Winning the Narrative War

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ABSTRACT: A president's ability to control the policy narrative during a military intervention is crucial to maintaining public support, especially when American blood might be shed. An examination of policy narratives couching the military interventions in the Gulf War and in Haiti reveal both the fragility of these narratives and the importance of framing.

Be it Roosevelt and infamy, Kennedy and Pax Americana, or Reagan and a wall that needed tearing down, framing a policy narrative with the right words can be critical to the legacy of a president.[1] Studies of successful framing of presidential messages find repetition begets message penetration which begets impact. But examples of failed presidential narratives are difficult to uncover for one obvious reason: they failed to dominate. Nonetheless, studies of unsuccessful framings and the policy implications thereof are important for understanding the presidency, especially now in a fragmented media environment when gauging the success of a narrative is more difficult. Even today, the president makes no more compelling decision than the one to risk the lives of American servicepeople. Consequently, studying successful and unsuccessful presidential wartime message framing can illuminate the importance of controlling narratives under the highest of pressures.

This article explores two cases of presidents framing messages addressing military interventions. Specifically, it examines George H. W. Bush's messaging regarding the Persian Gulf War and William J. (Bill) Clinton's messaging surrounding the invasion of Haiti following that country's 1991 coup. The authors contend an executive's ability to keep terminology dominant and forestall any counternarratives is a measure of rhetorical success. Being on the defensive or constantly having to reframe one's message is a measure of failure. Not all successful presidential framings will sway public support but maintaining a consistent narrative about a crisis is itself a measure of any administration's efficacy.

Background

Frames are subtle changes in language that can have dramatic impacts on public opinion by focusing attention on certain, select aspects

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1. Jeffrey K. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

of an event or issue.[2] Historically, elites set news frames since their word choices and perspectives are critical for journalists in the initial stages of reporting any story.[3] Well-known examples of framing in news coverage include presenting a rally or protest as a matter of free speech versus a public safety risk or using terminology like *welfare* instead of the more sympathetic framing of *assistance to the poor*.[4]

Cognitive science has shown such linguistic choices impact how information "encodes" in the brain and what becomes associated with the topic.[5] Specifically, the brain associates terminology and issues because of recency or frequency: we associate B with A because we have recently heard about B or because we think about B often.[6]

Creating a frame that will be adopted by the media in order that a particular policy will be embraced by the public is highly beneficial to a politician's success. Competition between the press and politicians over frames on domestic issues is common, but the press tends to more readily accept politicians' discourse on foreign policy.[7] Cases of successful counterframing of foreign policy should, therefore, be relatively rare—on foreign policy especially, the framing game is the executive's to lose.[8]

The Persian Gulf War

When the Gulf War began in August 1990, Bush condemned the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait calling it a "blatant use of military aggression

2.   Robert M. Entman, "Cascading Activation: Contesting the White House's Frame after 9/11," *Political Communication* 20, no. 4 (2003): 415–32.

3.   W. Lance Bennett, "Toward a Theory of Press-State Relations in the United States," *Journal of Communication* 40, no. 2 (June 1990): 103–25.

4.   Paul M. Sniderman and Sean M. Theriault, "The Structure of Political Argument and the Logic of Issue Framing," in *Studies in Public Opinion: Attitudes, Nonattitudes, Measurement Error and Change*, ed. William E. Saris and Paul M. Sniderman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 133–64; Kenneth A. Rasinski, "The Effect of Question Wording on Public Support for Government Spending," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (Fall 1989): 388–94; and Dennis Chong and James N. Druckman, "A Theory of Framing and Opinion Formation in Competitive Elite Environments," *Journal of Communication* 57, no. 1 (March 2007): 99–118.

