

# Post-9/11 Terrorism Threats, News Coverage, and Public Perceptions in the United States

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# Post-9/11 Terrorism Threats, News Coverage, and Public Perceptions in the United States

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Terrorists, policy-makers, and terrorism scholars have long assumed that the mere threat of terrorist strikes affects societies that have experienced actual acts of terrorism. For this reason, most definitions of terrorism include the threat of violent political acts against civilians. But so far research has neither validated this conventional wisdom nor demonstrated how actual and mass-mediated threat messages by terrorists and terror alerts and threat assessments by government officials affect the public in targeted states. This paper fills the gap providing evidence that who conveys such messages matters and that mass-mediated threat messages by al Qaeda leaders and announced alerts and threat assessments by U.S. administration officials had a significant impact on the American public's threat perceptions in the post-9/11 years.

## Post-9/11 Terrorism Threats, News Coverage, and Public Perceptions in the United States

Commenting on Americans' reactions to the attacks of 9/11, Osama bin Laden said with obvious satisfaction, "There is America, full of fear from north to south, from west to east. Thank God for that!" Since then, bin Laden and other al Qaeda leaders have frequently warned of more devastating anti-American attacks inside and outside the United States. Well versed in the psychology of fear, terrorists know that violent incidents and the mere threat of terrorism in the aftermath of major strikes accomplish one of their primary goals – to intimidate their target publics and force governments to react and often over-react.

Indeed, whether they actually stage or merely threaten violent spectacles, terrorists win instant access to the news media. But government officials who are responding to terrorist attacks are also in excellent positions to utilize the media to enlist public support for their policies.

Terrorists, decision-makers in targeted countries, and students of terrorism have long assumed that not only actual terrorist attacks but also serious threats of such strikes can and do increase targeted publics' fears and anxieties. Our research tests this conventional wisdom by examining the actual threat communications by Osama bin Laden and other al Qaeda figures, the alerts and threat assessments by President George W. Bush and members of his administration as well as the TV-network coverage of these pronouncements and by comparing them with trends in the American public's perceptions of threat in the post-9/11 era.

There is a growing body of research on the importance and effectiveness of the media in the terrorist scheme to get the attention of and intimidate their various target audiences – friends and foes alike (Schmid and de Graaf 1982; Alali and Eke 1991, Paletz and Schmid 1992; Weiman and Winn 1994; Nacos 1996, 2002). But with few exceptions (Kellner 2005; Nacos 2002; Miller 1980; Crelinsten 1997) there is a dearth of sound research that illuminates the roles of

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public communication, mass media, and public opinion in the politics of counterterrorism. As for public reaction to terrorism news, some researchers have concluded that exposure to television is less predictive of high levels of fear than are viewers' personal characteristics (Rubin et al. 2003), but there is also evidence that heavy consumers of TV news are far more likely to perceive the threat of terrorism in the United States as high than are people who pay less attention to the news (Nisbet and Shanahan 2004). Moreover, recent research has demonstrated that individuals' assessments of the terrorist threat affect their support for or opposition to counterterrorist policies (Nisbet and Shanahan 2004; Huddy et al. 2005; Kushner 2005).

### 1. News as Predominant Source of Public Affairs Information

More than eighty years ago, before the advent of radio and television, Lippmann ([1922] 1997) observed that what people know about the world around them is mostly the result of second-hand knowledge acquired by reading newspapers. In modern-day mass societies, people are even more dependent on the news; they have "nowhere else to turn for information about public affairs and for cues on how to frame and interpret that information" (Neuman, Just, and Crigler 1992, 2). Even when individuals witness events, such as a devastating terror attack or massive anti-war demonstrations, or when people are affected by socio-economic developments, such as high unemployment or increasing energy costs, they are still likely to depend on the news to explain the reasons, consequences, and political significance of what they have experienced personally. As Page and Shapiro (1992, 340) put it, the public "often responds not to events or social trends but to *reported events*."

Decisions on what and whom to present in the news and how to present them are often influenced less by ideological bias than by news organizations' focus on authoritative voices that they find at the most influential places of the executive branch. Administration officials dominate foreign policy and national security news, especially during international crises that involve the United States (Nacos 1990; Dorman and Livingston 1994; Cook 1994; Mermin 1999; Entman 2004). As Page and Shapiro (1992, 367) pointed out before Americans became the targets of catastrophic terrorism:

In matters of foreign policy, the executive branch of government often controls access to information, and it can sometimes conceal or misrepresent reality without being challenged. The political opposition is often intimidated or co-opted. Journalists, even when they are aware of what is going on, sometimes willingly hold back awkward truths in the name of "national security."

### 2. Propaganda of Fear and Terrorism as Media Event

Nineteenth century anarchists and radical social reformers recognized that they were able to send powerful messages to audiences by committing violence; they therefore defined terrorism as "propaganda by the deed" or "propaganda of the deed." Their idea was that terrorist strikes would drive fear into targeted societies and make them amenable to the revolutionary changes they sought. Spreading fear is central to terrorist and counterterrorist rhetoric and persuasion directed at audiences in whose interest the leaders of terrorist organizations and the governmental leaders of targeted countries claim to act. According to Pratkanis and Aronson (1991, 165), such fear persuasion is especially effective when it accomplishes the following, "(1) it scares the hell out of people, (2) it offers a specific recommendation for overcoming the fear-arousing threat, (3) the recommended action is perceived as effective for reducing the threat, and (4) the message recipient believes that he or she can perform the recommended action." Before and after 9/11, Osama bin Laden's demagoguery aimed often not only to threaten Americans and Westerners but also to accomplish the four objectives of fear propaganda among potential sympathizers. President George W. Bush and his administration, too, made their fear appeals along the four propaganda objectives in order to enlist broad public support for their post-9/11 agenda. To be sure, not all fear appeals succeed – but in the face of violent events that rise to the level of "media events" or "media spectacles," the mass public pays attention to appeals that boil down to persuasion of fear.

Communication scholars distinguish between communication as transmission and communication as ritual. Whereas transmission communication means disseminating information "farther and faster, eclipsing time and transcending space" (Carey 1992, 17), ritual communication refers to the "sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and communality" (Carey 1992, 18).

Communication as ritual has been discussed in the context of terrorism with respect to what Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz (1992) defined as “media events.” In its original meaning, a media event is televised live and preplanned (e.g., John F. Kennedy’s funeral, the royal wedding of Charles and Diana, Olympic Games) and in fact is co-produced by television networks and organizing governments or other public bodies. Considering terrorist spectacles during the 1980s, Gabriel Weimann (1987, 21) suggested that “there are attributes shared by certain terrorist events and the conceptualization of media events.” More recently, Elihu Katz and Tamar Liebes (2007) concluded that disruptive, threatening events, such as disaster, terror and war have actually upstaged the ceremonial “media events” and that terrorism events “are obvious co-productions of perpetrators and broadcasters” (Katz and Liebes 2007, 164). Unlike Weiman, Katz, and Liebes, Douglas Kellner calls the 9/11 attacks explicitly “shocking global media events” that were used by Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda on the one hand and President George W. Bush and his supporters on the other to advance their respective agendas and geopolitical designs (Kellner 2007, 25).

Following the events of 9/11, it was President Bush who “articulated the escalating patriotism, vilification of the terrorists, and demand for stern military retaliation,” as Kellner (2006, 165) put it. The news media, too, followed a melodramatic storyline that pitted the victimized nation against the ultimate villain. Based on a qualitative content analysis of Fox News on the afternoon of September 11, 2001, Anker (2005, 35) concluded, “Melodrama defined America as a heroic redeemer with a mandate to act because of an injury committed by a hostile villain.” While the virtuous nation and its heroes received copious and prominent news coverage, so did the villain-in-chief Osama bin Laden and those of his followers who killed themselves to kill thousands of innocent Americans. Indeed, in the months following the 9/11 attacks, bin Laden received more attention in television news than President Bush (Nacos 2002). This high degree of attention to bin Laden’s messages of hate and threat fit perfectly into the story about “the evil-doer,” as President Bush called the al Qaeda chief, and the patriotic warriors dispatched to hunt down bin Laden and, later on, to remove another threatening “evil,” Iraq’s Saddam Hussein, from power.

Both entertainment and news media have always paid extraordinary attention to violence regardless whether in the form of crimes or acts of terrorism (Bok 1998; Shanahan and Morgan 1999). Especially in television network news and local news programs terrorism outpaced by far other important events, issues, and problems. According to Iyengar (1991, 27), “Between 1981 and 1986, more news stories were broadcast [by the three TV networks ABC, CBS, and NBC] on terrorism than on poverty, unemployment, racial inequality, and crime combined. Hijackings, hostage situations, and similar events have been emblazoned on the public consciousness.” Research has also established that both the volume of terrorism coverage and the placement of terrorism stories within a broadcast affect the public agenda (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Nacos 1996): when the number of terrorism stories increased, the public’s perception of terrorism as a major national problem went up. Lead stories in TV newscasts proved even more potent in putting terrorism high on the public agenda. Although already over-covered in the 1980s, terrorism was far more in the news in the 1990s, when major anti-American attacks took place inside the United States (the first World Trade Center bombing in 1993, the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995) and abroad (the Khobar Towers bombing in 1996, the bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, the suicide attack on the USS Cole in 2000). But the post-9/11 terrorism-related news outpaced all records previously set by high volumes of terrorism coverage. With terrorism high on the news agenda, the public followed the media’s lead. For the eighteen months following the events of 9/11 Kern, Just, and Norris (2003) found a correlation between the number of terrorism stories in the three TV networks’ early evening news broadcasts and the public’s ranking of terrorism as the country’s most important problem. Our study covers a significantly longer time period.

Research has also established that “[b]y calling attention to some matters while ignoring others, television news influences the standards by which governments, presidents, politics, policies, and candidates for public office are judged” (Iyengar and Kinder 1987, 63). Moreover, the news also cues audiences to judge a president’s character in the context of heavily and prominently covered events, problems, or developments. Given that American

presidents are widely regarded as the nation's protectors-in-chief and managers of major crises, one would assume that this priming effect of the media provides citizens with the news parameters within which they grade the performance of their presidents in the face of terrorist strikes and threats. In the past, the approval ratings of presidents increased – often significantly – during and after terrorist incidents and in the wake of military responses to terrorism (Nacos 1996, 2002, 2006).

