

Terrorizing the Masses: Identity, Mass Shootings, and the Media Construction of  
“Terror”

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## **Dedication**

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## Introduction

This dissertation analyzes broadcast media coverage of a specific type of large-scale shooting event: mass shootings that take place on American military installations. Specifically, this project examines the ways in which both events and shooters are framed in mainstream American broadcast media, analyzing media coverage through the lens of two pivotal shifts in public understanding of similar tragedies that took place around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century—the 1999 Columbine shooting (which almost singlehandedly coined the phrase “mass shooting” and produced enduring tropes in media coverage), and the September 11, 2001 attacks, which permanently and drastically refigured the image of “terror” in the American imagination.

This dissertation examines three case studies (one taking place before Columbine and September 11; two taking place after)—the 1995 Fort Bragg shooting, the 2009 Camp Liberty shooting, and the 2009 Fort Hood shooting. While the Fort Bragg shooting resulted in fewer fatalities than the Camp Liberty and Fort Hood shootings (and failed to meet the somewhat arbitrary benchmark of four fatalities that some consider a prerequisite to the term “mass shooting,” at least in the legal sense) it was analogous to the other two shootings in many ways. All three resulted in the death or serious injury of dozens of people, all three were committed by men of similar age and rank who had served in the military for a similar amount of time, and the factors leading up to all three shootings (clear preexisting signs of mental illness, the repeated involvement of commanding officers and the intercession of other soldiers prior to the shooting, the growing alienation of each shooter from other soldiers in his unit) were closely



analogous. Additionally, all three shootings took place in venues or spaces on base that were considered “weapons-free” zones—an exercise training field, a medical stress clinic, and a soldier readiness center, respectively.

This research is important because of the timely and high profile nature of these kinds of tragic events. Mass shootings are an almost uniquely American problem, and the question of what constitutes terror—what it looks like, who is responsible for it, and how to best combat it—are pressing and visible issues for our time. This research is also important because the construction of concepts like “terror” and “mass shootings” in the mainstream media are often far more influential than technical, scholarly or policy-level definitions of these terms—as cultural theorist Stuart Hall noted, mass media do not simply reflect our lived realities; to a large degree, they construct them.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, while this dissertation charts the historical evolution (and trends in media coverage) of concepts like “terror” and “mass shootings” in chapters two and three, it is far more focused on the way these mainstream broadcast *media* construct, selectively invoke, contextualize and explain these terms. In other words, examining the ways in which news media construct large-scale tragedies, in light of two interrelated shifts in public discourse stemming from two visible and large-scale events around the turn of the century (September 11 and Columbine), is as important or even *more* important than examining official or policy definitions or constructions of these types of events, because most Americans do not experience these kinds of events firsthand. Rather, they interact with, relate to, and understand these events solely through the prism of news media.

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<sup>1</sup> S. Hall, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London: Macmillan, 1978).

This analysis is strongly informed by a cultural studies framework that recognizes the meaning-making potential of mass media, as well as the role of mass media in shaping and reinforcing existing dominant power dynamics.<sup>2</sup> Decades of scholarship have reinforced the primacy of television news in terms of its considerable power to reinforce certain attitudes or behaviors<sup>3</sup>, and I chose to focus specifically on broadcast news for this reason. In my approach, I also draw upon Carey's ritual model of communication, which views communication, in alignment with the social constructionist paradigm, as a "symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed."<sup>4</sup>

This dissertation asserts four key and interrelated points: (A) the primacy and importance of considering the two drastic shifts in public discourse at the turn of the 21st century that are described in this dissertation (the 1999 Columbine shooting and the 2001 September 11 attacks) to contextualize any current analysis of large-scale acts of public violence; (B) the evidence that points to two basic causal elements behind the vast majority of mass shooting events: severe, preexisting mental illness on the part of shooters (who are often informed by long-standing ubiquitous masculine cultural scripts

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.; R. Williams, *The Sociology of Culture* (New York: Schocken, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> E.g., T. Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); T. Dixon and D. Linz, "Race and the Misrepresentation of Victimization on Local Television News," *Communication Research* 27 (2000): 547-573; T. Dixon, "Crime News and Racialized Beliefs: Understanding the Relationship Between Local News Viewing and Perceptions of African Americans and Crime," *Journal of Communication* 58 (2008), 106-125; B. Frymer, "The Media Spectacle of Columbine: Alienated Youth as an Object of Fear," *American Behavioral Scientist* 52, no. 10 (2009): 1387-1404; D. Freedman and D. Thussu, eds., *Media and Terrorism: Global Perspectives* (Washington, DC: Sage, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> J. Carey, *Communication as Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

gleaned from mass media surrounding violence and mass shootings) and easy (often legal) access to high-powered weaponry; (C) the specific American focus on gun rights (and a fatalism on the part of media regarding future gun control measures) that disproportionately distorts discourse about mass shootings, and finally (D) the fascinating role that identity—especially nationality, race and religion—play in producing media coverage that frames nearly identical events in vastly different ways.

### **Research questions**

This dissertation aims to discover the differential nuances in framing between coverage of these three events. My research questions are as follows:

1. What narratives do broadcast media produce to contextualize and explain these attacks?
2. How are the culprits described? Are their motivations portrayed as internal or external? How are their identities framed in coverage?
3. When is “terror” as a descriptor triggered as an explanation or contextual cue for the event? When is mental illness invoked?
4. How do the two major key shifting points in public discourse surrounding mass tragedies outlined above (the emergence of and consolidation of the mass shooting framework that arose after Columbine, and the emergence of and consolidation of the post-September 11 terror framework in coverage of mass death events) influence coverage and/or inflect each other?

## Methods

With the help of a Kriss Research Support Grant, I obtained the entire population of video footage for broadcast coverage of the three events highlighted as case studies in this project (the 1995 Fort Bragg shooting, the 2009 Camp Liberty shooting, and the 2009 Fort Hood shooting) in the following six outlets: Fox News, CNN, MSNBC, ABC News, NBC and CBS. Each segment was cross-checked using Lexis Nexis. I downloaded written transcripts for each segment from Lexis Nexis to aid in my analysis (and for terminological precision), and over the course of multiple viewings of the material, I made changes and corrections as necessary to the written transcripts. For additional context, I also used Lexis Nexis to download the entire population of print coverage for each shooting event in three leading national newspapers (*The New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *USA Today*) using carefully chosen keywords. Often, broadcast coverage and print coverage reflected or reinforced one another—as in the case of a particularly prominent and widely reprinted feature article about the Fort Bragg shooting, which was prominently featured on-screen in some broadcast coverage.<sup>5</sup>

My methodological approach is rooted in a critical and cultural view that recognizes the primacy and meaning-making potential of mainstream news media, as well as the role of mass media in shaping and reifying power relationships in society.<sup>6</sup> Mainstream media both construct and reflect hegemonic ideals and cultural frames,

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<sup>5</sup> T. Richissi, “Nobody Listened When Soldier Warned of His Violent Intentions,” *News and Observer* (Raleigh, NC), March 9, 1997.

<sup>6</sup> R. Williams, *The Sociology of Culture* (New York: Schocken, 1982); S. Hall, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London: Macmillan, 1978).

setting a clear agenda for audiences who consume media.<sup>7</sup> This approach also recognizes that any project that examines discursive practices surrounding issues like this must be rooted in the long historical context that preceded current coverage<sup>8</sup>, so the first two chapters of this dissertation are devoted to reviewing the literature on (and the history of) both terrorism as a historical global concept and the relatively new concept of “mass shootings”—as well as the history of media coverage of these two concepts.

This project is also rooted strongly in the literature on framing, most notably defined by Entman in 1993 as “essentially involv[ing] selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.”<sup>9</sup> Framing theory is a key framework of this analysis, both because of the ability of mainstream media entities to delineate the scope and nature of the perceived realities of their audiences<sup>10</sup>, and because, in crisis situations in particular, the frames that

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<sup>7</sup> M. McCombs and D. Shaw, “The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1972): 176-187; S. Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” in *Culture, Media, Language*, ed. S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, and P. Willis (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 128-138; R. Entman and A. Rojecki, *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> M. Omi and H. Winant, “Racial Formation,” in *Race Critical Theories*, ed. P. Essad and D. Goldberg (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 123-145.

<sup>9</sup> R. Entman, “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm,” *Journal of Communication* 43 (1993): 51-58.

<sup>10</sup> Z. Papacharissi and M. Oliveira, “News Frames Terrorism: A Comparative Analysis of Frames Employed in Terrorism Coverage in U.S. and U.K. Newspapers,” *International Journal of Press/Politics* 13, no. 1 (2008): 52-74; G. Fairhurst and R. Sarr, *The Art of Framing: Managing the Language of Leadership* (Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, 1996); T. Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); M. McCombs and S. Ghanem,

mass media apply are instrumental in helping audiences identify the main causes for problems or tragedies, make moral or ethical judgments, and identify appropriate responses.<sup>11</sup>

In analyzing the texts, I employed a critical and comparative approach, evaluating both the imagery on-screen and the word choices used in coverage. I performed a multi-step critical discourse analysis over multiple viewings of each text (with accompanying transcripts). First, word choices in the texts were detailed and tallied. Because of this project's focus on the emergence of and shifting definitions of the terms "mass shooting" and "terror" around the turn of the 21st century, I am particularly interested in how, and how often, these terms—or similar/adjacent terms—were used in coverage. Second, in second and third viewings of the material, I took careful and comparative notes on the visual content (guided by an approach rooted in semiotic analysis) that accompanied each segment, both in terms of denotation (literal description of visuals) and connotation (associations that were evoked by visuals): on-screen headlines, icons used to "brand" each event for a given channel (often accompanied by a specific name for the event given by each outlet), lighting choices, in-studio vs. phone interviews with key sources, photos choices, and video clips that were chosen to accompany each story.

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"The Convergence of Agenda Setting and Framing," in *Framing Public Life: Perspectives on Media and our Understanding of the Social World*, ed. S. Reese, O. Gandy, Jr., and A. Grant (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2001), 67–81.

<sup>11</sup> Z. Papacharissi and M. Oliveira, "News Frames Terrorism: A Comparative Analysis of Frames Employed in Terrorism Coverage in U.S. and U.K. Newspapers," *International Journal of Press/Politics* 13, no. 1 (2008): 52-74; S. Reese and B. Buckalew, "The Militarism of Local Television: The Routine Framing of the Persian Gulf War," *Critical Studies In Mass Communication* 12, no. 1 (1995): 40-59; *Journalism After September 11*, ed. B. Zelizer and S. Allen (New York: Routledge, 2003).

In my application of critical discourse analysis, I looked for consistent emergent themes and frames along the lines delineated by Fairclough and Wodak, who identify the main tenets of critical discourse analysis as primarily investigating the following categories: social relations, the discursive nature of power relations (and accordingly, how these power relationships are produced and maintained by texts), the ways in which discourse can help build and create core tenets of society and culture, the ideological work of discourse, the historical nature of discourse, the mediated link between text and society, the interpretive and explanatory nature of discourse analysis, and the role of discourse as a form of social action.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, this project considers the social and power relationships that are produced and maintained in these texts, highlights the productive nature of the discourses present therein, and provides a historical context in which these discourses take place.

Using an approach that relied on emergent coding allowed me to include unforeseen or unanticipated frames and themes in coverage. It also helped me to critically examine coverage comparatively across events and across media outlets. For visual imagery on-screen, my approach was informed most strongly by Barthes' vision of semiotic analysis described in his classic essay, "The Rhetoric of the Text." This view of images holds that within each text (in this case, within each broadcast segment), there are two kinds of messages at work—both denoted messages/images (the literal message, without signification) and connoted messages (the symbolism inherent in each message—

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<sup>12</sup> N. Fairclough and R. Wodak, "Critical Discourse Analysis," in *Discourse Studies: A Multidisciplinary Introduction*, vol. 2, ed. T. Van Dijk (London: Sage, 1997), 258-284.

what each message *signifies* for the viewer).<sup>13</sup> This approach is an effective one for examining visual imagery, and has often been used in analyzing advertising and public relations messaging.<sup>14</sup> A similar intentionality went into the creation of these broadcast media texts, and examining visuals for signified connotations as well as literal descriptions helped provide an additional dimension of nuance and context to the word choices and terms used by newscasters and sources in these texts. I also considered elements that seemed to be notably absent in coverage—sources that were conspicuously omitted or ignored, for example, or certain paths of salient journalistic investigation that were not pursued.

## Chapters

In Chapter 2, I discuss the history and global usage of the term “terror” or “terrorism,” charting its evolution over four “waves” of historical meaning. I review the scholarly literature on terrorism, and compile a list of American and international policy definitions for the term. Finally, I chart the ways in which terror has historically been framed by the mass media, and the enormous cultural and political shift that took place after the terror attacks of September 11, 2001—attacks that permanently shifted American discourse on “terror,” and the image of terror in the American imagination.

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<sup>13</sup> R. Barthes, “Rhetoric of the Image,” *Responsibility of Forms* (January 1985): 21-40.

<sup>14</sup> E.g., M. Moffitt, “Critical Theoretical Considerations of Public Relations Messaging Around the Globe: Tools for Creating and Evaluating Campaign Messages,” *Journal of Promotion Management* 17, no. 1 (2011): 21-41; P. Lyth, ““Think of her as your Mother’: Airline Advertising and the Stewardess in America, 1930-1980,” *Journal of Transport History* 30, no. 1 (2009): 1-21.



Chapter 3 takes up a similar category of tragic and high profile events: mass shootings. In Chapter 3, I present policy definitions of mass shootings in the United States, and chart the global history of this particular phenomenon, with a special focus on cultural and political elements (such as gun legislation) that contextualize these events. I also highlight the ways in which Columbine—a mass shooting that took place just before the turn of the century—garnered enormous and unprecedented coverage, produced enduring tropes regarding coverage of these events, and solidified the term “mass shooting” in U.S. media and the American imagination.

In Chapter 4, I outline the events of the 1995 Fort Bragg shooting. I describe the primary frames that emerged in broadcast media coverage of the event—most notably, a strong focus on nationalism and patriotism (coupled with a vision of the shooter as “one of the military’s own”), investigative inquiry of the shooter’s weaponry, and a strong frame of mental illness as the primary causal factor in the shooting. I compare media coverage of the shooting to the facts that we now know about the event—omissions, inclusions and other choices made by broadcast newsmakers, and finally discuss where this shooting and its coverage fits into broader cultural narratives of the mid-1990s about issues like gun control, masculinity, patriotism and nationality.

In Chapter 5, I outline the events of the 2009 mass shooting at Camp Liberty, a former American military installation in Iraq. I contextualize the event in the cultural, social and political context of the period, and compare media coverage of the shooting—frames, omissions, inclusions, primary sources—to the facts of the event. I describe the primary frames that emerged in broadcast coverage of the shooting—most notably,

hyper-masculine and hyper-patriotic cultural scripts, a variant on mental illness that frames the shooter's motivations as being rooted primarily in "combat stress," and the near-total absence of any investigative inquiry regarding military policy or weaponry. Finally, I consider where the coverage of this shooting fits into cultural scripts and norms of the period, and how this coverage reflects cultural norms of the Iraq War period.

In Chapter 6, I outline the events of the 2009 Fort Hood shooting, discussing the social, political and cultural climate that preceded this shooting—the most deadly mass shooting to date to take place on an American military base. I describe the frames that emerged in broadcast media coverage of the shooting—most notably, the primacy and infallibility of the American military institution (as well as its role as a stand-in for the American people), the predominant frame of the event as an act of anti-American "terror," and the presence of old Orientalist tropes that securely placed the Fort Hood shooter in an "othered" category, excluding him from a shared vision of American (and military) identity. Finally, I discuss the role this coverage played in upholding norms and cultural scripts of the Iraq War period in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In the conclusion, Chapter 7, I discuss my findings, aligning my discussion of the ways in which these three case studies were framed along a few axes: (1) the effect September 11 had on the coverage of the 2009 shootings vs. the 1995 Fort Bragg shooting, (2) the effect Nidal Hasan's identity had on coverage of the Fort Hood shooting, and (3) the role the "theater of war" played in coverage of the Camp Liberty shooting—a shooting that took place in an active war zone. I reflect upon how framing decisions, word choice and sourcing affected the prism through which broadcast media

presented these attacks, and how journalists might move forward to more appropriately cover these shootings in the future.

## Chapter 1: Terrorism and Mass Media: The History of a Slippery Term

In the echo chamber of American news media, the idea of a “war on terror” has taken on a distinct vocabulary,<sup>15</sup> as well as a unique set of symbols and associations. But despite the omnipresence of the “war on terror,” and the reality that many people have an unspoken sense of what constitutes “terror,”<sup>16</sup> terrorism is a term that has always been notoriously difficult to define.<sup>17</sup> While this imprecision and subjectivity keep a commonly accepted universal definition of terrorism out of reach, an exploration of the evolution of historical terrorism, a delineation of the continuum of common understandings of terror’s meaning—and more importantly for the purposes of this study, what *news media* mean when they use the word—is crucial to approaching how large-scale tragic events are contextualized, framed and understood.

### Governmental and policy definitions

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<sup>15</sup> F. Halliday, *Shocked and Awed: A Dictionary of the War on Terror* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> As Sir Jeremy Greenstock, British Ambassador to the United Nations, put it in an address after September 11, “Let us be wise and focused about this: terrorism is terrorism . . . What looks, smells and kills like terrorism is terrorism”: A. Schmid, “Terrorism: The Definitional Problem,” *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law* 36, no 2/3 (2004): 103-147.

<sup>17</sup> B. Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); A. Schmid and A. Jongman, *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Data Bases, Theories, and Literature* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2005); A. Schmid, “Terrorism: The Definitional Problem,” *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law* 36, no. 2/3 (2004): 103-147; D. Freedman and D. Thussu, eds., *Media & Terrorism: Global Perspectives* (Washington, DC: Sage, 2012); W. Laquer, *The Age of Terrorism* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1987).

As a political term, “terrorism” carries enormous weight. Billions of dollars have been spent worldwide combating the spread of this particular type of violence, and two wars have been waged in the last two decades in the pursuit of its defeat.<sup>18</sup>

American public policy definitions of “terrorism” have narrowed in recent years, cleaving more closely to a single definition based on Title 22 of the U.S. Code, Section 2656f(d)(2): “The term ‘terrorism’ means premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant groups by subnational groups or clandestine agents.”<sup>19,20</sup>

Specifically, the CIA defines terrorism as follows:

- The term "terrorism" means premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents.
- The term “international terrorism” means terrorism involving the territory or the citizens of more than one country.
- The term “terrorist group” means any group that practices, or has significant subgroups that practice, international terrorism.<sup>21</sup>

Before 2005, the FBI defined terrorism (per the Code of Federal Regulations) as “the unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of

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<sup>18</sup> Notably, however, there is little consensus about how a war on a nebulous and abstract entity like “terror” might be clearly and emphatically “won.”

<sup>19</sup> Annual Country Reports on Terrorism, U.S. Code 22 (2010), § 2656f(d).

<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, previous versions of this section included a final clause to the definition of terrorism: “usually intended to influence an audience,” which has since disappeared. It is also important to note that the insertion of the term “subnational groups” eliminates state-sponsored terrorism from this definition.

<sup>21</sup> “Terrorism FAQs,” Central Intelligence Agency, <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/cia-the-war-on-terrorism/terrorism-faqs.html> (accessed April 19, 2013).

political or social objectives”<sup>22</sup> After 2005, however, the FBI adopted the 2656f(d)(2) terminology, a definition that is also shared by the National Counterterrorism Center.

Before 2010, the Department of Defense defined terrorism as:

the unlawful use of – or threatened use of – force or violence against individuals or property to coerce or intimidate governments or societies, often to achieve political, religious, or ideological objectives.<sup>23</sup>

In 2010, however, the DOD definition changed slightly to define terror more specifically in terms of political goals, defining it as:

the unlawful use of violence or threat of violence to instill fear and coerce governments or societies. Terrorism is often motivated by religious, political, or other ideological beliefs and committed in the pursuit of goals that are usually political.<sup>24</sup>

On an international level, the United Nations has made several attempts to come up with a commonly accepted global definition of “terrorism,” but its attempts have been mired in disagreements among member states. In 1996, the U.N. defined terrorism as:

[C]riminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes [that] are in any circumstance unjustifiable, whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or other nature that may be invoked to justify them.<sup>25</sup>

In 2004, the U.N. Security Council broadened its definition (and clarified the U.N.’s stance on terror) in Resolution 1566, noting that terrorism comprises:

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<sup>22</sup> General Functions, Code of Federal Regulations, title 28, section 0.85.