5.   Dietram A. Scheufele, "Framing as a Theory of Media Effects," *Journal of Communication* 49, no. 1 (March 1999): 103–22, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1999.tb02784.x; and Scheufele, "Agenda-Setting, Priming, and Framing Revisited: Another Look at Cognitive Effects of Political Communication," *Mass Communication and Society* 3, no. 2–3 (2000): 297–316, https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327825MCS0323_07.

6.   John R. Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511818691; and David Domke, Dhavan V. Shah, and Daniel B. Wackman, "Media Priming Effects: Accessibility, Association, and Activation," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 10, no. 1, (Spring 1998): 51–74, https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/10.1.51.

7.   John Zaller and Dennis Chiu, "Government's Little Helper: U.S. Press Coverage of Foreign Policy Crises, 1945–1991," *Political Communication* 13, no. 4 (1996): 385–405, https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.1996.9963127; and Entman, "Cascading Activation."

8.   This research analyzes public statements of Bush and Clinton from August 1, 1990 to January 15, 1991, and from January 20, 1993 to September 18, 1994, respectively. The data represent all official statements as documented in the *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, the official collection of administration pronouncements. Scholars looking to replicate this collection can access the papers at https://quod.lib.umich.edu/p/ppotpus/ using key words like: "Persian Gulf Crisis," "unconditional withdrawal," "military invasion," or "military aggression."

and violation of the UN [United Nations] Charter."[9] Bush repeatedly described the invasion as "naked aggression," a "brutal act of aggression," and an "unprovoked invasion."[10] His word choices signaled to the public how to understand what was occurring in the Persian Gulf—specifically, Iraq had brutally attacked Kuwait without reason. Bush also established that the United States was not responding to the crisis alone, but had dispatched envoys to work with the UN and allies around the world to convince Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait. This narrative would prove important moving forward when Saddam Hussein later attempted to introduce a counterframe that the conflict was a bilateral fight between him and America.[11]

Early in the conflict, Bush spoke frequently about diplomatic efforts to achieve his objectives for the conflict: Iraq's complete and unconditional withdrawal from Kuwait, the restoration of Kuwait's legitimate government, the security and stability of Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf, and the protection of US citizens abroad.[12] Throughout the first months of the Gulf War, Bush focused his language on these objectives, successfully establishing a dominant initial frame for the crisis and leaving little room for critics to introduce counternarratives.

Public opinion polls in August 1990 reveal Bush's narrative and rhetoric was successful: 60–75 percent of Americans were keeping abreast of events and supported Bush's policy.[13] There were complications though, as a majority also believed the United States was involved to protect American economic interests in the Persian Gulf and a minority believed the involvement was to deter Iraqi aggression.[14] From August 1990 through January 1991, even when Bush was unable to convince a majority of Americans about the justifications for US involvement in the Persian Gulf, he was able to maintain a majority of support for US military presence in Saudi Arabia.[15] These polls suggest Bush's framing was working.

In November, Bush adjusted his narrative to gain support for military intervention, building upon the existing framing to justify the use of force. Bush emphasized lessons learned from World War II, repeatedly drawing analogies between Saddam Hussein and Adolf Hitler and emphasizing the world could not appease aggressors.[16] Bush continued to express his desire for a nonmilitary resolution to the crisis, but now added that UN Security Council resolutions had to be implemented.

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9.   George H. W. Bush, *George Bush, 1990*, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, bk. 2, *July 1 to December 31, 1990* (Washington, DC: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Administration [NARA], 1991), 1082.

10.   George H. W. Bush, *George Bush, 1990, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, bk. 1, *January 1 to June 30, 1990* (Washington, DC: Office of the Federal Register, NARA, 1991).

11.   Bush, *George Bush, 1990*, bk. 2, 1082–183.

12.   Bush, *George Bush, 1990*, bk. 2.

13.   George Gallup Jr. and Frank Newport, "The Persian Gulf Crisis: American Opinion throughout the Month of August," *Gallup Poll Monthly* 299 (August 1990): 2.

