

From Spreading Freedom to WMDs and Back Again:
The Shifting Frames of the War on Terror, 2001-2006

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Abstract

The “war on terror” has changed dramatically in the last six years. Events have unfolded, battles have been won, lives have been lost, and public sentiment has shifted back and forth. Tasked with conveying the daily facts and the broader significance of the war to the public, the American media has employed a variety of different frames: spreading peace and stability in the Middle East, finding weapons of mass destruction, the prospect of an unwinnable civil war in Iraq, and many more. We examine coverage of the war by the *New York Times*, focusing on the what, why, and how of patterns in framing (and reframing) during times of national crisis. We argue that framing is a sticky, highly inertial process—the best predictor of today’s frame is the frame used yesterday—but still a process susceptible to overhaul. A single frame, even a powerful frame, is no match for the advance of time. Any status quo frame will be maintained only as long as the positive signals (e.g., events, international response, and public sentiment) reinforcing the dimension and tone of that frame outweigh the negative ones challenging it. And the susceptibility of a frame to being replaced increases with its duration on the agenda, particularly in the aftermath of a major national crisis, as any frame based on the initial crisis becomes less and less salient as the crisis recedes in history. Positive signals reinforcing the initial status quo frame will have decreasing value, whereas the value of negative signals will increase. The question is not *whether* the crisis will be redefined, but *how* and *when*. We offer generalizable hypotheses regarding the nature and duration of frames most likely to be employed both immediately following a national crisis and in later periods as the crisis evolves. We then test these hypotheses against an original database of all front-page *New York Times* articles about the war on terror (broadly defined) from September 11, 2001 through December 31, 2006; about 3,500 stories in all. The primary frame used in each story is coded based on an exhaustive set of frames, and the tone of each story is also recorded. This data provides rich illustration of how frames have been used, replaced, and reused in the public debate. We chronicle the debate’s evolution, identifying patterns in the types of frames that have been employed at different points in time and explaining why and how these frames have changed. We provide both a macro view of framing dynamics in media coverage of the war and in-depth examinations of specific frame shifts, such as advances in women’s rights in Afghanistan and the American military scandal at Abu Ghraib. Beyond analyzing the shifting frames of this current war, our findings contribute to the broader literature on framing by offering theoretical expectations and suggestive evidence about which frames will become dominant in times of crisis, how long these frames will persist, and what stimuli will lead to their displacement.