narrative is describing other events that we have faced as a nation and survived. Mentioning prior tragedies does at least two important things: It contextualizes the event in our national narrative and provides reassurance about the future. The editorial published by *The Florida Times-Union*, as did many others, repeatedly referred to the Pearl Harbor bombings on December 7, 1941 ("Tragedy beyond infamy,"). In addition, it mentioned other terrorist attacks, including the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 and the World Trade Center bombing in 1993. *The Herald* took a similar path, comparing the attacks to the Pearl Harbor bombings, the Oklahoma City bombing, and the previous World Trade Center bombing as well ("Worse than Pearl Harbor,"). This naming and rehashing of past tragedies helped prove to the readers that the nation will survive this tragedy as well.

The editorials published on the day after the 9/11 terrorist attacks told a story of a nation that had been grievously harmed—physically, emotionally, and financially. The citizens of the United States were shocked, outraged, and filled with grief over the events of the day before, leading to a sense that the national identity was damaged. The editorials published the next day expressed and validated these emotions, but at the same time, they worked to reaffirm the national identity in several ways. The editorials made it clear that while many of the details of life in America would change, the values that the United States held dear would never waver. In the face of a national tragic event that shook the nation to its core, the editorials reaffirmed the national identity by reviewing its many positive

characteristics, by binding Americans to one another, by attempting to separate Americans from other people, and by retelling, and adjusting, the national narrative. Thus, this group of editorials demonstrated the threat to the national identity that the 9/11 attacks appeared to be, and began the long and challenging work of identity reaffirmation that a tragedy of that magnitude required.

### **October 11, 2001 — One-Month Anniversary**

By the one-month anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, the reaffirmation of the national identity was in full swing. It had been determined that Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda were responsible for the tragedy, and bin Laden had released a video in which he praised the attacks. The United States government had just completed negotiations with five major news agencies to convince them to no longer broadcast bin Laden's videos in full, fearing that they included coded messages to al Qaeda followers. The bombing campaign in Afghanistan had begun a handful of days before the one-month anniversary, and the nation was uneasy about the anthrax-laden letters being mailed from Florida. As for Ground Zero, the pile of rubble was still smoking, and authorities believed that between 5,500 and 6,000 people were killed in the attacks, approximately double the final number of casualties. As with the first group, 20 editorials discussing the events of 9/11 were analyzed.

The editorials in the second set told the story of a nation under attack from dark forces. The nation, long believed to be invulnerable to this type of attack, was now at war with a group of people who were fundamentally opposed to all that Americans valued. The editorials argued that while much had changed over the

course of the preceding month, the innate character of Americans could not be suppressed. The group of editorials published one month after the terrorist attacks used very similar language as the first set to define for their readers what it meant to be an American, focusing on their strength and resolve, their tendency to take action in the face of a tragedy, and their commitment to freedom and justice. The second group of editorials was much less emotional than the first, focusing on the business of recovery: advice on how to find those responsible, lists of what had changed and what remained the same, and strong assurances that the American identity could survive this attack—and much worse—without damage.

Several of the editorials touched on the idea that the nation had believed that it was immune to such events, and that the 9/11 attacks caused a great awakening about security. *The Washington Times* began its editorial: “One month ago today, America learned that it was not invulnerable. America learned to fear, and this generation learned for the first time what it was to experience a major attack by foreign forces on American soil” (“God bless America,” p. A24). *The Tulsa World* said that the terrorists “have, for the moment, all but destroyed our sense of security” (“Never forget,”). *The Post-Standard* of Syracuse, New York, began by saying: “On Sept. 11, Americans learned a valuable lesson: We are all vulnerable, we are all interdependent, we are all part of the problems we face and part of the solution” (“Will lessons,”). And *The Philadelphia Inquirer* said, “We’re learning that some people hate us, and not in the way that, say, people hate the Dallas Cowboys. It’s real. It’s been true for some time. It’s not bound to change” (Heller, 2001, p. D01).

The feelings of shock and bewilderment that were so apparent in the first group of editorials were replaced by feelings of vulnerability in the second set. The editorials used this newfound sense of vulnerability as a platform to reaffirm and rebuild the national identity.

Much like the first group of editorials, the editorials published on the one-month anniversary of the attacks reaffirmed the national identity of the United States by calling upon shared values, traditions, and symbols. Many editorials discussed the feeling of patriotism pervading the nation. *The Washington Times* noted that after the attacks, “America began a rendezvous with patriotism, a love of country and fellow citizens” (“God bless America,” p. A24). Others discussed the resiliency of Americans and their ability to keep doing what was important, even in the face of uncertainty and grief. For example, the editorial published in *The Columbian* from Vancouver, Washington, began by saying, “Americans are resilient, it’s true.” And finally, many of the editorials noted the generosity of Americans, in their donations of blood, money, and other goods following the attacks. Several editorials made the case that the attacks brought out the very best in people. *The Post-Standard* of Syracuse, New York, discussed the generosity apparent in the hours after the attack, and then turned to the following days: “Ordinary people throughout the state, city and country lined up to donate blood, money, food and personal skills to the rescue-and-relief effort” (“Will lessons,” p. A13). Many of the editorials from this group noted that as a nation, the priorities had shifted. Instead of valuing celebrity gossip and the latest fashions, Americans were realizing that their families, friendships, and

communities were the most important. Flag sales were at an all-time high, a powerful symbol of support for the United States ("9/11: 45 questions," 2002).

On the day after the attacks, the editorials repeatedly called for Americans to bind together in the face of the tragedy. One month later, calling for unity was no longer needed, as it was apparent that Americans were unified after the terrorist attacks. While a handful of the editorials still mentioned unity, in general, the editorials in the second group no longer explicitly focused on binding the American people together. Instead of calling for unity, the editorials made references to common experiences and common feelings about 9/11. For example, *The Columbian* of Vancouver, Washington, said "While we still feel the Sept. 11 sting, and while the words 'Twin Towers' can make us cry upon hearing them, even if we are in the middle of cooking dinner, watching football or driving to work, we are in most ways recovered, bouncing back" (Hovde, 2001, p. C7). Many of the editorials used similar language, describing what Americans as a group were feeling—assuring readers that all Americans felt similarly and thus were bound together. As in the first group of editorials, the second group distinguished Americans from other people and did so even more emphatically. The majority of the editorials dichotomized the players in the 9/11 attacks between abject good and evil. *The Boston Herald*, for example, began its editorial by saying, "A month ago we saw the havoc that pure evil can wreak. We saw its victims and its path of destruction. Now we see its face and hear its words" in the videotape of Osama bin Laden ("In the face of evil," p. 036). *The San Diego Union-Tribune* characterized the terrorists' actions in this way: "We're



still picking our dead out of the still-smoldering rubble from the most cowardly attack in human history. Worse, thousands of bodies of murdered souls will never be found, so evil and inhuman was this assault on our nation” (“We can't let panic," p. B12).

President George W. Bush named Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda as the culprits on September 15, 2001, and named the Taliban of Afghanistan as co-conspirators on September 20, 2001. Unsurprisingly, nearly every editorial mentioned bin Laden by name, describing him as “evil” (Wrenn, 2001, p. 4), his philosophy as “false and twisted” (“Steadfast friends,”), and his followers as “sick-minded” (“We can't let panic," p. B12). The editorials clearly distinguished between “the greatest nation in the history of humankind” (“We can't let panic," p. B12) whose leaders were “insightful, knowledgeable, intelligent and forthright” (Wrenn, 2001, p. 4) and bin Laden, whose tactics were “heinous” (“We can't let panic," p. B12) and whose followers had moved from “fanaticism to barbarism” (“Never forget,”). Thus, there was a clear dichotomy between the sides of good and evil in the editorials. This dichotomy worked to bind the American people together while clearly distinguishing its citizens from other people, helping to reaffirm the national identity.

One of the most dramatic differences between the first and second groups of editorials was the complete lack of reference to other national tragedies in the second group. Nearly every editorial in the first group mentioned Pearl Harbor, the first World Trade Center bombing, the Kennedy assassination, and/or the Oklahoma City bombing. None of the 20 editorials in the second group mentioned any of these attacks. There was no longer a need to compare 9/11 to past tragedies because it was

no longer novel—citizens understood the breadth and importance of the day’s events without using other national tragic events as points of reference. The editorials did, however, continue to place the tragic event within the national narrative. A few talked about President Bush’s place in history; for example, *USA Today* compared his presidency to his father’s and to Franklin Roosevelt’s presidencies (“A month of crisis,” p. 14A). The editorials attempted to establish how this crisis would fit into the nation’s history. For example, *The Daily Egyptian* of Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, Illinois, commented, “September 11, 2001, was a moment in time in which history will view events as before and after. It has already seemed like an eternity” (“30 days later,”). The majority of the editorials used a similar construction, in which they argued that things would never be the same, and that this would forever be known as the post-9/11 world. However, at the same time that the editorials maintained that nothing would be the same, they continued to argue powerfully that the American identity would remain steadfast.

This notion of change was apparent in nearly every editorial. *The Lancaster New Era* of Pennsylvania said, “Yes, people say, their lives have changed in the past weeks. Parents hold tighter to their children. Strangers look at each other with new eyes, shaded by suspicion. There is a restlessness, a feeling of uncertainty” (Stauffer, 2001, p. A1). *The Denver Post* said, “A month ago, economists still argued that recession was too strong a word. Americans still thought that only Hollywood could blow up the Pentagon. Coloradans still figured that in the grand scheme of things, growth was a serious problem” (Carman, 2001, p. B01). The editorial named several

other issues that people believed were important prior to the 9/11 attacks. And finally, Southern Illinois University's *Daily Egyptian* said, "In just one month, 30 unbelievable days, the entire world was changed forever" ("30 days later,"). The belief that everything had permanently changed in America (and in some cases, the world) was just as apparent in the second group of editorials as it was in the first.

At the same time that the editorials argued that everything had changed, the overwhelming majority of editorials in this group focused on moving on as a nation. Many touched on the sense of normalcy and routine that was beginning to reappear, while others argued that we needed to move on with our lives. This helped to reaffirm the national identity because it demonstrated that even an event as immense and devastating as the 9/11 attack was not enough to change the substance of America. *The San Diego Union-Tribune* said, "some sense of normalcy has returned. People are going to work, watching baseball and football on TV, and taking in a movie on Saturday night" ("We can't let panic," p. B12). Similarly, *The Lancaster New Era* said, "Yes, Osama bin Laden has touched all of us. But people get up and go to work and to school. They get their hair cut. They take a walk with their children. They go shopping. They get their mail from their mail box" (Stauffer, 2001, p. A1). *The Pasadena Star-News* asked readers to go about their normal lives: "It is imperative that citizens maintain their daily routines as much as possible, because the most potent weapon in the terrorist's arsenal is paralyzing dread" ("An anniversary,"). This focus on routine is interesting, as in effect, it established "getting back to the norm" as the norm for the country. The editorials normalized, and in a

way, gave permission to their readers to start worrying about, and enjoying, the little things again.

In the initial set of editorials, a significant number commented on the American tendency to jump to conclusions, as well as the tendency to hold innocent people accountable for the actions of people of the same religion or ethnicity. In the editorials published one month later, these two characteristics of Americans were no longer a concern. In fact, *The Oregonian* said, “Think back, to the first day when many feared that superpower America would lash out too quickly at its terrorist enemies, furiously and blindly striking back, killing many innocent people. That didn’t happen” (“Thirty days after,” p. B10). It is interesting—and unexpected—that the editorials published one month after the attack were, as a whole, more positive about the American identity than those published the day following the attack.

However, one negative characteristic, the danger of limiting liberty, was not only still present in the editorials published one month later, but was intensified. For example, *The Chicago Sun-Times* noted that “Victory will come when we enhance our security without damaging our essential liberties. If the price of preventing terrorist attacks becomes the loss of our way of life, then the terrorists will have won. We must find a balance between freedom and deterrence” (“Looking forward,” p. 35). *The Orange County Register* said, “Heightened vigilance is to be expected and is important. But let us not forget that that among the values assaulted by the terrorists are freedom of speech and the right to be odd, different or unusual .... A strong America cannot only tolerate impertinent questions, it will be stronger through

allowing and even encouraging them” (“Can we have,”). Over the course of the month following the 9/11 attacks, the concern about civil liberties increased rather than decreased along with other negative characteristics.

Taken together, the editorials were much less emotional than the first group of editorials published the day after the 9/11 attacks. The first group repeatedly mentioned the grief, fear, anger, and shock that the writers and readers felt following the attacks, and many used the entire space to discuss the various feelings that the attacks aroused. The editorials published one month later, however, only briefly discussed emotion. Most used only one or two sentences to note that America was still mourning, or that the attacks shocked us all, or some similar sentiment. This group of editorials was much more matter-of-fact, discussing the details of the attack on Afghanistan, or listing the ways in which things had changed, or offering advice on how to respond to bin Laden.

The editorials published one month after the 9/11 attacks continued the narrative that began on that fateful day. The attacks caused a tremendous shock to the identity of the nation, and in the following weeks, the editorials worked to reaffirm the various positive components of the American character. The editorials made the argument that while we believed everything had changed forever after the attacks, in fact, the country was beginning to resume its old patterns just 30 days later, largely due to the strength of the American identity and values. The editorials made it clear that the national identity of the United States demanded a unified response against the

enemy, a resumption of our normal lives, and an allegiance to the nation's values and beliefs.