<sup>23</sup> U.S. Departments of the Army & Air Force, *Military Operations in Low Intensity Conflict* (FM 100-20), 1990.

<sup>24</sup> “Terrorism,” Defense Technical Information Center: Joint Electronic Library, [http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/dod\\_dictionary/data/t/7591.html](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/dod_dictionary/data/t/7591.html) (accessed November 24, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> UN General Assembly Resolution 51/210, *Measures to Eliminate International Terrorism*, December 17, 1996.

criminal acts, including against civilians, committed with the intent to cause death or serious bodily injury, or taking of hostages, with the purpose to provoke a state of terror in the general public or in a group of persons or particular persons, intimidate a population or compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act, which constitute offences within the scope of and as defined in the international conventions and protocols relating to terrorism, are under no circumstances justifiable by considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or other similar nature.<sup>26</sup>

For years, however, a proposed U.N. treaty intended to broadly criminalize international terrorism, the Comprehensive Convention Against International Terrorism, has been deadlocked—partially because of the inability of member states to achieve consensus about how to define terrorism<sup>27</sup>, echoing Yassir Arafat’s 1974 argument before the United Nations General Assembly on the deeply subjective and inherently socio-political distinctions between “terrorists” and “revolutionaries.”<sup>28</sup>

### **Scholarship on terrorism**

Among influential scholars of terrorism and terrorism policy, there is a similar dearth of consensus about how to define terror. Some prominent experts have offered their own definitions, drawing upon decades of scholarship that identify various elements that have historically represented terror, while others reject the idea of ever identifying a common or comprehensive definition. In 1987, for example, Walter Laqueur wrote that

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<sup>26</sup> U.N. Security Council Resolution 1566, *Terrorism*, October 8, 2004.

<sup>27</sup> Muslim Public Affairs Council, *A Review of U.S. Counterterrorism Policy: American Muslim Critique and Recommendations* (Washington, DC: 2003).

<sup>28</sup> “The difference between the revolutionary and the terrorist,” Arafat said, “lies in lies in the reason for which each fights. For whoever stands by a just cause and fights for the freedom and liberation of his land from the invaders, the settlers and the colonialists cannot possibly be called terrorist...”: Y. Arafat, Speech, U.N. General Assembly, November 13, 1974.

attempting to ever define terrorism was a futile act, and that any attempt to do so was not academically worthwhile, although terrorism itself is still an object worthy of study—even despite the reality that it may never be grounded in widely agreed-upon theory<sup>2930</sup>. Twenty years later, in 2007, Merari echoed these sentiments, writing that achieving consensus on a single definition of terrorism is not crucial to the study of terror as a phenomenon, except for linguists. However, Merari went on to stress the importance of making strides toward at least loosely differentiating terrorism from other forms of violence, writing that “as long as the term ‘terrorism’ simply denoted a violent behavior that is deplorable in the eyes of the user of the term, its utility is in propaganda rather than in research.”<sup>31</sup>

In 1975, Brian Jenkins defined terrorism according to the nature of the act of violence itself, an approach that was common in the '70s:

The most simple definition of international terrorism comprises acts of terrorism that have clear international consequences: incidents in which terrorists go abroad to strike their targets, select victims or targets because of their connections to a foreign state ... attack airliners on international flights or force airliners to fly to another country ... terrorism may also be defined as acts of violence or campaigns of violence waged outside the accepted rules and procedures of international diplomacy and war.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> W. Laquer, *The Age of Terrorism* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1987).

<sup>30</sup> See also P. Wilkinson, *Terrorism and the Liberal State*, 2nd edition (New York: Wiley, 1986), 96.

<sup>31</sup> A. Merari, “Terrorism as a Strategy of Insurgency,” in *The History of Terrorism: From Antiquity to Al-Qaeda*, ed. G. Chaliand and A. Blin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 13.

<sup>32</sup> B. Jenkins, “International Terrorism: A New Mode of Conflict,” in *International Terrorism and World Security*, ed. D. Carlton and C. Schaerf (London: Croom Helm, 1975), 13-34.



Jenkins also emphasized the role that publicity played in terms of the fundamental aims of terrorist actors, writing that terrorists “want a lot of people watching and a lot of people listening and not a lot of people dead.”<sup>33</sup>

Paul Wilkinson, another prolific scholar of terrorism who published a great deal in the 1970s and ‘80s, emphasized at length the differences between what he termed “guerilla” violence and terrorism, a distinction that was also echoed by Laqueur.<sup>34</sup> In a definition that reflected the most high-profile terrorist events of his time, in 1978

Wilkinson wrote that:

In essence, terrorism is a weapon of coercive intimidation, typically involving the taking of hostages and the threat of the gun and the bomb, to coerce governments to submit to terrorist demands. Characteristic objectives of terrorist groups are publicity, both national and international, the release of fellow terrorists from gaol, and large ransoms. Possible longer-term objectives include: introducing a general climate of collapse and fear; weakening and dividing governments and communities; and provoking the authorities into an over-reaction which would alienate popular support and enable the terrorist movement to pose as the defenders of the people.<sup>35</sup>

In much of his published work on the subject, Wilkinson emphasized this use of “provocative” strategies among specifically political terrorists to push governments toward failure, arguing that the only response to terrorism by liberal democracies necessitates firm law and order measures to keep terrorists in check.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> P. Wilkinson, “Terrorism: The International Response,” *World Today* 34 (1978): 5-13; W. Laqueur, *The Age of Terrorism* (Boston: Little Brown & Co, 1987); P. Wilkinson, *Terrorism and the Liberal State*, 2nd edition (New York: Wiley, 1986).

<sup>35</sup> P. Wilkinson, “Terrorism: The International Response,” *World Today* 34 (1978): 5-13.

<sup>36</sup> E.g., P. Wilkinson, *Terrorism and the Liberal State*, 2nd edition (New York: Wiley, 1986); P. Wilkinson, *Political Terrorism* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1974); P. Wilkinson, *Terrorism: International Dimensions* (London: Institute for the Study of Conflict, 1979).

In the early 1980s, there was a distinct shift in terrorism scholarship. In an echo of the earlier Red Scares, international terrorism (ostensibly orchestrated by the Soviets) began to be regarded as being globally interconnected and intended to upend the cultural hegemony of the West—the beginning of a turn toward scholarship that regarded terrorism as a vast global conspiracy aimed at unseating or destabilizing Western powers.<sup>37</sup> By the mid 1980s, however, the role of state-sponsored “terror” perpetrated by nations in the Middle East, rather than the Soviets (Libya, Syria, Iran and Iraq) superseded conspiracy theories regarding Soviet complicity in international terror, and terrorism became associated with a type of warfare in which weaker or rogue states could confront larger, more powerful rivals.<sup>38</sup>

In 1984, Rapoport embarked upon the first comparative study of religious terror groups, what Rapoport termed “holy” or “sacred” terror. Before the French Revolution, Rapoport argued, religious motivations (among the three traditions he considered: Hinduism, Islam and Judaism) provided the *only* justification for what we now think of as “terrorism,” writing presciently that the lessons gleaned from historical examples of religious terrorism should inform scholarship on modern-day religious terrorism, especially in regard to current terrorists’ motivations.<sup>39</sup> In later work, Rapoport went on to identify three “waves” of terrorism, with the first two waves taking place before the 1960s, the third (the era when the idea of “international terrorism” first gained a foothold)

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<sup>37</sup> E.g., C. Sterling, *The Terror Network: The Secret War of International Terrorism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1981); R. Cline and Y. Alexander, *Terrorism: The Soviet Connection* (New York: Crane Russak, 1984).

<sup>38</sup> B. Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

<sup>39</sup> D. Rapoport, “Fear and Trembling: Terrorism in Three Religious Traditions,” *American Political Science Review* 78, no. 3 (1984): 658-677.

spanning the late '60s to the mid-'80s, and an additional fourth wave, characterized predominantly by a religious dimension to terror, extending into the present.<sup>40</sup>

In his influential 1998 book, *Inside Terrorism*, Bruce Hoffman identifies terrorism as a fundamentally political concept, arguing that this facet—terror's unavoidably political nature—is a key characteristic that is absolutely paramount to understanding its aims. Hoffman writes:

Terrorism, in the most widely accepted contemporary usage of the term, is fundamentally and inherently political. It is also ineluctably about power: the pursuit of power, the acquisition of power, and the use of power to achieve political change. Terrorism is thus violence—or, equally important, the threat of violence—used and directed in pursuit of, or in service of, a political aim.<sup>41</sup>

Building upon the most common policy definitions of his time, Hoffman identifies five elements that set terrorism apart from other forms of violence: its political nature, the threat or action of violence, the intention of far-reaching psychological effects beyond the immediate victims/targets, the execution of said violence (or threat) by an organization with an identifiable structure, and the subnational or non-state nature of the entity carrying out the act.<sup>42</sup> Consequently, Hoffman succinctly defines terrorism as “the deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence and in pursuit of political change.”<sup>43</sup>

In 2005, in an updated version of their original (1984) germinal and magisterial survey of terrorism research, Schmid and Jongman identified 109 separate definitions of

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<sup>40</sup> D. Rapoport, “The Fourth Wave: September 11 in the History of Terrorism,” *Current History* 100, no. 650 (2001): 419-424.

<sup>41</sup> B. Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998): 14-15.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

terrorism (drawn from policy, governmental and academic sources), comparing and contrasting the elements from these definitions.<sup>44</sup> Specifically, the 22 most common elements (occurring with the greatest frequency in the definitions of terrorism Schmid and Jongman surveyed), were:

| Element  | Frequency |
|--|-----------|
| 1. Violence, force   | 83.5%     |
| 2. Political   | 65%       |
| 3. Fear, terror emphasized   | 51%       |
| 4. Threat  | 47%       |
| 5. (Psych.) effects of (anticipated) reactions                                   | 41.5%     |
| 6. Victim-target differentiation   | 37.5%     |
| 7. Purposive, planned, systemic, organized action                                | 32%       |
| 8. Method of combat, strategy, tactic  | 30.5%     |
| 9. Extranormality, in breach of accepted rules, without humanitarian constraints | 30%       |
| 10. Coercion, extortion, induction of compliance                                 | 28%       |
| 11. Publicity aspect   | 21.5%     |
| 12. Arbitrariness; impersonal, random character; indiscrimination                | 21%       |
| 13. Civilians, noncombatants, neutrals, outsiders as victims                     | 17.5%     |
| 14. Intimidation   | 17%       |
| 15. Innocence of victims emphasized  | 15.5%     |
| 16. Group, movement, organization as perpetrator                                 | 14%       |

<sup>44</sup> A. Schmid and A. Jongman, *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Data Bases, Theories and Literature* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2005).

|   |       |
|---|-------|
| 17. Symbolic aspect, demonstration to others                                    | 13.5% |
| 18. Incalculability, unpredictability, unexpectedness of occurrence of violence | 9%    |
| 19. Clandestine, covert nature  | 9%    |
| 20. Repetitiveness, serial or campaign character of violence                    | 7%    |
| 21. Criminal  | 6%    |
| 22. Demands made on third parties   | 4%    |

Table 1: Common elements of terrorism definitions

In contrast to the approach articulated by terrorism scholars like Walter Laqueur and Ariel Merari, Schmid and Jongman argue that definitional precision is crucial to the study of terrorism. With the above common elements in mind, the authors came up with their own all-inclusive definition of terrorism that incorporated all of the most frequent elements from the definitions they surveyed:

Terrorism is an anxiety-inspiring method of repeated violent action employed by (semi-)clandestine individual, group or state actors for idiosyncratic, criminal or political reasons, whereby—in contrast to assassination—the direct targets of the violence are not the main targets. The immediate human victims of violence are generally chosen randomly (targets of opportunity) or selectively (representative or symbolic targets) from a target population, and serve as message generators. Threat- and violence-based communication processes between terrorist (organization), (imperiled) victims, and main target are used to manipulate the main target (audience(s)), turning it into a target of terror, a target of demands, or a target of attention, depending on whether intimidation, coercion or propaganda is primarily sought.<sup>45</sup>

Another thing Schmid and Jongman's *Political Terrorism* survey does very well is delineate the different quadrants of typologies of terrorism definitions—powerfully underlining both the lack of consensus among scholars of terrorism and the ways in

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 28.

which articulated definitions of terrorism often subtly serve the specific interests and concerns of the people, governments or organizations doing the defining. A few common typological quadrants that Schmid and Jongman identify, for example, are actor-based vs. victim-based definitions, cause-based, motivation-based, demand-based, target-based, means-based or political orientation-based classifications.<sup>46</sup>

### **Global history of terrorism**

Although this study focuses primarily on terrorism since 1968—the beginning of the period Rapoport considers the advent of the third and fourth waves of global terrorism,<sup>47</sup> and the year in which most scholars argue that modern terrorism emerged<sup>48</sup>, it is important to note the deep historical roots to many of the key elements of modern terrorism. Many of the words associated with terrorism, for example, trace their etymology to specific ancient historical terrorist groups, such as *assassin* (a radical Muslim Shi'a sect that fought to repel Christian Crusaders beginning in the 11<sup>th</sup> century),

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 40. It is also important to note that even the title “Political Terrorism” itself implies at least two discrete categories of terrorism.

<sup>47</sup> D. Rapoport, “The Fourth Wave: September 11 in the History of Terrorism,” *Current History* 100, no. 650 (2001): 419-424; D. Rapoport, “Fear and Trembling: Terrorism in Three Religious Traditions,” *American Political Science Review* 78, no. 3 (1984): 658-677.

<sup>48</sup> See for example B. Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) and G. Chaliand and A. Blin, *The History of Terrorism: From Antiquity to Al-Qaeda* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). The year 1968 represented the confluence of a number of factors that influenced the shift toward our current era of terrorism – it was the year in which Latin American insurgents began using the strategy of urban guerilla warfare, the year the PLO began using terrorism as a global publicity strategy with the hijacking of Israeli El Al flight from Rome to Tel Aviv, and, not coincidentally, just a few years after the launch of the first commercial television satellite.

*thug* (a seventh-century Hindu sect that murdered traveling civilians on holy days for sacrificial offerings), or *zealot* (a Jewish sect operating from AD 66-73 that fought against the Roman Empire in early acts of public terror designed to garner attention).

Historically, the term “terror” as it appears in its present usage is generally traced back to the “Reign of Terror” during the French Revolution in the eighteenth century, referring to the widespread fear that accompanied public executions.<sup>49</sup> In 1794, revolutionary leader Robespierre famously declared that “terror is nothing but justice, prompt, severe and inflexible; it is therefore an emanation of virtue.”<sup>50</sup> Unlike many current applications of the term, however, the idea of “terrorism” during this early period referred more to an instrument of governance wielded by the revolutionary state – it was a “top-down” form of terrorism that viewed terror as a state tool, rather than an anti-government or revolutionary activity. This early conception of terror, however, did have two important things in common with its modern-day variant—namely, that the *regime de la terreur* was neither random nor indiscriminate, and that its goal, its very justification, reflected the idea of the creation of a new and better society in place of a fundamentally corrupt and undemocratic political system.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> E.g., L. Jarvis, “The Spaces and Faces of Critical Terrorism Studies,” *Security Dialogue* 40, no. 1 (2009): 5-27; G. Weimann, “The Psychology of Mass-Mediated Terrorism,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 51, no. 1 (2008): 69-86; G. Chaliand and A. Blin, *The History of Terrorism: From Antiquity to Al-Qaeda* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

<sup>50</sup> M. Robespierre, *Report upon the Principles of Political Morality Which Are to Form the Basis of the Administration of the Interior Concerns of the Republic* (Philadelphia, 1794), quoted in R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*, vol. 2 (London: Routledge, 1992), 1061.

<sup>51</sup> B. Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most scholars identify the Narodnaya Volya (“People’s Will” or “People’s Freedom”), a group of Russian constitutionalists who opposed tsarist rule, as the first true terrorist organization<sup>52</sup>, putting into practice the ideas of Carlo Pisacane, an Italian republican extremist who popularized the idea of “propaganda by deed”<sup>53</sup> (the idea that violence was sometimes necessary to draw needed attention to a just cause), a philosophy that informed terrorist ideologies for years to come. This led to the anarchist movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a period of time characterized by international terrorist conferences, assassinations of heads of state, and the dissemination of the first DIY or “how-to” manuals for violence and mayhem.<sup>54</sup> This movement, during which “terrorism” retained its revolutionary connotations, lasted until the eve of the First World War. Most of the members of these anarchist groups were young, disaffected nationalists (such as, for example, the Young Bosnians, or “Mlada Bosna,” a group comprised of young Bosnian Serbs, most of whom were students) who rose up against their ruling classes and governments. It was a member of Mlada Bosna, Gavrilo Princip, who assassinated

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<sup>52</sup> B. Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); D. Rapoport, “The Fourth Wave: September 11 in the History of Terrorism,” *Current History* 100, no. 650 (2001): 419-424; W. Laqueur, *The Age of Terrorism* (Boston: Little Brown & Co, 1987).

<sup>53</sup> C. Pisacane, “Political Testament,” in *The Anarchist Reader*, ed. George Woodcock (Glasgow: Fontana, 1977), 43-44, quoted in B. Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 43-44.

<sup>54</sup> B. Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); D. Rapoport, “The Fourth Wave: September 11 in the History of Terrorism,” *Current History* 100, no. 650 (2001): 419-424; W. Laqueur, *The Age of Terrorism* (Boston: Little Brown & Co, 1987).



Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914 and thereby set into motion the events that led to the First World War.<sup>55</sup>

By 1920, in the United States, the case of Sacco and Vanzetti, two Italian immigrant anarchists accused of killing a paymaster and his assistant in broad daylight, epitomized the widespread fear of “terror” spread by revolutionary or anarchist groups. The American press whipped citizens into a frenzy over the case, pushing for the convictions of the two men. It soon became clear that the two men had become victims of a miscarriage of justice—but by then it was too late. They were executed in 1927.<sup>56</sup>

Once the hysteria over the Russian Revolution and anarchism started to die down, especially in the West—by the 1930s—the meaning of terrorism shifted again. Accompanying the simultaneous rise of totalitarian governments, especially in Europe and Asia (the Nazis in Germany, Mussolini in Italy, Franco in Spain, Stalin in Russia) the meaning of the term was used more often to refer to the practices of mass repression employed by these states, rather than subnational or revolutionary violence or movements directed at states themselves.

In the 1960s, several radical (often student-led) groups (such as the Black Panthers, Students for a Democratic Society and its offshoot, the Weather Underground Organization) began to organize in the United States. Although the tactics of many of these groups fall under the umbrella of what now might be considered terrorism—bombings, shootings and arson—a ProQuest search of newspaper headlines before the late 1960s suggests that only handful of newspapers referred to the actions of the Weather

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<sup>55</sup> B. Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 22.

<sup>56</sup> B. Bagdikian, *The New Media Monopoly* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006).

Underground, for example, as "terror," and most of the characterizations of these radical groups as being "terror" groups (or as "terrorists") appeared much later, well into the '70s. "Terror" seems to have been a label that the press applied after the fact, once the symbolism and cultural heft of the post-1968 "international terrorism" era had begun to influence the way media organizations thought about these groups.

### **Post-1968, pre-September 11: the advent of modern "international terrorism"**

The period of time between 1968 and the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, saw many marked shifts in both the practice and study of terrorism. For the first time, because of the advent of satellite technology, and because of shifts in the tactics of high-profile terrorist organizations, terrorism was seen as a truly global phenomenon, crossing state lines and geographic borders. "International terrorism," as a conceptual term, first emerged during this period.<sup>57</sup>

This particular era of terrorism was marked by a few common elements: (A) the internationalization of terror; (B) the prevalence of airline hijacking as a method preferred by terrorists—in the 1970s, there were more than 100 hijackings each year, leading to the early portion of this period sometimes being called the "hijacking era;" (C) the centrality of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as a germinal and much-copied organization; and (D) the widespread idea among scholars of terrorism that

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<sup>57</sup> D. Rapoport, "The Fourth Wave: September 11 in the History of Terrorism," *Current History* 100, no. 650 (2001): 419-424; G. Chaliand and A. Blin, *The History of Terrorism: From Antiquity to Al-Qaeda* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

terrorist acts were concerned more with (and fueled primarily by a desire for) visibility and media coverage than they were with inflicting violence upon their actual victims—this emerging body of theory recognized and emphasized the growing influence of truly “mass” media.<sup>58</sup>

One event in particular in 1968, the July 22 hijacking of the Israeli El Al flight from Rome to Tel Aviv by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (a subset of the PLO), is widely seen as being particularly influential in terms of ushering in a new era of international terror. Although it was not the first hijacking of a commercial airline—groups had previously hijacked flights to reroute planes or land in restricted areas, such as Cuba, mainly to get around travel restrictions, rather than reach a global audience with specific demands—it was the first hijacking that was explicitly carried out for political ideological ends<sup>59</sup>, and in such a way that the circumstances were designed to force communication with the terrorists and to draw attention to their cause.<sup>60</sup>

In 1972, the murder of 11 Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics by the PLO’S Black September Organization (BSO) represented another high-profile example during this period of terrorism’s power to, as Hoffman put it, “rocket a cause from obscurity to

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<sup>58</sup> As Brian Jenkins concluded in his 1975 analysis of terrorism, “Terrorist attacks are . . . choreographed to attract the attention of the electronic media and the international press. Taking and holding hostages increases the drama. The hostages themselves often mean nothing to the terrorists. Terrorism is aimed at the people watching, not at the actual victims. Terrorism is a theater”: B. Jenkins, “International Terrorism: A New Mode of Conflict,” in *International Terrorism and World Security*, ed. D. Carlton and C. Schaerf (London: Croom Helm, 1975), 4.