### 3. Mass-Mediated Threat Messages and the Public: Three Hypotheses

Based on the literature in the field and our recollections of the news after 9/11 we expected our research to provide evidence for the following:

- (1) That threat messages from both Osama bin Laden and his closest associates as well as the Bush administration's official terror-alerts and other threat messages were heavily covered and prominently placed by the news media, including TV newscasts. Since bin Laden and other al Qaeda leaders were in hiding and only able to communicate via audio and video tapes, we expected to find that President Bush and other administration officials were the dominant news sources covered with respect to threat warnings, right behind media personnel such as news anchors, reporters, and correspondents.
- (2) That the news about the threat of further terrorist attacks influenced how Americans perceived the severity of the terrorist threat to the United States in general, to their communities, and to their own well-being and that of their families in particular. We also expected to find that the overall volume of threat messages affected how the public ranked terrorism as a major problem the country was facing.
- (3) That Washington's official terror alerts and the news coverage of them as well as other mass-mediated threat messages conveyed by administration officials affected the public's evaluation of President Bush's job performance in general and his handling of terrorism in particular. In the early months of the Iran Hostage Crisis in 1979–80,

Iranians' rhetorical attacks on President Carter and the United States contributed to the significant increases in Carter's public approval (Nacos 1996, chapter 5); we therefore hypothesized that threat messages from bin Laden and others in the al Qaeda leadership would have positive effects on President Bush's approval ratings.

### 4. Research Methodology and Data

Television news is the most important source of information for the majority of the public. While the overall audience of cable TV news has steadily grown in the last decade, the nightly network news broadcasts of ABC News, CBS News, and NBC News still outpace by far all individual news programs on cable television. For this reason, we chose the early evening TV newscasts of the three networks for our content analysis. Because the number of pertinent news segments was high, we did not work with full transcripts but coded abstracts available from Vanderbilt University's Television News Archive. Our reading of the abstracts indicated that they contained the basic information on reports about the threat of terrorism. We searched for segments that contained the terms threat(s), alert(s), or warning(s) in the context of terrorism for a thirty-nine-month period (October 1, 2001, to December 31, 2004). We also searched for reports that mentioned messages, statements, or tapes as well as bin Laden or al Qaeda themselves. A close reading of a sample of abstracts and full transcripts of nightly network news convinced us that literally all of these bin Laden/al Qaeda messages contained threats or warnings of future terrorist attacks. We retrieved a total of 373 relevant story abstracts, of which ABC News broadcast 32 percent, CBS News 34 percent, and NBC News 34 percent. We also retrieved a small number of newscast transcripts from the Lexis/Nexis news archives for a qualitative analysis of pertinent segments.<sup>1</sup>

In our quantitative content analyses we coded the network that broadcast a particular segment, the placement of each item as a lead or non-lead story, and the length of the

<sup>1</sup> Because the Vanderbilt TV news summaries provide the air times for each segment but the Lexis/Nexis transcripts do not, we compared the length of news segments about changes in the official terror alert levels either in terms of minutes and seconds or word counts.

segment. Coders identified the sources of threat messages, such as the President, the Secretary of Homeland Security, members of Congress, experts, members of the general public, foreign sources, Osama bin Laden, and media sources (anchors, correspondents, reporters, etc.), who have come to make up the bulk of news sources in both broadcast and print media (Nacos 1990, 1996). Finally, our coders categorized the type(s) of message(s) contained in each news segment: for example, increase or decrease of the national terrorism threat alert level; announcements of official threat warnings without increasing the color-coded alert scheme; and broadcasts of and reporting on bin Laden/al Qaeda. Given the fairly uncomplicated coding task, our coders achieved high reliability in their test coding. After a first reliability test in which our coders agreed in their coding of 90 percent of message sources and 82 percent of the types of messages, the coders then achieved 96 percent agreement for both in a second set of codings.

In addition, looking at the broader media environment, we searched open sources on the Internet for dates, abstracts, and transcripts of audio and videotaped messages released by bin Laden and other al Qaeda leaders, and for statements by U.S. administration officials alerting the public to specific terror threats or speaking of terrorism threats against the American homeland in more general terms. We coded these segments parallel to our TV coding, identifying the sources and categorizing the types of messages, in order to examine the effect of these mediated realities. Here, the British *Guardian's* timeline of bin Laden tapes was helpful as were the online archives of the White House and the Department of Homeland Security.

Finally, we retrieved public opinion survey questions about Americans' fears, concerns, worries, and assessments of the terrorist threat as well as questions on President Bush's overall and terrorism-specific approval rating from September 11, 2001 through December 31, 2005. It is worth noting that a search for "terrorism" produced four hundred survey items (from the iPOLL archive of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at the University of Connect-

icut), during the whole of the more than twenty-one-year period from January 1, 1980, when the Iran Hostage Crisis made headlines, to September 10, 2001, the day before the 9/11 attacks. But for the just over four years from September 11, 2001, to December 31, 2005, the same keyword search produced a total of 3,235 survey questions.<sup>2</sup> From the iPOLL archive, the "Polling the Nations" archive, the Marist College Institute for Public Opinion, and several other polling institutions we collected identical questions, preferably asked by the same survey organizations and repeated over time, in order to determine short- and long-term trends.<sup>3</sup>

In the retrieval process, we selected polls that revealed the public's more general concerns about future terrorism, catastrophic terrorist attacks in particular, and how these perceptions related to their own communities and to themselves and their families. Out of thirty-five repeated questions through the years, we focused further on responses to seven questions dealing with: concern about terrorist attacks over different time horizons at the national level, terrorism affecting one personally, terrorism as most the important issue facing the country, and approval of Bush in general and in his handling of terrorism.<sup>4</sup>

We used these questions to explore the relationship between public perceptions about terrorism, threat pronouncements by al Qaeda leaders and U.S. administration officials, and the news coverage of such threats.

## 5. Research Findings

### 5.1. Television News: Covering and Magnifying Terrorist Threats

"The United States is back on orange alert," Dan Rather said at the top of the CBS Evening News on May 20, 2003. According to Rather, "President Bush today approved raising the national terror alert from yellow, meaning an elevated risk of a terror attack, to orange, meaning there is now considered to be a high risk." In the following 3½ minutes Washington correspondent Bob Orr explained that officials in Washington "say they have no concrete information pointing to any imminent terror attack any-

<sup>2</sup> Searching on "terrorism" the corresponding numbers are 976 and 6,718 respectively.

<sup>3</sup> When we had more than one time point in a month, we took a monthly average.

<sup>4</sup> Complete question wordings and time points are available from the authors.

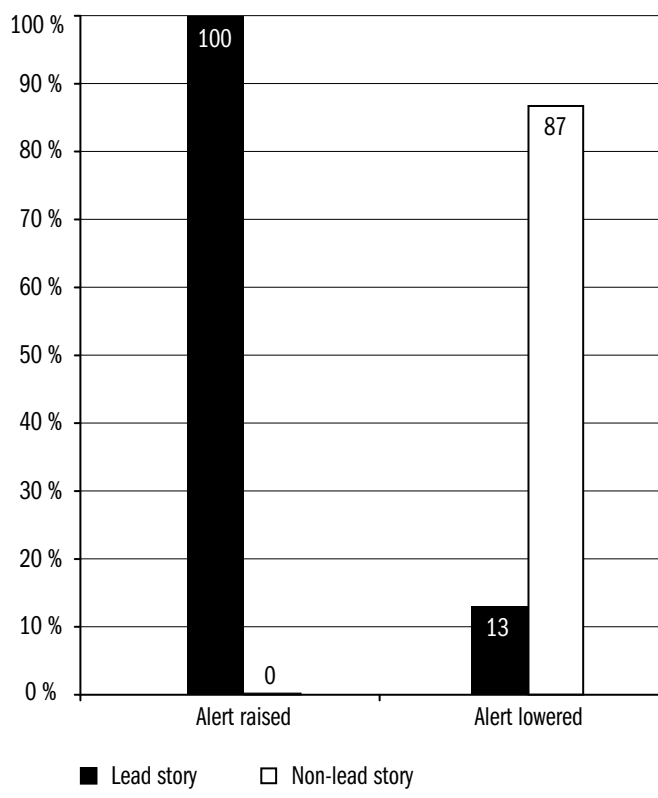
where in the U.S. But it's fair to say here in Washington, the level of worry is as high as it's been since September 11th." After comments by Asa Hutchinson, the Undersecretary of Homeland Security, and Randall Larson of the Anser Institute for Homeland Security, Rather asked CBS News Pentagon correspondent David Martin, "David, how imminent is a possible terror attack believed to be?" Martin's alarming answer: "Very imminent, Dan, if you believe the intelligence, which consists primarily of intercepted conversations among known al-Qaeda operatives talking among themselves about something big that is going to happen in the next two or three days." Ten days later, Jane Clayson, sitting in for Dan Rather as anchor of the CBS Evening News announced, "In this country, the terror alert level, raised to orange after the attacks in Saudi Arabia this month, was lowered today to yellow, elevated risk. The Department of Homeland Security says intelligence indicates the threat of an imminent attack has decreased." Forty-three words in two sentences in a non-lead segment were devoted to inform the audience that there was less reason to worry about a terrorist attack compared to the 642 words that were spoken to alarm Americans ten days earlier that there was an "imminent" threat of terrorism in the United States. ABC's World News Tonight and NBC's Nightly News covered these two official announcements in similar ways. On World News Tonight, the heightened terror alert of May 20, 2003, was dramatized by correspondent Pierre Thomas who revealed:

An FBI bulletin obtained by ABC News points to two recent e-mails, intercepted by US intelligence. One message warns of a possible devastating attack in the next 48 hours and urged all Muslims to leave all cities, especially Boston, New York and the commercial coastline. A separate intercepted message targets Washington, and again points to possible attacks against New York and the nation's beaches. The FBI made an immediate decision to share the e-mails with police across the country.