### **September 11, 2002 — One-Year Anniversary**

The terrorist attack of 9/11 was universally recognized as a national event that needed to be memorialized and ritualized. The first anniversary, after just one month, was held on October 11, 2001, at Ground Zero, as the pile of rubble continued to smoke. The next was held on March 11, 2002, but as Imber-Black (2004) argued, “the 6-month anniversary was an invention of the media; we are not a culture that typically marks a half-year anniversary of a death.” He described the one-year anniversary more poignantly as “a date that marked the passage of one full cycle of the seasons, holidays, birthdays, and simple day-to-day living without lost loved ones.” On the one-year anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the airwaves and newspapers were filled with coverage of the attacks, the anniversary commemorations, and the year in between. In the year following the attacks, the bombing campaign had continued in Afghanistan, the person(s) responsible for the anthrax letters had not been found, and President Bush had begun seriously discussing the possibility of waging war in Iraq. Domestically, the financial sector was still shaken from the attacks, and several companies had collapsed on the tails of corporate financial scandals.

The analysis of 20 editorials published on September 11, 2002, again found a remarkable amount of cohesion as the editorials worked to reaffirm the national identity and fit the tragedy into the national narrative. On the one-year anniversary of

the 9/11 attacks, the editorials told the story of a nation pausing to reflect on the greatest attack in its history: what occurred that day, how we responded as a nation, and how the event changed—or was unable to change—the identity of the United States. In addition, the editorials served as a warning, in that they cautioned against actions and ideas that would steer the country away from its core values and identity.

The one-year anniversary of 9/11 was a time for reflection for the American people. The editorials again mentioned all that had occurred in the time since the event, but rather than just mentioning the passage of time like the second group of editorials, this group noted how the anniversary itself affected the American people. *The Albuquerque Journal*, for example, called the one-year anniversary “traumatic” (“Sept. 11 rekindles pain,” 2002, p. A8), partly because of the media’s decision to replay many of the disturbing images of 9/11 on the anniversary and the days leading up to it. Other editorials called for readers to participate in the commemorative events held on September 11, 2002. *The Connecticut Post*, for example, said “Memorial events are scheduled throughout the nation and region during this week. Attend an event. In addition, take time and pause in thought or prayer to remember those who died or were injured and their relatives and loved ones” (“One year later,” 2002). The editorials reflected on the 9/11 attacks, on how the anniversary was being marked, and on the intervening year.

Unlike the second group of editorials, the editorials published a year after the attacks used much of their space to describe the depth of the grief that was felt throughout the nation. *The Chattanooga Times Free Press* said, “We will mourn, as

we should, on this dreadful anniversary day. We will lament the thousands of lives lost and changed, and grieve for the innocence surrendered” (Hasden, 2002). *The Omaha World Herald* said, “a year ago, fanatical terrorists inflicted a hurt on America the likes of which it had never sustained before” (“Don't forget, don't falter,” 2002, p. 6B). *The Star Tribune* of Minneapolis began its editorial by saying, “Not a soul alive can forget the morning the towers fell—the incomprehensible horror of it, the crushed-heart feeling that would not be banished” (“One year,” 2002, p. 12A). It is an interesting development that this third set of editorials expressed much more grief and despair than the second set, even though much more time had passed after the initial event.

This need for reflection was also demonstrated by the ways in which the editorials worked to include the attacks in the national narrative. The editorial published by *The New York Times* said: “What we suffered on that day will be an important part of the story of this country. But in the long run it will not be as important a part of the story as what we choose to do in response to what we suffered” (“9/11/02: America enduring,” 2002, p. A32). *The Winston-Salem Journal* expressed a similar sentiment by saying, “time does heal, at least superficially, and now Sept. 11 is becoming a part of the nation’s collective memory and history, like the day Pearl Harbor was bombed or the day President Kennedy was shot” (“Sept. 11, 2002,” 2002). *The Chicago Sun-Times* said, “Our enemies attacked us not for what we have done but for what we are. And because of the attacks, we are even more intensely what we are, a nation defined by our unum, not our pluribus” (Will, 2002, p.



35). The editorial continued by discussing the nation's seal, the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution. This discussion not only fit the 9/11 attacks and the rationale behind them into the greater national narrative of the United States, but also promoted the belief that the innate character of Americans had not changed since the country's founding.

One of the most powerful themes running through this set of editorials was the idea that everything had changed, but at the same time, the country's most fundamental values had not wavered. There was, in essence, a new normal in America. *The Albuquerque Journal* noted that while "it's a new world for all," at the same time, "the return-to-normal of our crass popular culture is a measure of our resilience and of the failure of the terrorists to break our spirit." *The Houston Chronicle* echoed this sentiment, saying "Somewhere between 'The world has changed forever' and 'My, how quickly things got back to the way they were before' is an altered reality with which the nation is still trying to come to terms" ("Sept. 11: Single year," 2002, p. A22). *The Christian Science Monitor* listed several aspects of American life that had changed: "Almost all say that their families are more important to them now than before 9/11 .... More young people are choosing to attend college near home. More than half of Americans have changed their spending habits" (Knickerbocker, 2002, p. 01). Unlike the editorials published one day and one month after the attacks, this set argued that while much had changed, much more had remained the same.

Many of the editorials focused on the strength and resilience of the American people, important components of the national identity. *The St. Petersburg Times*, for example, said that after the 9/11 attacks, though Americans were “still in shock, we nonetheless donated our money, rallied and showed our resolve. We overcame our differences to help New York City rebuild and to strike a heavy military blow against our enemies. We created, at least temporarily, a more tolerant nation that rediscovered common interests. Civility returned to everyday life” (“A renewal of spirit,” 2002, p. 14A). The editorial published in *The Tulsa World* echoed this sentiment: “Our resiliency, which is part of our Americanism, helps us go on” (DelCour, 2002, p. A14). *The Washington Post* also mentioned the nation’s resiliency: “The attacks revealed resiliency as much as vulnerability. It is not only that the country’s spirit wasn’t broken. Just as impressive, many critical support systems didn’t buckle” (Samuelson, 2002, p. A17). While nearly every editorial discussed the nation’s resiliency, some argued that we already had it while others encouraged Americans to be resilient. Focusing on the resiliency of the nation demonstrated to readers that while the United States took a terrific blow on 9/11, the innate character of the nation immediately recovered. The nation—its people, systems, and identity—was strong enough that even an attack as traumatic and devastating as 9/11 could not destroy it.

The editorials continued to bind Americans together, though to a lesser extent than those published the day after the terrorist attacks. *The New York Times* said that America is “bound together by things that transcend emotion, by principles and laws,

by ideals of freedom and justice that need constant articulation, perhaps especially when America's virtues seem most self-evident" ("9/11/02: America enduring," 2002, p. A32). *The Times-Picayune* of New Orleans explicitly called for unity among the citizenry, saying "A year ago today, terrorists caught us disengaged and disoriented. The only response is to plan for the worst, work together to bring about the best and meet whatever challenges face us" ("The rising," 2002, p. A14). *The Wyoming Tribune-Eagle* said that "The attacks solidified this country's willingness to stand together and stand tall" ("Sept. 11, 2002," 2002, p. A10). While the earlier groups of editorials made unity a centerpiece of their editorials, the discussions of unity in this group, while widespread, were less urgent. This is likely because a year after the attacks, the need for unity had taken a backseat to greater concerns facing the nation, such as the impending war in Iraq and the lack of progress in finding bin Laden.

The editorials again called upon shared American values, such as the freedom of speech, democracy, patriotism, and others to describe the American identity. Many of the editorials spent a few sentences or paragraphs outlining what Americans value. The value of freedom was cited the most. *The Chattanooga Times Free Press*, for example, said that "The United States is and was vulnerable precisely because of the exceptional freedoms it espouses and allows. The freedom to move, to speak out and to live one's life under generally nonrestrictive rules infuriates those who not only reject our way of life but see it as a threat to their own narrow-minded bigotry and utterly false sense of order" (Hasden, 2002, p. B6). *The San Francisco Chronicle*

warned that “we must be careful not to cede the liberties and rights that are the bedrock principles of our democracy” (“9-11-01: Impact,” 2002, p. A18). The shared values that were called upon the most in this set of editorials were the notions of freedom and democracy.

The editorials published on the one-year anniversary of the 9/11 attacks focused on the need for reflection and the question of what exactly had changed. But there was also one additional thread running through the editorials— a growing concern that the country’s identity was still threatened, both from external sources like al Qaeda, but also from within. To face the external threat, the editorials advocated punishing those who were against the American way of life. At the end of *The Chicago Sun-Times’* appeal to fight our enemies, the editorial said, “Sometimes, gunpowder does smell good because civilization—especially the highest, ours—is not inevitable. So we fight” (Will, 2002, p. 35). *The San Diego Union-Tribune* distinguished between the United States and Islamic countries on several levels, including the fact that “half their population, the women, cannot reach their full potentials,” and that “children, particularly of poor families (those of the wealthy are either sent abroad for education or are enrolled in Western style secular schools) get only religious training in the Madrasas (religious schools) instead of a broad education” (Gupta, 2002). *The Tulsa World* argued that, “The Osama bin Ladens and the Saddam Husseins try to distract their people away from what these regimes and radicals do not value: freedom, education, equality, modernity and choice” (DelCour, 2002, p. A14). *The Winston-Salem Journal* said, “The terrorists struck on one level

because they hate, envy and fear this nation's wealth and power. But on a deeper level, they struck because they hate and feel threatened by what the United States stands for fundamentally: democracy, freedom, individual worth and liberty, human rights, progress" ("Sept. 11, 2002," 2002, p. A10). The editorials warned that it was our national identity that the terrorists hated most.

However, there was also growing concern that America's identity could be damaged through internal forces, most importantly through the policies of the Bush Administration. The majority of the editorials in this third group mentioned a threat to civil liberties. *The Omaha World Herald* argued that the First Amendment must be protected because "any groundswell to give up rights because of last year's scurrilous and cowardly attacks represents a victory for the terrorists" ("Don't forget, don't falter," 2002, p. 6B). *The Albuquerque Journal* said, "We are uneasy at the suspension of constitutional guarantees, secret arrests and secret trials embraced by the administration. While we are willing to embrace extraordinary measures to thwart terrorists, we are forced to contemplate the possibility that terrorism could destroy from within the very freedoms that terrorists attacked" ("Sept. 11 rekindles pain," 2002, p. A8). *The Chattanooga Times Free Press* noted how important it was that we eradicate al Qaeda, but that "the challenge is to undertake that necessary task without compromising the constitutional rights that remain a beacon to the oppressed of the world" (Hasden, 2002, p. B6). The editorials explicitly warned against any policies that would constrain civil liberties.

The editorials were also concerned about the imminent war in Iraq, and many implied that the war went against the values inherent in the American identity. Without exception, those editorials that mentioned Iraq questioned the wisdom of involving the United States in that battle. *The San Francisco Chronicle*, for example, said, “the Bush administration appears determined to ‘expand’ the war into Iraq—though it has yet to show any link between Saddam Hussein and Sept. 11. A pre-emptive strike against Iraq threatens to erode international cooperation and to undermine the global campaign against terrorism” (“9-11-01: Impact,” 2002, p. A18). Others were more circumspect, such as *The South Bend Tribune* which said, “I know we have a right to defend ourselves, but how far should we extend our protective shield and sword into the world?” (Moor, 2002, p. D1). *The St. Petersburg Times* said, “Before we have finished one war, we are being told that another is necessary. With little explanation, the target has shifted from an invisible threat to a handy one, but with no promise that our entanglement in a difficult part of the world will end” (“A renewal of spirit,” 2002, p. 14A).

In addition to questioning Bush’s actions in the year since the 9/11 attacks, many of the editorials criticized his inaction on another front. A great number of the editorials mentioned that in past crises, Americans were asked to sacrifice in some way, but following the 9/11 attacks, no such call was issued. *The Oregonian* for example, said, “Maybe there are new security precautions, but our taxes haven’t gone up to pay for the war. We’re not collecting tinfoil or buying war bonds” (Reinhard, 2002, p. B09). Similarly, *The St. Petersburg Times* said, “While most Americans

signaled that they were ready to sacrifice for their country's future, they were never given an opportunity to do so. Prior generations had been called up to serve a greater cause, and they always responded" ("A renewal of spirit," 2002, p. 14A). The editorial then noted how in the past, citizens had rationed gasoline, purchased war bonds, and planted gardens, among other things. And finally, *The Star Tribune* of Minneapolis said, "Immediately after Sept. 11, Americans were desperate to serve, to sacrifice, to come together in common purpose. Consumed by a quintessential American impulse, they turned to their leaders with a question: What do you wish of us? Tell us, they said, and we'll act. But from Washington came nothing. 'Shop,' President Bush answered" ("One year," 2002, p. 12A). There was an overwhelming sense of frustration in the editorials about not being asked to sacrifice for the good of the country. In effect, the editorials complained that Americans were not allowed or encouraged to be true to the national identity of the country in the wake of the tragedy.