<sup>59</sup> Specifically, the hijackers negotiated successfully for the release of Arab political prisoners being held in Israel, holding Israeli citizens aboard the flight hostage until their demands were met.

<sup>60</sup> G. Chaliand and A. Blin, *The History of Terrorism: From Antiquity to Al-Qaeda* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

renown,<sup>61</sup> resulting in an interesting paradox. Although the attack was a failure on many fronts—not only did the BSO fail to achieve their principal demand, that several hundred Palestinian prisoners be freed from Israeli prisons, but the widespread global media coverage of the event led to nearly unanimous international condemnation of the attack, tarnishing the Palestinian cause. Only in terms of sheer publicity could the attack be considered a success. As Abu Iyad, a senior PLO official, put it, although the attack failed to achieve its ostensible demands, it the BSO did succeed in forcing the world to take notice of Palestinian issues, and the Palestinian people had “imposed their presence on an international gathering that had sought to exclude them.”<sup>62</sup> And in a communiqué published just after the attack in Beirut, the BSO wrote that “[t]he choice of the Olympics, from a purely propagandistic view-point, was 100 percent successful. It was like painting the name of Palestine on a mountain that can be seen from the four corners of the earth.”<sup>63</sup>

During this time period, the emphasis on *international* terrorism—terrorism that superseded all national borders—was exemplified most powerfully by the global success and prominence of the PLO, which became a sort of meta-terrorist organization, training would-be radicals who hailed from nations all over the world in the key tactics of effective terror. By the early 1980s, terrorism began to be viewed as a calculated means

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<sup>61</sup> B. Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 71

<sup>62</sup> A. Iyad and E. Rouleau, *My Home, My Land: A Narrative of the Palestinian Struggle*, trans. L. Koseoglu (New York: Times Books, 1981), 111-12.

<sup>63</sup> Quoted in B. Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 74

to specifically destabilize the West, with a focus particularly on the Soviets as masterminds behind global trails of terror organizations.

However, as old Cold War rivalries cooled, and a number of key political changes took place—such as the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan in 1989, coupled with events like the Islamic Revolution in Iran a decade earlier—the focus among policymakers and scholars of terrorism began to shift to a new wave of terrorism (what Rapoport calls the “fourth wave” of terrorism) that emphasized the rise in prominence of explicitly religious terrorist groups.<sup>64</sup> Rather than a specific political or revolutionary ethos, religion itself was seen as the predominant characteristic of this “wave” of terrorism. Beginning in the late ‘80s and extending into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, terrorism carried out by religious extremists rose in prominence. Religious groups behind this wave of terrorism were many and varied: the Hindu/Buddhist Aum Shinrikyo sect in Japan, which perpetrated the 1995 sarin gas attack in Tokyo, the Christian Identity movement in the United States (whose most famous adherent, Timothy McVeigh, was responsible for the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing), Jewish terrorists, such as Baruch Goldstein, the Brooklyn man behind the 1994 Cave of the Patriarchs massacre, and the al-Qaeda trained Muslim terrorists behind the first World Trade Center bombing in 1993.

If the PLO was the meta-organization that exemplified the first part of this period—the “third wave” of terrorism—then al-Qaeda, the organization behind an

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<sup>64</sup> D. Rapoport, “The Fourth Wave: September 11 in the History of Terrorism,” *Current History* 100, no. 650 (2001): 419-424; G. Chaliand and A. Blin, *The History of Terrorism: From Antiquity to Al-Qaeda* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

increasing number of anti-American terrorist attacks in the waning years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was shaping up to be the meta-organization that characterized the fourth era.

### **Post-September 11: the current era**

The global effect of September 11 in terms of the drastic shift it wrought in popular understandings of “terrorism” cannot be overstated. The 2001 attacks, which resulted (directly) in the deaths of nearly 3,000 in the United States and (indirectly) in the deaths of at least hundreds of thousands in the subsequent Iraq and Afghan wars, dramatically reorganized the way that Americans thought about terrorism, terrorists and risk. Al-Qaeda, the growing global militant Islamic terrorist organization responsible for previous attacks on American embassies and the World Trade Center in 1993, rocketed to global notoriety overnight. And Osama bin Laden, the wealthy Saudi al-Qaeda leader who claimed responsibility for the September 11 attacks, became its instantly recognizable mouthpiece and representative.

Although many in recent years have noted that al-Qaeda (Arabic for “the base”) is far more disparate, heterogeneous and diffuse than was commonly imagined in the first months and years after September 11,<sup>65</sup> the prominence of al-Qaeda as a seemingly central global purveyor of anti-Western terror profoundly and swiftly affected American domestic and foreign policy. The passage of legislation like the first PATRIOT ACT, signed into law in October 2001, emphasized the ostensible global and imminent threat of

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<sup>65</sup> E.g., J. Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin, 2004); B. Riedel, *The Search for Al Qaeda: Its Leadership, Ideology, and Future*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2010).

centralized Islamic organizations like al-Qaeda, granting the United States government previously unheard-of latitude at home and abroad in its global fight in the “War on Terror.”<sup>66</sup>

Notably, the post-September 11 period, and the new realities, associations and symbols that accompanied it, turned one important historical assumption about terrorism on its head. For decades, there had been widespread acceptance of the observation made famous by Brian Jenkins in 1975, that terrorists “want a lot of people watching and not a lot of people dead.” But as Hoffman observed in 2002, on September 11 “bin Laden wiped the slate clean of the conventional wisdom on terrorists and terrorism and, by doing so, ushered in a new era of conflict.”<sup>67</sup>

This shift was closely related to the changing motivations behind terrorist actors and organizations. In his discussion of the history of extremist ideologies, Philippe Migaux argues that the mujahedeen movement—the movement out of which organizations like al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) arose—is the most extreme and marginal form of contemporary terrorism because, unlike its politically motivated and revolutionary predecessors, it has no interest in negotiation. Rather than using terror as a tool to use in the pursuit of political or social ends, terrorism is seen by its practitioners as an end in itself. In the view of these extremists, Migaux writes, “violence is no longer merely a weapon; it is, ultimately, the

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<sup>66</sup> These provisions, many of which undercut or effectively repealed large sections of the Bill of Rights, included the authorization to indefinitely detain immigrants, the ability to search homes or businesses without the knowledge of occupants, and warrantless wiretapping.

<sup>67</sup> B. Hoffman, “Rethinking Terrorism and Counterterrorism Since 9-11,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 25, no. 5 (2002): 303-316.

only objective.”<sup>68</sup> Indeed, ISIL, which currently controls an area larger than the United Kingdom, openly espouses an apocalyptic vision of its role as the leaders of a “final caliphate” that involves—even demands—the wholesale slaughter of its enemies.<sup>69</sup>

In keeping with the forceful American response (the so-called “War on Terror”) that characterized the backlash to the September 11 attacks, this period of terrorism in the West has been marked by a far more authoritarian, militaristic response to terrorism and the threat of terrorism than nearly any era that came before it. The sweeping changes brought about by the PATRIOT ACT were only the tip of the spear in terms of the dramatic shift in how the ostensible threat of terrorism came to be conceptualized and addressed in the public sphere. Rather than having a discrete and identifiable enemy, as in years past, the new “enemy” envisioned by the “War on Terror” was highly individualized (rather than state-centric), focused on “rogue states,” evil individuals, and insurgencies.<sup>70</sup> As the American government focused increasingly on combating the nebulous and ambiguous enemy of “terror,” it relied increasingly on widespread and all-encompassing surveillance<sup>71</sup>, as well as preventative measures that included the arbitrary detainment of hundreds of Muslim immigrants on ostensible visa violations immediately

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<sup>68</sup> P. Migaux, “Al Qaeda,” in G. Chaliand and A. Blin, *The History of Terrorism: From Antiquity to Al-Qaeda* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 257.

<sup>69</sup> G. Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants,” *The Atlantic*, February 15, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2015/02/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>.

<sup>70</sup> J. der Derian, *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network*, 2nd ed (New York: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>71</sup> Exemplified most recently and alarmingly by revelations about the PRISM surveillance system.



following September 11<sup>72</sup>, secret arrests, indefinite and continued detainment of so-called “enemy combatants,” and numerous other human rights abuses.<sup>73</sup> By 2013, when double bombings shook the Boston Marathon, local, state and national authorities forcibly shut down the entire city in their hunt for the culprits.<sup>74</sup> Terrorism during this period has come to represent a fascinating paradox—it is an extremely low-probability event<sup>75</sup>, but state responses to terrorism (and the threat of terrorism) reflect and produce a social and political environment of continual hyper-alertness regarding terror.

During this post-September 11 period, another important shift also took place in terms of the ostensible aims of terrorists and terrorist organizations. In the period preceding September 11, the popular consensus was generally that terrorist groups intended their attacks to be “seen” and consumed by a terrorized audience—either to bolster awareness of their political goals or in the pursuit of specific demands. This changed, however, during the “fourth wave” of terrorism, and particularly after September 11. Rather than the terrorized public as a whole, the September 11 terrorists’ real audience was the population of their homelands and their regions of operation—and in the case of ISIL, this population reflects the growing number of individuals living

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<sup>72</sup> J. Wilgoren, “Swept Up In a Dagnet, Hundreds Sit in Custody and Ask ‘Why?’” *New York Times*, November 25, 2001, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/25/national/25DETA.html>.

<sup>73</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Presumption of Guilt: Human Rights Abuses of Post-September 11 Detainees*, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/us911/> (accessed March 30, 2015).

<sup>74</sup> B. Naylor, “Boston Lockdown ‘Extraordinary’ But Prudent, Experts Say,” NPR, April 22, 2013, <http://www.npr.org/2013/04/22/178446136/boston-lockdown-extraordinary-but-prudent-experts-say>.

<sup>75</sup> According to the NCTC’s most recent Counterterrorism Report, Americans are equally likely to be crushed to death by their furniture as they are to die in a terrorist attack—an average of 29 fatalities per year: National Counterterrorism Center, *Report on Terrorism*, <https://fas.org/irp/threat/nctc2011.pdf>.

under the rule of ISIL militants in Iraq and Syria.<sup>76</sup> For ISIL, the terror inflicted upon victims is designed both to force audiences to choose sides in what these extremists are hoping will ultimately turn into a final, apocalyptic global war between Islam and forces of secularism (primarily in the global West) and to cement their power and authority over a growing geographic region that includes large portions of Iraq and Syria.

Another new development that characterized the post-September 11 period was the rise in so-called “cyber terrorism.” Referring to the use of computer networks or internet tools shut down critical infrastructures and intimidate or coerce governments or civilian populations,<sup>77</sup> cyber terrorism was used as early as the late 1990s, when in 1997 the Tamil Tigers remotely shut down the servers of the Sri Lankan embassies in Seoul, Washington, D.C., and Ottawa.<sup>78</sup> By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, nearly all established terrorist organizations had a presence online, and today, every terrorist organization has some online presence or footprint, using the internet as a convenient space in which to proselytize to followers, communicate with adherents, and coordinate, plan and even carry out attacks using computer networks.<sup>79</sup>

### **International and domestic terrorist groups today**

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<sup>76</sup> B. Nacos, “Terrorism, the Mass Media, and the Events of 9-11,” *Phi Kappa Phi Forum* 82, no. 2 (2002): 13.

<sup>77</sup> W. Tafoya, “Cyber Terror,” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, <https://leb.fbi.gov/2011/november/cyber-terror>.

<sup>78</sup> B. Hoffman, “Rethinking Terrorism and Counterterrorism Since 9-11,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 25, no. 5 (2002): 303-316.

<sup>79</sup> G. Weimann, “The Psychology of Mass-Mediated Terrorism,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 51, no. 1 (2008): 69-86.

Currently, the State Department recognizes 49 official foreign terrorist organizations, including multiple offshoots of al-Qaeda (al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda in Iraq, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb).<sup>80</sup> Although the U.S. government does not generate a comparable list of domestic groups that are considered official terrorist organizations (thereby criminalizing association with or support for these groups in the same way that support for or association with official foreign terror groups are criminalized) it does clearly define what it considers domestic terrorism.

Specifically, the USA PATRIOT Act defines acts of *domestic* terrorism as those which: “(A) involve acts dangerous to human life that are a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or of any State; (B) appear to be intended— (i) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (ii) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or (iii) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping; and (C) occur primarily within the territorial jurisdiction of the United States.”<sup>81</sup>

Some organizations, such as the Southern Poverty Law Center, do compile more inclusive lists of hate groups and American domestic terror organizations, but the lack of consistent governmental identification of domestic groups is a problem for both policymakers and scholars of terrorism. One useful tool for keeping track of domestic terror incidents is the Global Terrorism Database, a subset of the National Consortium for

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<sup>80</sup> U.S. Department of State, Foreign Terrorist Organizations, <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm>.

<sup>81</sup> USA PATRIOT Act, U.S. Code 18 (2001), § 2331.

the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), itself a branch of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. The Global Terrorism Database compiles data on over 100,000 terrorist attacks, going back to 1970, in countries all over the world, including the United States. Criteria for inclusion in the database are as follows: (1) the act must be aimed at attaining a political, economic, religious, or social goal, (2) there must be evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to a larger audience (or audiences) than the immediate victims, and (3) the action must be outside the context of legitimate warfare activities.<sup>82</sup>

### **Media coverage of terrorism before September 11**

The very nature of terrorism—a tactic that almost always involves reaching an audience beyond those directly victimized—necessitates a two-way relationship with mass media.<sup>83</sup> As Paul Wilkinson wrote in 2001,

When one says “terrorism” in a democratic society, one also says ‘media.’ For

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<sup>82</sup> Global Terrorism Database, National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/> (accessed March 31, 2015).

<sup>83</sup> S. Carruthers, *The Media at War* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000); R. Clutterbuck, “Terrorism and Urban Violence,” in *The Communication Revolution in Politics*, ed. G. Benjamin (New York: Academy of Political Science, 1982), 165-175; P. Devine and R. Rafalko, “On Terror,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 463, no. 1 (1982): 39-53; W. Laqueur, *Terrorism: A Study of National and International Political Violence* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1977); B. Nacos, “Terrorism as Breaking News: Attack on America,” *Political Science Quarterly* 118 (2003): 23–52; P. Nelson and J. Scott, “Terrorism and the Media: An Empirical Analysis,” *Economics* 3 (1992): 329–339; R. Picard, *Media Portrayals of Terrorism: Functions and Meaning of News Coverage* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1993); A. Schmid and J. de Graaf, *Violence as Communication: Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1982); S. Chermak and J. Gruenewald, “The Media’s Coverage of Domestic Terrorism,” *Justice Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (2006): 428–461.

terrorism by its very nature is a psychological weapon which depends upon communicating a threat to a wider society. This, in essence, is why terrorism and the media enjoy a symbiotic relationship.<sup>84</sup>

Indeed, part of what sets “terrorism” apart from other forms of traditional warfare lies in its unorthodox, symbiotic relationship with mass media. Most definitions hold that the propagandistic aims of terrorist acts of violence are central to identify an act *as* terrorism. Thus, modern terrorism is inextricably and symbiotically linked to the mass media, which are not external actors to terror, passively relaying information, but are increasingly seen as active agents in the conceptualization of terror events themselves, meaning they are credited not only with the power to define terrorism, but constitutive power. Terrorism simply cannot be separated neatly from the ways in which it is “made to mean” by media.<sup>85</sup>

Beginning in the late 1960s—coinciding with the dawn of what we now think of as the “modern era” of international terrorism—scholars of terrorism began focusing increasingly on the ways in which terrorist organizations used new forms of instantaneous mass media (most notably, television) to garner unprecedented attention from the press—although, even before the age of television, many states regarded terrorism as an essentially publicity-seeking strategy.<sup>86</sup> Terrorism theory of the 1970s,

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<sup>84</sup> P. Wilkinson, *Terrorism Versus Democracy: The Liberal State Response* (London: Frank Cass, 2001).

<sup>85</sup> D. Freedman and D. Thussu, eds., *Media & Terrorism: Global Perspectives* (Washington, DC: Sage 2012), 10; C. Townshend, *Britain’s Civil Wars: Counterinsurgency in the Twentieth Century* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986).

<sup>86</sup> S. Carruthers, *Winning Hearts and Minds: British Governments, the Media and Colonial Counterinsurgency, 1944-1960* (London: Leicester University Press, 1995).

especially, increasingly highlighted the role of mass media in the decision-making processes of terrorist organizations. As Brian Jenkins wrote in 1975:

Terrorist attacks are often carefully choreographed to attract the attention of the electronic media and the international press. Taking and holding hostages increases the drama. The hostages themselves often mean nothing to the terrorists. Terrorism is aimed at the people watching, not at the actual victims. Terrorism is a theater.<sup>87</sup>

Building upon the “terrorism as theater” mode of thought, in 1985 British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (whose tenure was marked by a number of disputes between broadcasters and government, often over the subject of televised terrorism) famously described mass media-provided publicity as the “oxygen” on which terrorists and terrorist groups depend, arguing that democratic nations must find ways to “starve” terrorists from attaining it.<sup>88</sup>

But the reality is that both news media *and* terrorist organizations have a mutual interest in disseminating dramatic images.<sup>89</sup> Terrorists (which Walter Laqueur referred to in 1977 as the “super entertainers of our time”)<sup>90</sup> offer media irresistibly dramatic and newsworthy bait that news media cannot resist, leading to a sort of unfortunate symbiosis.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> B. Jenkins, “International Terrorism: A New Mode of Conflict,” in *International Terrorism and World Security*, ed. D. Carlton and C. Schaerf (London: Croom Helm, 1975), 13-34.

<sup>88</sup> B. Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

<sup>89</sup> B. Nacos, *Mass-Mediated Terrorism: The Central Role of the Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

<sup>90</sup> W. Laqueur, *Terrorism* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1977).

<sup>91</sup> There have also been, of course, occasional cases in which terrorists directly demanded access to news media—such as the Unabomber’s successful insistence that American newspapers print his manifesto (which, ironically, led to his identification and arrest).

In a 1994 study examining over 6,000 incidents of international terrorism spanning the late 1960s to the early 1990s, Weimann & Winn found a significant increase in terrorist acts that specifically applied media-oriented considerations to their attacks—such as choice of victims, timing, or explicit plans for contact with the media.<sup>92</sup> Notably, however, many scholars have found that not all terrorist attacks garner the same amount of coverage in the Western press. In a 2006 study, Chermak & Gruenewald examined 21 years of media coverage of terror attacks, from 1980 to September 10, 2001. They found that the characteristics that most often indicated which attacks were covered during this pre-September 11 period included (1) incidents with high numbers of casualties, (2) incidents that were linked to domestic, rather than international, terrorist groups (a focus that would shift dramatically after September 11), (3) incidents targeting airlines, and (4) incidents involving hijackings, the tactic that broadly characterized the “third wave” of terrorism, during which much of this period fell. Specific forms of terrorism—such as, most frequently, state terrorism—were also often excluded from coverage in favor of subnational or insurgent terrorism.<sup>93</sup>

Beyond these inconsistencies and selectivity in terms of which terror attacks garner coverage, many scholars also criticized mass media for perceived problems in terrorism coverage—problems that most often included the sensationalism and oversimplification of terrorist attacks—or the argument that mass media inevitably privilege

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<sup>92</sup> G. Weimann and C. Winn, *The Theater of Terror: Mass Media and International Terrorism* (New York: Longman, 1994).

<sup>93</sup> S. Chermak and J. Gruenewald, “The Media’s Coverage of Domestic Terrorism” *Justice Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (2006): 428–461; D. Paletz and A. Schmid, *Terrorism and the Media* (New York: SAGE, 1992).