In what followed, current and former federal and local officials then commented on the raised threat alert. In all, 734 words were spoken. When the official terror alert was lowered ten days later, Peter Jennings announced it in two sentences and twenty-five words: "The Department of Homeland Security has lowered its terrorist threat

level today from orange to yellow. Ten days ago, you will recall, they raised it." Over at NBC News, anchor Tom Brokaw introduced the comprehensive lead story by telling his audience that the decision to once again jack up the nation's security alert had been made in the White House. Reporting from Washington, correspondent Pete Williams revealed that intelligence leading to the higher terror alert was received during the interrogation of suspected Al-Qaeda members arrested in Saudi Arabia after recent bombings in Riyadh; the segment then turned to Hutchinson of the Department of Homeland Security and New York's Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly for comments. Finally, reporting from the State Department, Andrea Mitchell spoke about possible terrorist targets inside and outside the U.S. When the threat level was lowered ten days later, the Nightly News did not bother to mention the change.

Figure 1: TV coverage of official terror alert changes by placement



Taken together, the three networks aired eighteen reports on the Bush administration's decisions to raise the national terror alert level and fifteen segments on the lowering of

the color-coded alarm. In addition, the networks reported three times on raised terror alerts for New York and two times for other cities, while two newscasts mentioned the lowering of regional alerts. True to the media's tendency to highlight shocking, sensational, disconcerting news, all twenty-three announcements of increases in the national or local terrorism alert levels were reported as lead stories (fig. 1). Conversely, ABC, CBS, and NBC reported decreases in these threat levels far less prominently airing only 13 percent of such announcements as lead stories and 87 percent further down in their particular broadcasts. When the Bush administration raised nation-wide terrorism alerts, the networks devoted on average 5 minutes and 20 seconds to such reports; when the national terror alert was lowered, the average news segment lasted only 1 minute and 34 seconds (fig. 2). The difference was even more pronounced with respect to local threat alerts in that the average airtime for raised terror levels was 2 minutes and 56 seconds versus only 20 seconds for segments reporting on the lowering of official terror alerts. When the three

networks aired reports about official terror alerts and advisories that did not involve changes in the color-coded alert status, the average length of these segments was still 2 minutes and 20 seconds.

No doubt, then, that the news magnified the administration's terrorism alerts by reporting such announcements mostly in lead stories and very long segments, while downplaying the new lower alert levels or not covering such changes at all.

How did the networks cover the frequently released audio- and videotaped messages by bin Laden and his close associates? In the 305 instances, in which the release of a new bin Laden/al Qaeda message was reported or the content of these communications was analyzed, commented on, or referred to in the networks' evening broadcasts, about half of these messages (51 percent) were contained in lead stories. When bin Laden/al Qaeda messages were not dealt with in lead stories, they were typically referred to or analyzed by experts, administration officials, other domestic actors and, on a few occasions, by foreign sources. The average length of news segments that contained bin Laden/al Qaeda messages was close to four minutes (3 minutes and 51 seconds). Only 25 percent of these explicit and implicit threat messages were translated statements by bin Laden and other al Qaeda leaders or summaries of these communications by anchors and correspondents, 6 percent were comments attributable to foreign sources, and more than two thirds (69 percent) originated with domestic sources responding to hostile remarks by al Qaeda's leaders. In the TV newscasts we examined, 28 percent of President Bush's statements concerning terrorism threats and alerts were reactions to communications by bin Laden or other al Qaeda leaders as were 22 percent of those by experts and 100 percent by CIA officials. This high degree of attention to al Qaeda's communications is powerful evidence for the tendency of target societies to perpetuate the propaganda of their terrorist foes and thereby, even if unwittingly, assist terrorists in their efforts to spread their intimidating messages.

Typically anchors, correspondents, and reporters describe public affairs news, characterize the importance of events or developments, and paraphrase what political actors have stated. As a result, more information is conveyed by

**Figure 2: TV coverage of official terror alert changes by airtime**

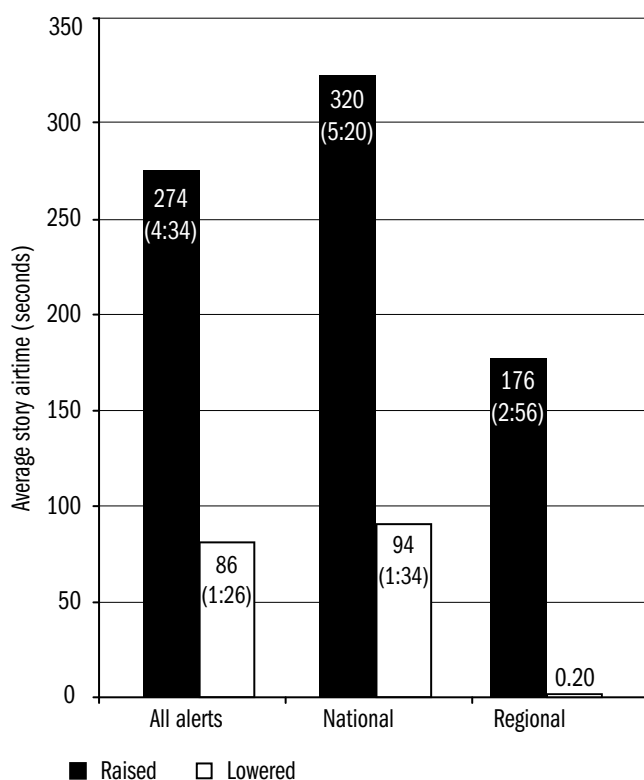
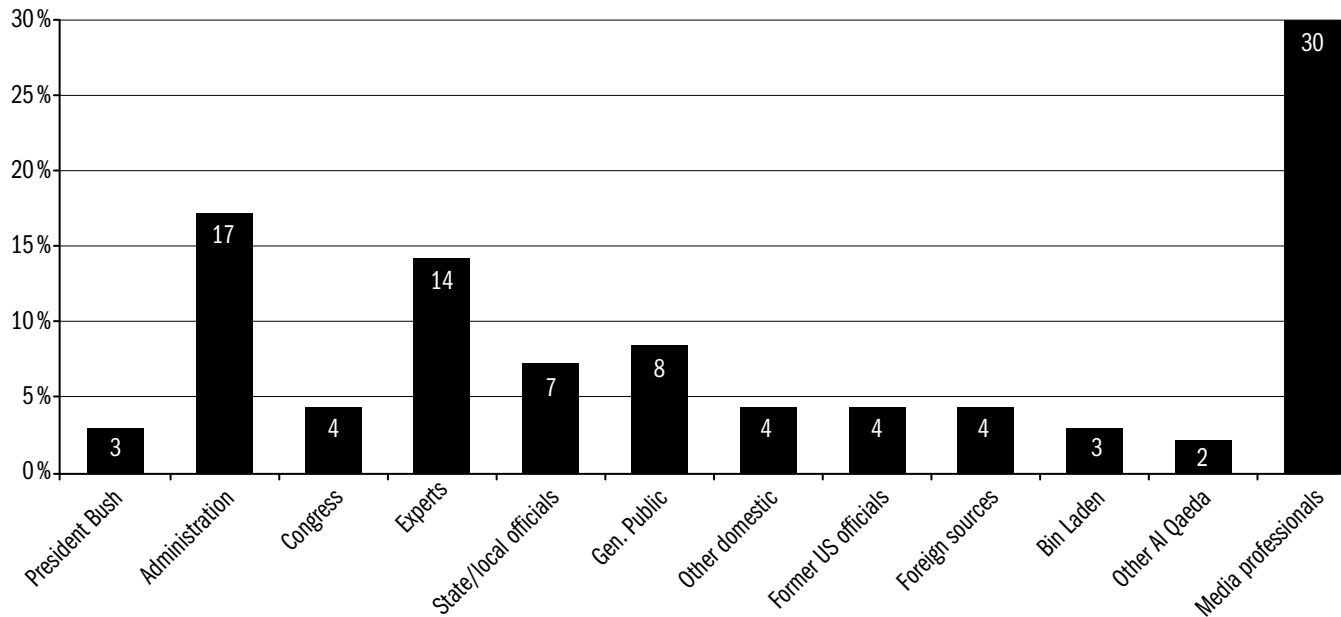




Figure 3: TV coverage of official terror alert changes by airtime



media-based sources than by newsmakers and by those who react to and comment on whatever news unfolds. As figure 3 shows, this was also the case in the years after 9/11 with respect to terrorism threat messages in that media personnel comprised 30 percent of the sources reporting on terror threats regardless of whether the warnings and threat assessments came from the Bush administration or from al Qaeda leaders. Administration officials accounted for 20 percent of all domestic and foreign sources with President George W. Bush (3 percent) and the Secretary of Homeland Security (4 percent) combining for 7 percent of all sources. Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge or other high officials in his department issued terror threat warnings and announced up and down changes in the color-coded terrorism alert system. But following administration officials, terrorism and counterterrorism experts comprised the most often selected non-media group, accounting for 14 percent of all sources. This was hardly surprising because the television networks had signed these experts up in droves as news consultants after 9/11. While not identified as experts, former government officials (4 percent of all sources) and members of the military (1 percent) were actually also cast in the roles of experts.

Although far less involved in the mass-mediated terror threat debate, members of Congress made up 4 percent of the total news sources.

When it came to reporting on terror threats, all three networks paid attention to ordinary Americans (8 percent of all sources) and offered them opportunities to express their feelings about the usefulness of such warnings. And whereas federal departments and agencies issued all threat warnings, local and state officials were reacting to announcements from Washington since the alerts were on some occasions issued for particular areas (i.e. New York City, Los Angeles). As a result, mayors, governors, police commissioners, and others in the emergency response communities constituted 7 percent of all sources.

All in all, television news on specific and general terror threats was the domain of American sources (91 percent) – only 9 percent of all sources were foreigners. But of these non-Americans, bin Laden and other al Qaeda leaders together represented 5 percent of all foreign and domestic sources and were more frequently newsmakers in the threat debate than were members of the U.S. Congress. More

important, television network news presented bin Laden as a news source as often as President Bush, each “capturing” a 3 percent share of the total number of sources cited.