The editorials published one year after the attack were, in many ways, more similar to those published the day after the attack than they were to those published one month after the attack. The grief, anger, and shock—so apparent in the first set, and barely present in the second set—reappeared in this set as writers attempted to make sense of the emotions that the one-year anniversary of 9/11 aroused. The set of editorials continued to tell the narrative of 9/11, this time telling a story of a nation beginning to come to terms with the greatest attack in its history. The story began by reflecting on that day and the following year, then discussed what had changed and

what had remained constant, and ended by questioning whether the apparent path of the nation was consistent with the values and identity of the United States. The one-year anniversary of the attacks served as a transitional point for the nation. The first two sets of editorials focused almost entirely on the events of 9/11—what happened, how we felt, what it meant to our nation. But on the one-year anniversary, the focus was beginning to shift from the past to the future. In this set, fears about the imminent war in Iraq and the threats to civil liberties indicated this change in focus to the future of the United States.

### **September 11, 2006 — Five-Year Anniversary**

Five years after the attacks, there had been many developments in the war on terrorism, leading to more cynicism about the war and the Bush Administration. The war in Iraq showed no signs of waning, as the situation there had only gotten worse by nearly every measure. Osama bin Laden was no closer to being found, and in fact, members of the Bush Administration were rarely even mentioning his name. The war in Afghanistan was continuing, but many worried that success there was being undermined by the ongoing efforts in Iraq. President Bush won reelection in 2004, campaigning on a platform of security and anti-terrorism efforts, but by fall of 2006, his support had fallen to new lows.

Five years after the 9/11 attacks, the editorials told the story of a country that had mostly recovered from the wounds suffered that day and had largely resumed its way of life. The story began with a reminder of the grief and shock of the day five years before and then turned to an assessment of America's progress in the Global



War on Terror. However, in this story, one theme emerged more strongly than any other, and that was the threat to the nation's identity from within. The editorials continued to rebuild and remind readers of the national identity and values, but instead of doing so because of the terrorist attacks, they did so because of an overwhelming belief that the country was heading down a path that was fundamentally opposed to our national identity.

Many of the editorials asked readers to remember those who were lost on 9/11, and others somberly mentioned those soldiers lost in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as well. *The Birmingham News* said, "We remember nearly 3,000 people who lost their lives that day—some in the World Trade Center, others in the Pentagon, others still in the Pennsylvania countryside. We remember their families and friends, whose lives will never be the same. We remember those injured. We remember the destruction of buildings, the damage to our institutions, the devastation we all felt" ("Five years out," 2006, p. 4A). *The Boston Herald* said, "Today we stop and remember those we have lost" ("Five years later: We light the way," 2006) and *The Sarasota Herald-Tribune* said, "Nearly 3,000 people died on 9/11, so today is, above all, a day of remembrance" ("Remember and learn," 2006, p. A14). The editorials began by acknowledging the grief that still surrounded the 9/11 attacks, before turning to an assessment of what had changed in the years since 2001.

Nearly every editorial attempted to measure the progress of the nation in the years since the attacks. *The Augusta Chronicle*, for example, began with "How does one measure 'progress' in a type of war we have never fought before...?"

("Examining 9-11 plus five," 2006, p. A04). *The Chicago Tribune* began by saying, "Anniversaries nudge all of us to reflect on where we were—on the day a baby arrived, the day of a jubilant family wedding, during a national drama—and also on where we are today" ("The journey," 2006). Another way the editorials assessed our progress was by asking what had changed in American culture. Most argued that five years after the attacks, while many small details had changed, "it is remarkable how much has stayed the same" ("Five years after," 2006). *The Los Angeles Times* editorial said "9/11 changed everything, Americans told themselves in the enduring days, weeks and months. How could it not?" But then later in the editorial, it clarified that "We now know that 9/11 did not change everything, at least not permanently" ("9/11/06," 2006, p. B10). *The Rocky Mountain News* argued that some things did change: We are more likely to support anti-terrorism methods, and we feel more vulnerable than we did before ("Five years later, what really changed," 2006, p. 35A). However, these changes were minor in that they did not alter the national narrative or identity.

As in previous groups of editorials, five years after the 9/11 attacks, the editorials reassured readers that tragic events could not change the innate character or destiny of America. For example, *The Boston Herald* said, "And all the while we remain a light among nations. Terrorists can take lives and topple buildings, but they cannot change who we are and what we hold sacred" ("Five years later: We light the way," 2006). *The Baltimore Sun* described the toll that fear took on Americans: "A nation built by explorers, revolutionaries, pioneers, cowboys and the muscular grit of

the industrial age is nervously looking over its shoulder, wondering in what seemingly innocent face and peaceful place evil may lurk” (“A nation transformed,” 2006, p. 10A). Many of the editorials mentioned how we proved ourselves immediately after the attacks. *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer* argued that immediately after the attacks, “many Americans responded with resolve, not terror” (“Five years after 9/11,” 2006, p. B5). These editorials reaffirmed the national identity by arguing that America is (and will continue to be) honorable and brave.

A call for unity was prevalent in the five-year anniversary editorials. Many explicitly asked for unity, while others were more circumspect, such as the editorial published by *The Omaha World-Herald*: “No matter what their politics, ethnicity, gender or religion, Americans remember the sensation that gripped them five years ago today” (“Ready for the future,” 2006). *USA Today*, however, explicitly called for unity from all Americans: “As Americans think back to that awful day, they should recall the intense sense of community and patriotism that brought out the best in the nation—and consider what can be achieved when that unity is harnessed” (“Nation struggles,” 2006). Five years after the attack, the editorials still worked to reaffirm the national identity by binding American citizens to one another.

However, out of all of the groups of editorials, this group was the most negative. *The Albuquerque Journal* criticized the Bush Administration for adopting, “unilaterally and secretly, measures no president would dare resort to in time of peace” (“Unity, vigilance,” 2006, p. A8). From criticizing citizens’ support of the war in Iraq, to the country’s use of torture, to the allowance of many civil rights to be

weakened, the editorials questioned America's new identity five years after the 9/11 attacks. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, for example, quoted a passage from one of bin Laden's speeches in which he called Americans hypocrites for abusing inmates at Guantánamo and ignoring their basic civil liberties and right to a fair hearing. The editorial then said, "It is galling to be lectured on human rights by someone of bin Laden's ilk; it stings all the more because he is right" (Bookman, 2006, p. 9A). Several editorials noted how the abuses taking place at Guantánamo and elsewhere were an affront to the values of the nation.

Many editorials asked citizens to remember the values and ideals for which America stood. For example, *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer* asked American citizens to "remember the ideals that unite the country" and assured us that "This is a nation built on an enduring, frequently renewed belief in freedom, self-government and liberty" ("Five years after 9/11," 2006, p. B5). *The St. Petersburg Times* concluded with "We can—and we must—hold on to the values and the spirit that some call American Exceptionalism. The terrorists would like nothing better than to see us surrender our most precious freedoms and bedrock values to fear" ("Freedom from fear," 2006, p. 14A). The editorials, disagreeing with the apparent trajectory of the United States, were careful to remind readers of the values that were crucial to the American identity.

In addition, several years into the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the American public was getting impatient with the apparent lack of progress on both fronts, and this was increasingly apparent in the five-year anniversary editorials. For example,

*The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* said that the results of the Global War on Terror “are not what we should have expected, given the manpower, lives and money expended in the cause” (Bookman, 2006, p. 9A). *The Austin American-Statesman* mentioned that President Bush’s “abysmal approval ratings suggest that we blame Bush for sending more than 2,600 troops to their deaths in a war we once demanded” (“Five years of blame,” 2006, p. A10). *The Brattleboro Reformer* of Vermont said, “Before we knew it, the war on terror shifted from capturing Osama bin Laden and dismantling al-Qaida to overthrowing Saddam Hussein and democratizing Iraq” and noted that we are now involved in a “long and costly invasion and occupation of Iraq” (“The other victims,” 2006). The discussion of the war in Iraq and the Global War on Terrorism was uniformly negative. The negativity was much more direct than it was on the one-year anniversary, when editorials tentatively questioned the wisdom of the Iraq war. The passing of five years since the 9/11 attacks dampened much of the emotion and hysteria surrounding the initial event, allowing a much clearer picture of the state of the nation to emerge. The five-year anniversary editorials were by far the most critical of the nation’s path—something that would have been extremely unpopular in the days and months immediately following the attacks.

Anniversaries of tragic events prompt citizens to assess and critique the nation’s progress since the event. The overall consensus of the 2006 editorials was that, fundamentally, the terrorist attacks changed nothing. This consensus affirmed the national narrative. In a country that was exceptional in every way, how could a handful of terrorists fundamentally change the culture and identity of the nation? The

answer provided by the narrative was that America was strong, that it could not be thrown off course by a single event, and that while we still mourned and remembered those who were lost, our faith in America and in American Exceptionalism remained sound. However, at the same time, we must actively protect our values and continue to be strong in our national identity, never letting it waver in the face of threats from abroad—or threats from within.

### **Conclusion**

On the day after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, as well as on the one-month, one-year, and five-year anniversaries, newspapers from all over the country published editorials related to the event. Taken together, the editorials told the story of the tragic event and its aftermath, of the national identity as it was challenged first by external forces and then by internal forces. The story began with the abject horror and utter grief of the entire nation on the day after the attacks. The editorials called upon the values and character inherent in the national identity to help the country persevere through the tragedy. A month later, much of the shock had worn off and the editorials were all business, encouraging people to resume their normal lives and encouraging the government to avenge the deaths of those lost on that day. The one-year mark found the nation still grieving, but also reflected a sense that it had regained much of its strength—that even though many believed everything had changed forever, in fact, very little actually had. And the five-year mark completed the story's circle, with the country again questioning its identity, and whether it had the strength of character to stand up for its values in the face of the Global War on

## Terror and the war in Iraq.

The editorials displayed a range of emotions, from initial trauma expressed in the first set of editorials to frustration about the country's path expressed in the final set. The shock and bewilderment expressed in the first set of editorials was never expressed again, except that in later editorials, the writers sometimes remembered the feelings of shock and bewilderment they felt on the day of the event. The first set of editorials was by far the most emotional, followed by the one-year and then five-year anniversaries. The one-month anniversary was notably bereft of significant emotional content, showing that the initial emotional horror had been replaced by a need to both move on with daily life, and make a plan for revenge. Recognizing the emotional significance of anniversaries of all kinds, it makes sense that the one-year anniversary would be especially poignant for American citizens, as it marks a full passing of holidays, birthdays, school years, and other events and milestones.

Each set of editorials depicted the American identity as something to be proud of—especially its resilience and strength, and the value it placed on freedom and democracy. Each set of editorials overwhelmingly praised the American character, noting its heroism, bravery, thoughtfulness, generosity, and integrity. This glorification of the American culture, citizens and identity was most pronounced on the one-month and one-year editorials. In the editorials published the day after the attacks, the thousands of individual stories of heroism and bravery and sacrifice had not yet been heard, and thus it was too soon to do much more than say how strong and united the country would be or should be in the face of the attacks. And on the

five-year anniversary, much of the American pride was tempered by frustration with the American people for accepting the Bush Administration's war in Iraq and lessening of civil liberties.

Of course, the editorials also mentioned a few negative aspects of the American national identity, such as the tendency to blame all Arabic or Muslim people. It is interesting that even in a time when there was such pride and intense patriotism in the country—as well as the inevitable questioning of one's enemies' patriotism—that the editorials still questioned or warned against some of the country's negative proclivities.

The four sets of editorials analyzed above are a fascinating window into how the media helped reaffirm the national identity and national narrative following a tragic event caused by external forces. The editorials worked to bind the citizens together and to distinguish Americans from other people, they called upon shared values and established societal norms, they described what it meant to be an American, and fit the tragic event into the national narrative. The editorials worked to help Americans understand and cope with the tragic event immediately following the attack, and then worked to help readers deal with the anniversaries of those events. In addition, the editorials assessed the change and progress of the nation, and called it to task for its shortcomings. Altogether, the editorials published the day after the 9/11 attacks and on the one-month, one-year, and five-year anniversaries provide an excellent vantage point from which to view the reaffirmation of national identity following a national tragic event.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### **Identity Construction Following National Tragic Events Caused by Natural Forces—The Case of Hurricane Katrina**

On August 23, 2005, Hurricane Katrina formed over the Bahamas and crossed southern Florida before increasing in size and intensity in the Gulf of Mexico. The hurricane made landfall along the coast of Louisiana and Mississippi on the morning of August 29, causing incredible damage. Of the cities devastated by the hurricane, New Orleans was hit the hardest. As the storm passed, the levees protecting the city from high water were breached in 53 places, and consequently 80 percent of the city was flooded.

Hurricane Katrina and the resultant flooding are blamed for the deaths of nearly 2,000 people and the disappearance of several hundred more ("Hurricane Katrina," 2006, p. 430). The overwhelming majority of the missing and dead were residents of Louisiana, although the coastal region of Mississippi also lost several hundred people. The economic impact of the hurricane was the largest of any natural event in the United States, expected to top more than \$150 billion (Burton & Hicks, 2005). The hurricane was a significant tragic event in America, causing a great deal of trauma and loss for the entire nation.

Hurricane Katrina and the events that followed were not only a natural disaster, but they also were a threat to the identity of United States citizens. Americans were shocked by the thousands of lives lost, the enormous number of

displaced people, the destruction of hundreds of thousands of acres—including one of the United States' most unique and distinguished cities—and the apparent blundering on numerous levels by the government. *The Bangor Daily News* of Maine said that before the storm, Americans had “faith that the greater the danger, the bigger the hero who will save the day. The cavalry will arrive. The sheriff will clean up Dodge City. Brownie will do a heckuva job” (Benoit, 2005, p. A11). The editorial argued that citizens lost this faith in their country in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. *The Wall Street Journal* said that the events of Hurricane Katrina, especially in New Orleans, “remind us that civic order, even in America, is more fragile than we like to think” (“The battle of New Orleans,” 2005, p. A14). From a sense of disbelief regarding the immensity of the storm itself, to the destruction of one of the country's major cities, Hurricane Katrina threatened the national identity of the United States.