(and therefore possibly glamorize) terrorist activities.<sup>94</sup> This research largely concluded that mass media in the post-1968 and pre-September 11 era disproportionately emphasized the most dramatic and violent terrorist incidents, downplaying or wholly ignoring historical, social and cultural contexts and explanations for terrorism—a type of news coverage that came to be known as “infotainment.”<sup>95</sup> In 1994, Crenlinsten argued that one of the indirect effects of this kind of coverage of terrorism was dangerous for public discourse, because

images substitute for ideas, and personality for experience. Short, simple messages supplant long, complex ones, and drama takes the place of exposition. Hence, quick, dramatic solutions are preferred to questioning, argument, and compromise, all of which lead to doubt and uncertainty.<sup>96</sup>

### **Media coverage of terrorism after September 11**

The events of September 11 served as the ultimate example of “terrorism as theater”—what Weimann called “the most powerful and violent performance of the modern theater of terror,”<sup>97</sup> a perfectly choreographed production aimed at American and international audiences. But it soon became clear that the “terrorism as theater” metaphor, which had prevailed before September 11, was no longer adequate to characterize the

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<sup>94</sup> S. Carruthers, *The Media At War* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000).

<sup>95</sup> T. Atwater, “Terrorism on the Evening News: An Analysis of Coverage of the TWA Hostage Crisis on ‘NBC Nightly News,’” *Political Communication and Persuasion* 4 (1987): 17–24; D. Paletz, J. Ayanian, and P. Fozzard, “The I.R.A., the Red Brigades, and the F.A.L.N. in the *New York Times*,” *Journal of Communication* 32 (1985): 167–172; R. Picard, *Media Portrayals of Terrorism: Functions and Meaning of News Coverage* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1993).

<sup>96</sup> R. Crelinsten, “The Impact of Television on Terrorism and Crisis Situations: Implications for Public Policy,” *Journal of Contingencies & Crisis Management* 2, no. 2 (1994): 61.

<sup>97</sup> G. Weimann, “The Psychology of Mass Mediated Terrorism,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 51, no. 1 (2008): 69-86.



current era of terrorism. Terrorism in the post-September 11 world went far beyond “theater.” It could be more aptly described as terror as instantaneous spectacle, available for consumption immediately, worldwide.<sup>98</sup>

The September 11 attacks marked the first time that the U.S. found itself subject to large-scale terror within its own borders, a threat that dramatically shaped the ways American news media covered not only the event itself, but everything from domestic policy discussions to international affairs. The post-September 11 American cultural landscape was marked by saturation media coverage of the attacks—in the first few days, many TV stations even skipped commercials to carry continuous, uninterrupted coverage—as media practitioners scrambled to explain how and why they happened. This round-the-clock coverage dramatically refigured the ways in which American news media and audiences thought about “terror” – what terror looks like, who terrorists are, and how terror fits within the confines of American nationalism and identity. During these first waves of saturation reporting on the attack, news media connected their coverage to cultural imaginations of the self, community, the nation, and the global environment.<sup>99</sup>

At this pivotal point in American history, news practitioners found themselves at a crossroads. As the United States swiftly launched retaliatory military campaigns in Afghanistan—initially ostensibly aimed at routing terrorist training camps and defeating al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden—news media had an obligation to present the American

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.; B. Nacos. "Terrorism, the Mass Media, and the Events of 9-11," *Phi Kappa Phi Forum* 82, no. 2 (2002): 13.

<sup>99</sup> P. van der Veer and S. Munshi, *Media, War and Terrorism: Responses from the Middle East and Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

public with complete, nuanced, and critical coverage. Instead, many news media took an uncritical approach, couching their analysis in narrow terms of hyper-patriotism that closely parroted government talking points (and that exploited preexisting Islamophobic stereotypes), while under-reporting both broad protest movements and counter arguments made by policymakers opposing war.<sup>100</sup>

News coverage—especially televised coverage—of the events of September 11 quickly degenerated in the weeks following the attacks, as networks rolled out sensationalist bottom-of-the-screen banner logos announcing “America At War,” or “America Under Attack.”<sup>101</sup> Following a 15-year period in the 1980s and ‘90s during which American journalism had been most commonly characterized by frivolity, self-absorption and ironic distance from society, the press became “re-nationalized,” drawing journalists back within the body politic.<sup>102</sup> Terrorism coverage after September 11 broadly fed into dominant state discourses surrounding fear, terrorism and victimization—for example, in the years following the September 11 attacks, the terms “crime,” “victim” and “fear” were heavily present in news reports about terrorism, constructing public discourse that reflected symbolic relationships about order, danger

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<sup>100</sup> A. DiMaggio, *When Media Goes to War: Hegemonic Discourse, Public Opinion, and the Limits of Dissent* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010); S. Munshi, “Television in the United States from 9/11 and the U.S.’s Continuing ‘War on Terror’: Single Theme, Multiple Media Lenses,” in *Media, War and Terrorism: Responses from the Middle East and Asia*, ed. P. van der Veer and S. Munshi (New York: Routledge, 2004), 46-60; S. Bonn, *Mass Deception: Moral Panic and the U.S. War in Iraq* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010); R. McChesney, “September 11 and the Structural Limitations of U.S. Journalism,” in *Journalism After September 11*, ed. B. Zelizer and S. Allen (New York: Routledge, 2002), 91-100.

<sup>101</sup> J. Carey, “American Journalism On, Before, and After September 11,” in *Journalism After September 11*, ed. B. Zelizer and S. Allen (New York: Routledge, 2002): 85-103.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

and threat that were exploited by those in power in ways that they could not be before September 11 (most notably, in terms of ubiquitous domestic surveillance and extralegal detention). In many ways, this post-September 11 landscape of discourse about terror was more complex, more polarized, and less nuanced than it had been before.<sup>103</sup>

In coverage that echoed centuries of what Edward Said described as “Orientalist” thought,<sup>104</sup> news media in the weeks and months following September 11 also consistently produced coverage that reproduced reductive and binary stereotypes and Arabs and Muslims, creating what Vultee called a “uniquely menacing” image of Islam.<sup>105</sup> In 2003, Padgett and Allen argued that during the Cold War and pre-September 11 period, the convenient crisis “other” was the Soviet Empire. But after September 11, mass media reverted to a new “Evil Empire” model, a good/evil dichotomy. In this coverage, the new “Evil Empire” was Islam—a view that equated an attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon with an attack on Western free markets and democracy and vilified a homogeneous Muslim “other” in simplistic terms.<sup>106</sup>

Islamophobia has characterized much coverage of terrorism (and issues even peripherally related to terror or terrorism) in the years since 2001. Many news accounts

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<sup>103</sup> D. Altheide, “Terrorism and the Politics of Fear,” *Cultural Studies <-> Critical Methodologies* 6, no. 4 (2006): 415-439; B. Nacos, “Terrorism as Breaking News: Attack on America,” *Political Science Quarterly* 118 (2003): 23–52; B. Nacos, *Mass-Mediated Terrorism: The Central Role of the Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

<sup>104</sup> E. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

<sup>105</sup> F. Vultee, “Jump Back, Jack, Mohammed’s Here,” *Journalism Studies* 10, no. 5 (2009): 623-638; D. Kumar, “Framing Islam: The Resurgence of Orientalism During the Bush II Era,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 34, no. 3 (2010): 254-277.

<sup>106</sup> A. Padgett and B. Allen. “Fear’s Slave: The Mass Media and Islam after September 11,” *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture & Policy* 109 (2003): 32-40.

have displayed a marked reduction of Muslim subjects to simple binaries to offset the heroic leadership of an American-led West, in a return by media to tropes of Islam and Muslims that cast these players in a simplified light. Media discourse reproducing simplified pre-existing anti-Muslim anxieties may also be related economic factors—often, the identification of a simplified Muslim enemy may serve as a proxy for Western societies’ anxieties over the instability of the neo-liberal system, while legitimizing the destruction of the social fabric of the Middle East via the threat of “terror.”<sup>107</sup>

It is impossible to overstate the effect that the events of September 11 had in terms of contextualizing the way that audiences think about large-scale tragedies. The shifting trends in terrorism (tactics, identities, and ostensible goals), as well as massive shifts in news media, which are increasingly globalized, concentrated, polarized and instantaneous, have led us to an uncertain present. In the years since September 11, there are specific set of elements and signifiers that trigger what we now think of as “terrorism”—a far different set than there were before the attacks. Certain mass shootings, for example, such as the 2009 Fort Hood shooting, or the 2012 Sikh temple shooting in Wisconsin, are described widely as acts of terrorism, while others are not.

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<sup>107</sup> G. Kassimeris and L. Jackson, “The West, the Rest, and the ‘War on Terror’: Representation of Muslims in Neoconservative Media Discourse,” *Contemporary Politics*, 17, no. 1 (2001), 19-33; M. Featherstone, S. Holohan, and E. Poole, “Discourses of the War on Terror: Constructions of the Islamic Other after 7/7,” *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics* 6, no. 2 (2010): 169-186; Center for American Progress, *Fear, Inc.: The Roots of the Islamophobia Network in America* (Washington, DC: Ali, Clifton, Duss, Fang, Keyes & Shakir, 2011); L. Jayyusi, “Terror, War and Disjunctures on the Global Order,” in *Media & Terrorism: Global Perspectives*, ed. D. Freedman and D. Thussu (Washington, DC: Sage, 2012), 23-46; G. Khiabany and N. Williamson, “Terror, Culture and Anti-Muslim Racism,” in *Media & Terrorism: Global Perspectives*, ed. D. Freedman and D. Thussu (Washington, DC: Sage, 2012), 134-150.

And certain elements of perpetrators' identities are preferentially included (or excluded) as a matter of routine news reporting on such events. In this sense, the moment of September 11 was a key turning point, a pivotal moment in history that must inform any analysis of media coverage of large-scale tragedies.

## Chapter 2: Mass Shootings in the United States: Media and the Effect of Columbine

The September 11 attacks, and the shifting landscape of the iconography of terror that accompanied them, represent one major factor that continues to inform the way Americans think about large-scale tragedies. A second factor that substantially affects the way we view these tragedies is the almost uniquely American problem of what we now call “mass shootings.”

There have been at least 70 mass shootings in the United States in the past 30 years, 33 of which have occurred since 2006.<sup>108</sup> Although media coverage of these types of events has intensified in recent years, these phenomena are not new—as early as 1966, a University of Texas engineering student opened fire on students from a tower on campus, indiscriminately killing 17 people.

The problem of mass shootings, however, has taken on a different cultural quality in the last 20 years, marked by intensified concerns over terror incidents and colossal changes to the American media landscape. The increased use and spread of social media, enhanced media coverage of mass shootings and a 24-hour news cycle all contribute to this phenomenon.<sup>109</sup> Mass shootings in the twenty-first century have become more salient in mass media account as a specific type of recurring social problem that require explanation. The changes to news media that have accompanied the new millennium,

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<sup>108</sup> M. Follman, G. Aronsen, and D. Pan, “A Guide to Mass Shootings in America,” *Mother Jones*, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/07/mass-shootings-map>.

<sup>109</sup> J. Knoll, “Mass Shootings: Research and Lessons,” *Psychiatric Times* 30, no. 2 (2013): 6.

however—the rapid rise of the digital age, round-the-clock news, and new media of all kinds—have often served to complicate the public discourse about these events.

Trends accompanying these changes in media formed the backbone of much of the criticism of media coverage of the 1999 shooting at Columbine, the first “mass shooting” that triggered that particular, now-pervasive label. Concerns about sensationalism, violent media, round-the-clock news coverage and the potential for “copycat” shootings have intensified in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with Columbine in particular serving as a crystallizing moment for those issues. It is crucial to examine news coverage of these kinds of events in light of all the recent changes that have taken place in the context of news media in the years following the key turning point of Columbine. The Columbine shooting created a new prism through which to view gun deaths, immediately followed by the focus on “terror” that accompanied September 11.

## **Columbine**

The 1999 shooting at Columbine High School, which resulted in the deaths of 15 people,<sup>110</sup> including the two perpetrators (high school students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold), received more media coverage than any American mass shooting before or since. The Columbine shooting was the first to be covered live on cable television, and many of the tropes and themes that accompanied coverage of the shooting have had powerful “sticking power,” substantially shaping the way later shootings are framed and understood. Consequently, the Columbine shooting is widely considered a foundational

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<sup>110</sup> The Columbine shooting remains the most deadly shooting ever to take place at an American high school, followed closely by the 2005 shooting at a school on the Red Lake Indian Reservation in Minnesota.

event that played a pivotal role in influencing the framing of subsequent mass shootings—it was, in many ways, an analog to the paradigm shift that accompanied news coverage of the first Gulf War. The exhaustive, cyclical, round-the-clock news coverage that followed the shooting (indeed, the Columbine shooting was one of the top three most closely watched news stories of the 1990s) represented a permanent change in public discourse about mass shootings, capturing Americans’ attention in a unique way,<sup>111</sup> and many of the stories and frames that were deployed to explain and describe the attack resurfaced in coverage of later shootings. Columbine also precipitated the most intense period of legislative activity on school violence of that year—or of any prior session of Congress. Thirty-five percent of all bills introduced in 1999 dealing with school violence were introduced in April and May (the month of the shooting and the month immediately following it); no more than 9 percent of such bills were introduced in any other month of that legislative session.<sup>112</sup> In many ways, Columbine marked a watershed in the coverage (and wider public discussion) of these kinds of tragedies.<sup>113</sup>

Indeed, before Columbine, “mass shootings” as we think of them today did not exist. To be sure, there were events that we would now think of as mass shootings,

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<sup>111</sup> Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, “Columbine Shooting Biggest News Draw of 1999,” <http://www.people-press.org/1999/12/28/columbine-shooting-biggest-news-draw-of-1999/>.

<sup>112</sup> R. Lawrence and T. Birkland, “Guns, Hollywood, and School Safety: Defining the School-Shooting Problem Across Public Arenas,” *Social Science Quarterly* 85, no. 5 (2004): 1193-1207.

<sup>113</sup> R. DeFoster, “American Gun Culture, School Shootings, and a ‘Frontier Mentality’: An Ideological Analysis of British Editorial Pages in the Decade After Columbine,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 3, no. 4 (2010): 466-484; P. Leavy and K. Maloney, “American Reporting of School Violence and ‘People Like Us’: A Comparison of Newspaper Coverage of the Columbine and Red Lake School Shootings,” *Critical Sociology* 35, no. 2 (2009): 273-292.



attacks during which a gunman or gunmen opened fire seemingly at random in workplaces, schools, religious institutions or other venues. But ProQuest and Lexis Nexis searches of American newspapers for the term “mass shooting” finds that before Columbine, the term was only used to refer to cases of state terrorism (all overseas), or to historical events (involving, most often, the Nazis or Stalinist Russia). After Columbine, the term spiked in popularity, and its use in American newspapers has skyrocketed in the last decade, grouping a particular genre of shooting event under the umbrella of this term. A similar search for references to “rampage shootings,” which is sometimes used synonymously to refer to mass shootings, found a handful of references to gun “rampages” as early as the 1980s, but no references to “rampage shootings” as a descriptive term for this specific kind of incident until the early 1990s; the term only gained traction and wider usage beginning in 1998-99. Interestingly, many post-Columbine media accounts used the terms “rampage shooting” or “mass shooting” to *retroactively* describe earlier incidents from decades past (often to contextualize more current shootings). The term “mass shooting” is also much more prevalent in media accounts than “rampage shooting,” with references to “rampage shootings” occurring only about a quarter as often as references to “mass shootings.”

In addition to its link to the emergence of the term “mass shooting,” Columbine contributed to the ways in which Americans think about these kinds of events in other ways. Specifically, many of the tropes and explanatory elements that arose in the days and months immediately following the Columbine shooting have been recycled by—or

reflected in—media coverage of later shootings.<sup>114</sup> Early coverage of the shooting linked it to the ominous-sounding “Trench Coat Mafia,” to bullying, to the Goth youth subculture, and to a hatred of Christians, jocks and minorities by Klebold and Harris, depicting the shooters as disaffected youth, pushed to the brink by relentless mistreatment at the hands of more popular students, fueled by violent music and video games.

Nearly all of these explanations were wrong. These elements existed at Columbine—there was a so-called “Trench Coat Mafia,” and incidents of bullying—but none of it had any connection to the shooting. The shooters were not Goths, they were not particularly picked-upon, and there was no connection to minorities, Christians, Marilyn Manson, or Hitler’s birthday.<sup>115</sup> But these frames that emerged in coverage of Columbine—of disaffected youth, violent popular culture, and the idea of the so-called “juvenile super-predator”—strongly influenced the framing of all subsequent shooting events that seemed to fit the same contextual mold.

The themes in media coverage that emerged in the aftermath of the Columbine shooting sparked concerns about youth and violence, about the media’s role in heightening the risk of “copycat shootings,” and about the dangerous cultural forces that produced the killers. Columbine served to crystallize these concerns in ways that were unprecedented, and almost singlehandedly created several new frames for talking about mass shooting events.

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<sup>114</sup> C. Willis-Chun, “Tales of Tragedy: Strategic Rhetoric in News Coverage of the Columbine and Virginia Tech Massacres,” in *Critical Rhetorics of Race*, ed. M. Lacy and K. Ono (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 47-64.

<sup>115</sup> D. Cullen, *Columbine* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2009).

## Defining mass shootings

Broadly speaking, the term “mass shooting” refers to an event in which multiple people become victims of gun violence in a single incident. But clear policy definitions of mass shootings are even harder to come by than definitions of terrorism. In one of the few clear-cut definitions set forth by law enforcement, a 2008 FBI crime classification report differentiates a “mass murder” from a “spree murder” based on the temporal separation between murders:

Generally, mass murder was described as a number of murders (four or more) occurring during the same incident, with no distinctive time period between the murders. These events typically involved a single location, where the killer murdered a number of victims in an ongoing incident (e.g. the 1984 San Ysidro McDonalds incident in San Diego, California; the 1991 Luby’s Restaurant massacre in Killeen, Texas; and the 2007 Virginia Tech murders in Blacksburg, Virginia).<sup>116</sup>

Accordingly, three elements of what are commonly considered “mass shootings” include (1) the exclusion of crimes that are extensions of previous incidents or feuds, such as gang violence, as well as robberies—the event must be somewhat indiscriminate in terms of the targeting of victims; (2) the attack must take place in a fairly public or open place, in a single incident (as opposed to multiple incidents over time); and (3) the killer(s), in accordance with FBI guidelines, must take the lives of at least four people.<sup>117</sup>

Notably, expanding these criteria even slightly—including cases that involved robberies or family members, or including cases with even one or two fewer fatalities, but

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<sup>116</sup> FBI, National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, <http://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/serial-murder/serial-murder-1#two>.

<sup>117</sup> These criteria were most clearly delineated in an oft-cited, multi-year investigation into mass shootings and gun violence by *Mother Jones*: M. Follman, G. Aronsen, and D. Pan, “A Guide to Mass Shootings in America,” *Mother Jones*, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/07/mass-shootings-map>.

a similar number of injuries—would increase the number of mass shootings exponentially. According to the FBI, for example, in its statistics on the years from the years 1976 to 2010, reflecting all mass shootings in which at least four victims were killed, there have been, on average, about 20 mass shootings per year in the United States.<sup>118</sup>

In her thorough study of rampage school shootings, Katherine Newman noted that rampage shootings almost always involve five “necessary but not sufficient conditions”: (1) the shooter(s)’ perception of himself (shooters are almost always white males) as extremely marginal in the social worlds that matter to him; (2) the shooter(s) must suffer from psychosocial problems (mental illness, severe depression, or abuse, for example) that magnify the impact of marginality; (3) “cultural scripts”—prescriptions for behavior, often gleaned from news or entertainment media—must be available to lead the way toward an armed attack; (4) a failure of surveillance systems that are intended to identify troubled individuals before their problems become extreme; and finally (5) gun availability.

The focus on psychological problems is key—most rampage or mass shooters suffer from (often untreated) severe depression, paranoia, obsession or other forms of mental illness.<sup>119</sup>

### **American mass shootings**

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<sup>118</sup> J. Fox, “Mass Shootings not Trending,” *The Boston Globe*, [http://boston.com/community/blogs/crime\\_punishment/2013/01/mass\\_shootings\\_not\\_trending.html](http://boston.com/community/blogs/crime_punishment/2013/01/mass_shootings_not_trending.html).