## 5.2. The Terrorist Threat and Public Opinion

Terrorism experts agree that modern terrorism began in 1968, when Palestinian groups began to hijack commercial airliners to advertise their grievances against Israel. In the following decades, many terrorist incidents targeted citizens of the United States and other countries. As a result of anti-American terrorism abroad, four of five Americans believed in the second half of the 1980s and in the 1990s that terrorist attacks inside the U.S. were very likely or somewhat likely. In April 1995, shortly after the Oklahoma City bombing, a case of domestic terrorism, 86 percent of the American public thought that an act of terrorism in the United States within the next twelve months was “very likely” (48 percent) or “somewhat likely” (38 percent) (Nacos 2006, 261–62). At that time, the terrorism that most Americans had in mind was probably of domestic origin, not of the international variety. After 9/11, however, the focus of public officials, the news media, and presumably the public was on international terrorism. When asked about the likelihood of another terrorist attack in the United States within the next few months, the majority of Americans felt consistently that more terrorism was “very likely” or “somewhat likely.” In the weeks after 9/11, up to 88 percent of respondents believed that additional terrorist strikes were “very likely” or “somewhat likely” within a few months. As time went by without further acts of terrorism, there was a downward trend especially in the “very likely” category. Thus, by the summer of 2005 and early 2006 only 52 percent and 53 percent of the public, respectively, thought terrorist attacks within the next few months were “very likely” (9 to 10 percent) or “somewhat likely” (43 percent).<sup>5</sup> When interviewers did not specify a time frame for possible terrorist strikes (i.e. “a few months” or “soon”) when inquiring about the level of respondents’

concerns that there would be more major terrorist attacks in the United States, the number of those who said they worried “a great deal” declined from 41 percent in early October 2001 to 24 percent in August 2005, shortly before the fourth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. The number of Americans who were “somewhat” or “not too much” worried increased from 53 percent a few weeks after 9/11 to 65 percent as the fourth 9/11 anniversary approached. But a modicum of worries remained: only between 4 percent (several weeks after 9/11) and 10 percent (nearly four years after 9/11) of Americans were “not at all” worried about another major terror attack in the United States.<sup>6</sup> In the nearly four years after 9/11, between one third and one fourth of all Americans thought it “very likely” that “in the near future” another act of catastrophic terrorism “causing large numbers of American lives to be lost” would occur; between 38 and 46 percent believed that such a terrorist catastrophe was “somewhat likely;” and only 3 to 6 percent were confident that another act of *catastrophic* terrorism was “not likely at all.”<sup>7</sup> It is telling that Americans’ expectations of catastrophic terrorism in the “near future” fluctuated a bit in the years after 9/11 but did not subside; on the contrary, in early October 2001, less than a month after 9/11, 71 percent of Americans thought another incident of catastrophic terrorism was “very likely” or “somewhat likely,” and in July 2005, a few days after the quadruple suicide attacks on the London transit system, 75 percent of Americans – 4 percent more than shortly after 9/11 – expressed this expectation.<sup>8</sup>

While the overwhelming majority of Americans was to one degree or another worried about the likelihood of additional terrorism sometime in the future, they were far less concerned that terrorists would strike in their own communities. In the days following the events of 9/11, about four of ten Americans were personally concerned about terrorism in the area where they lived. But these sentiments weakened during the next months and years, so that between

<sup>5</sup> This analysis is based on thirty-one national surveys conducted by CBS News and the CBS News/New York Times polling partnership. The first of these polls was conducted in September 2001 and the last in late January 2006.

<sup>6</sup> We examined thirteen national surveys conducted by ABC News and ABC News/Washington Post.

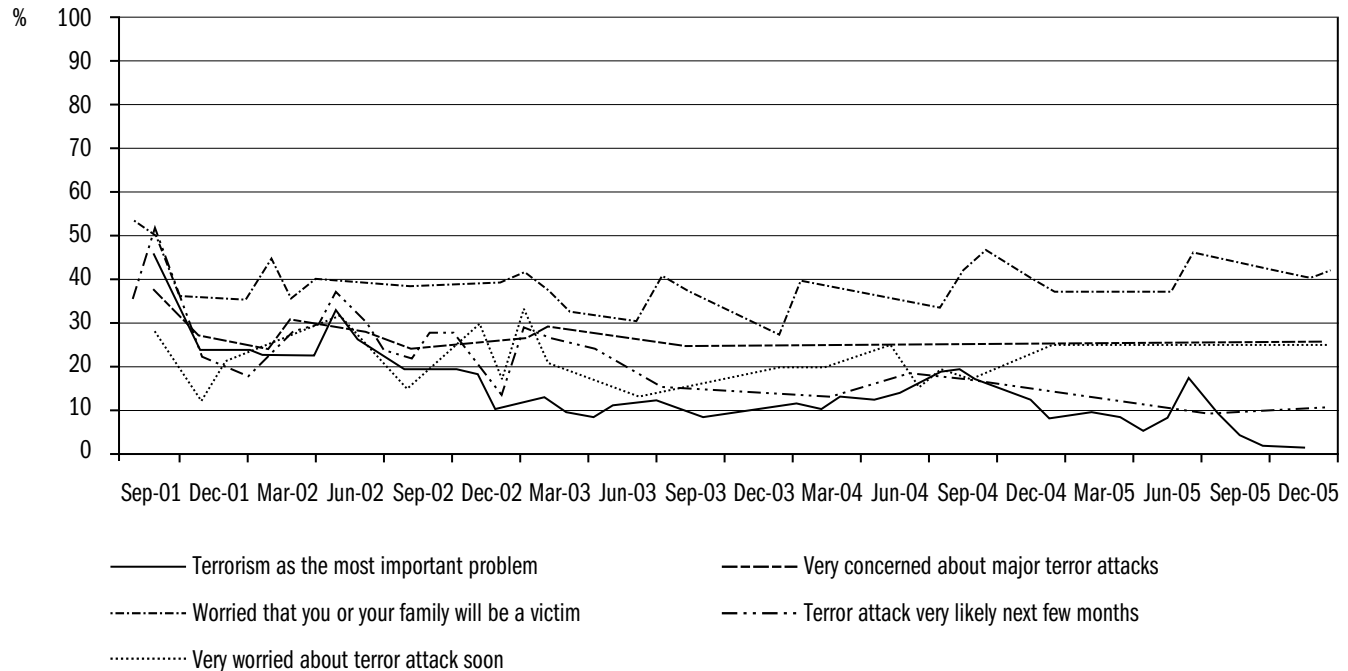
The first of these polls was conducted in October 2001 and the last in August 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Fox/Opinion Dynamics surveys contained the same question nine times. The first of these polls was conducted in October 2001 and the last in July 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> This conclusion is based on surveys conducted by CBS News and the CBS News/New York Times polling partnership. The first of these polls was conducted in September 2001 and the last in late May 2003.

Figure 4: Concern about terrorist attacks



two thirds and three fourth of the public were no longer worried about terrorism in their own neighborhoods.<sup>9</sup>

The story was different for residents of New York City, the site of the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center and the complete destruction of the whole World Trade Center complex in September 2001. In the spring of 2004, two of three residents of New York City were convinced that the risk of another terrorist attack was higher in their own community than in other big cities around the country.<sup>10</sup> No wonder, then, that the majority of New Yorkers remained for years “very worried” or “worried” about another major act of terrorism in their city. And while one third to one half of Americans around the country said they were not worried at all about terrorism in their own area, only 9 to 16 percent of New Yorkers were without such worries.<sup>11</sup>

In the days and weeks immediately following the events of 9/11 more than half of all Americans were “very worried” or “somewhat worried” that they themselves or a member of their family would become a victim of terrorism. While these personal concerns waned during the following years, typically one of three or two of five Americans feared that terrorists could harm them or their loved ones. Personal concerns about the terror threat seem to rise after major terrorist acts and when official terrorism alerts were issued. Thus, following the bombings of London’s transit system 47 percent of Americans were worried about the possibility that they or their families could become victims of terror strikes whereas only 38 percent expressed these concerns before the events in London. After Washington officials warned of possible terror attacks in the United States before the presidential elections in early 2004, Americans’ level of concern about their own well-being and that of their fami-

<sup>10</sup> The poll was conducted by the New York Times in April 2004. At that time, 65 percent of New Yorkers believed their city to be the highest risk

area in the country and 72 percent said that they were very concerned about another terror attack in their city.

<sup>11</sup> The Marist College Institute for Opinion Research polled New York City residents on this four times from October 2001 to March 2005.

lies increased from 34 percent in early August to 42 percent in early September and 47 percent in mid-October.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, the American public did not buy into the Bush administration’s claim that the Iraq War was part of the post-9/11 efforts to rid America and the world of terrorism. Instead, at all times after the invasion of Iraq more Americans believed that the war had increased the threat of terrorism against the United States than that it had decreased it. Whereas a majority or plurality of Americans thought initially that the terrorist threat had remained the same, this changed for good around the first anniversary of the Iraq invasion, when more Americans thought that the terror threat against America had increased rather than remained about the same.

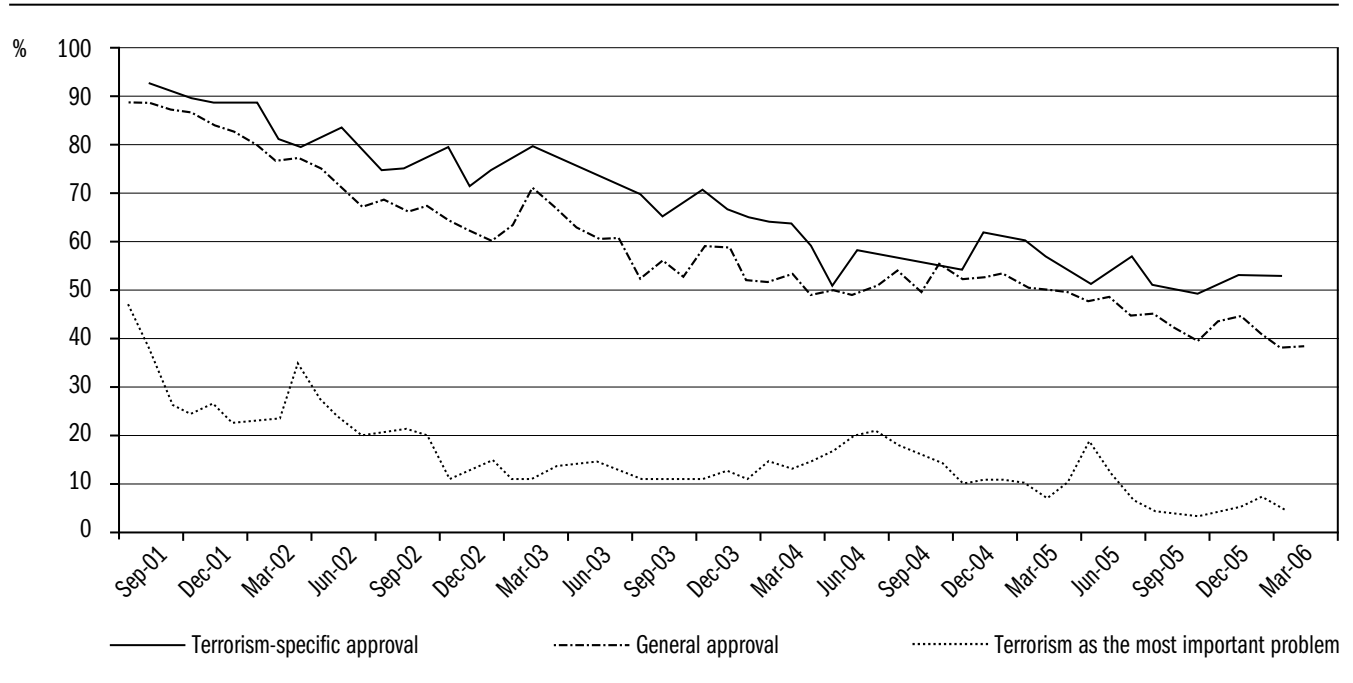
**5.3. Dynamics of Public Opinion and the Media**