14.   Gallup and Newport, "Persian Gulf Crisis," 7.

15.   Gallup and Newport, "Persian Gulf Crisis."

16.   Bush, *George Bush, 1990*, bk. 2, 1148–256.

Bush and his allies had a large hurdle to overcome before using force: the concern over another Vietnam-like quagmire, which, in August 1990, 48 percent of Americans admitted to fearing.[17] Polls indicate Bush overcame these fears by stressing American forces had sufficient resources to overwhelm Iraqi forces and the administration had every intention to depart the region quickly.[18]

As months passed, as a result of the framing of this narrative, Bush succeeded in convincing a majority of Americans to support his policy choices.[19] By January 1991, almost two-thirds of Americans said they had given a "great deal" of thought to whether the United States should invade to retake Kuwait from Iraq, and over half reported supporting military intervention.[20]

In addition, Bush's many statements, news conferences, and exchanges with reporters ensured three-fourths of Americans said they understood why the United States was involved in the Persian Gulf.[21] Polls show Bush's statements brought public understanding in line with his own reasons for US involvement: peace, security, and stability in the region over access to oil supplies.[22] Despite Saddam Hussein's counterframing efforts, public concerns that oil was the real reason for the conflict, and worries about a second Vietnam, Bush successfully controlled the narrative about the Gulf War until the invasion in 1991 and the commencement of Operation Desert Storm.

The 1991 Haiti Coup

In addition to establishing the policy narrative for the Gulf War, Bush also established the narrative for the Haitian coup that ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in September 1991. From the beginning Bush stated the United States was "worried about Haiti" and supported the "restoration of the democratically elected government to Haiti."[23] He also stated he was "wary of using US forces in the hemisphere" and he hoped a resolution could be "done without any kind of force," publicly supporting efforts by the Organization of American States to resolve the

17.   Gallup and Newport, "Persian Gulf Crisis," 7.

18.   Data from polls on Persian Gulf War in *Gallup Poll Monthly* from August 1990 to January 1991.

19.   Adam Clymer, "War in the Gulf: Public Opinion; Poll Finds Deep Backing While Optimism Fades," *New York Times*, January 22, 1991, https://www.nytimes.com/1991/01/22/us/war-in -the-gulf-public-opinion-poll-finds-deep-backing-while-optimism-fades.html.

20.   "Times Mirror News Index, January 1991," Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Poll Database, Pew Research Center, https://www.people-press.org/question-search/?qid=237708 &pid=51&ccid=51#top.

21.   "Buildup to War," *Gallup Poll Monthly* 304 (January 1991): 21.

22.   Data from polls in *Gallup Poll Monthly* from August 1990 to January 1991.

23.   George H. W. Bush, *George Bush, 1991, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, bk. 2, *July 1 to December 31, 1991* (Washington, DC: Office of the Federal Register, NARA, 1992), 1246–646; Bush, *George Bush, 1992–93, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, bk. 1, *January 1 to July 31, 1992* (Washington, DC: Office of the Federal Register, NARA, 1993); and Bush, *George Bush, 1992–93, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, bk. 2, *August 1, 1992 to January 20, 1993* (Washington, DC: Office of the Federal Register, NARA, 1993).

crisis.[24] Bush's narrative constrained US support in this crisis to diplomatic efforts and economic sanctions against the illegal government.[25]

Throughout 1992, Bush narrowed his rhetoric, advocating for Aristide's return, continuing economic sanctions, and the repatriation of refugees. Further, Bush's statements made clear the United States would not use force or send troops to restore democracy to Haiti or Aristide to power.[26] This policy position would change with Clinton. At first, Clinton continued Bush's narrative with little adjustment. But as the crisis continued, Clinton tried to change the narrative to fit with his own emerging policy.