<sup>119</sup> P. Langman, *Why Kids Kill: Inside the Minds of School Shooters* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

Depending on which of the above criteria for defining mass shooting one adopts, there have been anywhere between two to 20 mass shootings per year, on average (although most estimates, especially those relying on FBI statistics, lean toward the considerably higher end of this scale<sup>120</sup>), in the United States over the last 30 years. These shootings are almost solely committed by men—only one mass shooting in the past 30 years was committed by a woman.<sup>121</sup>

Columbine represented one particularly high-profile shooting. Among other high-profile American shootings that decade in particular were two shootings in 1991 (one in Killeen, Texas, and one at the University of Iowa). In 1998, a shooting at a middle school in Jonesboro, Arkansas, attracted considerable media attention, largely because of the ages of the perpetrators (11 and 13). Other notable and high-profile mass shootings in the years following Columbine included the Wedgewood Baptist Church shooting (1999), the Red Lake Reservation shooting in Minnesota (2005), the Lancaster County Amish school shooting (2006), the Virginia Tech college campus shooting (2007), the Fort Hood shooting (2009), the 2011 Arizona shooting targeting a Congressional event in Tucson, the Aurora theater shooting in Colorado (2012), the Wisconsin Sikh temple shooting (2012) the horrific 2012 shooting at an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut that left 20 children and six adults dead. In 2013 and 2014, high-profile shootings at the Navy Yard in Washington, D.C. (2013) and Isla Vista, California (2014) also made headlines.

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<sup>120</sup> Mayors Against Illegal Guns, *Mass Shootings since January 20, 2009*, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/files/2013/02/mass\\_shootings\\_2009-13\\_-\\_jan\\_29\\_12pm1.pdf](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/files/2013/02/mass_shootings_2009-13_-_jan_29_12pm1.pdf).

<sup>121</sup> M. Follman, G. Aronsen, and D. Pan, “A Guide to Mass Shootings in America,” *Mother Jones*, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/07/mass-shootings-map>.

Of the conservative estimate of 70 mass shootings in the United States in the past 30 years, the majority were committed using semiautomatic handguns, followed distantly by rifles, revolvers and shotguns. Of all the weapons used in these shootings, about one third would have been outlawed by the failed proposed assault weapons ban of 2013.<sup>122</sup> The vast majority of mass shooters also obtained their weapons legally—nearly 80 percent.<sup>123</sup> Although assault weapons were used in a relative minority of cases (28 percent), shootings that involved assault weapons were considerably deadlier than those that did not—with an average of 8.3 deaths, compared with 5.4 deaths on average for the rest.<sup>124</sup>

The United States is not the only country in which high-profile mass shootings have occurred. Shootings in European countries—most recently Germany, Switzerland, and Norway—have also captured global media attention in the past decade. However, despite arguments by anti-gun-control apologists that European countries have similar rates of gun violence (and in particular, mass shootings) as the U.S.,<sup>125</sup> the objective reality is the United States, with its massive arsenal of weapons—an estimated 300 million, the highest rate of per capita gun ownership in the world—has exponentially higher rates of almost every kind of gun violence (about 20 times the average for all other

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> B. Plumer, “Study: The U.S. has had One Mass Shooting per Month since 2009,” *Washington Post*, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2013/02/02/study-the-u-s-has-had-one-mass-shooting-per-month-since-2009/>.

<sup>125</sup> E.g., D. Greenfield, “Europe Has Same Rate of Multiple Victim Shootings as the United States,” *Frontpage Mag*, <http://frontpagemag.com/2012/dgreenfield/europe-has-same-rate-of-multiple-victim-shootings-as-the-united-states/>; J. Lott, Jr., “Gun Control and Mass Murders,” *National Review*, <http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/229929/gun-control-and-mass-murders/john-r-lott-jr.>

developed countries), from suicides to mass shootings, than any other developed nation<sup>126</sup>—and indeed, many American cities alone, such as Detroit, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C., have gun-homicide rates comparable to some of the most violent nations in the world.<sup>127</sup>

Interestingly, especially in the wake of the 2012 Newtown shooting, which left 20 small children dead and spurred a flurry of legislative activity aimed at enacting common-sense gun regulations<sup>128</sup>, there is an established precedent to examine in two other large, developed English-speaking nations.

In 1996, shootings a month apart in Dunblane, Scotland, and Port Arthur, Tasmania (Australia), prompted immediate and sweeping sets of gun reforms in those countries, including buyback programs, increased background checks, and new bans on previously legal weapons. In comparison to the dozens of mass shootings that have taken place in the U.S. in the years since 1996, there has been only one mass shooting in the U.K. during that period (in 2010), and zero in Australia. Research following the gun buyback program in Australia found an 80 percent drop in firearm suicide rates, and a 59 percent drop in gun-related homicides in Australia in the years between 1995 and

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<sup>126</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Global Study on Homicide*, [http://www.unodc.org/documents/congress/background-information/Crime\\_Statistics/Global\\_Study\\_on\\_Homicide\\_2011.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/congress/background-information/Crime_Statistics/Global_Study_on_Homicide_2011.pdf).

<sup>127</sup> R. Florida, “Gun Violence in U.S. Cities Compared to the Deadliest Nations in the World,” Citylab, <http://www.theatlanticcities.com/politics/2013/01/gun-violence-us-cities-compared-deadliest-nations-world/4412/>.

<sup>128</sup> It is also notable that 2012 was the deadliest year to date in terms of the sheer number of victims of American mass shootings, with over 140 fatalities.

2006.<sup>129</sup> And in the U.K., despite a small surge in gun-related offenses around the year 2000, every year since has seen successive drops in the rates of gun crimes.<sup>130</sup>

Despite the clear success of these gun control measures in the U.K. and Australia, however, it is generally considered unlikely that similar changes could be implemented successfully in the United States, because of a combination of factors including the Second Amendment (and the United States' unique gun culture<sup>131</sup>), as well as a powerful gun lobby that has so far managed to block almost all efforts to tighten firearms policy at both the state and federal levels, even pushing successfully to enact a law in 1996 that banned Centers for Disease Control funding for any research that "advocated or promoted gun control," a law vague enough that the CDC shied away from research on gun violence altogether until President Obama signed an executive order allowing the CDC to study gun violence again in January, 2013.<sup>132</sup>

In terms of the overall trend of American mass shootings, there is some disagreement among those who study the phenomenon about whether they are on the rise or not. The *Mother Jones* investigation, for example, which used a very narrow set of

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<sup>129</sup> A. Leigh and C. Neill, "Do Gun Buybacks Save Lives? Evidence from Panel Data," [http://andrewleigh.org/pdf/GunBuyback\\_Panel.pdf](http://andrewleigh.org/pdf/GunBuyback_Panel.pdf).

<sup>130</sup> I. Tharoor, "When Massacres Force Change: Lessons from the U.K. and Australia," *Time*, <http://world.time.com/2012/12/17/when-massacres-force-change-lessons-from-the-u-k-and-australia/>.

<sup>131</sup> O. Dorell, "In Europe, Fewer Mass Killings Due to Culture not Guns," *USA Today*, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2012/12/17/guns-mass-killings-worldwide/1776191/>.

<sup>132</sup> M. Luo, "N.R.A. Stymies Firearms Research, Scientists Say," *New York Times*, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/26/us/26guns.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/26/us/26guns.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&); B. Plumer, "Gun Research is Allowed Again. So What Will We Find Out?" *Washington Post*, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2013/01/17/gun-research-is-allowed-again-so-what-will-we-find-out/?print=1>.



criteria to identify mass shootings (excluding almost all cases with multiple shooters, for example, and excluding armed robbery, gang-related violence, and domestic violence, which the FBI reports do not exclude) concluded that mass shootings in America are on the rise—and specifically, that 2012 was the deadliest year to date in terms of the total number of victims of these shootings, with over 140 victims.

Criminologist James Alan Fox, on the other hand, who uses broader criteria to identify mass shootings (and who therefore recognizes far more events as mass shootings), argues that in terms of sheer frequency, the number of mass shootings in the United States remained fairly consistent from the mid-1970s to 2010, with a few notable spikes in events or fatalities (due to what he argues is random variability), but a predictable average of about 20 shootings per year.<sup>133</sup>

### **Media coverage of mass shootings**

In the years since Columbine, media coverage of mass shootings has generally cleaved to a fairly standard and predictable routine (although there are some venue-specific variations—school shootings typically generate a somewhat different kind of coverage than religious or workplace shootings, for example). The focus of media discourse has shifted somewhat in recent years, particularly around the issues of political civility, gun control and mental illness, but much criticism of media coverage of these tragedies remains consistent.

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<sup>133</sup> J. Fox, “Mass Shootings not Trending,” *The Boston Globe*, [http://boston.com/community/blogs/crime\\_punishment/2013/01/mass\\_shootings\\_not\\_trending.html](http://boston.com/community/blogs/crime_punishment/2013/01/mass_shootings_not_trending.html).

One common—and deeply problematic—focus among news media in the aftermath of mass shootings is the in-depth exploration of why a shooter “snapped.” Inherent in this coverage is the assumption that some circumstance or slight or series of incidents caused the shooter to experience a sort of mental break, entering a state of mind in which he was briefly unable to tell right from wrong. In coverage of the Virginia Tech shooting, for example, mass media commentators focused on the shooter’s unsuccessful experiences with romantic relationships and his classmates on campus. Coverage of the Columbine and Red Lake shootings emphasized the shooters’ social alienation and alluded to incidents of bullying. Romantic rejection, a sense of alienation, and bullying are three very common elements that often come up when exploring what caused mass shooters to commit their crimes. But as Katherine Newman notes in “Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings,” these proximate events do not help us to understand these kinds of shootings:

They may be the straw that broke the camel’s back, but at most they help explain *when* a shooting happens rather than *why*. Events that seem to be precipitators usually turn out on closer inspection not to be.”<sup>134</sup>

Indeed, most mass shootings are planned carefully and well in advance. When news media devote considerable airtime or inches to exploring the minor inconveniences or perceived slights that ostensibly pushed a mass shooter to “snap,” they both oversimplify and mischaracterize the events themselves and miss the real, and more troubling, “why” that underlies most of these kinds of tragedies: untreated severe mental illness combined with easy access to high-powered weaponry.

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<sup>134</sup> K. Newman, *Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 60.

Given that nearly 80 percent of American mass shooters in the past 30 years obtained the weapons they used legally, one might expect to see the issue of gun policy in the United States take on a more prominent role in terms of framing the explanatory factors behind these tragedies. In coverage of Columbine, in fact, many print media did focus on the issue of gun control, but this focus was largely driven by policymakers, framed as a showdown between President Clinton and his political opponents, and was nearly matched by a parallel media focus on the ostensible dangers of youth popular culture.<sup>135</sup> In the years since Columbine, although media coverage outside the U.S. devoted considerable time and space to permissive American gun laws in conjunction with mass shootings<sup>136</sup>, American media interest in gun control and gun accessibility as an explanatory variable waned considerably, with media accounts focusing more prominently on alternate interpretive schema, such as cultural alienation (in the 2009 Binghamton, New York shootings, for example), social and romantic rejection (in the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings) and most bafflingly, a climate of political incivility in the U.S. (in the 2011 Tucson, Arizona shooting)<sup>137</sup>. American media did not devote considerable airtime or space to the issue of gun accessibility as a *primary* explanatory variable until the massacre in Newtown, Connecticut, when the senseless murder of over

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<sup>135</sup> R. Lawrence and T. Birkland, "Guns, Hollywood, and School Safety: Defining the School-Shooting Problem Across Public Arenas," *Social Science Quarterly* 85, no. 5 (2004): 1193-1207.

<sup>136</sup> R. DeFoster, "American Gun Culture, School Shootings, and a 'Frontier Mentality': An Ideological Analysis of British Editorial Pages in the Decade After Columbine," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 3, no. 4 (2010): 466-484.

<sup>137</sup> R. DeFoster and C. Squires, "Civility vs. Gun Control" (NCA paper, National Communication Association, November 22, 2013).

20 elementary-aged children by a shooter who lived in a “house full of guns”<sup>138</sup> prompted President Obama, in a speech given two days later in Newtown, to say:

We can’t accept events like this as routine. ... Are we really prepared to say that we’re powerless in the face of such carnage? That the politics are too hard? Are we prepared to say that such violence visited on our children year after year after year is somehow the price of our freedom?”<sup>139</sup>

In the months that followed, however, every effort to enact even minor changes to federal gun laws (including talk of a revival of the assault weapons ban and more stringent background checks) failed. In a shared American moment of grief that mirrored the tragic carnage of Dunblane and Port Arthur, pressure from the gun lobby (including the widespread and inaccurate assertion that the background checks bill would mandate universal gun registration) ensured that when it came to federal American gun policy, even the murder of 20 small children by an AR-15-style rifle was not enough to prompt meaningful change.

### **The effect of Columbine**

Media coverage of the Columbine shooting focused extensively on the shooters’ alleged bullying at the high school, positioning Harris and Klebold (who were incorrectly identified as members of the ominous-sounding “Trench Coat Mafia”) as victims of a toxic peer culture who carried out the shooting as a means of revenge against jocks and

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<sup>138</sup> M. Flegenheimer and R. Somaiya, “Nancy Lanza, Mother of Conn. School Gunman, was ‘Big, Big Gun Fan,’” *Denver Post*, [http://www.denverpost.com/breakingnews/cj\\_22200174/profile-nancy-lanza-mother-conn-school-gunman](http://www.denverpost.com/breakingnews/cj_22200174/profile-nancy-lanza-mother-conn-school-gunman).

<sup>139</sup> M. Landler and P. Baker, “‘These Tragedies Must End,’ Obama Says,” *New York Times*, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/17/us/politics/bloomberg-urges-obama-to-take-action-on-gun-control.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/17/us/politics/bloomberg-urges-obama-to-take-action-on-gun-control.html?_r=0).

minorities.<sup>140</sup> Most coverage also focused on their alleged consumption of dangerous or violent popular culture—the music of Marilyn Manson, Goth culture, and violent video games, as well as their preoccupation with Hitler and the Nazis.<sup>141</sup> Although it soon became clear that these explanations were not only inadequate, but wildly inaccurate, these frames persisted in coverage of mass shootings for years afterward—terms like “juvenile super-predator” and “alienated youth” gained currency<sup>142</sup>, and many news frames surrounding the shooters’ motivations were recycled in coverage of later shootings, even those that did not take place in school settings.<sup>143</sup>

Columbine coverage was also novel in another way—it was the first mass shooting of its kind to be covered live on national television, and in terms of sheer volume, it garnered a level of coverage that has so far been unmatched by any mass shooting before or since. This coverage sparked new ethical concerns about the degree and tone of coverage of mass shootings. As Bob Steele of the Poynter Institute noted shortly after the shooting:

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<sup>140</sup> S. James, “Surviving Columbine: What We Got Wrong,” *ABC News*, <http://abcnews.go.com/Health/MindMoodNews/story?id=7363898>.

<sup>141</sup> P. Langman, *Why Kids Kill: Inside the Minds of School Shooters* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); D. Cullen, *Columbine* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2009).

<sup>142</sup> B. Frymer, “The Media Spectacle of Columbine: Alienated Youth as an Object of Fear,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 52, no. 10 (2009): 1387-1404; G. Muschert, “The Columbine Victims and the Myth of the Juvenile Superpredator,” *Youth Violence & Juvenile Justice* 5, no. 4 (2007): 351-366.

<sup>143</sup> R. DeFoster, “American Gun Culture, School Shootings, and a ‘Frontier Mentality’: An Ideological Analysis of British Editorial Pages in the Decade After Columbine,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 3, no. 4 (2010): 466-484; P. Leavy and K. Maloney, “American Reporting of School Violence and ‘People Like Us’: A Comparison of Newspaper Coverage of the Columbine and Red Lake School Shootings,” *Critical Sociology* 35, no. 2 (2009): 273-292.

The story reaffirmed for us the great danger of certain elements of live coverage of a breaking crisis. When [student] Patrick was seen falling out of that window, my concern was not its gruesomeness, but the danger that the gunmen could be watching television and use that information to shoot at escaping students.<sup>144</sup>

Other concerns about news media coverage of the Columbine tragedy included the seemingly intrusive nature of some coverage—from Ted Koppel’s televised town-hall-style meeting with the residents of Littleton to Dateline’s 15-month-long special on the survivors of the shooting. Some criticized the coverage as creepy and exploitative, intruding on the privacy of grieving families.<sup>145</sup>

A final problematic element in coverage of Columbine (an element that has extended in subsequent years to coverage of other mass shootings) is the over-reduction of explanatory variables to simplistic explanations like bullying. It bears repeating that boys and men who commit mass shootings are simply not ordinary people who were pushed to “snap”—they are disturbed individuals, and in almost every case there were signs of serious mental illness long before the shooting(s) took place.

When news media—as they did in coverage of the Columbine tragedy—reduce explanations of why shootings occur to storylines that rely on simplistic surface-level factors like bullying, social alienation and impulsive revenge, they are essentially offering readers and viewers red herrings, avoiding the two overwhelmingly most common factors that underlie most mass shootings—namely, untreated mental illness and unimpeded (often legal) access to deadly weapons.

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<sup>144</sup> D. Trigoboff, "Lessons of Columbine," *Broadcasting & Cable* 130, no. 14 (2000): 26.

<sup>145</sup> C. James, "Grist for TV: Family Grief Since Killings At Columbine," *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/07/20/arts/critic-s-notebook-grist-for-tv-family-grief-since-killings-at-columbine.html>.

## Race and coverage of crime

Race-based inequalities have always existed in coverage of crime and violence in the United States.<sup>146</sup> In coverage of mass shootings, these inequalities often involve marked differences in the coverage of urban violence versus suburban violence (the category in which mass shootings almost always fall). Gun violence is often framed as being an innate and inextricable part of an “inner city” way of life—shootings in urban neighborhoods, for example, where the majority of residents are black, are often framed as “black-on-black” violence that is to be expected in these environments, and consequently, violence is therefore seen as unsurprising and unworthy of serious soul-searching to identify explanatory variables.<sup>147</sup> Indeed, as many scholars have pointed out, the only reason many mass shootings have generated the attention they did in mass media was that the shooters and most of the victims were white. Had the majority of the

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<sup>146</sup> T. Dixon and D. Linz, “Race and the Misrepresentation of Victimization on Local Television News,” *Communication Research* 27 (2000): 547-573; T. Dixon, “Schemas as Average Conceptions: Skin Tone, Television Exposure and Culpability Judgments,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 83, no. 1 (2006): 131-149; T. Dixon, “Who is the Victim Here?: The Psychological Effects of Overrepresenting White Victims and Black Perpetrators on Television News,” *Journalism* 9, no. 5 (2008): 582-605; T. Dixon, “Crime News and Racialized Beliefs: Understanding the Relationship Between Local News Viewing and Perceptions of African Americans and Crime,” *Journal of Communication* 58 (2008), 106-125; C. Stabile, *White Victims, Black Villains: Gender, Race and Crime News in US Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2006); T. Dixon and D. Linz (2000), “Race and the Misrepresentation of Victimization on Local Television News,” *Communication Research* 27 (2000): 547-573.

<sup>147</sup> C. Campbell et al., eds., *Race and News: Critical Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2011); D. Wilson, *Inventing Black-on-Black Violence: Discourse, Space and Representation* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005).

shooters (or their victims) been black, the attention would likely have been more minimal, and the need to explain their pathology less pronounced.<sup>148</sup>

As a whole, news media tend to overrepresent or misrepresent nonwhite Americans (and specifically, black Americans) as perpetrators of crime, while whites are disproportionately framed as victims or defenders against lawbreaking, priming consumers of media to conflate black and Latino identities with criminality and violence in general.<sup>149</sup> A considerable body of media research has established that these patterns in journalistic story framing have palpable consequences in terms of social reality—heavy television viewers, and in particular, those who consume a great deal of news content that overrepresents nonwhite criminality, for example, are far more likely to perceive black subjects as violent and to assume criminal culpability for darker-skinned subjects.<sup>150</sup> Other studies have found that the choices journalists make in terms of particular news

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<sup>148</sup> O. Patterson, “When They Are Us,” *New York Times*, April 30, 1999, <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/04/30/opinion/when-they-are-us.html>; M. Dyson, “Uglier Than Meets the Eye,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 13, 2001.