To determine how the media shape the national identity of the United States following a national tragic event caused by natural forces, I analyzed more than 60 newspaper editorials from three time periods. The first set of editorials was published September 5, 2005, one week after Hurricane Katrina's landfall in Louisiana and Mississippi. The editorials published in the days immediately following landfall did not give an adequate picture of the mindset of the nation. This is because Hurricane Katrina, and the subsequent flooding, was an event that did not happen at an exact moment in time, such as a bombing or assassination. Rather, the hurricane itself took several hours to pass over the affected area, and the flooding of various cities like New Orleans took several more days to reach its peak. Thus, examining editorials

from one week after the beginning of the tragic event provided a more complete view of national identity construction than editorials from immediately after the disaster. In addition to this first set, editorials published on the one-year and two-year anniversaries of the landfall of Hurricane Katrina were examined to provide insight into how the national identity reconstruction effort changed over time.

The editorials were chosen from all those published in the LexisNexis database for the specific dates. The newspapers were a variety of sizes and were from each region of the United States. For example, editorials were chosen from newspapers in cities such as Anchorage, AK; Boston, MA; Charleston, WV; Flint, MI; Omaha, NE; Salt Lake City, UT; and San Jose, CA. In addition, editorials from national newspapers such as *USA Today*, *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* were included, as were newspaper editorials from the Gulf Coast region and the city of New Orleans. Nearly every editorial was published without a byline, which indicated that the opinions conveyed within were generally representative of the editorial staffs of the newspapers.

Each editorial was reviewed, giving careful consideration to how the editorial worked to establish or reconstruct the national identity of the United States one week, one year and two years after Hurricane Katrina struck. Specifically, I looked for descriptions of the American character and value systems, a discussion of the American past and/or future, whether the editorials attempted to establish societal norms for how to think and feel about the situation, and how the editorials attempted to bind American citizens together in the face of the threat.

In what follows, I examine key themes related to national identity that emerged from this analysis. I describe a story in three parts. Immediately after the hurricane, the nation reacted with an overwhelming sense of shock and outrage at what the aftermath of the storm revealed: the enormous number of desperately impoverished Americans living along the Gulf Coast and the magnitude of the governmental incompetence in preparing for and responding to the devastation caused by the storm. However, so soon after the disaster, the editorials reflected a general sense of optimism about the reconstruction efforts, believing that the government would begin to operate more smoothly after the initial bumps. Yet one year later, the editorials indicate that this optimism had been unfounded. They described a government that continued to bungle the recovery effort as Americans began to question their own sense of security in the face of future crises. According to the editorials, while the government had failed, average American citizens had not. They had taken action to help those who were not helped by the government. And finally, two years after the storm, the editorials reflected a sense of resignation in the American people regarding the Bush Administration and its continued poor handling of the Hurricane Katrina recovery. The editorials bemoaned the apparent abandonment of an entire region of the United States, and pressed citizens to elect people to office who would help us return to the values that were important to the nation, thus restoring the national identity.

### September 5, 2005 — One-Week Anniversary

In the days following the arrival of Hurricane Katrina, newspaper editorial pages were filled with opinions and information about the event itself and the American response to it. By the time one week had passed after landfall, the editorials had coalesced around a few themes. The editorials told a story of a nation full of generous and brave people going about their lives. The apparent tranquility of American life was shockingly disrupted by the hurricane, causing chaos and devastating conditions along the Gulf Coast. This natural tragedy uncovered the seamy underside of America: the stark differences between the rich and poor, the ineptitude and impotence of the American government at all levels, and the violence and lawlessness of some of its citizens in the face of crisis. The story concluded with the promise that by working hard and returning to our basic American values, the nation could overcome this natural disaster.

The story told by the editorials began by describing America as a nation full of determined and generous people. Describing the citizenry in this way reaffirmed the national identity of Americans by promoting positive attributes of that identity. At the same time, pointing out positive character traits of Americans functioned to reassure readers that the basic identity of U.S. citizens remained intact, even while the unthinkable unfolded in the South. *The Anchorage Daily News* said, “The United States is a land of boundless optimism. We are the people who can do anything—win a world war, put a man on the moon, create unrivaled prosperity for most of our citizens, cover the world with our inventions” (“Economic slippage,” 2005, p. B4).

*The New York Times* described Americans as “generous” people with a profound appetite to help others in times of need (“A day on,” 2005, p. A20), while *The Post and Courier* of Charleston, South Carolina, noted the “compassion” and “courage” of Americans (“America to the rescue,” 2005, p. 10A). And *The Richmond Times Dispatch* of Virginia waxed that “America has always been a place of humanitarian action and compassion—a place where people look out for each other and are always willing to take care of their neighbors in need, whether they are across the street, around the corner, or around the globe” and said that “Putting our compassion into action is deeply rooted in the American character” (McElveen-Hunter, 2005, p. A13). These positive descriptions of the American identity reassured readers that the identity remained intact, even as it was threatened by Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath.

The editorials told the story of a nation going about its business when a natural crisis struck its shores, causing great turmoil and destruction along the Gulf Coast. The magnitude of the devastation wrought by the storm shook the national identity, and the editorials expressed the citizens’ awe at the events that transpired. *The Anchorage Daily News* said that New Orleans was “a great city descended into chaos and madness” (“Economic slippage,” 2005, p. B4). *The Flint Journal* of Michigan described the “unimaginable misery along the Gulf Coast, where tens of thousands of people are ending their summer amid death and destruction on a wartime scale” (“Work to be done,” 2005, p. A12). *The Philadelphia Inquirer* said, “The heartbreak of the Gulf Coast’s saga is being tallied now: a great city’s flood

peril, smaller coastal communities' destruction, the homelessness of thousands from New Orleans, and the millions of homes that have gone days without utilities" ("Great sorrow," 2005, p. A12). *The Portland Press Herald* of Maine described the "bodies floating in the water and people begging for drinking water, food and medicine" ("Overwhelmed by disaster," 2005, p. A8). The scenes that took place along the Gulf Coast were shocking to most Americans, as they had long believed that that type of destruction was impossible in the United States. The national identity of the United States included a belief in American Exceptionalism—that things like this couldn't happen here—and thus this identity was threatened when Americans witnessed through the media the chaos that resulted from the hurricane.

The editorials compared the conditions in New Orleans with those in impoverished nations of the world. This comparison reacted against American Exceptionalism, a concept within the national identity that was beginning to be called into question. *The Anchorage Daily News* said that the media coverage showed "scenes Americans associate with benighted Third World nations whose names we can barely pronounce. People surrounded by squalor and destruction giving voice to their despair" ("Economic slippage," 2005, p. B4). *The Atlanta Journal Constitution's* editorialist wrote that she was "stunned to hear people in our own land referred to as 'refugees.' That is a word associated with problems 'over there,' isn't it?" (Gentry, 2005, p. 15A). And *The Brattleboro Reformer* of Vermont said, "Take people who already have next to nothing and throw them into a maelstrom of chaos, starvation, disease and death, and the result is something that looks more like the

Third World rather than a major American city' ("Before the storm," 2005). The editorials discussed the shock most Americans felt as they watched the happenings in New Orleans and began to understand that America was not immune to the type of disaster that had long bedeviled other countries.

The consensus among the editorialists was that Hurricane Katrina revealed the most pressing problems facing American society—problems that had long been ignored by the majority of the citizens. *The Boston Globe* said, "Hurricane Katrina was more than a natural disaster. It was a political epiphany, laying bare difficult truths from which, mainly, the United States has been in flight" (Carroll, 2005, p. A17). *The Brattleboro Reformer* of Vermont said, "Disasters have a way of ripping away the veneer of civilized society and exposing many problems which would, under normal circumstances, be ignored. The scenes of anarchy last week in New Orleans are a good example" ("Before the storm," 2005). Syndicated columnist Leonard Pitts said, "Tragedy often becomes a stage for the best of human character. But it seems as if this tragedy also is destined to be a stage for the worst, a spotlight on the divisions that have lately grown so much wider between us" (2005, p. F4). The editorials agreed that the tragedy revealed several failures in our society, particularly enormous poverty, government failure on a massive scale, and the choice of some members of society to take advantage of others during a tragedy. All three of these failures threatened the national identity of Americans to varying degrees.

The first major crisis revealed by Hurricane Katrina was the immense divide between the "Haves" and "Have-nots." The media coverage of Hurricane Katrina



and the subsequent flooding depicted the very poorest of the poor in America, and the editorials reported on this mostly hidden population with horror. *The Boston Globe* said that “the flooding of the cities and towns along the Gulf Coast has pulled a curtain back on a huge population of desperately impoverished people.” It continued, “The wealthiest nation on earth has its hidden legion of have-nots, and all at once the rest of us saw them. The scandal of rank poverty was exposed, and if beholding it was like seeing something indecent, that’s because such poverty in this nation is exactly that—indecent” (Carroll, 2005, p. A17). This sense of indecency or shame was prevalent throughout the editorials, as Hurricane Katrina not only displayed the enormous divide between rich and poor to the rest of the United States, but also to the world.

At stake here was more than just a sense of shame or embarrassment about a nation as wealthy as the United States having such a large population of desperately poor people. The revelation of the status of the poor also spoke to a profound failure of the American Dream. The ideology behind the American Dream, with the goal of producing “a society in which ordinary people have the opportunity to make a better life” (Rowland & Jones, 2007, p. 430) was still intact, yet the ability of many to realize that dream was in doubt. It appeared that gone were the days in which each generation of Americans could count on their children surpassing them in a variety of variables such as wealth, education, and occupation. The idea of the American Dream—that anyone could not only pursue happiness but also achieve it in this land of plenty—seemed to be more fiction than reality. The importance of this dream

cannot be overstated, as DeSantis argues, one of the most pervasive myths in the United States is this “story which posits that with effort, hard work, optimism, and egalitarian cooperation, anyone in America can morally achieve economic success and enjoy the freedom, leisure and religious and social independence that attend wealthy economic status” (DeSantis, 1998, p. 480). The events of Hurricane Katrina provided a window into one major poor population in America, and the existence of this population threatened the national identity and the belief that in America, anyone could succeed.

New Orleans was the scene of the most blatant divisions between rich and poor. *The Brattleboro Reformer* of Vermont said that “there have always been two New Orleans”: “the happy, vibrant party city that is so beloved, especially by tourists” and the city “where half of the households earn less than \$22,000 and nearly 30 percent of the population lives in poverty” (“Before the storm,” 2005). The idea of two different New Orleans, one as the playground for the wealthy, and the other as the quarters for the servants, was mentioned in several editorials. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* noted that “long before the hurricane traumatized so many of New Orleans’ poorest, the number of Americans living in poverty had risen—up about 1.1 million last year” (“Great sorrow,” 2005, p. A12). Hurricane Katrina, according to the editorials, exposed to the world the great divide between the rich and poor in America. The word “exposed” is key. Hurricane Katrina did not cause the vast gulf between the Haves and Have-nots; rather, it exposed this divide to the rest of the country and to the world.

Another problem that was revealed by Hurricane Katrina was the staggering ineptitude and impotence of the American government at all levels. The poor government response shook the national identity because it created a sense of vulnerability and a feeling that the government could not protect—or even help—Americans in their time of need. *The Boston Globe* said that “the spectacle of failure, how for days the government was powerless to help such [impoverished] people, only put on display how government was already failing them and everyone else” (Carroll, 2005, p. A17). *The Charleston Daily Mail* of West Virginia discussed the newfound sense of vulnerability when it said, “Government officials talk in high-flung phrases about how we are ready to meet any terrorist attack that anyone or anything can throw at us. The Gulf Coast crisis proves them wrong.” The editorial concluded, “The government has let us all down. We’re waiting impatiently to hear that we’re ready for any eventuality. But we aren’t holding our collective breath” (Peyton, 2005, p. 4A).

The complaints about the government left no agency or department unscathed, and New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin and President George W. Bush were equally cursed. *The Portland Press Herald* said that “there has been a steady drumbeat of criticism—aimed at the lowest officials and all the way up to President Bush” (“Overwhelmed by disaster,” 2005, p. A8). The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) received a large portion of the criticism, as demonstrated by the editorial from New York’s *Daily News*: “Notably asnooze throughout too many early hours of the Gulf Coast nightmare has been the Federal Emergency Management

Agency, a once-robust outfit that seems to have lost its sense of mission” (“Federal bureaucracy,” 2005, p. 26). The editorials argued that Hurricane Katrina demonstrated to the citizens of America that their government was powerless to help in their time of greatest need, causing a feeling of vulnerability and a questioning of the national identity. As many of the editorials pointed out, one of the major benefits of citizenship in the United States was the promise that the government would quickly come to one’s aid—no matter where in the world one was. Hurricane Katrina destroyed our vision of a country that was eminently competent. The United States had won World War II, sent people to the moon, wiped out disease, and spread democracy around the world, but could not adequately prepare for or respond to a storm. Thus, the realities of the government’s competence after Hurricane Katrina came as a major blow to the national identity.