In examining the dynamics of public opinion and the media we focused on seven questions dealing with the following: concern about terrorist attacks over different time hori-

zons at the national level, terrorism affecting one personally, terrorism as most the important issue facing the country, and approval of President Bush’s performance as president in general and his handling terrorism in particular.<sup>13</sup>

As we see in figure 4, the boldest line tracking the public’s perceptions of terrorism as the most important issue facing the country today reveals that since 9/11, unsurprisingly, this perception decreased noticeably (we will discuss some of the peaks further below). This trend correlates significantly with the trends of the three questions dealing with concern about terrorist attacks: great concern about major terrorist attacks ( $r=.77, p<.005$ ), worries about an attack occurring soon ( $r=.51, p<.01$ ), and thinking that an attack will occur in the next few months ( $r=.79, p=.000$ ). Interestingly, the correlation with personal worry about being a victim of terrorism is much less ( $r=.41, ns$ ).<sup>14</sup> Figure 5 shows that the public’s belief that terrorism is the most important issue facing the country correlates significantly with Bush’s approval ratings, in general ( $r=.736$ ,

**Figure 5: Terror threat: Bush approval and terrorism**



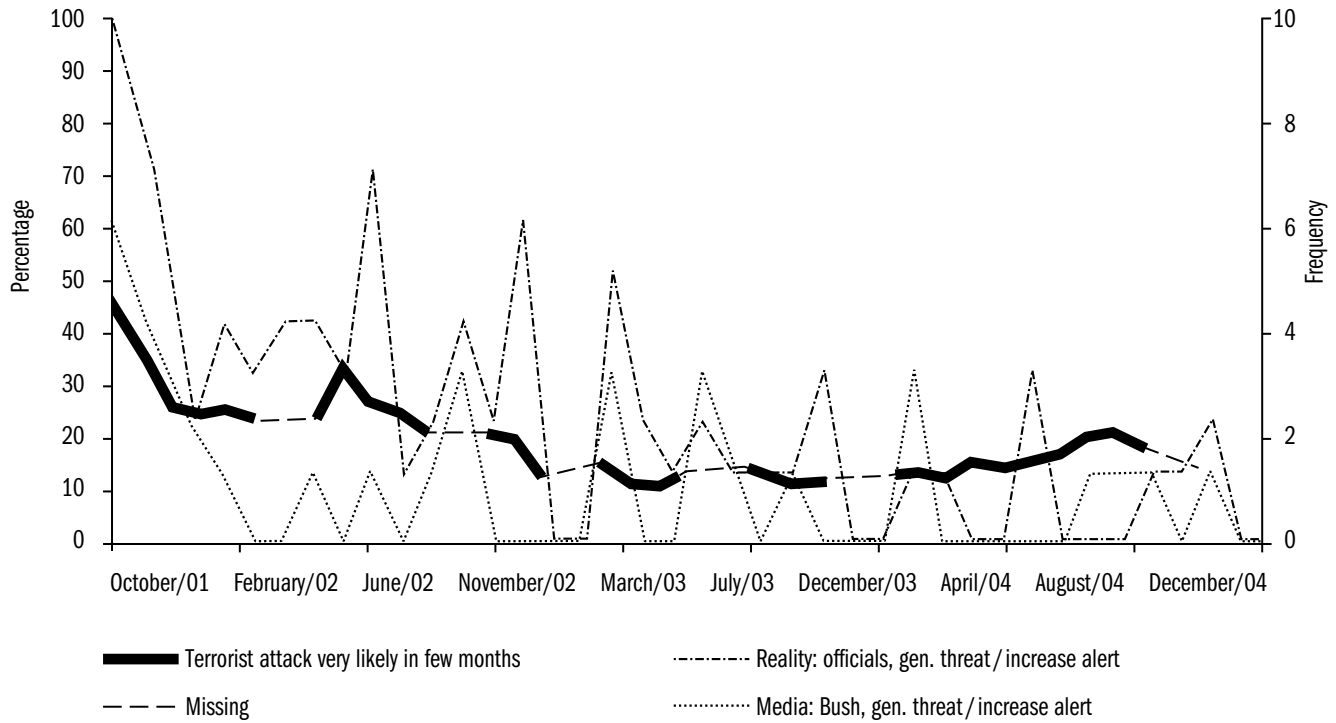
<sup>12</sup> See Appendix, question 5.

<sup>13</sup> See Appendix for survey items used in figures 4–11.

<sup>14</sup> Most of these four questions also correlate noticeably with one another. The correlations are: for great concern about major terrorist attacks, average  $r=.596$ ; very worried about an attack

occurring soon, average  $r=.457$ ; thinking that an attack will occur in the next few months, average  $r=.592$ ; and personal worry, average  $r=.398$

Figure 6: Most important issue? Terrorism. October 2001 – December 2004



$p < .001$ ) and with regard to terrorism ( $r = .715$ ,  $p < .001$ ), showing a similar systematic drop every year since 9/11.<sup>15</sup>

We examine these public opinion data more closely for the first thirty-nine-month period where we compare them with the trends in media (television) reporting or content on threats and alerts, and also trends in the threat assessments and terrorist alerts by U.S. administration officials that were almost certainly conveyed to, and likely to influence, the public through the full range of mass media outlets. In one instance, we include the timeline for the actual video- and audio-taped communications by bin Laden during this period. To avoid confusion over the threats and alerts that were covered by network news and the actual threats and alerts by administration officials and the al Qaeda leadership, we refer in the following discussions to “mediated reality” as the complete set of “actual,” or “original” statements and pronouncements by administration officials or bin Laden/al Qaeda. We emphasize

the most notable effects based on correlation coefficients and multiple regression analysis results (treating public opinion as the dependent variable and media content and actual statements as independent variables).

We first examine the extent to which the news media’s coverage of terrorism is related to how the American public perceives the graveness of the terrorist threat to the United States. We begin with the simple hypothesis that the volume of threat coverage affects how the public rates terrorism as a major national problem. Since research has demonstrated the agenda setting function particularly with respect to terrorism (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Norris, Kern, and Just 2003; Nacos 1996), one would expect that the total volume of mass-mediated threat messages has an impact on the public’s perceptions of the importance of terrorism as the major national problem. Surprisingly, this does not occur in our case. We found that it is not the total volume of threat messages that matters but *who* conveys

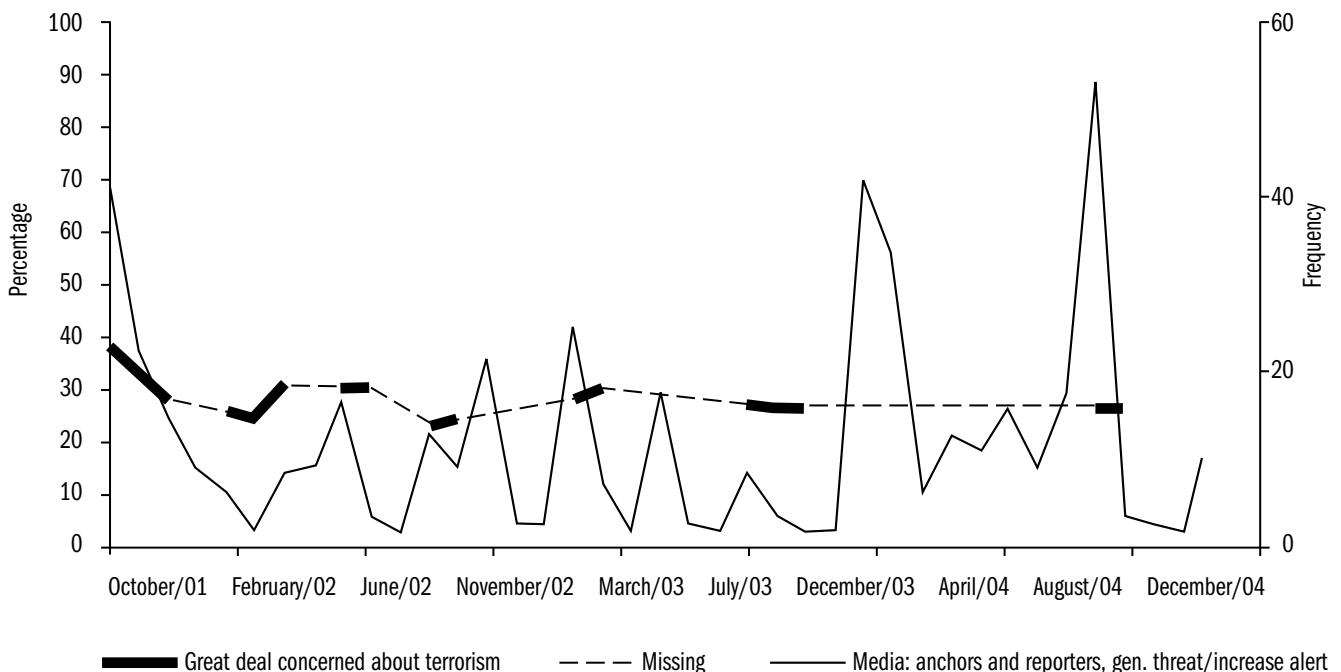
<sup>15</sup> The two Bush approval questions correlate significantly with each other ( $r = .937$ ).

such messages. On second thought, this finding is less surprising because our measure of the total of mass-mediated threat messages represent only a fraction of the complete public debate on terrorism. And it is the complete volume of reporting on terrorism that has been found to affect the public’s agenda. So, what did we find? On the issue of how the public ranks terrorism as a major national problem, we found that media content and the “mediated reality” measure had the strongest impact. Specifically, President Bush’s statements in the media concerning terrorist threats and alerts were highly correlated with responses to this survey question ( $r=.63, p<.001$ ). Among all the media variables these messages by Bush that were reported on television news had a very strong correlation with public perceptions, a phenomenon we will see again in relation to other aspects of public concern. In addition, statements by U.S. administration officials alerting the public to specific terror threats or speaking about such threats against the American homeland in more general terms had the strongest impact of all variables in this case ( $r=.83, p<.001$ ; regression coefficient,  $b=2.69, p<.001$ ). There was, not surprisingly, a strong correlation ( $r=.62, p<.001$ ) between television coverage of what President Bush said about terrorist

threats and alerts and actual threat and alert statements by administration officials.

