

**An Analysis of the George W. Bush Administration's
Communications on Iraq
from January 28 – February 3, 2003**

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by
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Abstract

The project is defined by three research questions:

- What were the key messages contained in the Bush Administration's external media communications?
- Did they appear in the media?
- Did they appear as released? (i.e. Were they accurate?)

The first question is addressed by an analysis of President Bush's 2003 State of the Union Address and official White House communications (as identified by the White House's official Web URL) for one week following the speech (Jan. 28 – Feb. 3, 2003). The second and third questions are answered by doing a content analysis. This content analysis is of two newspapers – The New York Times and The Los Angeles Times– from Jan. 28 – Feb. 3, 2003 (the two weeks following the State of the Union address).

Conclusions drawn by the researcher are: some messages may have received less coverage over a period of time because new messages were taking their place; spoken communication from the president proved to be more effective than written press releases; and other news may have pushed some of the key messages down to a lesser priority for the media.

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Introduction

The following analysis will be a look into the messages relayed to the American people by the George W. Bush Administration from January 28- February 3, 2003 (the date of The State of the Union Address and one week following) and the effectiveness of the communication of those messages.

In determining the effectiveness, three research questions have been posed:

- What were the key messages contained in the Bush Administration's external media communications?
- Did they appear in the media? (i.e. Were they printed/aired?)
- Did they appear as released? (i.e. Were they accurate?)

By answering these questions, the researcher can reach conclusions about the effectiveness of the messages and of the way in which they were communicated to the American public.

Methodology

The research was done in several steps for this analysis. First, all White House communications that mentioned Iraq from January 28 – February 3, 2003 were obtained from the official White House Web site, www.whitehouse.gov. Any communication that did not make reference to Iraq was omitted for purposes of this study. Both written press releases and transcripts of spoken communication were obtained by the researcher.

Next, key messages were identified. This was done by locating key phrases that appeared in two or more separate communication pieces. The messages that appeared multiple times were obviously the messages that the Bush Administration deemed necessary to communicate as often and as accurately as possible.

After determining these messages, a chart was made listing the messages and the dates covered in this study (January 28 – February 3, 2003). This chart had the names of two prominent and often cited newspapers in the United States, *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times*. These papers were selected as they are widely regarded as “Newspapers of Record.” Their content is representative of content in newspapers throughout the United States.

A Lexis-Nexis search was then done to determine all of the stories appearing in *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times* containing the words “Bush” and “Iraq” that appeared in the main news section (section “A”) from January 28 – February 3, 2003. Editorial and opinion columns were omitted for this particular study¹. The researcher then obtained copies of these newspapers for January 28- February 3, 2003.

Using a basic content analysis method, column inches were measured to determine the total length of the stories as well as the space devoted to the key messages of the Bush Administration. From this data, a total was determined each day for the number of column inches for stories containing “Bush” and “Iraq” and also for the number of column inches devoted to the Bush Administration’s key messages. A

¹ For purposes of this study, verbatim reprints of President Bush’s speeches were also not counted. For instance, *The New York Times* runs the text of the State of the Union address every year. This was not counted as the messages were obviously going to appear, and this was unrelated to the effectiveness of the Bush Administration’s communication tactics.

percentage was then calculated that showed the amount of the stories that portrayed these messages accurately.

Key Messages

After obtaining the official White House communications for the dates previously discussed, the key messages were identified. Surprisingly, the messages that appeared most often were not concrete reasons to go to war with Iraq. Instead, the messages were more “emotional.”

The key messages were:

- Compassion of the American people
- Cooperation/friendship with other countries
- Saddam as “threat to peace”
- Saddam has “weeks, not months”
- A peaceful resolution is the ideal
- Iraq is a terrorist threat / threat to security / safety threat
- Iraq – Al Qaeda links
- “America is strong”

The emotion contained in many of these messages may have been more likely to move Americans to agree to a war with Iraq. As most Americans are not college-educated (www.census.gov), repeating specific facts and statistics may not have been as effective as articulating a generalized threat to Americans’ everyday lives.

Even these general, emotional messages were covered extensively in the media.

Content Analysis

The following data was collected through a content analysis:

| <i>1/28/2003</i> | The New York Times | Los Angeles Times |
|--|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| Compassion | 0 | 0 |
| Cooperation / friendship | 0 | 0 |
| Saddam as "threat to peace" | 0 | 0 |
| "Weeks, not months" | 0 | 0 |
| Peaceful resolution | 2 | 1 |
| Threat of terrorism / security / protection / safety | 0 | 4 |
| Al Qaeda links | 4 | 9 |
| Strength of America | 3 | 1 |
| <i>Total for messages</i> | 9 | 15 |
| <i>Total for complete stories</i> | 238 | 144 |
| Total percentage devoted to messages | 3.78% | 10.42% |

| <i>1/29/2003</i> | The New York Times | Los Angeles Times |
|--|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| Compassion | 10 | 6 |
| Cooperation / friendship | 0 | 1 |
| Saddam as "threat to peace" | 11 | 6 |
| "Weeks, not months" | 13 | 3 |
| Peaceful resolution | 5 | 6 |
| Threat of terrorism / security / protection / safety | 25 | 17 |
| Al Qaeda links | 2 | 0 |
| Strength of America | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Total for messages</i> | 66 | 39 |
| <i>Total for complete stories</i> | 752 | 409 |
| Total percentage devoted to messages | 8.78% | 9.54% |