According to the editorials, Hurricane Katrina also revealed one last problem in America that threatened the national identity: that in times of crisis, some Americans will attempt to take advantage of others. Whether discussing the price gouging at the gas pump, violence in the Superdome, or looters in the streets, the editorials expressed dismay and disappointment at this small subset of Americans. *The Charleston Gazette*, for example, said that in events like Hurricane Katrina, “Laws become unenforceable. Some cast aside the social constraints that normally govern their daily lives and take what they can as everything falls apart around them” (Dionne, 2005, p. 4A). *The Portland Press Herald* described, “Desperation among the hundreds of thousands of Gulf Coast residents—refugees, actually—has

simmered and boiled into anger and violence. Some have succumbed to looting” (“Overwhelmed by disaster,” 2005, p. A8). *The Wall Street Journal* focused on the “FEMA debit-cards fiasco intended to pay for necessities that were used for things like flat-panel TVs and tattoos” (“The tragedy of New Orleans,” 2006, p. A14). And *The San Antonio Express-News* said, “We watch in disbelief as police fight against lawlessness and looters for control of a city. It’s difficult to believe that the order and civility that identifies us can break down, that our idea of who we are can turn to rubble” (Landa, 2005, p. 7B).

This tendency for some to shed societal values and take advantage of others threatened the national identity because it directly conflicted with the story the nation told about itself. As noted above, many of the editorials focused on the positive attributes of the American character, including compassion and generosity, especially in times of crisis. The traits of compassion and generosity conflicted with the stories reported in the media of looting, violence, and price gouging particularly in New Orleans. This dissonance threatened the American sense of self, and caused many to wonder whether their own city would also devolve in the face of a calamity such as Hurricane Katrina.

While the hurricane and its aftermath revealed several immense problems in America, the editorials made the case that the United States could overcome the devastation with a tremendous amount of effort. *The Anchorage Daily News* summarized that “removing floodwaters from the streets of the Crescent City, drying out businesses and homes, will be monumental tasks. Virtually every major

institution in New Orleans is in chaos” (“Economic slippage,” 2005, p. B4). But however hard the challenge, the editorials argued that we could overcome it. Many argued that we should use the tragedy to fix what was wrong with America, such as *The Flint Journal* of Michigan when it said, “America should use this catastrophe, as we didn’t use Sept. 11, as a rallying point to inspire the fixing of many long-standing ills” (“Work to be done,” 2005, p. A12). In order to return to the values idealized in the national identity, the nation would have to work to solve many incredible challenges: the devastation of New Orleans and many other Gulf Coast cities, as well as the other problems revealed by Hurricane Katrina, like government incompetence and the profound poverty faced by many Americans. The reality of life post-Katrina was that the American Dream was unlikely to be achieved in a country addled by an incompetent government and with such a large class of the extremely poor.

The editorials agreed that in order to overcome all that was wrong in America, we would have to return to basic values. The editorials sent a rallying call to readers, promising them that if we remained true to the innate American character, we would be up to the challenge of rebuilding the Gulf Coast region. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* said, “We cannot take the easier, softer way out of this. Now is the time to rise to the occasion. Now is the time to show we have wisdom greater than our greed” (Gentry, 2005, p. 15A). *The Charleston Daily Mail* of West Virginia commented on how difficult the work ahead would be, but added that Americans were up to the challenge and had already begun: “There is no question that the American people can meet such challenges [as the destruction caused by Katrina],

because they are doing it .... All the hysteria, showboating and recriminations made in haste should not obscure the fact that Americans are getting this job done” (“Americans will get through this,” 2005, p. 4A). *The Daily News* of New York commented that American soldiers in the Gulf Coast region were “performing heroically in what is left of New Orleans and the coast—Americans at their finest, doing the job the way America does a big job once it gets started’ (“Federal bureaucracy,” 2005, p. 26).

One week after Hurricane Katrina, the editorials revealed the threat to the nation’s identity that was caused by the storm and the governmental response. However, the editorials were still brimming with optimism, promising that despite the many threats to the American identity, it would remain strong. Despite the shock of discovering the true breadth of poverty in the country, and the dismay at learning how unprepared the government was to handle this type of calamity, the editorials maintained the belief that the trajectory of the tragedy would quickly change direction. This sense of idealism, that the incompetence displayed in the immediate aftermath of the storm would quickly be corrected, is in itself a component of the national identity. The editorials argued that while we were quite surprised at the extent of the disaster in our midst, surely we would not fail in our mission to put things back as they were if we put our minds to it.

But working hard would not alone solve the country’s problems. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* said that we first must look critically at what the country had become. As the editorial said, “Now is the time to take ourselves to task, no matter

how painful the criticism is to hear. The key is not to focus on who is wrong, but what is wrong and what needs to be done to make things right” (Gentry, 2005, p. 15A). *The Boston Globe* said, “Change for the better begins by reckoning with the worst, which Katrina helped us do. A bystander nation must reclaim itself, accepting responsibility for the unnecessary impoverishment of millions” (Carroll, 2005, p. A17). The editorials called for Americans to return to the core values that define the national identity. As *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* concluded, “We cannot wait for some leader to do the right thing. We must do the right thing” (Gentry, 2005, p. 15A) while *The Portland Press Herald* said, “Support, patience and more and more heroes are needed” (“Overwhelmed by disaster,” 2005, p. A8). The consensus among the editorials was that with hard work and a return to our values, the country would be able to overcome the destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina. As *The Post and Courier* of Charleston, S.C., said, “Americans, in and out of uniform and in and out of government, have a proud history of overcoming daunting challenges. With courage, unity, perseverance and generosity, we will overcome this one, too” (“America to the rescue,” 2005, p. 10A).

The editorials published one week after Hurricane Katrina’s landfall told the story of a great nation that had lost its way. While its citizens were generally good and generous people, the promise of the American Dream had been broken. The devastation wrought by the national disaster revealed a country that was deeply divided between the rich and poor, in which the American Dream was not a reality—or even a distant hope—for many citizens. This realization, that Third



World-level poverty was prevalent in one of America's favorite tourist destinations, shook the national identity of the United States. Compounding this threat was the surprise and horror felt by many Americans about how completely incompetent the government had been. The belief that the American government would (or even could) take care of its people in a crisis was threatened.

These threats to the national identity, however, were mitigated somewhat by the editorials. The editorials attempted to paint a portrait of a nation that could redeem itself—a nation in which the debris could be cleaned up, the damaged lives repaired, the incompetent government reformed, and the nation's social divisions healed. But to do so required a return to the values that were at the heart of the national identity: courage, compassion, generosity and a willingness to roll up one's sleeves to get to work. The events of Hurricane Katrina revealed, in a way not done so by the other tragedies discussed in this project, that the response to the tragedy is as important—or in some cases even more important—than the tragedy itself. After one week had passed, the hurricane itself was no longer the story. Instead, the story was about how we as a nation responded—both individually and through our government—and how we must continue to respond to remain true to the values inherent in the national identity of the United States.

#### **August 29, 2006 — One-Year Anniversary**

At the one-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, the reconstruction effort left much to be desired. More than half of the citizens of New Orleans had not yet returned, and hundreds of miles of streets in the poorest parts of the city were still

littered with the detritus from the storm and ensuing flood. Local government had not yet prepared a reconstruction plan for the city, and thousands of families were living in “temporary” trailer homes provided by FEMA. The Army Corps of Engineers had begun repairing the levee system that failed during the hurricane, and while it was not significantly improved over pre-Katrina levels, it was nearly complete.

The editorials published one year after Hurricane Katrina told a story of a unique American city that was paying the price for government ineptitude at all levels. The editorials blamed the damage and deaths from the storm on poor preparation, inadequate immediate aid, and a slow recovery effort by the government. The complete failure of the government threatened the American sense of security and identity. The long-held belief that the government would come to the aid of Americans when disaster struck was shattered, leaving many to question their own safety and security in an uncertain future. In reaction, the editorials worked to reaffirm the threatened identity by arguing that when the government failed so miserably as in the Katrina event, regular citizens stepped in to do the government’s work. In this view, the profound generosity and compassion of the American people saved many lives and livelihoods in the hours, days and months after the storm. The editorials spent a considerable amount of space praising the work of ordinary Americans. At the same time, the fact that an entire year had passed since the storm and the government had still not begun to function effectively signaled that something was profoundly wrong with America. The failures of the government suggested that

the American Dream was threatened not only for the poorest Americans, but for the entire nation.

One year after Hurricane Katrina struck, the editorials described how New Orleans and other cities along the Gulf Coast were paying the price for the ineptitude of the government in the face of a great natural threat. All levels of government—national, state and local—were widely criticized for their failures in the face of Hurricane Katrina. Many still compared the area to less developed countries, like *The Berkshire Eagle* of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, when it said, “About half of the city is still without electricity. About one-third of the hurricane debris remains where it fell. Tourist areas have been rebuilt, but not the areas occupied by minorities.” It concluded, “This is how Third World nations react, or fail to react, to disaster. This is how the White House handled Katrina” (“A year since Katrina,” 2006). The editorials blasted the government for poor levee design, poor disaster preparedness planning, a poor immediate response, and a poor recovery effort a full year after the hurricane struck. The failure of the government on so many levels and across so much time was a blow to the American identity. The belief in American Exceptionalism was damaged, if not completely destroyed, for a large percentage of the population, and the promise of a government with the ability and desire to care for its citizens was broken.

The criticisms of the government covered three time periods—before, during, and after the storm—with the most scathing attacks reserved for the government’s response after the hurricane had passed. First, the editorials called the Army Corps of

Engineers and the state of Louisiana to task for failing to prepare for an event of this type. *The News and Observer* of Raleigh, NC, noted that the Army Corps knew about the “weakness of New Orleans’ 200-mile levee system,” that “Louisiana officials knew all too well of the erosion of the marshy natural barriers to hurricane storm surges,” and that “local emergency responders” “weren’t prepared for downed communication” (“Woe of Katrina,” 2006, p. A8). *The News Tribune* of Tacoma, Washington, said that “New Orleans’ levees might not have failed in the first place had the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Congress and local officials not been complacent for many years about the possible impact of an unusually violent hurricane” (“Katrina: A case study,” 2006, p. B04). And *The Philadelphia Inquirer* said that New Orleans’ levee system was an “incomplete, poorly designed, scientifically unsound, sinking system” (“Let's be smarter,” 2006, p. A10). While it was widely understood that an event of this nature could occur, the various levels of government did little to prepare for the eventuality. The inability of the government to prepare for this disaster, predictably, caused many Americans to question whether they would be safe in another disaster, whether it was a hurricane, terrorist attack, epidemic, or some other event. Regardless of the time and money devoted to disaster-preparedness at all levels of government, American citizens had good reason to question the safety of their families when the next disaster struck.

Along with criticism regarding preparations made in advance of the disaster, the editorials censured all levels of government for their poor immediate response during the crisis. *The Berkshire Eagle* of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, said, “The worst

did happen, and when it did, the federal government stood paralyzed” (“A year since Katrina,” 2006). *The Herald-Sun* of Durham, North Carolina, echoed this point when it said, “Seldom has federal, state and local government responded so slowly or so poorly when citizens needed them most” (“One year after Katrina,” 2006, p. A6). *The Roanoke Times* of Virginia said, “The failure of local, state and federal officials in the frantic days following landfall were obvious at the time. The storm overwhelmed local and state officials, and the federal government proved delusional” (“One year of failure,” 2006, p. B6).

But the editorials’ complaints about the government response were not limited to its immediate efforts in the hours and days after Hurricane Katrina struck. The editorials maintained that the government continued to fail in the majority of its long-term recovery efforts. *The Herald-Sun* of Durham, North Carolina, said, for example, that “one year after Hurricane Katrina, too many residents of the Gulf Coast continue to be disappointed by government. Large parts of the Gulf Coast still look like a war zone and thousands of families are still waiting for trailers from FEMA” (“One year after Katrina,” 2006, p. A6). *The Chicago Sun-Times* complained of the “epic bureaucratic failures that first left thousands without shelter or proper medical care and now forsakes survivors of the storm through a failure to deliver on promises of aid, housing for the poor and even basic cleanup” (“Woe of Katrina,” 2006, p. 25). And *The News Tribune* noted that in the year since Hurricane Katrina struck, “FEMA has stumbled again and again in assistance to Katrina’s victims, wasting hundreds of millions of dollars in the process” and that “The so-called reconstruction of New

Orleans has been a case study in official ineptitude” (“Katrina: A case study,” 2006, p. B04).

The failure of the government in so many ways and on so many levels led the editorials to question a basic assumption of the American identity: that if disaster should strike, the government would come to the rescue. The fact that this assumption had been called into question led citizens to feel a new sense of vulnerability. *The News and Observer* of Raleigh, North Carolina, worried about how the government would respond “when the next catastrophe strikes,” whether it was “a category 5 hurricane, bird flu epidemic, dirty bomb, or worst of all, a disaster beyond our imagination” (“Woe of Katrina,” 2006, p. A8). Virginia’s *Roanoke Times* expressed concern that “there is no evidence Homeland Security is any better prepared to handle the next major disaster” (“One year of failure,” 2006, p. B6). This fear of the government’s ability to provide a safety net for its citizens during and after the next disaster was hardly irrational, given the nearly complete breakdown at all levels in the year after the hurricane struck. The failed government response worked as a powerful correction to the sense of American Exceptionalism, and the invincibility with which many had believed that America was blessed.