<sup>149</sup> T. Dixon, “Schemas as Average Conceptions: Skin Tone, Television Exposure and Culpability Judgments,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 83, no. 1 (2006): 131-149; C. Stabile, *White Victims, Black Villains: Gender, Race and Crime News in US Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2006); R. Entman and A. Rojecki, *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

<sup>150</sup> E.g., T. Dixon, “Schemas as Average Conceptions: Skin Tone, Television Exposure and Culpability Judgments,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 83, no. 1 (2006): 131-149 and T. Dixon, “Crime News and Racialized Beliefs: Understanding the Relationship Between Local News Viewing and Perceptions of African Americans and Crime,” *Journal of Communication* 58 (2008): 106-125.



frames can also significantly affect audience decision making about public policy in general.<sup>151</sup>

Race and nationality often clearly come into play in coverage of mass shootings in particular. For example, in their study comparing media coverage of the Columbine and Red Lake school shootings, two events that were very analogous both in terms of venue and number of victims, Patricia Leavy and Katherine Maloney found that coverage of the Red Lake school shooting—the culprit of which, Jeff Weise, was Native American—overwhelmingly featured a much more pronounced focus on race and class than the Columbine shooting. Additionally, despite the similar number of victims and the analogous nature of the two events, Columbine garnered far more national coverage than Red Lake, which remained a primarily local story. Explanatory variables for the Columbine shooting were most often identified as external elements that corrupted the two shooters—video games, bullying, “Goth” culture—while in coverage of the Red Lake shooting, coverage focused in much more tightly on “American Indian culture,” extending perceived social deficiencies in reservation family life to the crimes committed by Weise, the Native American shooter.<sup>152</sup>

Unlike Red Lake, the shooting at Columbine, which took place in an affluent suburb and involved two white shooters, was immediately constructed as a significant and traumatic national event that permanently shifted American collective memory and

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<sup>151</sup> V. Price and D. Tewksbury, “Switching Trains of Thought,” *Communication Research* 24, no. 5 (1997), 481.

<sup>152</sup> P. Leavy and K. Maloney, “American Reporting of School Violence and 'People Like Us': A Comparison of Newspaper Coverage of the Columbine and Red Lake School Shootings,” *Critical Sociology* 35, no. 2 (2009): 273-292.

demanded soul-searching and explanation, reflecting a dominant media approach that privileges both white subjects and the middle class.<sup>153</sup>

These findings were echoed in Cynthia Willis-Chun's later comparison of media coverage of the shootings at Columbine and Virginia Tech—an apt comparison both because of the similar scale of both shootings, as well as the fact that Seung-Hui Cho, the Virginia Tech shooter, explicitly professed admiration for Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, the Columbine shooters. Although in many ways mass media depicted culprits similarly—as troubled loners bent on destroying those people who contributed to their alienation—Cho was a legal permanent American resident of South Korean descent, and his race and nationality often came into play in coverage of the Virginia Tech shooting in ways that the (largely invisible) white racial identity of the Columbine shooters simply did not. Specifically, the Columbine shooters were framed in coverage as “all-American boys gone wrong,” while Cho was consistently positioned as an outsider to American culture, both within the smaller environment of Virginia Tech and in the United States in general.<sup>154</sup> These findings echo broader media trends of ascribing internal motivations to nonwhite shooters, who are presented as fundamentally, personally deficient, and external motivations to white shooters (a frame driven largely by Columbine coverage,

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> C. Willis-Chun, “Tales of Tragedy: Strategic Rhetoric in News Coverage of the Columbine and Virginia Tech Massacres,” in *Critical Rhetorics of Race*, ed. M. Lacy and K. Ono (New York: New York University Press, 2011): 47-64.

which offered up everything from violent video games to Marilyn Manson's music as explanations for the violence of the two white shooters in that attack).<sup>155</sup>

### **Nationality, the military, and "us" vs. "them"**

Mass shootings that take place on military bases—the category of shootings that this study explores—are particularly wrapped up in issues of identity, including categories such as masculinity, nationality, and race.

Almost all mass shooters are male, with only one exception in the past 30 years. This is noteworthy because, as scholars like Sut Jhally and Jackson Katz have spent decades underlining, American masculinity is consistently and inextricably linked to violence, particularly in terms of the "cultural scripts" that many mass shooters look to when they plan their attacks.<sup>156</sup> For years, American media have glamorized increasingly regressive and violent masculine ideals, creating a cultural definition of manhood in which violence by boys and men is naturalized and even expected in ways that would be shocking or unexpected from girls and women.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> C. Stabile, "Toxic Coverage: The National Media Imaginary on Gendered Gun Violence," (Conference paper, American Studies Association Session, November 22, 2013).

<sup>156</sup> K. Newman, *Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings* (New York: Basic Books, 2004); J. Katz and S. Jhally, "The National Conversation in the Wake of Littleton is Missing the Mark," *Boston Globe*, May 2, 1999, [http://www.jacksonkatz.com/pub\\_missing.html](http://www.jacksonkatz.com/pub_missing.html); *Tough Guise 2: Violence, Manhood and American Culture*, DVD, directed by Jeremy Earp (2013; Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 2013).

<sup>157</sup> J. Katz and S. Jhally, "The National Conversation in the Wake of Littleton is Missing the Mark," *Boston Globe*, May 2, 1999, [http://www.jacksonkatz.com/pub\\_missing.html](http://www.jacksonkatz.com/pub_missing.html); *Tough Guise 2: Violence, Manhood and American Culture*, DVD, directed by Jeremy Earp (2013; Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 2013).

Shifting understandings of “American-ness”—the ways in which American national identity are understood and deployed—also come prominently into play in shootings that take place on military bases.

Although, as Paul Wong pointed out in *Race, Ethnicity and Nationality in the United States*, nationality is often neglected in scholarly research on identity, any analysis that takes up identity as an object of study must take into account the role of nation/nationality—a category that is particularly crucial to examine in a heterogeneous culture like the United States, in which immigration makes up a large portion of our population growth.<sup>158</sup>

Wong presciently raised these concerns in 1999, just before the attacks of September 11 made nation and nationality an even more pressing and salient issue for those who study identity in media. Many scholars have identified the ways in which the terror of September 11—as well as other factors that have emerged since the turn of the century, such as increasing ethnic diversity in the U.S., and rancor over immigration—have refigured American conceptions of who we are and how we think about our national identity.

One of the clearest ways that the events of September 11 have affected American notions of national identity have often had to do with the exclusion of Middle Eastern, Arab, or Muslim subjects from an implicitly binary definition of American nationality. Drawing upon decades of scholarship on what Edward Said, in 1978, called

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<sup>158</sup> P. Wong, introduction to *Race, Ethnicity and Nationality in the United States: Toward the Twenty-First Century* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999).

“Orientalism,”<sup>159</sup> many media scholars in the years since September 11 have found that Middle Eastern, Arab or Muslim subjects are consistently positioned in media coverage as being diametrically opposed to American national identity.<sup>160</sup>

In 2003, for example, Andrew Padgett and Beatrice Allen argued that media coverage after September 11 replicated an old “Evil Empire” model from the Cold War—positioning Muslims as the new “other” that the Soviets filled during the Cold War era. In this coverage, they argued, a simplistic “good versus evil” binary arose that afforded viewers and readers no shades of gray—a view that equated an attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon with an attack on Western free markets and democracy and vilified a homogeneous Muslim “other” in the simplistic terms of the Red Scares.<sup>161</sup> In an analysis of media discourse on the “war on terror” after September 11, George Kassimeris and Leonie Jackson also found a marked reduction of Muslim subjects to simple binaries to offset the heroic leadership of an American-led West, in a return by media to tropes of Islam and Muslims that cast these players in a simplified light.<sup>162</sup> And in her analysis of Public Service Announcements aimed at stemming the tide of hate crimes against Muslims and Arabs after September 11, Evelyn Alsultany found that even in ostensibly well-meaning media products—PSAs whose authors described their vision

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<sup>159</sup> E. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

<sup>160</sup> E.g., F. Vultee, “Jump Back, Jack, Mohammed’s Here,” *Journalism Studies* 10, no. 5 (2009): 623-638; and D. Kumar, “Framing Islam: The Resurgence of Orientalism During the Bush II Era,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 34, no. 3 (2010): 254-277.

<sup>161</sup> A. Padgett and B. Allen. “Fear’s Slave: The Mass Media and Islam after September 11,” *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture & Policy* 109 (2003): 32-40.

<sup>162</sup> G. Kassimeris and L. Jackson, “The West, the Rest, and the ‘War on Terror’: Representation of Muslims in Neoconservative Media Discourse,” *Contemporary Politics* 17, no. 1 (2011): 19-33.

as intending to promote diversity, tolerance and mutual respect—these conceptions of American identity and Muslim/Arab identity were often framed as being at odds with each other, reinforcing existing Orientalist representations by self-consciously highlighting the extreme patriotism of individual Muslim individuals and families, seemingly requiring them to “prove” their patriotism to overcome an implied “us versus them” binary.<sup>163</sup>

These trends in coverage extend further even than unconscious reproductions of centuries-old hostilities between a stereotypical Muslim “East” and a Christian “West.” In an August 2011 report, the Center for American Progress detailed the rise of what it called “Islamophobia” in the United States, arguing that a consistent group of foundations, politicians, pundits and advocacy groups actually compose a propagandistic network of anti-Muslim that consistently pop up to position Islam and Muslims as being an imminent threat to American ideals. In the report, the center outlined the ways in which the consolidated ownership structure of several media organizations—most notably, News Corporation—allowed messages demonizing Arabs, Middle Easterners, and Muslims and promoting fear of these groups to proliferate well beyond the partisan media, in coverage that bore all the hallmarks of a propaganda campaign.<sup>164</sup>

Other scholars have taken up the broader question of what American national identity looks like in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, taking into account pressing current issues like immigration and growing ethnic diversity in the United States.

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<sup>163</sup> E. Alsultany, “Selling American Diversity and Muslim American Identity through Nonprofit Advertising Post-911,” *American Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (2007): 593-622.

<sup>164</sup> Center for American Progress, *Fear, Inc.: The Roots of the Islamophobia Network in America* (Washington, DC: Ali, Clifton, Duss, Fang, Keyes & Shakir, 2011).

In particular, the issue of immigration (and especially undocumented immigration) has had a marked effect on notions of American national identity, especially in the years since September 11, during which heightened concerns about national security and porous borders raised the public salience of the issue of immigration and immigration policy. An increased focus on immigration (particularly undocumented immigration) also helped fuel the formation of nativist groups like the Tea Party and various militia groups, which made combating undocumented immigration central foci of their political agendas.<sup>165</sup> In Michelle Holling’s analysis of one of these umbrella organizations, the “Minutemen Project,” which styles itself as a “citizens’ group” that patrols the U.S./Mexico border, Holling found that legitimate American national identity is consistently framed as patriotic, masculine, and multicultural—but that these self-descriptions mask fundamentally white supremacist values, framing immigrants as colonizers, and as “dehumanized, externalized, and criminalized subjects.”<sup>166</sup> These findings support Kent Ono and John Sloop’s earlier work in their book *Shifting Borders: Rhetoric, Immigration and California’s Prop 187*, in which they argue that the nature of who we conceive of as the “enemy” in the U.S. has shifted from “an integrated, coherent enemy” to a “disintegrated, incoherent enemy”—representing the uncertainty of

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<sup>165</sup> The number of immigrants living in the United States has grown considerably in the last 50 years, from about 9.7 million in 1960 to 40.4 million in 2005, with about 1/3 of these immigrants arriving after the turn of the twenty-first century. The influx of undocumented immigrants has slowed and now remains fairly stable at an estimated 11.1 million people: CAP Immigration Team, “The Facts on Immigration Today,” Center for American Progress, <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/report/2013/04/03/59040/the-facts-on-immigration-today-3/#population>.

<sup>166</sup> M. Holling, “Patrolling National Identity, Masking White Supremacy: The Minuteman Project,” in *Critical Rhetorics of Race*, ed. M. Lacy and K. Ono (New York: New York University Press, 2011): 98-116.

immigrants and immigration—resulting not only in a lack of clarity about who “we” are as a nation but also in the construction of an enemy that is multiplied, racialized, and feminized.<sup>167</sup>

Indeed, many commentators and pundits have expressed alarm about recent trends in American immigration, arguing that immigrants threaten the cultural, economic and legal norms of the United States.<sup>168</sup> But as Deborah Schildkraut found in 2011, new waves of immigration to the United States—and the ethnic changes to the demography of the American landscape that have accompanied them—have not led to substantial changes in American values (specifically in terms of how Americans articulate what being American signifies), nor have they led to a multiculturalist diffusion of identity in which nonwhite or immigrant ethnic groups are less likely to think of themselves as “American” than others. Indeed, in a study that oversampled traditionally understudied ethnic groups, and in a finding markedly at odds with critics’ warnings about the dangers of immigration, Schildkraut found that immigrants overwhelmingly identify themselves primarily as Americans, and uphold traditional American ideals such as “freedom” and “opportunity.” Significant sectors of U.S. public opinion, however, continue to indicate that many Americans resent immigrants and immigration, consistently respond to survey questions by saying there should be a decrease in immigration to the U.S., and view American identity as being fundamentally white, native-born and ethnically European. In

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<sup>167</sup> K. Ono and J. Sloop, *Shifting Borders: Rhetoric, Immigration, and California's Proposition 187* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002).

<sup>168</sup> E.g., G. Bauer, “E Pluribus Pluribus?” *USA Today*, June 15, 2006; E. Feulner and D. Wilson, *Getting America Right: The True Conservative Values Our Nation Needs Today* (New York: Crown Forum, 2006); S. Huntington, *Who Are We?: The Challenges to America's National Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).



this way, lingering ascriptivist views were reawaked by September 11, challenging a more inclusive incorporationalist viewpoint.<sup>169</sup>

Intriguingly, another scholar of American national identity, Colin Woodward, argues that, particularly when it comes to attitudes toward violence (mass shootings, for example, or high-profile violent crimes in general) American national identity has never been a single discrete object of study. Instead, Woodward argues, there are multiple “Americas” that cross state and regional borders, battle lines that were determined long ago by different groups of early American settlers and that determine dominant regional cultural attitudes toward everything from stand-your-ground laws, to gun control, immigration and violence. The Deep South, for example, has its roots in a caste system based in slavery and a focus on classical Republicanism, while what Woodward calls “Yankeedom,” founded on the shores of the Massachusetts Bay by Calvinists and extending across much of the Northern U.S., puts more of an emphasis on civilization through social engineering, communal empowerment, intellectual achievement, and the assimilation, rather than alienation, of outsiders.<sup>170</sup>

## **Conclusion**

When it comes to thinking about large-scale episodes of gun violence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century—both in terms of the way they are viewed by Americans and covered by mass

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<sup>169</sup> D. Schildkraut, *Americanism in the Twenty-First Century: Public Opinion in the Age of Immigration* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); D. Schildkraut, "The More Things Change . . . American Identity and Mass and Elite Responses to 9/11," *Political Psychology* 23, no. 3 (2002): 511-535.

<sup>170</sup> C. Woodard, “Up in Arms,” *Tufts Magazine*, <http://www.tufts.edu/alumni/magazine/fall2013/features/up-in-arms.html>.

media—several factors must be considered. The foundational role of the 1999 Columbine shooting was integral both in establishing the concept of a “mass shooting” as a unique descriptive term and in setting the stage for frames in coverage of similar subsequent events that would persist for years to come. And while there is disagreement among experts as to whether mass shootings are increasing in the United States (a conflict that arises largely in definitional disputes surrounding the term “mass shooting” itself) one thing is clear: the United States indisputably faces a unique environment of gun violence that is wholly unparalleled by other developed nations. Further, it is clear that the way we approach and attempt to make sense of mass shootings in the United States is inextricably tied to issues of identity—specifically, nationality, masculinity and race.

Consequently, the way mass media construct and the way individual Americans think about mass shootings—and about the identities of the individuals who perpetrate them, especially on politically and nationally fraught environments like military bases—touch on some of our most deeply held conceptions of American identity itself.

### Chapter 3: The 1995 Fort Bragg Shooting

In this chapter I will review the facts of the 1995 Fort Bragg shooting, describe the primary frames that emerged in broadcast media coverage of the event, compare media coverage of the shooting to the facts that we now know about the event—omissions, inclusions and other choices made by broadcast newsmakers, and finally discuss where this shooting and its coverage fits into broader cultural narratives of the time period about issues like gun control, masculinity, patriotism and nationality.

#### **Gun violence and national identity in the mid-1990s**

The mid-1990s saw a sharp successive decrease in single-victim firearm incidents and deaths—a drop from 1.2 million incidents in 1993 to 523,613 in 1999.<sup>171</sup> But at the same time, the average number of people killed in mass shootings (per the FBI definition, shootings that claimed the lives of four or more victims) continued to slightly climb<sup>172</sup>—although single-victim gun killings dropped more than 40 percent in the years between 1980 and 2010, the average number of people dying each year in mass shootings climbed from 161 to 163 during the same period.<sup>173</sup>

In the meantime, the focus among American mass media on the issue of gun violence and gun control in the 1990s largely followed episodes of what the press and

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<sup>171</sup> National Institute of Justice, “Gun Violence,” <http://www.nij.gov/topics/crime/gun-violence/pages/welcome.aspx>.

<sup>172</sup> T. Hargrove, “Mass Murder Rises as Other Killings Decline,” *East Valley Tribune*, September 19, 2010, [http://eastvalleytribune.com/nation\\_world/article\\_22f7ab2c-c2b5-11df-ae77-001cc4c03286.html?mode=print](http://eastvalleytribune.com/nation_world/article_22f7ab2c-c2b5-11df-ae77-001cc4c03286.html?mode=print).

<sup>173</sup> FBI, “Crime in the United States: Violent Crime,” <http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/crime-in-the-u.s/2010/crime-in-the-u.s.-2010/violent-crime/violent-crime>.

public officials considered “epidemics” of gun violence—first, following the unusually deadly period of firearms violence that spanned from 1988 to 1994, and second, the largely unprecedented (but ultimately ineffective) galvanization of gun control voices and advocacy that followed the Columbine shooting and subsequent mass shootings in 1999, from increased donations to national gun control organizations to President Clinton’s attempts at passing renewed gun control measures.<sup>174</sup>

In the years prior to the Fort Bragg shooting, there were also several high-profile events that highlighted issues of nationality, American identity, violence and the far right. In 1992 and 1993, deadly confrontations between the U.S. government and separatist groups—involving suspected white supremacists at Ruby Ridge and the Branch Davidian religious sect in Waco, Texas—galvanized an increasingly vocal and violent right-wing militia movement in the U.S. that became increasingly wary of the U.S. government. Just six months before the Fort Bragg shooting, in an attack designed to coincide with the two-year anniversary of the Waco siege, Timothy McVeigh, a militia sympathizer with ties to the Christian Identity Movement, carried out a bombing in Oklahoma City that killed 168 people and injured nearly 700 others. Indeed, the so-called “Patriot” movement—composed of conspiracy-minded groups that viewed the federal government as their primary enemy—reached a peak in the mid-1990s, with 858 antigovernment

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<sup>174</sup> K. Goss, *Disarmed: The Missing Movement for Gun Control in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), <http://press.princeton.edu/chapters/s8328.html>.

“Patriot” groups listed by the Southern Poverty Law Center in 1996, the year after the Oklahoma City bombing.<sup>175176</sup>

It was in this context that the Fort Bragg shooting captured national attention—at the tail end of a period of increased gun violence in the United States, and coming immediately on the heels of the deadliest terrorist attack yet to occur on American soil.

### **The shooting**

In the foggy predawn darkness of October 27, 1995, 1,300 soldiers gathered in a floodlit stadium to begin their daily morning exercises at the Fort Bragg military base in North Carolina. All the soldiers were paratroopers, members of the elite 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division. The division, a contingency force of the Army historically deployed at short notice—as little as two hours—to areas of extreme global conflict, was headquartered at the base.<sup>177</sup> The assembling soldiers were unarmed, dressed only in white T-shirts, running shorts, and reflective belts.<sup>178</sup>

At 6:30 a.m., as the paratroopers stretched and got into formation for their usual four-mile run—beginning a six-week assignment at their highest alert level, during which

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<sup>175</sup> M. Potok, “The ‘Patriot’ Movement Explodes,” *Southern Poverty Law Center* 145 (2012), <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-report/browse-all-issues/2012/spring/the-year-in-hate-and-extremism>.

<sup>176</sup> Notably, the number of Patriot Movement-affiliated extremist groups dropped substantially by the late 1990s—to just 150 relatively inactive groups in the year 2000—before skyrocketing again with the election of Barack Obama in 2008 and the subprime mortgage crisis that preceded the economic collapse.

<sup>177</sup> D. Priest, “Sniper Kills 1, Wounds 18 at Fort Bragg; Suspect Is Identified As a Soldier From D.C.,” *Washington Post*, October 28, 1995.