As depicted in Figure 6, all the variables shown decrease over time in the same direction and also show increases during some of the same short-term periods. When Bush’s reactions to and comments about terrorist threats are reported in television news and when administration officials make these statements, the public is more likely to perceive terrorism as most important. This happened at several time points: In June 2002 the peak in the public’s threat perception followed several terrorism alerts the previous months, when administration officials initiated a heightened state of alert for railroads and other transit systems and warned of a special threat against the Statue of Liberty and the Brooklyn Bridge. Moreover, in early June U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft made the dramatic announcement that Jose Padilla, a U.S. citizen and alleged al Qaeda associate, had been arrested while plotting to acquire and explode a “dirty bomb” in an American city. As television news covered these threat announcements heavily, the public’s view of terrorism as a major problem for the country increased from 22 percent in May to 33

Figure 7: Concerned about major terrorist attacks. October 2001 - December 2004

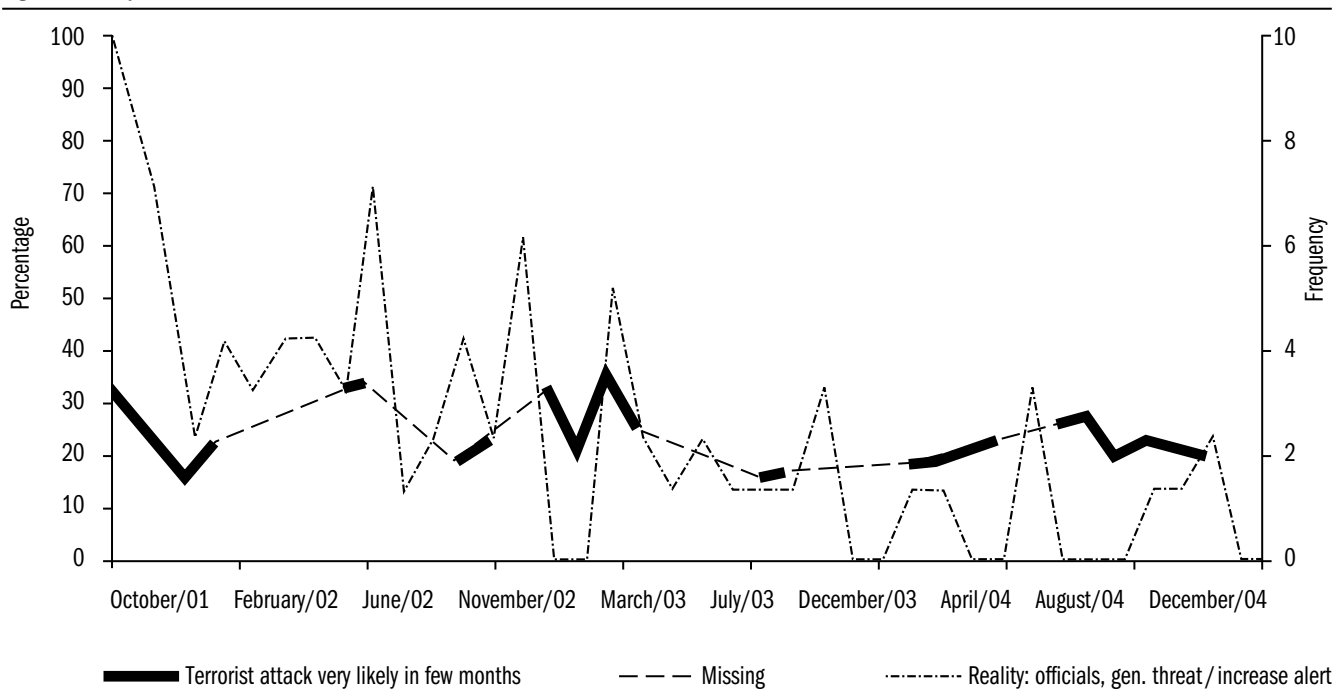


percent in June. It is noteworthy that there was a dearth of mass mediated threat messages and actual threat and alert statements in the preceding period.

In February 2003, the month before the invasion of Iraq, terrorist threat statements by President Bush were reported on TV three times, and there were five original statements by administration officials during that month. The following month, we see a slight increase in the public's perception of terrorism as the most important threat (from 10 percent to 13 percent) after a decrease in the previous months (from 18 percent to 10 percent). In December 2003, when Saddam Hussein was captured, the same pattern occurred. One might think that this success would lead to a decreased level of threat (no correlation was found between these types of messages with responses to any of our survey questions) and a smaller percentage of people thinking that terrorism is the most important issue facing the country. But two heavily covered domestic events could have affected the public: First, the chairman of the 9/11 Commission, Thomas Kean, said publicly that

the 9/11 attacks could have been prevented. Three days later, Secretary of Homeland Security Tom Ridge raised the terror threat alert for the upcoming holidays. Finally, in the months before the presidential elections the same pattern occurred: from June 2004 (and even earlier) the public's perceptions regarding terrorism as the major problem strengthened steadily with a peak in September/October 2004 – reaching the same level as in November 2002 (when the American-led coalition had made progress in the fight against al Qaeda and the Taliban).<sup>16</sup> In the case of the public's concern about more major terrorist attacks in the U.S, we find that the media had the only apparent influence on people's perceptions. Specifically in this case, we identified the influence of TV news anchors, correspondents, and reporters describing the terrorist threat in general terms or reporting on increases in the level of terrorism alerts ( $r=.54$ ;  $b=1.20$ ,  $p<.01$ ). This reframes an earlier finding (Page and Shapiro 1992) that identified TV news commentary as the strongest influence on the public's policy preferences. In this case media professionals collectively appeared to be potent influences on public attitudes.

Figure 8: Worry about another terrorist attack soon. October 2001 – December 2004



<sup>16</sup> For further elaboration on the patterns around the presidential elections, see the questions dealing with Bush's approval.

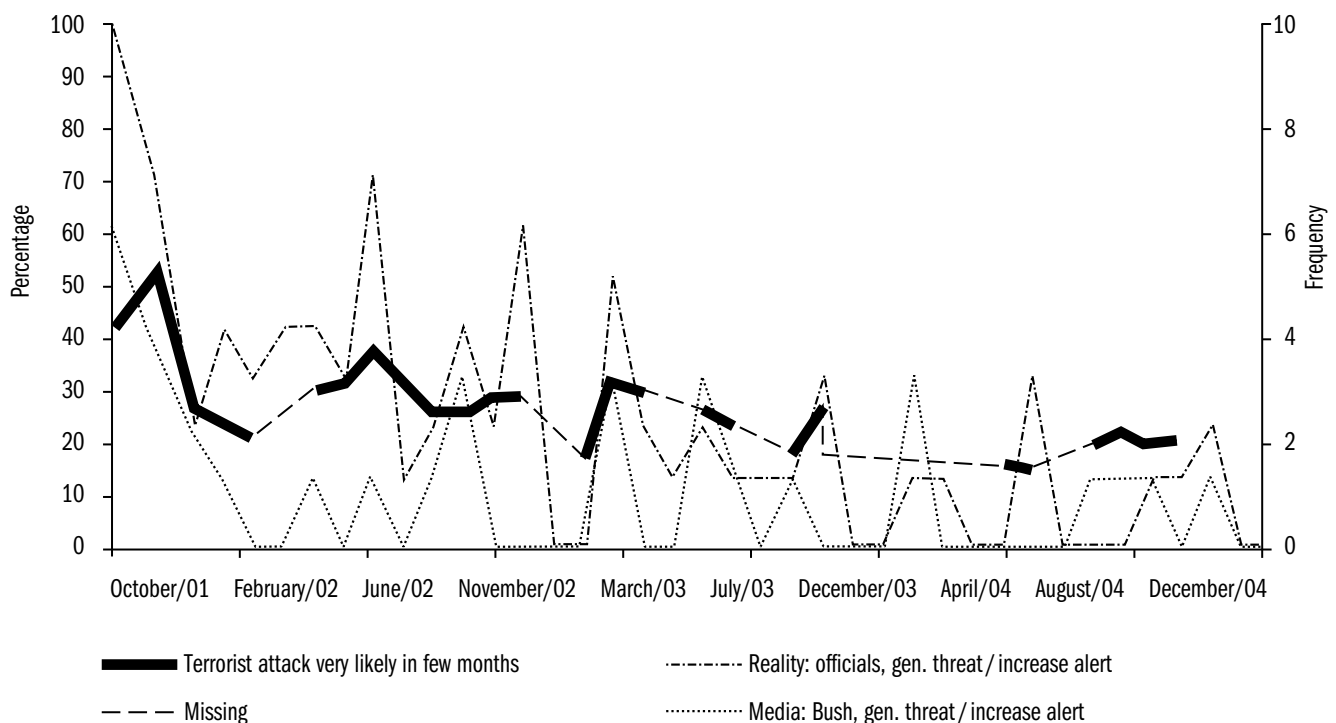
Figure 7 shows several concurrent peaks in the trend: when media professionals, the “voices of the news,” talk about terrorism threats or increased levels of alert, the public accepts this and becomes more concerned. This occurred particularly around February/March 2003 with 27 to 29 percent of the public very concerned that another major terrorist attack will happen in U.S. (rising from 22 percent in previous opinion polls). This happened for a reason: in February, network TV mentioned the threat of terrorism and the increased levels of official alerts twenty-five times, followed up by six messages in March, when the Iraq invasion was launched. The emphasis on the threat of terrorism in the media continued reaching a high peak of fifty-five threat messages in August 2004, a month later 25 percent of the public was very concerned about another major terrorist attack in the U.S. – two months before the presidential election.