This newfound lack of confidence—a new sense of vulnerability—was widely discussed in the editorials. *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* said that the government’s response to the storm “flattened America’s confidence in itself. How could this happen here? This kind of thing happens other places—earthquakes in Armenia, mudslides in South America, tsunamis in Indonesia—and then we go there and fix

things.” It continued, “As to the restoration of America’s self confidence, a CBS/*New York Times* poll done last week showed that 44 percent of Americans say they have little or no confidence in the government’s ability to respond to the next disaster, be it man-made or an act of God” (“New Orleans diaspora,” 2006, p. C6). The inability of any level of government to adequately respond to Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent flooding led many to question whether the country’s citizens would be safe following the next tragedy. One would have expected that there would have been widespread calls for governmental reform and accountability in the editorials published one year after the hurricane. Yet, there was very little.

This lack of significant pressure on the government to reform can be explained by two primary reasons: First, the country was beginning to accept that the government was incompetent, and second, regular American citizens took the place of government in the disaster response. During the course of the year that had passed since the hurricane, while the criticism of the government only intensified, there were significantly fewer calls for drastic reform, accountability, and improved oversight in the editorials. This points toward the trajectory displayed in the editorials published regarding Hurricane Katrina: initial outrage, disbelief, and horror that had already faded to irritation, disillusionment, and acceptance just one year later. Ironically, this very failure of government in responding to Hurricane Katrina had the effect of strengthening support for anti-government conservatives who opposed government action in nearly all areas.

Second, while the editorials were unanimously critical of the government in relation to the events of Hurricane Katrina, they argued that American citizens stepped in where the government failed. *The Roanoke Times* of Virginia declared that “Volunteer efforts across the nation filled many of the gaps left by the federal response” (“One year of failure,” 2006, p. B6). *The Herald-Sun* of Durham, North Carolina, said, “If there is a bright spot in the weeks and months after the storm, then it was the generous and giving souls all over the country that stepped up to lend the good people of the Gulf Coast a hand. They helped make an extremely difficult situation less so for the people of the Gulf Coast, and they continue to do so today” (“One year after Katrina,” 2006, p. A6). *The Chicago Sun-Times* noted that many New Orleans neighborhoods were doing the work that had been neglected by the government: The city was “determined to make something new out of something old—even if neighborhoods have to do the heavy lifting” (“Woe of Katrina,” 2006, p. 25). The editorials argued that everyday Americans were fulfilling part of the role of government in their communities and across the country.

The fact that American citizens filled the gaps left by the inadequate government response spoke to the remarkable character of Americans. *The News & Observer* of Raleigh, North Carolina, said that “some people have demonstrated a selfless love for their fellow man that won’t soon be forgotten” (“Woe of Katrina,” 2006, p. A8). *The Kalamazoo Gazette* of Michigan said that we should “never underestimate the ability of Americans to help those in need. Americans around the nation wrote checks, volunteered their time and efforts to assorted relief



organizations, traveled as church groups to the Gulf Coast to help reconstruction and sometimes even opened their homes to the displaced” (“Lessons Katrina,” 2006). *The San Antonio Express-News* said that citizens “responded magnificently. People opened their homes to strangers. Nonprofit agencies and houses of worship tended to the needy.” The editorial ended by saying, “from small children donating cherished toys to corporations writing large checks, thousands of individuals performed deliberate acts of kindness that offered common decency to the victims of an uncommon calamity” (“A flicker of humanity,” 2006, p. 6B). And *The Telegram & Gazette* of Worcester, Massachusetts, said that “the outpouring of material and cash donations from private organizations, businesses and individuals highlighted Americans’ generosity in the face of disaster” (“After the storm,” 2006, p. A10). The editorials made the case that when confronted with a natural disaster, Americans would help each other in their time of greatest need. This propensity to help each other following a great disaster—and the displays of courage and heroism as disasters unfold—was representative of the character found within the national identity. Americans valued the traits of courage, compassion, and generosity, and thus actions that resulted from these values were to be expected. The focus on the greatness of individual Americans also had the effect of further strengthening support for the anti-government agenda conservatives.

At the same time, a small handful of editorials argued that it was still the responsibility of government to perform effectively during the next disaster. These editorials argued that if there was one lesson to take away from the Hurricane Katrina

disaster, it was, in the words of *The Herald Sun* of Durham, North Carolina, that “we must demand that government on all levels better prepare for the next big storm” (“One year after Katrina,” 2006, p. A6). Similarly, Michigan’s *Kalamazoo Gazette* asked “A year later, what have we as a nation learned from this catastrophe?” and answered that “emergency preparedness, by both government and individuals, cannot be overemphasized” (“Lessons Katrina,” 2006). *The News and Observer* of Raleigh, North Carolina, also discussed the importance of creating individual survival plans in the event of a disaster, acknowledging that the government might not be available for assistance (“Woe of Katrina,” 2006, p. A8). These calls for individual actions spoke to the general understanding that the government had been delegitimized because of its performance (or lack therefore) following Hurricane Katrina. Not only did Americans need to come to the rescue of their neighbors in need and provide financial assistance to the survivors of the storm, but they also needed to prepare their own disaster kits because they could no longer expect the government to help them in the days following a tragedy.

The reality of average American citizens stepping in to take care of compatriots when the government could or would not points in two different directions regarding politics in America. On the one hand, this failure of government can be viewed as the failure of conservative ideology. In essence, conservative executive and legislative branches view “big government” as an albatross around the neck of the average American. If an overarching goal of a conservative movement in power is to reduce the size of the government—to act as an anti-government

government—then the government’s preparation and recovery efforts for a disaster such as Hurricane Katrina are the only possible result. The government’s failure during a crisis becomes the proof of their argument that the government is the problem. On the other hand, the fact that American citizens and corporations came together in such great numbers to help their fellow citizens and to take up the slack left by the government and its agencies reinforces the idea that the private sector could, would and perhaps should take on a greater role in providing for the poor and other disadvantaged people in American society. In both cases, the editorials published one year after the storm indicated that the failure of government had led not to call for dramatic action, but to the sinking feeling that perhaps the government was not up to the job.

On the one-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, the editorials widely criticized the performance of all levels of government, before, during, and after the disaster. However, while the government failed, the United States citizens did not. Americans from across the country helped those who were suffering. These twin points make a powerful argument regarding the national identity of the United States. In effect, the national identity of the United States resides in its people, not its government. One year after the storm struck, the country was on a path toward acceptance: of the destruction caused by the storm, of the incompetence of the government, of the desperate poverty in the region, of the notion that in a future crisis we cannot rely on the government, and of the reality that many parts of the Gulf

Coast region, particularly New Orleans, would not return to their pre-Katrina condition, despite the promises made immediately after the storm.

### **August 29, 2007 — Two-Year Anniversary**

Two years after Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast, only 60 percent of residents had returned to the area, and much of the region remained in shambles (Campanella, 2007, p. 7). On the two-year anniversary, newspapers ran editorials commenting on what had transpired since the event, and what needed to be done in the future. The editorials told the story of a city and region destroyed by two disasters: one natural and one man-made. Hurricane Katrina wreaked havoc along the coastline, and the resulting storm surge flooded 80 percent of New Orleans. The destruction caused by Mother Nature, however, was matched by the destruction caused by inept government officials as they slowly and inadequately responded to the country's greatest natural disaster. The editorials argued that the entire Gulf Coast had been abandoned by the United States and its people. They made the case that abandoning the region—and especially New Orleans—went against the national identity of the United States. In order to live up to the values of the American character, the editorials said that we must rally around the region.

Two years after the storm had passed, the national identity of the nation was still damaged. Nothing had been done to counter the Third-World-like poverty that most Americans discovered immediately after the storm. The recovery effort was characterized by one mistake after another, with little accountability and even less reform. Two years later, Americans were beginning to accept the new reality, and the

reshaped national identity. Gone was the security of knowing that the government would immediately come to its citizens' rescue in times of crisis. And two years after the storm, even the sense of outrage had faded, replaced with a sense of resigned frustration with the Bush Administration.

The editorials began by noting the enormity of the natural disaster that afflicted the Gulf Coast region, calling it "one of the worst natural disasters in our nation's history" ("A city of extremes," 2007). This commentary on the size and scope of the hurricane reminded readers, two years after the storm, of how shocked most Americans were at the time. *The San Antonio Express-News* described how "Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast near New Orleans on August 29, 2005, flooding the city, killing almost 2,000 people and devastating broad swaths of the area" ("Two years later," 2007, p. 10B). *The San Jose Mercury News* said that the hurricane "destroyed schools, hospitals, roads, parks and forests," killed more than 1,800 people and damaged more than 200,000 homes (Lieber, 2007). The editorials noted, however, that the natural disaster of Hurricane Katrina would not have been so terrible if it were not for the poor planning and response by the government. As *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer* said, "It was two years ago that the hurricane they knew was coming came, and the levees they knew would break did, and the neighborhoods they figured would flood in fact, drowned" ("Katrina: Disaster neglect," 2007, p. B6). Describing the events of Hurricane Katrina in such stark terms allowed the editorials to remind readers of their own horror and outrage as they watched events unfold, a necessary precondition to convincing readers to not turn their backs on the region.

The editorials continued to blast the government at all levels for its poor planning, its immediate response and the recovery effort. *The San Antonio Express-News* said, “Compounding the natural disaster was the bureaucratic bungling epitomized by Michael Brown, then head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Brown was so inept that during an interview with CNN, he had to be informed that thousands of evacuees had sought shelter in the New Orleans Convention Center” (“Two years later,” 2007, p. 10B). *The Brattleboro Reformer* of Vermont said, “The pitiful response of the Bush administration to the plight of New Orleans and the rest of the Gulf Coast before, during and after Katrina confirmed to the nation that, just as has been in the case in Iraq, more importance was put on political considerations than on actual solutions that work” (“A city of extremes,” 2007).

Several editorials made the case that the preparation for and response to Hurricane Katrina were indicative of the preparation for and response to the unfolding events in Iraq. This comparison of two of the Bush Administration’s largest blunders is interesting, as it insinuated that perhaps “the government” was not entirely broken, but rather that President George W. Bush’s version of the government was broken. At the two-year anniversary, the primary season for the presidential election was in full swing, and many of the editorials mentioned presidential candidates and what they said they would do to help the region. It appears that much of the sense of acceptance that was so apparent in the second-anniversary editorials may not have been about giving up the fight against poverty, or the fight for a more competent government.

Instead, it had more to do with a sense of acceptance about the realities of the competency of the Bush Administration, further tempered by the knowledge that it would soon end.

However, even with the knowledge that the administration that had failed so widely was on the way out, the editorials fretted that the Gulf Coast region—and in particular, New Orleans—was abandoned by the government and by much of the country. One *Boston Globe* editorialist wrote from New Orleans: “Please don’t abandon us again. None of us can afford it” (Clark, 2007, p. A17). Another editorial in *The Boston Globe* said, “Crescent City residents are desperate to keep the nation as a whole from ignoring their city’s plight” (“The long slog,” 2007, p. A16). *The Record* of Bergen County, New Jersey, said that “The most important resource, the people of the Gulf Coast, are still being treated like throwaways, like they are not part of the region’s distinctive fabric” (Aaron, 2007, p. L09). And *The San Gabriel Valley Tribune* of California said, “Residents of Crescent City’s poor neighborhoods were abandoned long before Hurricane Katrina, said the newly elected Democratic Sen. Barack Obama from Illinois shortly after the storm hit. They’ve been abandoned again, judging by the city’s sluggish pace of recovery” (Page, 2007). This sense of abandonment was key, as it demonstrated that although it seemed inevitable that the Bush Administration would continue to fail the region, the rest of the nation could not do so and still remain true to the national identity.

Along the same lines, the editorials argued that the United States broke its promise to the region. As *The Boston Globe* said, “two years on, as Katrina begins to

fade in many Americans' memories, much of the help promised to the storm's victims still has not materialized" ("The long slog," 2007, p. A16). Vermont's *Brattleboro Reformer* said that "Promises of money to rebuild were never fulfilled" for the poorer neighborhoods in New Orleans ("A city of extremes," 2007). *The South Florida Sun-Sentinel* said "Much work needs to be done before the nation's promise to restore the region is fulfilled" ("South Florida," 2007). This sense of abandonment and of broken promises filled the editorials, especially those of writers who visited New Orleans or other parts of the region on the two-year anniversary. The sense of a broken promise was especially significant, as it reflected the view that the American Dream was also broken. The abandonment of the region, and the failure to live up to the promises made to rebuild it, were representative of a lack of hope and sense of resignation in the waning months of the Bush Administration. Two years after the storm, only 29 percent of Americans approved "of the way that President Bush is handling his job" (2007), and a sense of acceptance filled the newspapers as his term moved towards its end.