<sup>178</sup> R. Smothers, “Sniper Kills 1, Wounds 18 at Army Base,” *New York Times*, October 28, 1995.

the force could be sent anywhere in the world on two hours notice in the event of war or military emergencies—shots rang out from a nearby wooded area.<sup>179</sup> The first shot shattered the spine of Chief Warrant Officer Abraham Castillo, and a second shot pierced the lung of Staff Sergeant Matthew Lewis, who was standing near Castillo. At first, as several soldiers later described in statements about the shooting, the paratroopers didn't think it was live fire. But as bullets continued to fly, the assembling soldiers scattered in panic. A soldier who heard the shots in a nearby barracks grabbed a video camera and began taping the scene from his window overlooking the stadium, footage that was later broadcast widely on CNN and other broadcast outlets.<sup>180</sup>

Crouching in the dark woods about 150 yards away from the floodlights of the stadium was William Kreutzer, a 26-year-old sergeant and fellow member of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne division who served as a weapons squad leader and had experience in long-range surveillance and reconnaissance. Kreutzer had been scheduled to be on the field that morning, exercising with the other members of his division. Instead, he armed himself with three civilian firearms purchased separately off-base—a 9-millimeter Glock pistol, a .22-caliber Ruger, and an AR-15 semi-automatic rifle, the civilian version of the military M-16.<sup>181</sup> In the wee hours of the morning, Kreutzer drove to a wooded knoll overlooking the stadium, took up a position near his car, which he parked on a wide path in the wooded area, and began firing upon his fellow soldiers as they took their positions for the morning run.

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<sup>179</sup> “Ft. Bragg, North Carolina / Sniper Attack,” *ABC Evening News*, October 27, 1995.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>181</sup> “Sniper Suspect Had Respect of Neighbors,” *New York Times*, October 30, 1995; “Fort Bragg North Carolina Sniper Attack,” *NBC Nightly News*, October 27, 1995.

Near the woods, four unarmed Special Forces troopers happened to be jogging by when they heard the shots. One ran to flag down a passing car, while the others ran toward Kreutzer in what they later described as a “flanking maneuver,” tackling him and forcibly disarming him. During the ensuing fight, one of the troopers broke his hand, while another was shot in the foot as he ran toward Kreutzer.<sup>182</sup> The last soldier to be shot was 38-year-old Major Stephen Badger, a career military intelligence officer, who rushed within 25 feet of Kreutzer before being shot in the head. As the Special Forces troops descended upon the gunman, Kreutzer begged them to kill him.<sup>183</sup>

Kreutzer was apprehended by military police and taken to a local Criminal Investigation Command office, where, according to court-martial documents, Kreutzer was described as “possibly delusional,” telling military police that the shooting was “God’s way,” and that God had made him do it.<sup>184</sup>

In the aftermath of the shooting, one soldier—Major Badger—was declared dead on the scene, while 18 other wounded soldiers (two injured critically) were rushed to nearby hospitals. As a result of the shooting, one soldier, Major Guy Lafaro, remained in a coma for 45 days, while Castillo was paralyzed from the neck down as a result of a bullet lodged in his spine.<sup>185</sup> Later the same day, after the victims’ conditions were stabilized and Kreutzer was detained, military leadership on base held a press conference

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<sup>182</sup> D. Priest, “Sniper Kills 1, Wounds 18 at Fort Bragg; Suspect Is Identified As a Soldier From D.C.,” *Washington Post*, October 28, 1995.

<sup>183</sup> T. Richissi, “Nobody Listened When Soldier Warned of His Violent Intentions,” *News and Observer* (Raleigh, NC), March 9, 1997.

<sup>184</sup> *United States v. Kreutzer* 59 M.J. 773, 775 (A. Ct. Crim. App. 2004).

<sup>185</sup> M. Montgomery, “Death is Different: *Kreutzer* and the Right to a Mitigation Specialist in Military Capital Offense Cases,” *Army Lawyer* 405 (February 2007): 13.

featuring the four Special Forces soldiers who subdued Kreutzer, one of whom appeared on crutches. An ashen-faced Sergeant Anthony Minor, who broke his hand in the confrontation, described his efforts to subdue Kreutzer during the attack at the press conference. “We did what we were trained—what we were supposed to do,” Minor said. “Anybody in that field would have done the same thing in our situation.”<sup>186</sup>

Broadcast media coverage the day of the shooting—and next-day print coverage—described reports that the shooter was “emotionally disturbed,”<sup>187</sup> but noted the military’s refusal to comment on the then-unnamed suspect’s mental state.<sup>188</sup> It soon became clear, however, that Kreutzer had a long and well-documented history of mental illness.<sup>189</sup> He was described as a loner, a soldier who reportedly felt alienated and mistreated by his fellow soldiers, who, unnerved by his frequent talk of killing, nicknamed him “Crazy Kreutzer” and “Silence of the Lambs.”<sup>190</sup> He repeatedly sought help from his military superiors, but aside from a brief two-week period during which he was barred from accessing weapons (after telling a military social worker that he had specific plans to murder other soldiers in his squad), he did not receive it.<sup>191</sup> Fellow soldiers reported that Kreutzer would often cry after receiving negative feedback, that he

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<sup>186</sup> “Ft. Bragg, North Carolina / Sniper Attack,” *ABC Evening News*, October 27, 1995.

<sup>187</sup> “Fort Bragg North Carolina Sniper Attack,” *CBS Evening News*, October 27, 1995.

<sup>188</sup> R. Smothers, “Sniper Kills 1, Wounds 18 at Army Base,” *New York Times*, October 28, 1995.

<sup>189</sup> F. Shen, “Family Says Army Knew of Son's Troubles,” *Washington Post*, May 31, 1996; *NBC Nightly News*, August 8, 1997.

<sup>190</sup> F. Fessenden, “They Threaten, Seethe and Unhinge, Then Kill in Quantity,” *New York Times*, April 9, 2000; “Witness Says Sergeant Vowed to ‘Mow Everyone Down,’” *New York Times*, June 11, 1996.

<sup>191</sup> L. Goodstein and W. Glaberson, “The Well-Marked Roads to Homicidal Rage,” *New York Times*, April 10, 2000.



spoke nearly constantly about death and murder, and that he was target of frequent teasing and practical jokes from his squadmates.<sup>192</sup> Kreutzer was never referred to a psychiatrist, and did not receive a mental evaluation before being given back his military weapon.<sup>193</sup> The extent of Kreutzer's mental health intervention was a series of conversations with Capt. Darren Fong, the 82nd Airborne's counselor and social worker, who reported that Kreutzer had detailed plans to kill himself and others, but ultimately concluded that he was not a serious threat.<sup>194</sup>

Even after specifically warning a friend, Specialist Burl Mays, the night before the shooting, that he planned to open fire on his fellow soldiers the following morning, no steps were taken by military officials to intercede or intercept him prior to the shooting.<sup>195</sup> In the court-martial proceedings, Mays testified that he first became alarmed when Kreutzer told him he had plans to “mow down” his squadmates, although Kreutzer had made similar threats before. “The last thing he told me,” Mays testified, “was [that] he had to go; he was loading magazines.”<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> T. Richissi, “Nobody Listened When Soldier Warned of His Violent Intentions,” *News and Observer* (Raleigh, NC), March 9, 1997.

<sup>193</sup> Notably, however, even barring Kreutzer from access to his military weapon(s) may not have prevented the shooting, which he carried out using three civilian weapons purchased off base. Army soldiers are allowed to own non-military-issued guns and rifles, but are expected to both register civilian weapons and keep them locked up if they live on base. It is unclear whether this expectation was strictly enforced—or enforced at all—in Kreutzer's case.

<sup>194</sup> T. Richissi, “Nobody Listened When Soldier Warned of His Violent Intentions,” *News and Observer* (Raleigh, NC), March 9, 1997.

<sup>195</sup> L. Goodstein and W. Glaberson, “The Well-Marked Roads to Homicidal Rage,” *New York Times*, April 10, 2000.

<sup>196</sup> “Witness Says Sergeant Vowed to ‘Mow Everyone Down,’” *New York Times*, June 11, 1996.

Despite Kreutzer's history of making similar statements and threats (another former sergeant in Kreutzer's unit testified that Kreutzer once threatened to shoot soldiers at an observation post in the Sinai region of Egypt because they harassed him), when Mays arrived early the following morning and noticed that Kreutzer was missing, he alerted his superiors just before 5 a.m. and rushed to Kreutzer's room, where he found a copy of Kreutzer's will on the desk and discovered that his bed had not been slept in. Mays testified that he tried again to warn his superiors, but that his concerns were dismissed outright. The platoon leader and platoon sergeant laughed when the threat was brought to their attention<sup>197</sup>, with his first sergeant responding that Kreutzer was a "pussy" who "wouldn't do anything like this."<sup>198</sup> Notably, none of this information—about Kreutzer's specific history of making these kinds of threats, or of Kreutzer's clear preexisting signs of mental illness—were covered in news media until several years after the shooting.

After the shooting, military psychiatrists and psychologists who examined Kreutzer diagnosed him with paranoid "schizotypal personality disorder," of which his obsession with guns, social isolation, and anger were classic symptoms.<sup>199</sup> Army regulations call for soldiers with even mild personality disorders to be discharged. Had the diagnosis been made before the shooting, it is likely that Kreutzer would have been discharged immediately.

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<sup>197</sup> *United States v. Kreutzer*, 59 M.J. 773 (Army Ct. Crim. App. 2004).

<sup>198</sup> L. Goodstein and W. Glaberson, "The Well-Marked Roads to Homicidal Rage," *New York Times*, April 10, 2000.

<sup>199</sup> T. Richissi, "Nobody Listened When Soldier Warned of His Violent Intentions," *News and Observer* (Raleigh, NC), March 9, 1997.

Nine months later, Kreutzer was convicted of one count of premeditated murder and 18 counts of attempted murder by a court-martial jury. In court proceedings, Kreutzer did not deny carrying out the shootings, but said that his actions were intended as a message that his military unit did not care about its men.<sup>200</sup> In the early weeks and months preceding the trial, Kreutzer was offered a plea deal by prosecutor—if he pled guilty to murder, they would not seek the death penalty. But Kreutzer insisted he wanted to die, having already attempted suicide in his prison cell.<sup>201</sup> By March 1996, however, Kreutzer, having been on medication for his depression and other mental illnesses, changed his mind and attempted to accept the deal. By then it was too late; military prosecutors had decided to pursue the death penalty. Major Gen. George Crocker, commander of the 82nd Airborne Division, chose 11 men and one woman for the court-martial jury—six of whom were in a direct line of command of other jurors, stacking the jury toward a preference for the death penalty.<sup>202</sup>

On June 12, 1996, after a 19-hour trial, the military jury sentenced Kreutzer to death, making him one of only eight military service members at the time serving a death sentence. At the time—and to this day—the last execution by the U.S. military was on April 13, 1961, when the Army hanged a private convicted of rape and attempted murder.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> *United States v. Kreutzer*, 59 M.J. 773 (Army Ct. Crim. App. 2004).

<sup>201</sup> T. Richissi, “Nobody Listened When Soldier Warned of His Violent Intentions,” *News and Observer* (Raleigh, NC), March 9, 1997.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>203</sup> Associated Press, “Paratrooper Sentenced to Death for Sniper Attack at Fort Bragg,” *New York Times*, June 13, 1996.

Nearly a decade later, however, in 2005, in a four-to-one decision, the Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces affirmed a previous 2004 decision by the Army Court of Criminal Appeals, overturning the death sentence and commuting it instead to a sentence of life in prison.<sup>204</sup><sup>205</sup> In the 2005 majority opinion, the court found that Kreutzer had received inadequate legal representation, and that in particular, he had erroneously been denied the services of a “mitigation specialist,” an expert specifically trained to provide the court with psychological or other mitigating evidence for sentencing authorities in capital cases<sup>206</sup>—a role designed to provide the court with a fuller view of the social and psychological factors present in capital cases.<sup>207</sup> At the time of the trial itself, the judge, Colonel Peter Brownback, rejected a motion by defense attorneys to spend \$3,000 for an expert to document mitigating circumstances that called for sparing Kreutzer's life.<sup>208</sup>

In the ensuing years at Fort Bragg, other high-profile cases of violence on and around the Army base made the national news—the December, 1995 murder of a black couple by three white Fort Bragg soldiers in what was described as a skinhead initiation rite, the

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<sup>204</sup> *United States v. Kreutzer*, 61 M.J. 293 (2005)

<sup>205</sup> Sixteen men have been sentenced to death by the military since 1984, when the system was overhauled, and today only six remain—the other ten have had their sentences overturned because of mistakes made at numerous levels in the military justice system: M. Taylor, “Many death sentences in U.S. military overturned,” *McClatchy DC*, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2011/08/28/121849/many-death-sentences-in-us-military.html>.

<sup>206</sup> *United States v. Kreutzer*, 61 M.J. 293 (2005)

<sup>207</sup> M. Montgomery, “Death is Different: *Kreutzer* and the Right to a Mitigation Specialist in Military Capital Offense Cases,” *Army Lawyer* 405 (February 2007): 13.

<sup>208</sup> T. Richissi, “Nobody Listened When Soldier Warned of His Violent Intentions,” *News and Observer* (Raleigh, NC), March 9, 1997.

slaying of four wives of Army soldiers by their husbands in 2002,<sup>209</sup> and the 2012 shooting by a Fort Bragg soldier of his commanding officer.<sup>210</sup>

### **Broadcast media coverage of the shooting**

On the evening of the day of the shooting, all three major evening network news channels—ABC, NBC and CBS—led their newscasts with the story of the shooting, and CNN aired segments about the shooting during the midday period. Vanderbilt Television News Archive clips and Lexis Nexis transcript searches confirmed that 15 separate segments were devoted to the shooting (comprising 18 minutes and five seconds of coverage), spanning a period ranging from the day of the shooting itself to August, 1997, when NBC continued extensive follow-up coverage on the Army’s handling of mental illness in Kreutzer’s case. In the year following the shooting, *The New York Times* published 10 articles about the shooting, the *Washington Post* published 10, while *USA Today* published 6.

### **Frames**

Broadcast coverage of the Fort Bragg shooting largely kept to three major themes, with some slight variations—first, a broad characterization of the shooting within the bounds of a clearly nationalistic/patriotic frame of reference that held up the military as

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<sup>209</sup> T. Ricks, “Slayings of 4 Soldiers’ Wives Stun Fort Bragg,” *Washington Post*, July 27, 2002.

<sup>210</sup> The 2012 shooting did not fit the mass shooting mold—it appeared to be the result of a personal vendetta against the commanding officer, and resulted in two deaths—the officer and the shooter, a 27-year-old specialist who shot himself after opening fire during a safety briefing on-base.

an extension of American identity; second, a sustained focus on the guns Kreutzer used—both where and how he obtained the weapons as well as the environment of gun restriction/availability on-base at Fort Bragg; and third, considerable criticism of the military’s failure to recognize and address Kreutzer’s (many) preexisting warning signs of severe mental illness, including his own explicit pleas for help.

### **Nationalism and patriotism**

One of the most common themes in broadcast coverage of the Fort Bragg attack involved a focus by media on the military as a sort of stand-in for American national identity, positioning the attack as a uniquely menacing (and unexpected) assault on American soil and its victims as heroes suffering and dying in the service of a noble cause.

Within this frame, one specific element that emerged again and again was the fact that the shooter was “one of [the military’s] own”—a soldier firing upon his squadmates, his own comrades. In its initial coverage on the day of the attack, for example, NBC News described the members of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division as being “under fire on American soil” by a “fellow soldier,” highlighting the irony that these elite paratroopers unexpectedly faced this kind of violence at home, rather than in a war zone abroad. A headline on-screen identified Kreutzer (in capital letters) as “THE ENEMY WITHIN”—an ironic and unexpected threat that the military did not see coming.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> “Fort Bragg North Carolina,” *NBC Nightly News*, October 27, 1995.

Much of the wording and imagery associated with the shooting, especially in the earliest days of coverage, emphasized the ties between the military and American patriotism and identity. Echoing a line in the Star-Spangled Banner, for example, CBS's Dan Rather described the shooting as taking place "by the dawn's early light." And in clips covering the funeral of shooting victim Major Stephen Badger, Badger's widow was quoted, in a phrase that called to mind the Gettysburg address, saying that her husband "was a true American hero" who "ultimately gave that last full measure of devotion."<sup>212</sup> American flags were featured prominently, both in field clips and in-studio coverage, from flag-draped coffins at Badger's funeral to the "icon" used to brand the shooting on CBS, which featured a stylized silhouette of a soldier wearing a combat helmet and wielding an assault rifle, dotted in some cases with stylized bullet holes, standing before a crosshairs, with a rippling American flag behind him.

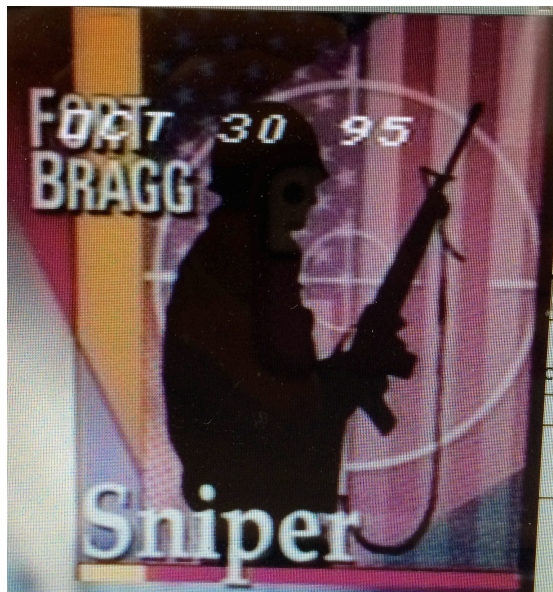


Figure 1: Sniper Icon.

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<sup>212</sup> "Badger Funeral / Violence," *CBS Evening News*, October 30, 1995.

Early coverage of the shooting was less critical of the military than later coverage, which exposed substantial problems with the military apparatus for identifying and mitigating mental illness in its ranks. Early coverage by CBS, for example, three days after the shooting, referred to Kreutzer as a soldier who was “nursing some as yet unknown grudge,”<sup>213</sup> flirting with a problematic frame that would become far more prevalent in coverage of subsequent American mass shootings—the idea that the shooter “snapped.” In the same report, reporter David Martin speculated that perhaps the pressures of the military lifestyle were a factor that caused Kreutzer to suddenly become homicidal:

Cases like this grab headlines, but behind the headlines lies an overall increase in reports of violence in the military, which some experts link to cutbacks in the size of the armed forces. Those cutbacks have cost many servicemen their jobs and placed greater demands on those who remain.<sup>214</sup>

Martin went on to link the shooting to a recent increase in the rate of spousal and child abuse in the military, speculating that the additional stress of a military lifestyle—repeat deployments, the strain caused by the demands of a smaller military thanks to cuts in funding—were at least partly to blame for the shooting. This frame of an overwhelmed military trying to grapple with the realities of spending cuts (which was, interestingly, repeated in the later 2009 Camp Liberty shooting, which took place on a military base in the midst of a war zone) suggested that the institution of the military itself had been undermined by these changes, rendering it less able to address problems like Kreutzer’s.

## **Weapons**

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.



A second frame in broadcast coverage emerged later in media investigations, once it became clear that Kreutzer was mentally ill and had no single easily identified reason for targeting the soldiers who became victims in the attack. The fact that the shooting took place on a field for exercise where soldiers were, by custom, always unarmed, was highlighted repeatedly, as was the fact that the Special Forces soldiers who tackled Kreutzer to stop the attack were also unarmed. Most broadcast coverage in the initial days following the attack noted that the weapons Kreutzer used were civilian weapons, describing the specific types of guns found on the scene.

A few days after the shooting, several broadcast segments began investigating the gun shop where Kreutzer obtained his weapons, a suburban Maryland store called “Freestate Arms.” In a November 1 segment on NBC Evening News, reporter Pete Williams detailed the many transgressions of Freestate Arms, which had recently been shut down by authorities from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) when it became clear that over 200 guns seized at crime scenes led investigators back to the tiny store and its owner, who made illegal sales. Williams also dug into the legal obstacles facing proponents of gun control:

Authorities say there are hundreds of other shady gun dealers nationwide, a startling finding in a survey of over 180,000 licensed gun dealers. Only about 900 of them—less than 1 percent—are responsible for selling more than half the guns traced in crimes. For years, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms had no way to single out problem dealers; now, [the] ATF says a new computer system can flag them ... But gun control advocates say a big loophole remains in the law—over half the states allow a legal gun buyer to resell to anyone ... But after bruising fights over assault weapons and the Brady Law, neither party in Congress is pushing for any new gun control.<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> “Maryland / Gun Shop,” *NBC Nightly News*, November 1, 1995.