| 1/30/2003 | The New York Times | Los Angeles Times |
|--|--------------------|-------------------|
| Compassion | 0 | 0 |
| Cooperation / friendship | 5 | 0 |
| Saddam as "threat to peace" | 9 | 4 |
| "Weeks, not months" | 4 | 0 |
| Peaceful resolution | 0 | 0 |
| Threat of terrorism / security / protection / safety | 3 | 6 |
| Al Qaeda links | 0 | 0 |
| Strength of America | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Total for messages</i> | 21 | 10 |
| <i>Total for complete stories</i> | 305 | 288 |
| Total percentage devoted to messages | 6.89% | 3.47% |

| 1/31/2003 | The New York Times | Los Angeles Times |
|--|--------------------|-------------------|
| Compassion | 0 | 1 |
| Cooperation / friendship | 0 | 0 |
| Saddam as "threat to peace" | 4 | 2 |
| "Weeks, not months" | 7 | 5 |
| Peaceful resolution | 1 | 0 |
| Threat of terrorism / security / protection / safety | 2 | 1 |
| Al Qaeda links | 3 | 1 |
| Strength of America | 0 | 1 |
| <i>Total for messages</i> | 17 | 11 |
| <i>Total for complete stories</i> | 224 | 251 |
| Total percentage devoted to messages | 7.59% | 4.38% |

| <i>2/1/2003</i> | The New York Times | Los Angeles Times |
|--|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| Compassion | 2 | 0 |
| Cooperation / friendship | 1 | 0 |
| Saddam as "threat to peace" | 2 | 0 |
| "Weeks, not months" | 6 | 4 |
| Peaceful resolution | 0 | 2 |
| Threat of terrorism / security / protection / safety | 1 | 0 |
| Al Qaeda links | 0 | 0 |
| Strength of America | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Total for messages</i> | 12 | 6 |
| <i>Total for complete stories</i> | 316 | 140 |
| Total percentage devoted to messages | 3.80% | 4.29% |

| <i>2/2/2003</i> | The New York Times | Los Angeles Times |
|--|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| Compassion | 0 | 0 |
| Cooperation / friendship | 0 | 0 |
| Saddam as "threat to peace" | 2 | 0 |
| "Weeks, not months" | 6 | 0 |
| Peaceful resolution | 0 | 2 |
| Threat of terrorism / security / protection / safety | 0 | 0 |
| Al Qaeda links | 0 | 0 |
| Strength of America | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Total for messages</i> | 8 | 2 |
| <i>Total for complete stories</i> | 240 | 213 |
| Total percentage devoted to messages | 3.33% | 0.94% |

| 2/3/2003 | The New York Times | Los Angeles Times |
|--|--------------------|-------------------|
| Compassion | 0 | 0 |
| Cooperation / friendship | 2 | 0 |
| Saddam as "threat to peace" | 3 | 0 |
| "Weeks, not months" | 2 | 3 |
| Peaceful resolution | 0 | 0 |
| Threat of terrorism / security / protection / safety | 4 | 0 |
| Al Qaeda links | 1 | 2 |
| Strength of America | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Total for messages</i> | 12 | 5 |
| <i>Total for complete stories</i> | 222 | 146 |
| Total percentage devoted to messages | 5.41% | 3.42% |

Analyzing the Data

After an examination of the data and combined research, several observations can be made.

The most significant finding is that the key messages identified above were accurately and extensively covered most in the media in publications dated the day immediately following the president's State of the Union Address. This method of communicating, then, proved to be very effective. The messages were received and then relayed to the general public by *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times*.

As time goes on, however, the messages saw an overall drop in coverage. This could be due to several reasons. First, the Bush Administration may have been crafting new messages that did not appear in this study because they were not yet repeated during the time frame covered.

Secondly, this may also have been due to the methods used to communicate the key messages after the State of the Union Address. In the week following the address, news releases were the main tactic used to convey the key messages. These news releases

may have not been as effective. Also, the news stories that covered any other spoken address by the president were the most likely to have directly quoted one of the key messages. It can then be concluded that accuracy and frequency of the messages was best achieved through spoken communication rather than written.

A third factor that possibly contributed to the drop in the percentage of message coverage was other news. On February 1, 2003, the space shuttle *Columbia* burned up over Texas. This was a major news story that temporarily took the focus off of Bush and Iraq. Proof of this is found in both papers studied. On February 1 and 2, 2003, the front pages of *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times* were devoted almost entirely to the space shuttle tragedy.

These factors may have all played a role in the decreasing percentage of column inches relaying the Bush Administration's key messages.

Conclusions

After an examination of White House communications and media coverage of their key messages, several conclusions can be drawn.

First, some messages may have received less coverage over a period of time because new messages were taking their place. Second, spoken communication from the president proved to be more effective than written press releases. Effectiveness for purposes of this paper is defined as "a message accurately printed in a newspaper." Thirdly, other news may have pushed some of the key messages down to a lesser priority for the media.

Other news can not be controlled by the Bush Administration when a disaster, such as the *Columbia*, occurs. However, the crafting of new messages and the means of delivering these messages can be controlled. These two elements are important to control and maintain in order to effectively communicate a key message.

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