In this way, the editorials began the process of saving the American Dream and reenergizing American identity by blaming Bush, not American society. The editorials argued that the government's treatment of New Orleans and the rest of the Gulf Coast—particularly its "abandonment"—went against the character of the United States. *The Brattleboro Reformer*, for example, said, "Of the many shameful moments of George W. Bush's presidency, the way it left a great American city to rot in the sun after Katrina ranks near the top" ("A city of extremes," 2007). *The San*



*Jose Mercury News* said, “The reality is that the neglect of the Gulf Coast after the impact of Katrina is a tragedy that requires the attention of every American. It is an object lesson in the importance of holding governmental agencies accountable to meet the fundamental needs of the people they represent” (Lieber, 2007). Clearly, there was renewed faith or at least hope that government could work again, as long as it was not led by President Bush. The editorials characterized the abandonment of an entire region, particularly by the government, as shameful and embarrassing to the nation, and something that must be changed in order to remain true to American ideals. In other words, while it was viewed as likely that the Bush Administration would not fulfill its promises to the region, the rest of the country—and the next administration—must not forget the Gulf Coast. Doing so would prove that the ineptitude demonstrated by the Bush Administration was not an anomaly, but rather permanent. The upcoming elections, combined with a huge push by everyday Americans to repair the region and the troubles the hurricane revealed, would ensure that the national identity was intact and that the American Dream could again become a reality.

Even while the editorials took the government to task for its treatment of the Gulf Coast region, they continued to comment on the positive character of Americans, describing them as generous and “selfless” (“Katrina's victims,” 2007, p. 20). Many commented on the enormous amount of money donated by American citizens to charities helping in the Gulf Coast. *The Record* of Bergen County, New Jersey, said “Even with the inevitable compassion fatigue, Americans still managed

an estimated \$4.2 billion in charitable donations” (Aaron, 2007, p. L09). *The San Francisco Chronicle* argued that regular citizens stepped in when the government failed: “With the very large exception of Bill White, mayor of Houston, what good news there was came from the charitable acts of private citizens” including “the busloads of college kids spending spring break rebuilding homes” (“A crisis that continues,” 2007, p. B8). *The Star-Ledger* of Newark, New Jersey, described the “80 brightly painted houses aimed at luring the region’s musicians home” being built by Habitat for Humanity volunteers (F. Coleman, 2007, p. 15). And another *Star-Ledger* editorialist began by saying, “Over the past two years since Hurricane Katrina, I’ve seen waves of hardworking volunteers from nonprofits, faith-based groups and college campuses descend on New Orleans, full of compassion and hope” (Brinkley, 2007, p. 15). The editorials maintained that while the government abandoned the region, everyday Americans continued to step in to fill the gaps left by the government response.

But what had been done so far was not enough. The editorials argued that Americans must continue to help New Orleans rebuild, and more importantly, must elect government officials who would work for the people. *The Times-Picayune* of New Orleans said, “We still have a long way to go. Two years isn’t nearly long enough to heal from the wounds inflicted by Hurricane Katrina and the failure of the federally built levee system” (“Looking back,” 2007, p. 6). *The Dallas Morning News* asked, “Is America doing enough for New Orleans?” and answered: “No. There is a world of hurting still going on there, and our fellow Americans need help”

("Crescent City cleanup," 2007). *The San Jose Mercury News* said, "It has been two years, America. We can do better than this" (Lieber, 2007). *The Boston Herald* said, "There is much that needs to be done—by government, by the private sector, by locals who keep on keepin' on. But we can help too—by volunteering time and money or both; by keeping the pressure on federal officials to deal with an infrastructure that must be rebuilt in a way that will protect a treasured American city, and by not forgetting this region and its people who continue to need our support" ("Katrina's victims," 2007, p. 20). And *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer* summarized, "We need a FEMA run by people with a history of accountability, insurance companies that pay customers what they are owed and support for local law enforcement and medical personnel" ("Katrina: Disaster neglect," 2007, p. B6). In essence, it was up to everyday Americans to force the government, through voting and speaking out, to help repair the national identity. Only by reconnecting with the values that many argued were ignored during the Bush Administration could citizens reform government and consequently regain faith in the American Dream.

The editorials published two years after Hurricane Katrina told the story of a region still struggling to return to some sense of normalcy. The area—battered by the hurricane's winds and resultant flooding—was further damaged by the government's inept response at the local, state and federal levels. The editorials bemoaned the fact that the entire region had been abandoned, particularly by the Bush Administration, and called to Americans to continue their service to the region. Two years later, the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina still caused many to question the basic

assumptions about what it meant to be an American. There was still no assurance that the government would be more able, or more willing, to assist New Orleans or any other city following a major natural disaster. But there clearly was more optimism about government than at the one-year mark. As more and more Americans became disenchanted with the Bush Administration, it became clear that the problem was not government in general, but this government in particular. Consequently, the editorials argued that it was up to citizens to force the government to be accountable, both for its mistakes in the past, but also to improve planning for future calamities. However, there was an unmistakable sense that it was too late to try to reform or change the present administration, and that any significant solutions to the problems in the region, or to larger problems such as poverty, would have to wait until the next president took office.

### **Conclusion**

Hurricane Katrina and the resulting flooding caused a rupture in the national identity of the nation—one which still has not been repaired and likely cannot be repaired fully until Americans see tangible evidence that the federal government can work effectively. While Americans have always criticized various levels of government, most Americans still believed that despite all of its failings, in a time of great need, it would do everything in its power to protect their lives and livelihoods. The events of Hurricane Katrina broke that trust. One week after landfall, newspaper editorials lambasted the government for its planning and preparation and even worse response and recovery. As Americans were left without food, water and shelter for

days on end, fellow citizens were aghast at their neglect by the government they had trusted. Immediately after the attack, the editorials proclaimed that Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath revealed the ineptitude of the national government. The hurricane's storm surge swept aside more than the thousands of lives and homes; it also swept aside the illusions that the government would care for its people. In addition, the hurricane revealed another frightening reality about America: the immense poverty endured by many in the region. The editorials expressed dismay and shame at the plight of so many people who could not afford to get out of the way of the storm, and were hardest hit by its devastation.

A full year after Hurricane Katrina did its damage, the Gulf Coast region had barely recovered. At this time, the government received still more scorn from newspaper editorials, as the inexcusable ineptitude displayed in the days after landfall extended into the following months. The editorials made an attempt, however, to reconstruct the national identity by creating a careful distinction between the government and the American people: While the government was inefficient and incompetent, the American people were not. By essentially arguing that the American identity and character of the nation were found in its people and not its government, the identity remained robust and no longer had to be in question. Therefore, the editorials could blast the government for its many failings while simultaneously praising the American people for their good works. The fact that the American people remained true to the ideals and character of the nation reassured citizens that when the next disaster strikes, even if the government responded poorly,

fellow citizens would respond to the best of their abilities. This argument reaffirmed the greatness of the national identity of the United States, while at the same time aided those who opposed government itself.

Two years after Hurricane Katrina, the editorials' review of the government had only gotten worse, but the blame had been shifted from government in general to the Bush Administration in particular. The editorials argued that the Bush Administration had abandoned the region and broken its promises, leaving millions of people with little hope or help. While American citizens still did their best to make up for the government failures, it was not enough. In order to be true to the American identity, the government must reconstruct the Gulf Coast. The editorials reflected a sense of acceptance of—of giving up on—the Bush Administration, essentially arguing that its performance over the past two years in the Gulf Coast (and Iraq) demonstrated that it was impossible to fix. At the same time, anything less than a full reconstruction and recovery went against the character of the nation, and therefore the editorials called for citizens to elect government officials in the future who would be more responsive and competent, and who would understand the importance to the national identity of fully reconstructing the Gulf Coast.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Conclusions and Implications Regarding National Identity

#### Reconstruction Following a National Tragic Event

When the United States is struck by a large-scale tragedy, the national identity is shaken. This shaken national identity is often reflected in a new sense of vulnerability, a concern about how the country should react, and questions about how and when the country can return to a sense of normalcy. In times of crisis, many Americans look to the media in order to help make sense of the event. This project examines the ways in which the American media reconstruct the national identity following a national tragic event.

Most days, newspaper editorials from across the country cover an infinite number of local, national, and international topics. They focus on public figures, politics, social issues, and sometimes frivolous subjects, with little continuity from newspaper to newspaper. However, as I have demonstrated, immediately following a national tragic event, there is a strong tendency for newspaper editorials to cohere into a unified voice. In the cases I studied, the editorialists—whether from a large city or a small town, whether conservative or liberal, whether from the Deep South or the Pacific Northwest or any other region—set aside their differences and spoke as one. This unity in the messages broadcast by the media following national tragedies provides an unmatched window through which to view national identity reconstruction.

In this chapter, I begin by summarizing the research presented in the previous chapters. I then turn to a discussion of the implications of this project and an elaboration of the conclusions I have made in previous chapters. I then describe the primary limitations of the project, offer several possible directions for future research, and mention a few final notes about the project and its importance.

### **Summary of Chapters**

In the first and second chapters, the theoretical basis for this project was presented. While much has been written about the nature of national identity—its definition, components, functions and construction—very little was known about how national identity is reconstructed following tragic events. National tragedies provide a unique window into the identity reconstruction process, as these events tend to focus our attention on matters greater than our day-to-day duties and activities. In these chapters, I argued that a narrative and thematic approach is most appropriate for revealing national identity reconstruction.

In chapter three, I examined how the media reconstructed the national identity following a terrorist attack by an American citizen. The Oklahoma City bombing served as the case study for this discussion. I analyzed newspaper editorials published one day after the attack, as well as on the one-year and ten-year anniversaries. The Oklahoma City bombing continues to rank as the worst case of domestic terrorism in United States history, although the shock of the event has lessened over time in part because of the events of 9/11.



The editorials published after the Oklahoma City bombing told a story of a nation filled with generous and courageous citizens who were shocked out of their complacency by an evil attack by one of their own. One day after the attack, the editorials expressed bewilderment at the choice of location and revealed a profound sense of vulnerability. Most Americans had believed that they were relatively safe and that terrorist attacks, and the accompanying fear and horror, were reserved for other countries. A year after the bombing, the editorials worked to rationalize the fact that an American citizen had committed the attack. They did so by charging that McVeigh was not a “real” American, that he did not represent American values, and that he was “crazy.” At the same time that McVeigh was effectively separated from “real” Americans, the editorials discussed at length the positive characteristics associated with the American identity. Finally, ten years after the bombing, other national tragedies, such as the 9/11 attacks and Hurricane Katrina, had taken center stage in America. After a decade had passed, the Oklahoma City bombing was no longer viewed as a major threat to national identity. Instead, the events of that day were remembered as a terrible tragedy, but a tragedy that no longer threatened the larger American national identity.

In chapter four, I turned to an analysis of how the media reconstruct the national identity in the wake of a terrorist attack caused by external sources, using the hijacking and crashing of four jets by al Qaeda operatives on September 11, 2001, as the case study. The 9/11 attack remains the worst case of terrorism in the nation’s history, and the effects are still being felt in the economy, travel industry, and

political and foreign affairs, among other areas. In charting the identity reconstruction efforts, I analyzed editorials published the day after the attacks, along with editorials published on the one-month, one-year, and five-year anniversaries.

The editorials published the day after the attack expressed utter shock, grief, and trauma, but promised that Americans would stay strong in the face of this great evil. While they acknowledged that life would never be the same in the United States, they argued that the values and ideals for which Americans stood could not be altered. One month after the attack, the editorials were all business: arguing for swift action in bringing the accomplices of the hijackers to justice, offering advice on how to proceed in the battle, and providing powerful reasons to believe that Americans could survive this tragedy. After a year had passed, the editorials were more reflective, discussing how much had changed in the year since the event, and questioning the wisdom of beginning another war when the battle against al Qaeda had not yet been won. Finally, five years after the attack, the editorials told a story of a nation that had largely recovered from the events of 9/11. The editorials argued that America was threatened more by actions from its own government than by any external forces, and therefore attempted to remind readers of the values inherent in the national identity.

In chapter five, I examined how the media reconstructed the national identity following a national tragic event caused by natural forces. For the case study, I analyzed editorials published following Hurricane Katrina, which was one of the largest natural disasters in American history. I began with editorials published one

week after the hurricane's landfall, followed by a review of the editorials published on the one-year and two-year anniversaries.

One week after the hurricane, the editorials argued that the storm revealed enormous problems with American society, particularly the deep divide between rich and poor, and the spectacular ineptitude of the government before, during, and after the hurricane reached land. Despite the problems, the editorials maintained a level of confidence that the government would quickly improve, and that the revelation of the vast number of very poor people along the coast would spur an effort to help them get on their feet. However, one year after the storm, that optimism had been proven unfounded, and the editorials reconstructed identity by separating average Americans from the government. They effectively praised the work of average citizens in rebuilding the Gulf Coast, while scolding the government at every level. These editorials expressed growing doubt about the ability of government to respond to crises. Paradoxically, the very failure of government became support for an anti-government agenda, and at this point, calls for reform were not a dominant response. Two years after the storm, the editorials reflected the view that the problem was not the government in general, but the particular administration in power. The utter cynicism about government expressed after one year had dissipated. Instead of an anti-government agenda, the editorials encouraged citizens to elect government officials who would be more competent and able to fulfill basic American values.

### **Implications**

Several decades ago, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross proposed a model of grieving regarding death and dying (1969). She described five stages that most people encounter when confronted with a great loss, whether the death of a loved one, news of one's own imminent death, or a similar experience. The first stage, denial, occurs when the person first hears the news and tries to avoid the inevitable. The second stage is anger, in which the person expresses his or her frustration about the situation, and the third stage is bargaining, in which the person fruitlessly seeks for a way out of the situation. The fourth stage, depression, is when the person realizes how bad the situation really is, and the fifth stage, acceptance, is when the person comes to terms with the negative situation and begins to move forward.