Similar to Bush, Clinton's policy narrative discussed the US preference for restoring democracy in Haiti and returning Aristide to power, as well as US efforts to support international negotiations toward these ends. Clinton's narrative however, referred to the US "commitment" and "determination" to restore democracy to Haiti, whereas Bush only said "worried" or "supported," without committing the country to any solution to the Haitian crisis.[27]

While seemingly minor, this variation in terminology, when applied to policy decisions, makes a significant difference in public messaging. *Commitment* and *determination* imply significantly different degrees of willingness to work toward a policy goal than *worried* does. This was the first of several differences between the two presidents' framings of the Haitian crisis. Other significant divergences included Clinton's decreased focus on the Haitian refugee policy, increased attention to human rights, and stating Aristide had been elected by "two-thirds of Haitian voters."[28] This messaging foreshadowed a policy shift and an attempt to change how the public understood the crisis.

In overcoming Bush's hands-off narrative to gain public support for his own more interventionist policy, Clinton faced an uphill battle after seeming to (at first) accept Bush's more laissez-faire policy. Establishing a foreign policy narrative is hard; changing one is even harder. Further, Clinton did not deliver his Haiti narrative frequently or consistently, mentioning Haiti on average three days per month throughout 1993.

24.   Bush, *George Bush, 1991*, bk. 2, 1247, 1263.
25.   Bush, *George Bush, 1991*, bk. 2, 1246–646; Bush, *George Bush, 1992–93*, bk. 1; and Bush, *George Bush, 1992–93*, bk. 2.
26.   Bush, *George Bush, 1991*, bk. 2, 1646.
27.   Bush, *George Bush, 1991*, bk. 2, 1246–646; Bush, *George Bush, 1992–93*, bk. 1, 376–908; Bush, *George Bush, 1992–93*, bk. 2, 1954; William J. Clinton, *William J. Clinton, 1993, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, bk. 1, *January 20 to July 31, 1993* (Washington, DC: Office of the Federal Register, NARA, 1994), 55, 290, 309, 311; Clinton, *William J. Clinton, 1993, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, bk. 2, *August 1 to December 31, 1993* (Washington, DC: Office of the Federal Register, NARA, 1994), 184, 1743, 1758, 1864; Clinton, *William J. Clinton, 1994, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, bk. 1, *January 1 to July 31, 1994* (Washington, DC: Office of the Federal Register, NARA, 1995), 1292; and Clinton, *William J. Clinton, 1994, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, bk. 2, *August 1 to December 31, 1994* (Washington, DC: Office of the Federal Register, NARA, 1995).
28.   Clinton, *William J. Clinton, 1993*, bk. 1, 823, 832; Clinton, *William J. Clinton, 1993*, bk. 2, 1730, 1731–2, 1744, 1764; Clinton, *William J. Clinton, 1994*, bk. 1; and Clinton, *William J. Clinton, 1994*, bk. 2, 1548.

The consequence in terms of public opinion was clear: October 1993 polling indicated more Americans disapproved of Clinton's handling of Haiti than approved of it.[29]

In early May 1994, Clinton revealed a more forceful policy toward Haiti by introducing two new phrases: "not ruling out any option[s]" and "time for a new initiative."[30] He began emphasizing the length of the coup—almost three years—and stated, "maybe we've let it run on a bit too long."[31] He also harkened back to earlier narratives that two-thirds of Haitian voters had elected Aristide and the US mission was to restore democracy.[32] Additionally, Clinton more frequently referred to the fact that following the coup, Haiti was one of just two nondemocratic countries in the hemisphere and therefore of significant strategic interest to the United States.[33] In fact, between May and August 1994, Clinton began to include "defending democracy" as a specific US interest in his increasingly hawkish narrative.