When pollsters mentioned a particular time frame asking respondents whether they worried that another terrorist attack would occur “soon,” we found that the actual statements by U.S. administration officials alerting the public

to specific terrorist threats or speaking in more general terms about the threat had the strongest impact on public opinion ( $r=.49, p<.05; b=1.64 p<=.1$ ). Figure 8 shows that the public’s perceptions fluctuated noticeably, as did the original statements by officials in a somewhat corresponding pattern. In June 2002, when there were more official statements about the terrorist threat and the increase in the alert level, the public reacted with a sharp increase (from 20 percent in January, the last time the question was asked, to 32 percent) in the level of worry. In February 2003 there were several actual statements by officials following a couple of quiet months, which were followed by a sharp increase in the percentage of the Americans revealing that were very worried about a terrorist attack occurring soon. – with the percentage nearly doubling from 18 percent in January 2003 to 34 percent in February.

Next, focusing on the issue of how likely there will be another terrorist attack in U.S. within “a few months,” we find an apparent impact of both the media’s coverage of President Bush’s comments and assessments concerning the terrorist threat ( $r=.58, p<.005$ ) as well as the actual

Figure 9: Likelihood of attack in the next few months. October 2001 – December 2004



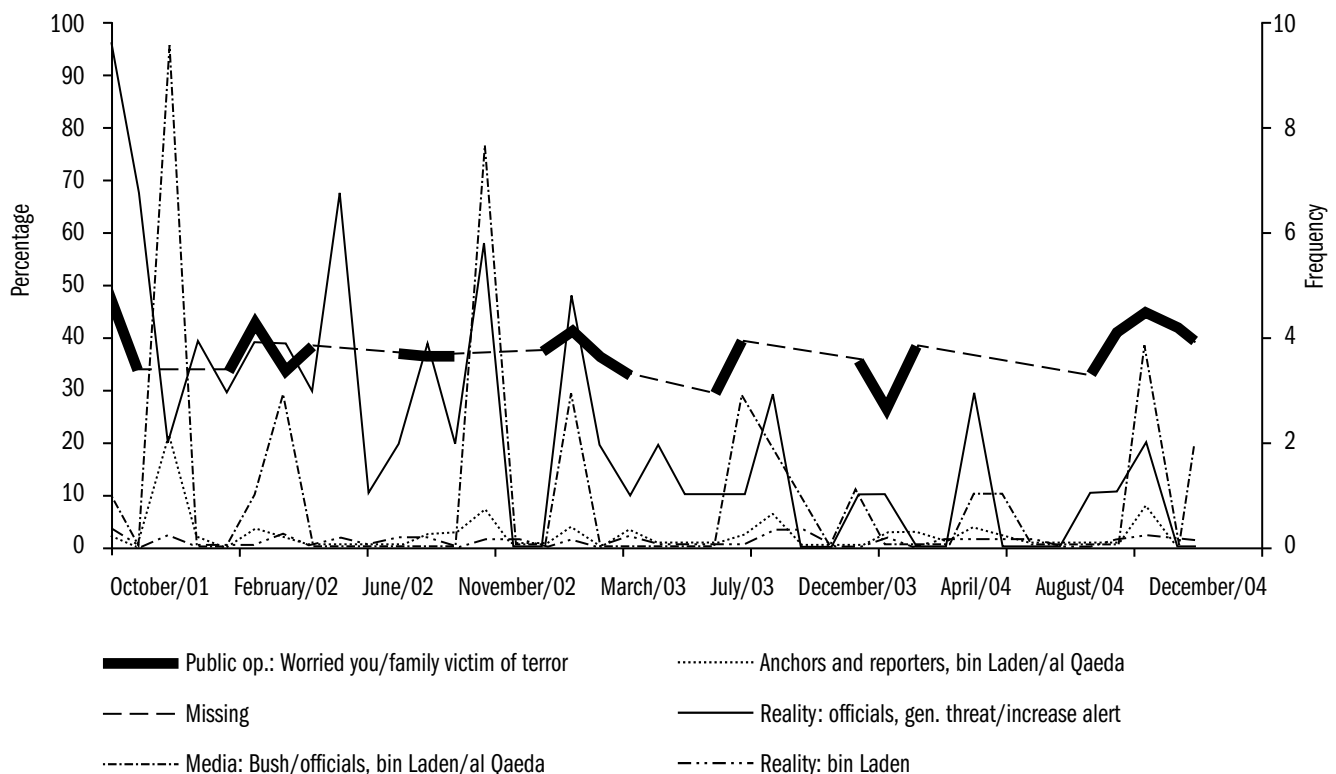


statements by U.S. administration officials alerting the public to specific terror threats or speaking in more general terms ( $r=.73, p<.001; b=2.86, p<.01$ ). It is interesting to note in Figure 9 the corresponding high and low levels in all three variables. In June 2002 more people – 36 percent compared to 29 percent in May – believed it “very likely” that another terrorist attack would happen within the next few months. In the same month, there were seven original statements by administration officials about the terrorist threat and higher alert level (as opposed to an average of three or four in the previous months), and television news reported one pertinent comment by President Bush. Another peak occurred in October-November 2002 with 27 percent of the public responding that a terrorism attack was “very likely” in the next few months; this coincided with two actual statements by officials in October followed by six such pronouncements in November. In February 2003, 29 percent of the public, up from 14 percent in January, believed a terror attack was very likely to happen within the next few months. During that time, television

news carried three threat messages by President Bush and administration officials made five actual threat statements. Not surprisingly, from July to September 2004, during the build-up to the final phase of the presidential election campaign, 19 percent of the public, up from 12 percent in April, thought it very likely that another terrorist attack would happen within a few months. During this time, television news frequently carried threat and alert messages by President Bush, and administration officials made similar pronouncements just as often.

Looking at perceived threats at the personal level, as shown in Figure 10, we find a slightly different picture. When it comes to the public’s own deepest concerns, it is perceptions about Bin Laden that may matter most: specifically, the variables related to comments on TV by public officials (including President Bush) about threats by bin Laden or al Qaeda ( $r=.44, p<.05$ ); news anchors, correspondents, or reporters describing threats by bin Laden or al Qaeda ( $r=.46, p<.05$ ); the actual warnings or threats of more terrorist at-

Figure 10: Worry that you will be victim of terrorism. October 2001 - December 2004



tacks by bin Laden and his al Qaeda associates themselves ( $r=.44, p<.05$ ), and U.S officials' actual statements about the threat of terrorism ( $r=.40, p<.1; b=.781, p<.11$ ).

Figure 10 shows that even as time passed, a relatively high percentage of the public continued to be (very or somewhat) worried that they and their loved ones would be affected personally by a terrorist attack. Though we see spikes in the trend, the overall pattern is fairly steady. It is interesting to note that in this case, unlike the others we examined, just mentioning bin Laden or al Qaeda in TV news or the appearance of bin Laden or al Qaeda in tapes seemed to matter. Apparently, the architects of the 9/11 attacks continued to have a hold on the public's mind, causing people to be apprehensive not just about protecting the nation but even more so worrying about their and their families' security – although the likelihood of any individual being harmed by terrorist attacks is very low. These are very likely emotion-driven responses. When members of the administration, including President Bush, refer to bin Laden by name and this is reported on TV network news, such references are often more numerous than the actual communications by bin Laden or al Qaeda.

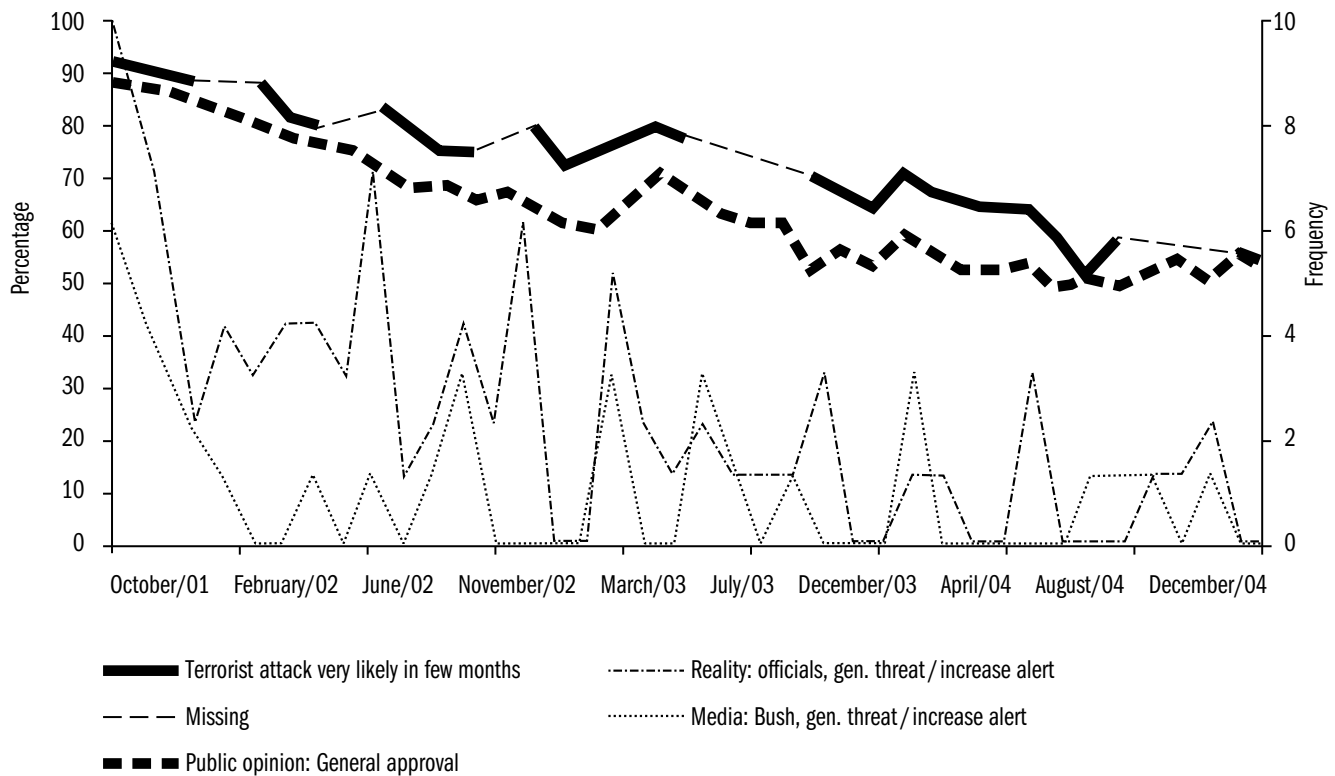
For example, in April 2002, when two al Qaeda tapes were simultaneously released, the TV newscasts we examined carried three reactions by administration officials to these tapes, and there was one pertinent comment by a media professional. Whether connected to the threats on these tapes or not, the same month was marked by four actual statements by U.S officials announcing an increase in the terrorism alert level. A month later, more Americans were worried about their personal safety in case of a terrorist attack (increasing from 35 percent to 40 percent). When in February 2004, a month after al Qaeda released an alleged bin Laden audio-tape, several comments were made on TV news regarding this communication, and one administration official issued an actual threat warning, there was a sharp increase in the public's personal fear from 28 percent to 40 percent. Later, during the election campaign, we see similar patterns as described earlier: from August to October 2004 the percentage of the public worried rose from 34 percent to 47 percent – with nearly half of the public expressing concern about becoming a victim of terrorism. In September 2004, another bin Laden tape