To some extent, these stages are apparent in the editorials published after national tragic events. The denial stage is similar to the editorials' expressions of shock and reluctance to believe that such an event could happen in America. Many of the editorials also expressed anger about each of the three events—either at the culprits in the cases of terrorist attacks, or at the government in the case of Hurricane Katrina. Depression, too, could be seen in the editorials, especially at the one-year anniversaries, when many of the editorials expressed grief over the lives lost in the tragedies. And acceptance was expressed in many of the editorials written after significant time had passed. The best example of this was the ten-year anniversary editorials of the Oklahoma City bombing, in which a high level of acceptance had been reached. Bargaining was the only one of Kübler-Ross' stages that was not

reflected in the national response to a tragedy. This is likely because the media would be doing a disservice to readers if they fruitlessly sought a way out of the situation, rather than acknowledging the very real tragedy that was occurring.

While Kübler-Ross' grief cycle sheds light on how the grieving process works for a nation, it does not offer a complete picture. While most of the stages are present for the nation dealing with a tragic event, they appear in a different order, and additional stages are apparent as well. For the United States at least, the reaction to national tragic events adheres to a narrative arc that begins with shock, followed by feelings of vulnerability and then anger, leading to a strengthening of resolve, and finally, acceptance.

Based on the three case studies, after a national tragedy the first reaction is one of complete shock and bewilderment that such a thing could happen in America. Regardless of whether it was domestic terrorism, a foreign attack, or the wrath of Mother Nature, Americans were shocked that such a devastating event could happen on American soil. This shock speaks to the power of American Exceptionalism, one aspect of which is the sense that the United States is (or should be) somehow immune from the types of tragedies faced by other countries because of our status as "the greatest nation on earth." In fact, that phrase or one similar to it was found in several editorials. After the initial sense of shock, the editorials reflected a feeling of vulnerability and a loss of innocence. Americans wondered how such a thing could happen here, and whether they were safe from similar events in the future. Again, it did not matter who or what caused the tragedy. This threat to identity naturally led to

a strengthening of resolve and a promise to not let the event change who we are. And finally, the editorials displayed a sense of acceptance regarding the tragic event, with a promise to go on as well as could be expected and to maintain the memory of those who were killed or harmed in the tragedy. Each of the three case studies demonstrated a very similar narrative pattern with regard to how Americans cope with national tragic events.

This narrative pattern is reflective of American identity. The tragic events in the three case studies discussed above occurred in 1995, 2001, and 2005. Yet each event came as a complete surprise, and after each event, Americans could not believe that something of the sort could happen on our soil. Each time, Americans felt shocked and newly vulnerable, and they lost their sense of innocence. Apparently, Americans have a very short memory. It does not take long for complacency to creep back in, and the lessons learned during each crisis are quickly forgotten. This forgetfulness is key to the sense of resiliency that many of the editorials mentioned. Even after a tremendously shocking event, Americans quickly get back to the business of ordinary life in America.

Not only is this American resilience reliant upon a large capacity to forget, but it also depends on a collective blindness about the dangers present in the world. Americans are obviously aware that large-scale disasters frequently occur in the world, such as civil wars, coups d'état, earthquakes, tsunamis, and many others. Yet, there is a perceived invincibility that pervades American culture, and an assumption that terrible events will only happen elsewhere. Of course, this is demonstrably

untrue, but this belief is reinforced by the sense of forgetfulness described above. In the three cases analyzed in this project, only a handful of years had to pass before Americans could be newly shocked that such an event could occur in their country. The American people's forgetfulness and blindness to the world's dangers are two very important components in the resiliency inherent in the national identity. In an odd way, the very blindness of the American people strengthens their sense of identity. Of course, as I note later, this blindness also has less benign effects.

A final component of this resiliency is the seemingly unflappable sense of optimism found in American national identity. The editorials clearly demonstrated that no matter how grave the disaster—no matter how many dead, no matter how incompetent our government, no matter how terrifying the enemy—the belief in American Exceptionalism prevailed. The editorials maintained a faith that the country would go on, and that everything would turn out fine in the end. This optimism was demonstrated most dramatically in the shift in tone from the first to the second year in editorials concerning Hurricane Katrina. After one year, the editorials reflected deep doubt about American self-government itself. But with the passage of another year, that doubt had been overwhelmed by the optimism inherent in American national identity. No longer was Katrina a basic failure of all government, but only of the Bush Administration. These three components—forgetfulness, blindness to global dangers, and eternal optimism—are the substance of the resilience in American national identity that was so amply demonstrated in the editorials.

The analysis of the editorials suggests that there are three primary reasons for why American identity is so resilient. First, Americans have an amazing ability to rationalize in order to maintain the sense of identity. For example, in the case of the Oklahoma City bombing, the media made the claim that the perpetrators were not actually American, when they were clearly born and bred in the Midwest, in order to maintain the positive valence of national identity. If Americans were characterized as strong, compassionate people who valued life and liberty, yet American citizens caused the death and destruction in Oklahoma City, the resulting dissonance required significant rationalization. The easiest way to accomplish this rationalization, as discussed above, was to characterize the perpetrators as not “real” Americans.

Second, the national identity is resilient because of a strong and independent media that clearly feel a duty to protect the nation by reinforcing national identity. In response to the three crises, the media affirmed national identity, guided citizens in how to act, think, and feel, and helped citizens cope with tragedy. The media acted as a kind of national psychological counselor, providing the public with a venue to express their reactions and thereby helping average citizens cope with the tragedies. Readers could see their own concerns, feelings, and pride reflected in the editorials, and could use the editorials as a guide for how to feel and what to believe regarding the tragedy. If, as many believe, the influence of newspapers has declined and will continue to decline in the future (Anick, 2005), there is a real question about whether some other institution will be able to play the counseling role that has been fulfilled by newspapers for well over a century.



And finally, American Exceptionalism clearly is a key element in American national identity. The optimism at the heart of American Exceptionalism is reflected in the sense that somehow the United States is better, stronger, and more moral than other nations. Domestically, American Exceptionalism is reflected in the theme at the heart of the American Dream, that with hard work and a commitment to basic values, things will get better (Adams, 2001; DeSantis, 1998). The international and domestic variants of American Exceptionalism are clearly quite appealing for many Americans. There is still great power in the idea of being an American. A May 2008 Harris poll found that 84 percent of Americans believe that there is “a unique American national identity based on shared beliefs, values, and culture” (Bradley Foundation, 2008, p. 6) and 94 percent “report that they are proud to be Americans” (p. 7). In addition, 89 percent believe that “U.S. citizens are better off than citizens in other nations” (p. 7). These statistics demonstrate that even in a time of public dismay about the course that the country is taking, when there is widespread disapproval of the federal government, and fears about a recession (The Pew Research Center, 2008), the sense of pride in being an American has not wavered.

There are frequent assertions by conservatives that the American national identity is growing weaker ("America's identity crisis," 2008). Indeed, the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation recently released a report arguing that while the national identity is still strong, it is becoming less strong each year. The conservative think tank's report, entitled “E Pluribus Unum: The Bradley Project on America's National Identity,” makes the case that the national identity is beginning to weaken because of

the influx of immigrants and the lack of proper American history education in the nation's schools (Bradley Foundation, 2008). Similarly, every Independence Day, newspapers report that born-and-bred Americans do not have enough civic knowledge to pass the citizenship test that immigrants must pass to become citizens (Lewis, 2008). However, what this project makes clear is that despite the fact that many Americans cannot say for sure how many amendments the Constitution has or what year it was written, the American national identity is strong. The editorials published after national tragic events spoke in a unified voice about the values that the American people hold dear, and they demonstrated that the national identity has maintained its strength, even in the face of tragedies.

The resilience of the American identity in the face of tragedy also speaks to the importance of symbolic separation in national identity reconstruction. With an attack from external forces, the editorials focused on separating Americans from, in President Bush's words, "the evildoers." This separation between "us" and "them," or between good and evil, helped reinforce national identity. This separation had the effect of binding American citizens together as sharers of common feelings, beliefs, values, and goals. At the same time, the editorials categorized the foreign villains as completely evil, with no regard for life, freedom, or the American way of life. With an attack from domestic sources, the need for separation again was apparent. In this case, however, the separation was between "real" Americans and those Americans who are crazy or evil enough to want to do harm to fellow citizens. Similarly, in the case of a natural event, the idea of separation was prominent. The editorials divided

Americans between average, generous, hard-working Americans, and the government.

In all three cases, the characters in the narrative were quickly separated between heroes and villains. The heroes were average American people who were true to the American national identity: hard-working, generous, compassionate, freedom-loving, and proponents of justice. The villains were whoever threatened the national identity, whether they were terrorists, looters, warhawks, or the American government. One reason that American national identity is able to remain strong in the face of grave threat is this capacity to separate real Americans from the “evildoers.” The only way to effectively maintain a belief in the exceptional nature of Americans in the face of disaster is to distance ourselves from those who would sully the identity.

As the media work to narrativize the event by dividing the characters into heroes and villains, they also quickly place the tragedy in the national narrative of the United States. It appears that the placing of tragic events within the larger narrative of the country by the media does at least three things. First, it helps contextualize the tragedy, telling readers what led to the event, how it occurred, and how it can be overcome. Second, placing the tragedy within the national narrative provides a sense of degree regarding the event. By arguing that a given tragedy is not as bad as previous events, the media help put the tragedy in perspective for the American people, thus advising them on how to act and feel about the situation. And finally, placing the tragedies within the national narrative reassures Americans that the

country will continue into the future, just as it has after every other tragic event in the past. The editorials published immediately after each tragedy in the cases above promptly compared the tragedies to others in the past, whether it was the first World Trade Center attack, prior hurricanes, or Pearl Harbor. In each case, calling upon other tragedies within the national narrative reassured readers about the doggedness of the country.

Earlier I mentioned the odd way that blindness about the world strengthens core aspects of American national identity. It must be noted, however, that this blindness comes at a grave cost. Arguably, there was little that could have been done to prevent the Oklahoma City bombing. Almost no one suspected that American radical groups would use a truck bomb to attack a government building in a Midwestern city. The same cannot be said about Hurricane Katrina and the 9/11 attacks. Experts long had predicted a “doomsday scenario” in New Orleans if the storm were big enough (Berger, 2001; Bourne, 2004). And there had been many warnings about the danger posed by al Qaeda, some even mentioning the possibility of attacks using airplanes (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks, 2004). The unfortunate point is that the blindness at the heart of American national identity makes it difficult for experts and other elites to rouse the public in order to focus on known risks, such as those posed by large hurricanes and foreign terrorist attacks. Blindness makes American identity more resilient and optimistic, but it also makes the nation vulnerable.

### **Limitations**

This project has several limitations. The first limitation stems from the fact that I only analyzed newspaper editorials. A broader understanding of how the media shape national identity following a national tragic event would be discovered by using a greater variety of media forms. Specifically, this research would benefit from also analyzing magazine articles, as well as coverage of the events on television, the radio, and in the blogosphere. It also would be useful to study data on how the public uses media material, such as editorials. Of course, a project of this nature must be limited in scope in order to be doable, and I continue to believe that out of the possible media choices, newspaper editorials offer the most direct insight into how the media attempt to reconstruct national identity.

A second limitation of this project is the focus on anniversaries in subsequent years, rather than analyzing all editorials published on the topic in the years after the event occurred. Analyzing all editorials would certainly offer a more complete picture of the trajectory of national identity construction. However, it is clear that anniversary editorials are especially important and are more likely than other editorials to include language that rebuilds national identity.

A third limitation of this project is that only the media were analyzed. Undoubtedly, national identity construction occurs in many venues other than the media, and this is certainly true following national tragic events. The national identity is likely reaffirmed through public ceremonies and prayers, monuments and memorials, and museums dedicated to the tragedy, among others. While the goal of

this project was only to determine how the media work to reconstruct identity, a much deeper understanding of identity reconstruction would be gained by including a wider variety of material.

### **Future Research**

This project points in several directions for future research. Using a wider variety of media types and analyzing them during more time periods would lead to a deeper understanding of national identity reconstruction following tragedies. In addition, taking into account a wider range of national identity reconstruction methods, such as public ceremonies, memorials, and many others, would be useful.

It also would be useful to examine smaller tragedies, perhaps even ones that are only discussed in local or regional media, to see how the media reconstruct national identity in those cases. Along the same lines, future research could examine more than one example of each tragedy type to learn whether the patterns I have outlined hold true. While the cases considered here are the most significant examples in each of the three categories, more could be learned by examining several of each tragedy type to see whether the patterns remain consistent. It would also be useful to analyze the response to tragic events from further back in American history, to see how the reconstruction effort has changed over time.

### **Conclusion**

There is no question that a strong national identity is critical for a healthy country. The national identity helps citizens heal from national tragedies, reassures them that the country will go on despite the threat, and guides citizens toward

responding in a way that remains true to the values inherent in the identity. In his discussion of the American Dream, Walter Fisher quoted philosopher John Courtney Murray regarding the importance of the national identity: “The complete loss of one’s identity is, with all propriety of theological definition, hell. In diminished forms it is insanity. And it would not be well for the American giant to go lumbering about the world today, lost and mad” (1973, p. 167). Following a national tragic event that threatens American identity, the news media work to reaffirm that identity so that in our darkest hours, Americans need not lumber around, lost and mad.

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