Nonetheless, he failed to outline specifically what US interests or mission objectives were. For example, Clinton first talked about Haiti being in the United States' backyard, then walked back this messaging.[34] He talked about Haiti sending drugs and that it, like Cuba, was a nondemocracy.[35] During this period of a lack of specificity and contradiction in the policy narrative, in July 1994, 50 percent of survey respondents opposed the military intervention desired by the Clinton administration.[36]

In an attempt to gain public support, Clinton made a flurry of public statements in mid-September to update Americans on developments and explain his policy decision. After Clinton addressed the nation on September 15, 1994, support for an intervention increased somewhat, possibly due to a rally-around-the-flag effect: Gallup reported 66 percent of Americans were convinced by Clinton's arguments, but 43 percent disapproved of the way Clinton had handled the situation in Haiti.[37] These gains were temporary: by October, approval of Clinton's handling of the crisis fell to 54 percent.[38] By February 1995, while 47

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29.   "International Policy Opinion Survey, October 1993," Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Poll Database, Pew Research Center, accessed April 2, 2020, https://www.people-press.org/question-search/?qid=278345&pid=51&ccid=51#top.

30.   Clinton, *William J. Clinton, 1994*, bk. 1, 859.

31.   Clinton, *William J. Clinton, 1994*, bk. 1, 819.

32.   Clinton, *William J. Clinton, 1993*, bk. 1, 823, 832; Clinton, *William J. Clinton, 1993*, bk. 2, 1730, 1731–2, 1744, 1764; Clinton, *William J. Clinton, 1994*, bk. 1; and Clinton, *William J. Clinton, 1994*, bk. 2, 1548.

33.   Clinton, *William J. Clinton, 1994*, bk. 1, 954.

34.   Clinton, *William J. Clinton, 1994*, bk. 1, 954, 1217.

35.   Clinton, *William J. Clinton, 1994*, bk. 1, 954.

36.   "People, The Press & Politics Poll—New Political Landscapes, July 1994," Pew Research Center for the People and the Press Poll Database, Pew Research Center, accessed April 2, 2020, https://www.people-press.org/question-search/?qid=292467&pid=51&ccid=51#top.

37.   David W. Moore and Lydia Saad, "After Clinton Speech: Public Shifts in Favor of Haiti Invasion," *Gallup Poll Monthly* 348 (September 1994): 16–17.

38.   "The People & the Press Poll—Prelude to the Election October 1994," Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Poll Database, Pew Research Center, accessed April 2, 2020, https://www.people-press.org/question-search/?qid=292638&pid=51&ccid=51#top.

percent said they had approved of his handling of the crisis, 47 percent also reported disapproval.[39] Our analysis of Clinton's framing of the military intervention in Haiti concludes he failed to establish a policy narrative convincing Americans that the seriousness of the Haitian crisis warranted armed intervention.

Implications for Future Executives

A successful presidential policy narrative rallies domestic and international support behind a policy decision. A strong narrative successfully framed helps coalesce support for a policy and quiets potential counternarratives. But such narratives and frames must remain agile—media and communications theory reveal a presidential narrative cannot be presented and then left alone. A successful narrative and frame, repeated with some frequency, keeps the event relevant for the public.

These two case studies provide the following three insights:

- Whenever possible, a president should establish a narrative early. This timing is important for new initiatives or events and for efforts to redirect an existing policy narrative—the sooner an administration publicizes its version of events or policy position, the better chance a message has of gaining traction.

- The success of the narrative depends on how well an administration conveys the relevancy of the issue in question. Presidents employing consistent, sustained phraseology are more likely to beget success than presidents using inconsistent, contradictory, or confusing language.

- A successful frame evolves with the situation but has consistent foundations, and allows a president to establish national interests and objectives. During the Gulf War, Bush established US interests early and did not change them. Clinton did not do this—the administration's narrative regarding US strategic interest in Haiti morphed multiple times.

Every administration faces messaging and optics problems. While no one case can provide comprehensive instructions for all occasions, executives would be well-served to study the messaging strategies of Bush and Clinton in the examples above, one of successful control of a presidential policy narrative and the other, a mishandling of the same.

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39.   "Policy Opinion Survey, October 1993."

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