surfaced and administration officials spoke about the threat of terrorism. In October, the month before the elections, two bin Laden tapes were released and generously covered by the TV networks, and there were two actual statements by public officials with respect to a heightened threat of terrorism. It is no wonder that Americans worried increasingly about their own and their families' vulnerability.

How did all this affect President Bush's approval rating? First, it appears that both his overall approval ratings and the public's rating of his handling of terrorism were affected by news reports of President Bush's statements about the terrorist threat and increases in the alert level (overall approval:  $r=.42, p<.05$ ; approval in handling terrorism:  $r=.37, p<.1$ ), and administration officials' public statements on this issue (overall approval:  $r=.68; p<.01; b=3.93, p<.01$ ; approval on terrorism:  $r=.64, p<.05; b=4.03, p<.01$ ).

As we see in Figure 11, even though the general pattern is one of a gradual decrease in both approval ratings (and, no doubt, other factors were influencing President Bush's overall approval rating), certain brief spikes in these ratings occur roughly in tandem with increases in the number of administration statements and news reports citing President Bush on the terrorist threat. It seems that as long as the administration planted fear in the public, the President's approval ratings benefited. For example, in July 2002 we found one statement by Bush about the terrorist threat reported on television, and there were seven actual public statements to this effect by administration officials coinciding with a four point increase to 83 percent in the President's rating on handling terrorism. During September/October 2002, this approval declined to 74 percent. In September, there were three comments by President Bush reported on television during the same months as there were four public statements by administration officials emphasizing the terrorist threat; this was followed in October by only two such statements issued by administration officials. In contrast, there were six statements the following month that preceded a five point increase (to 79 percent) in the public's approval of Bush's handling of terrorism in December 2002. During February 2003, three television-reported statements by Bush along with five actual statements by administration officials occurred in tandem

Figure 11: Terrorism and approval of Bush. October 2001 – December 2004



with a slight increase of three points (to 74 percent) in Bush's terrorism-specific approval. There had not been statements of this sort during the preceding months of December 2002 and January 2003, when the Bush rating dropped by eight points to 71 percent. By April 2003 the approval rating for Bush's handling of terrorism reached 79 percent. The same pattern occurred for Bush's overall approval as well: an increase from 59 percent in February to 65 percent in March 2003 and to 70 percent in April 2003 as administration officials continued to emphasize the terrorist threat during these months, while the public rallied to support the President during the invasion of Iraq. Moving forward into June and summer 2004, there was an increase in TV coverage of Bush's comments on the terrorism threat along with more actual statements by administration officials. During this time there was an increase in Bush's public approval for handling terrorism from 50 to 57 percent from June to July 2004; Bush's general approval rating increased from 47 percent in May to 53 percent in September 2004.

Overall, then, it seems that emphasizing the terrorist threat and official alerts tended to buoy the President's approval ratings – both his terrorism-specific rating and his overall approval. Further, while it is not surprising that we found a correlation between public perceptions of the terrorist threat and mass-mediated or actual terrorism alerts, this is a one-sided effect. When it came to reporting about the official *lowering* of terror alert levels, such coverage was not prominent – if it occurred at all. One does not have to be a cynic to suspect that pronouncements of a relaxed state of terrorism threats are not politically beneficial.

## 6. Discussion

True to the media's appetite for sensational and dramatic "breaking news" to engage their audiences, network TV newscasts devoted generous airtime and prominent placements to attention-getting, disconcerting threats communicated by Osama bin Laden and his associates on the one hand and terrorism alerts issued by administration officials on the other. Indeed, television network news

– and, no doubt, cable TV, radio, and the print media as well – did not simply report this news but magnified it. In comparison, the non-dramatic and presumably calming news of administration decisions to relax terror alerts was under-covered and thus minimized.

These coverage patterns arguably played into the hands of the al Qaeda leadership whose communications left no doubt about its goal to strike fear into Americans.

But President Bush and others in the administration, too, benefited from the prompt and significant coverage of their terror alerts and threat assessment thereby continuously reminding the American public why the “war on terrorism” had to be fought. It seemed that the White House did not in effect mind the prominent coverage of bin Laden and al Qaeda threats. Whereas the administration protested against the airing of bin Laden video-tapes by U.S. television outlets shortly after 9/11, no such complaints were filed thereafter. Albeit belatedly, President Bush himself told a White House reporter that he believed “his 2004 re-election victory over Sen. John Kerry was inadvertently aided by Osama bin Laden, who issued a taped diatribe against him the Friday before Americans went to the polls.”<sup>17</sup> As the President put it, “I thought it was going to help. I thought it would help remind people that if bin Laden does not want Bush to be president, something must be right with Bush.”<sup>18</sup> Of course, it was perhaps equally or even more likely that bin Laden wanted Bush to be re-elected. Not surprisingly, Senator Kerry, too, told an interviewer soon after the election that he lost to President Bush because of the bin Laden video.<sup>19</sup>

After the end of the Cold War, some media scholars expected that the disappearance of the long Cold War consensus would free the media from the dominance of presidents and administration officials in security and foreign policy news (Entman 2000; cf. Shapiro and Jacobs 2000). Since the predominant terrorist threat of our time

has both international and domestic dimensions, our study offers a partial test of the hypothesis of the press’s liberation. If there was a short period in which the news media were more independent of Washington’s decision-makers, it did not last past the events of 9/11. Instead, just as during the Cold War, authoritative sources (the President, other administration officials, members of Congress, state and local officials, former military and government figures) were the predominant news sources.

Americans’ concerns about the threat of terrorism within their own borders remained quite high during the post-9/11 years and actually increased frequently in the wake of increases in reporting of threats and terrorism alerts. The public’s worries about “catastrophic” terrorism in their country were particularly persistent, and in the wake of the July 7, 2005, bombings of the London transit system it was actually more pronounced than in the weeks after the 9/11 attacks. Not surprisingly, New York City residents were significantly more worried than their compatriots that their community was a more likely target of future terrorism than other areas.

Last, we found strong correlations between mass-mediated terror alerts and threat messages and the public’s evaluation of terrorism as the country’s major problem. However, it was not the total volume of threat news but rather the influence of particular sources that moved public opinion. Here, the President and administration officials apparently had the greatest effects on Americans’ collective assessment of terrorism as the nation’s top problem. Interestingly, different public perceptions appeared to be affected by different news sources. Thus, media professionals’ reporting on terror alerts and threats appeared especially influential on public concerns about major acts of anti-American terrorism occurring *some time in the future*. Americans reacted to actual statements by administration officials when it came to their worries that terrorism would happen *soon* – after all, the administration’s official

<sup>17</sup> Reuters, “Report: Bush says bin Laden aided in elections,” February 28, 2006. <http://www.msnbc.com/id/11604530/>, accessed June 19, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> “Exclusive: Kerry Says UBL Tape Cost him Election,” Fox News.com, November 21, 2004. [http://www.foxnews.com/printer\\_friendly\\_story/0,3566,139060,00.html](http://www.foxnews.com/printer_friendly_story/0,3566,139060,00.html), accessed June 20, 2006.

terrorism alerts were covered heavily and were likely to be perceived as signaling imminent terrorist attacks. Not unexpectedly, bin Laden's actual threat messages and their press coverage affected public opinion as well – especially Americans' concerns that they and their families could become the victims of this sort of political violence.

Whereas bin Laden's threat messages did not win (nor aim for) the sympathies of Americans, President Bush's overall job performance and the public's rating of his handling of terrorism improved in the short term as the result of official alerts or threat assessments and related press coverage. Revelations by Tom Ridge, who resigned as Secretary of Homeland Security in early 2005, suggest that perhaps some people in the administration were aware of these effects. In an effort to “debunk the myth” of his department's responsibility for repeated terror alerts, Ridge said, “There were times when some people were really aggressive about raising it [the color-coded terror alert level], and we said, ‘For what?’”<sup>20</sup>

To summarize, then, in the wake of the long lasting “media event” of 9/11, both bin Laden with other al Qaeda leaders and President Bush with other administration officials utilized the mass media to communicate their propaganda of fear. By over-covering in particular the frequent “fear messages” by administration officials, the media contributed to what one critic described as “creating a culture of hysteria” (Kellner 2005, 28), or what one might call a climate of fear that conditioned Americans to rally around the President and his “war on terrorism.” At the same time, the media “served in a perverse way as instruments of al Qaeda and terrorism, since one of the goals of terror attacks is to spread fear and anxiety” (Kellner 2005, 28).

<sup>20</sup> Ridge's session with journalists was reported by Mimi Hall, “Ridge reveals clashes on alerts,” USA TODAY, May 10, 2005. [http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2005-05-10-ridge-alerts\\_x.htm?POE=NEWISVA](http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2005-05-10-ridge-alerts_x.htm?POE=NEWISVA), accessed March 10, 2006.

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