In this coverage, gun control was largely framed as a polarized fight in the legislature, divided along intractable party lines and unlikely to change.

### **Mental illness in the military**

A final frame that was pervasive in the later waves of coverage of the shooting (after Kreutzer's conviction and sentence of death) centered around the military's failure to catch the many warning signs of Kreutzer's mental illness (and impending turn to violence) that preceded the shooting. Much of this coverage was driven by Kreutzer's father, who reached out to news media with his concerns about the military's failures in his son's case. Broadcast news media conducted interviews with Kreutzer's parents, with mental health experts, and with Army attorneys.

One of Kreutzer's defense attorneys was quoted describing a military culture that overtly and explicitly discouraged soldiers from seeking help from psychiatrists and social workers. Todd Richissi, a print journalist for the Raleigh *News and Observer* who published an expose of the military's failures in Kreutzer's case, was interviewed on-air describing the case: "This was a guy that was waving big red flags, literally begging for help. And he was basically told, 'Go take a nap.'"<sup>216</sup>

In August 1997, over a year after Kreutzer had been sentenced to death, NBC News aired an in-depth investigative segment examining the intricacies of the case, focusing on the charge levied by Kreutzer's family that the military ignored clear warning signs of mental illness before the shooting. Reporter Fred Francis criticized

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<sup>216</sup> "North Carolina/Shooting," *NBC Nightly News*, August 8, 1997.

military commanders who failed to take Kreutzer's warnings seriously, and interviewed both Kreutzer's parents and Kreutzer himself at length about his mental state leading up to the shooting:

FRANCIS: Kreutzer was sent to a counselor he says he thought was a doctor.

Mr. KREUTZER Jr.: (On phone) I told him I had feelings of hostility towards most of the members of my squad and I was seriously considering killing.

FRANCIS: What follows, fellow soldiers say, was an extraordinary and deadly mistake that the Army refuses to acknowledge. Kreutzer was disarmed for only a few weeks and months later, surprisingly promoted. Yet over a year later, Kreutzer again began talking openly about murder ... The Army does not dispute that Kreutzer sought help. Yet, at trial, that was ignored, even though this prosecutor's document called him, quote, "nuttier than a fruitcake." Defense lawyers say those seeking mental health care are often ignored and others don't ask for it since an Army psychiatrist's notes are not confidential.<sup>217</sup>

According to court-martial documents, Francis' point about the absence of mental health discussion at trial was apt. The subject of Kreutzer's mental health—while remaining a clear unspoken subtext to the military's case—barely came up at trial. Captain Darren Fong, the social worker who spoke to Kreutzer and documented his homicidal fantasies, did not testify. A minor witness, Staff Sergeant Roger Sweeney Jr., testified that over a year after the shooting, although scouts checked the woods for snipers during morning runs at the stadium where the shooting took place, no new systems or procedures had been enacted to help soldiers with mental health issues or to ease self-referral.<sup>218</sup>

The NBC investigation went on to interview Kreutzer's parents in-studio, splicing footage of his tearful mother and stoic father alongside footage of an unnamed man

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> *United States v. Kreutzer*, 59 M.J. 773 (Army Ct. Crim. App. 2004).

shouting at Kreutzer as he entered the courthouse a year earlier to await his sentencing:

“Are you ready to die?”<sup>219</sup>

A wave of print coverage during the same period—from the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and *USA Today*, among others—preceded much of the broadcast focus on the military’s failure to catch Kreutzer’s illness, with some newspapers reporting on the controversy even before the death penalty sentence was handed down. As early as May 1996, the *Washington Post* ran a story with the headline “Family Says Army Knew of Son’s Troubles,” quoting Kreutzer’s parents, who detailed their son’s struggles with suicidal depression and pointed the finger of culpability at the Army for failing to identify and treat mental illness in the ranks.

"In the Army, there have been similar suicides and incidents similar to my son's," Kreutzer said. "We've learned there is no training for officers and enlisted men to search for people with mental problems. Hopefully, my son's case can be a wake-up call to them to put in place procedures so this never happens again."<sup>220</sup>

In 1997, Todd Richissi of the *Raleigh News and Observer* published a sweeping and influential report detailing the many opportunities the military had to intervene before Kreutzer’s illness turned to violence. Most notably, Richissi documented the military’s failure to make changes to their mental health policy following the shooting, and a culture that explicitly discouraged soldiers from seeking help:

Cpl. Jerry Hoyler, who has since left the Army, said that in the hours after Kreutzer's attack, mental health workers were sent to talk to the troops. In a meeting room, they invited the soldiers to come forward if they needed any help.

"We don't need any outside help," one of the officers shouted. "We're the Airborne Infantry and we take care of our own."

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<sup>219</sup> “North Carolina/Shooting,” *NBC Nightly News*, August 8, 1997.

<sup>220</sup> F. Shen, “Family Says Army Knew of Son's Troubles,” *Washington Post*, May 31, 1996; *NBC Nightly News*, August 8, 1997.

That, Hoyler said, sent a message: "Mental health wasn't looked upon as an option for dealing with this. We knew if we went we'd risk losing our jobs. Anyway, hell, if you saw this happen and knew Kreutzer went to mental health, would you have gone to mental health? Hell, no."<sup>221</sup>

In 2000—just after Columbine—*The New York Times* published a 3500-word expose on mass shooters that delved into the Fort Bragg case, explicitly comparing Kreutzer to the Columbine shooters, and tying the event into the new umbrella term of “mass shootings” that emerged with the Columbine case.

Fifteen months before his final ambush, when Sergeant Kreutzer had an outburst in which he threatened to kill soldiers, and it became common knowledge, his superiors sent him to a military social worker.

"He told me that he had specific plans to kill the people in his squad," the counselor, Darren Fong, told military investigators, the court-martial documents show. But when he was returned to full duty, Sergeant Kreutzer was not referred to Army psychiatrists. He was barred from access to weapons for two weeks.

The morning of Oct. 27, 1995, Sergeant Kreutzer hid in the woods and fired onto a field of American soldiers who thought they were at peace. He wounded 18 of them, and killed Maj. Stephen Mark Badger, an intelligence officer and a father and stepfather of eight children.

Sergeant Kreutzer kept firing until he was tackled from behind by two comrades.

Minutes later, he spoke to a military police officer, Bruce W. Hamrick.

"He said he kept warning people that he was going to kill somebody," Mr. Hamrick testified, "but that nobody would listen."<sup>222</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Broadcast coverage of the Fort Bragg shooting largely focused on the unexpected nature of the event – in particular, the irony of the shooter being one of the military's own. In later waves of coverage, journalists began to dig into the failures of the military

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<sup>221</sup> T. Richissi, “Nobody Listened When Soldier Warned of His Violent Intentions,” *News and Observer* (Raleigh, NC), March 9, 1997.

<sup>222</sup> L. Goodstein and W. Glaberson, “The Well-Marked Roads to Homicidal Rage,” *New York Times*, April 10, 2000.

to catch what is now clear were explicit and repeated warning signs that Kreutzer may become violent – as well as the failure of the military to enact any meaningful changes to procedure or policy following the shooting. Overwhelmingly, broadcast coverage described the event as a “shooting,” “murder” or “sniper shooting/sniper attack.” Only once was the shooting described as a “military tragedy.” The shooting was never described as a “spree” or “rampage” until after Columbine, when it was grouped along with other similar events in meta-coverage examining trends in rampage or mass shootings. Similarly, the shooting was never described as a “mass shooting” until after Columbine.

The visuals that accompanied coverage were dominated in early days by the home video footage of the shooting: frenetic, jerky, dimly lit and intense. In later coverage, investigations expanded beyond the shooting itself and into broader factors that led to the event, digging into the role played by Freestate Arms, a notorious gun shop associated with the event, and into Kreutzer’s history, especially as told by his family and friends, who were afforded considerably primacy as sources—seated in-studio for extended interviews and presented sympathetically. After the first few days of coverage, B-roll footage accompanying spoken segments moved away from the frenetic imagery of the morning itself, and mostly involved slow pans of old portraits of Kreutzer or of documents or charts pertaining to the case.

Unlike coverage of later shootings, interestingly, coverage of the Fort Bragg shooting continued long into the military court-martial process, continuing to cover events as they

unfolded within the military judicial process, even after Kreutzer's conviction and sentencing.

In terms of his motivations or reasons for the shooting, Kreutzer himself was initially framed as a stressed-out soldier who "snapped" (for as-yet-unclear reasons) and later as a largely sympathetic character, a deeply mentally ill soldier who was tormented by his peers, and whose many pleas for help fell on deaf ears. This frame of Kreutzer as a tragic, doomed figure was bolstered by the strong influence of his family as sources, whose relentless persistence in contacting news media and raising questions about the military's mental health structures substantially shifted later news coverage of the event and its aftermath. This third frame in broadcast coverage—of the military's failures to catch the many warning signs before the shooting—seems to have been driven in large part by preceding print media coverage on the subject. In one case, a broadcast segment included a shot slowly panning Todd Richissi's in-depth *News & Observer* article about the shooting.

One element that was notable in its absence from coverage was Kreutzer's comments about God immediately after being arrested. Although these disturbing comments were present in publicly available court-martial documents, they never became a part of the story, and never came up in any print or broadcast coverage of the case. In the court martial documents themselves, these comments about "God's will" were only presented as further (rather glib) evidence of Kreutzer's "nuttness."

## Chapter 4: The 2009 Camp Liberty Shooting

In this chapter I will review the facts of the 2009 mass shooting at Camp Liberty, a former American military installation located in Baghdad, Iraq. I will discuss the frames that emerged in American broadcast coverage of the shooting, contextualize the event in its cultural, social and political context, and compare media coverage of the shooting—frames, omissions, inclusions, primary sources—to the facts of the event. Finally, I will consider where the coverage of this shooting fits into or contradicts cultural scripts and norms, and how this coverage reflects cultural norms of the Iraq War period: the primacy of the military, the invisibility of weaponry and gun control issues, and omnipresence of hyper-masculine and hyper-patriotic cultural scripts.

### **Gun violence and the Iraq War**

In the 2000s, rates of gun violence in the United States continued to drop from their peak in the late '80s and early '90s, although not nearly as sharply as in the 1990s. Compared with 1993 (the year when U.S. gun homicides peaked), the year 2010 saw a firearm homicide rate that had decreased by 49 percent, with nearly all of the decline taking place in the 1990s and a more moderate decline in the late 2000s.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> Pew Research Center, “Gun Homicide Rate Down 43 Percent since 1993 Peak; Public Unaware,” <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/05/07/gun-homicide-rate-down-49-since-1993-peak-public-unaware/>; “Rate of U.S. Gun Violence Has Fallen Since 1993,” *NPR News*, May 7, 2013, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2013/05/07/181998015/rate-of-u-s-gun-violence-has-fallen-since-1993-study-says>.



Mass shootings, however, did not slow down during this time period. Several high-profile and unprecedentedly deadly mass shootings captured the attention of the American public in the years preceding the Camp Liberty shooting—including the Red Lake school shooting in Minnesota (2005), the Amish school shooting in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania (2006), the Virginia Tech and Westroads Mall shootings (2007), and the Northern Illinois University shooting (2008). Moreover, the yearly number of dead and injured as a result of mass shootings actually climbed in the first decade the 21<sup>st</sup> century—from fewer than ten in the year 2000 to over 140 in 2012.<sup>224</sup>

The 2009 shooting at Camp Liberty also came six years into the American occupation of Iraq. Largely as a result of the terror attacks of September 11, the decade that preceded the shooting marked by a sharp turn in American discourse toward hyper-patriotism. Gallup polling in 2009 found that 56 percent of Americans reported that they felt the war was going “moderately well” or “very well.”<sup>225</sup> The American mass media performed a powerful agenda-setting role in this context, bolstering “support the troops” rhetoric and echoing and reinforcing the arguments of political elites drumming up support for the war.<sup>226</sup> These messages often resulted in reductionist, sensational discourse that relied on oversimplified notions of an inherently un- and anti-American enemy, the “them” to our “us”—drawing implicitly upon decades of media and cultural

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<sup>224</sup> *Mother Jones*, “America Under the Gun: A Special Report on Gun Laws and the Rise of Mass Shootings,” <http://www.motherjones.com/special-reports/2012/12/guns-in-america-mass-shootings>.

<sup>225</sup> Gallup, “Foreign Affairs: Iraq,” <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1633/iraq.aspx>.

<sup>226</sup> S. Bonn, *Mass Deception: Moral Panic and the U.S. War on Iraq* (New Brunswick, N.J., Rutgers University Press: 2010).

scripts vilifying Arabs and Muslims as terrorists.<sup>227</sup> This rhetoric was particularly notable in the political discourse put forth by President George W. Bush, who clearly identified the “enemy,” as well as the purported reasons that the enemy hates America in many of his addresses pertaining to the war:

“Why do they hate us?”

They hate what they see right here in this chamber: a democratically elected government ... They hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other ... They want to drive Israel out of the Middle East. They want to drive Christians and Jews out of vast regions of Asia and Africa ...

We have seen their kind before. They're the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century. By sacrificing human life to serve their radical visions, by abandoning every value except the will to power, they follow in the path of fascism, Nazism and totalitarianism.<sup>228</sup>

With this speech, delivered on September 20, 2001, President Bush clearly delineated the parameters of the conflict in black-and-white terms, pitting the global West against forces in the Middle East and drawing upon famous relatively recent historical examples with enormous American cultural heft (Nazism and fascism). Most news media closely appropriated the “elite” framing of the building conflict in the Middle East, drawing primarily upon official sources, to the exclusion of others.<sup>229</sup>

Often this reliance upon official sources resulted in widespread media coverage that functioned to amplify and disseminate official accounts of the war and its effects,

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<sup>227</sup> D. Merskin, “The Construction of Arabs as Enemies: Post-9/11 Discourse of George W. Bush,” in *Bring 'Em On: Media and Politics in the Iraq War*, ed. Lee Artz and Yahya R. Kamalipour (Rowman & Littlefield: New York, 2005), 121-137.

<sup>228</sup> “Text: President Bush Addresses the Nation,” *Washington Post*, September 20, 2001, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress\\_092001.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress_092001.html).

<sup>229</sup> A. DiMaggio, *When Media Goes to War: Hegemonic Discourse, Public Opinion, and the Limits of Dissent* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010).

marginalizing or downplaying dissent. In his work examining broadcast media coverage of the Iraq War, for example, DiMaggio (2010) found that the U.S. was more prone to overreliance on official sources than other countries, and that this overreliance resulted in the near-erasure of widespread protests and critics of the war, which had the further effect of both restricting Americans' access to reliable and complete information about the war as well as creating categories of "worthy and unworthy victims" of the conflict.<sup>230</sup> U.S. casualties were presented as major news, and coverage of American troop deaths was highly ritualized, emphasizing the sacrifice of military families and underlining the idea that their deaths functioned to keep Americans from "having to fight them at home."<sup>231</sup> Coverage of other categories of victims varied wildly, from Iraqis killed as a result of "sectarian violence," who received more abstract but prominent coverage, to Iraqis killed in non-combat environments by U.S. troops, who received very little coverage except where such events were framed as being carried out by "rogue soldiers."<sup>232</sup>

In fact, many argued that the war's legitimization in news media (the success of which relied upon preexisting negative stereotypes and an almost exclusive reliance upon official sources) constituted what Bonn, in particular, called an "elite-engineered moral panic," pitting an American "us" on the side of good against a more nebulous "them," delegitimizing dissent and overlooking and excusing the many errors and deceptions that

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

led to U.S. involvement in the war, which Chomsky described as an “unmitigated disaster.”<sup>233</sup>

In this agenda-setting role, American mass media—and especially broadcast media—were very successful at drumming up support for the war (and, tangentially, for the U.S. military) via political rhetoric. One way this was often accomplished was by using what Stahl (2010) called “technofetishism,” focusing on the superior and high-tech weaponry of the American military. This focus on technological exhibitionism underlined the presentation of the war as what Der Derian (2009) called a “virtuous war”—presenting the war in terms of gleaming, high-tech weaponry, obliterating images of the dead and dying, emphasizing the “surgical” or “precision” capabilities of new weapons, and transforming state violence into an object of pleasurable consumption.<sup>234</sup> Indeed, however, outside of the echo chamber of broadcast media reporting in the early years of the Iraq War, so-called virtuous war is “anything *but* less destructive, deadly or bloody for those on the receiving end of the big technological stick” (p. xxxii)<sup>235</sup>

By the time Sergeant Russell, the shooter in the Camp Liberty incident, carried out his attack, at least 4,302 American soldiers had been killed in Iraq, and the support of

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<sup>233</sup> S. Bonn, *Mass Deception: Moral Panic and the U.S. War in Iraq* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010); A. DiMaggio, *When Media Goes to War: Hegemonic Discourse, Public Opinion, and the Limits of Dissent* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010); J. der Derian, *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009); N. Chomsky, "The Poisoned Chalice," *Extra!* (August 2007): 16-19.

<sup>234</sup> J. der Derian, *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment-Network* (New York: Routledge, 2009); R. Stahl, *Militainment, Inc.: War, Media and Popular Culture* (Routledge: New York, 2009).

<sup>235</sup> J. der Derian, *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment-Network* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

the American public was waning.<sup>236</sup> The proportion of Americans who said that the decision to use military force in Iraq was the “wrong decision” had slowly gained a majority—54 percent of Americans, compared with just 22 percent of Americans in 2003, when the war began.<sup>237</sup> Meanwhile, estimates of the number of civilians killed by this point in the war vary widely. The Iraq Ministry of Human Rights estimated a total of 85,694 civilian deaths from the period of 2004 to 2008.<sup>238</sup> The organization Iraq Body Count, which collated civilian deaths using cross-checked media reports, estimated that there were between 97,461 and 106,348 civilian deaths as of July 2010.<sup>239</sup> On the other end of the spectrum, a national cross-sectional sample survey carried out in 2006 by the British medical journal *The Lancet* estimated a total of 654,965 civilian deaths as a result of the war between March 2003 and June 2006—218 times more than the 2,996 who perished in the September 11 attacks.<sup>240</sup>

### **The shooting**

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<sup>236</sup> “U.S. Casualties: U.S. Troop Deaths in Iraq,” *USA Today*, March 19, 2008, [http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/casualties/2009-05-02-may-toll\\_N.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/casualties/2009-05-02-may-toll_N.htm); Pew Research Center, “Public Attitudes Toward the War in Iraq: 2003-2008,” <http://www.pewresearch.org/2008/03/19/public-attitudes-toward-the-war-in-iraq-20032008/>.

<sup>237</sup> Pew Research Center, “Public Attitudes Toward the War in Iraq: 2003-2008,” <http://www.pewresearch.org/2008/03/19/public-attitudes-toward-the-war-in-iraq-20032008/>.

<sup>238</sup> H. Fischer, “Iraq Casualties: U.S. Military Forces and Iraqi Civilians, Police and Security Forces,” *Congressional Research Service*, October 7, 2010, <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R40824.pdf>

<sup>239</sup> “Iraq War in Figures,” BBC News, December 14, 2011, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-11107739>.

<sup>240</sup> G. Burnham, R. Lafta, S. Doocy, and L. Roberts, “Mortality After the 2003 Invasion of Iraq: A Cross-Sectional Cluster Sample Survey,” *The Lancet*, October 12, 2006, <http://brusselstribunal.org/pdf/lancet111006.pdf>.

On Monday, May 11, 2009, Sergeant John M. Russell, 44, had a noon appointment at Camp Liberty's on-base "combat stress clinic," a center intended to be a psychological oasis for soldiers serving in Iraq.

Russell, who lived in Sherman, Texas, a town just north of Dallas, was in the final weeks of his third tour in Iraq, having served previous deployments in Bosnia and Kosovo.<sup>241</sup> He was a member of the 54th Engineering Battalion, based in Bamberg, Germany, and a career Army man, having joined the Army National Guard in 1988 and signed up for active duty Army in 1994.<sup>242</sup> Russell was married, with one son from a previous marriage to a German woman he met while stationed in Bamberg. Before his career in the military, Russell, who struggled with learning disabilities, worked in restaurants, grocery stores, and in property management.<sup>243</sup>

The May 11 visit to the stress clinic was not Russell's first. The clinic was a place where soldiers could stay for up to four days, "recharging" and receiving group and individual therapy in the midst of the war. Russell reportedly visited the clinic four times prior to the day of the shooting.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> "U.S. Soldier Charged with Murder in Iraq Shooting Deaths," *CNN*, <http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/05/12/iraq.soldiers.killed/>.

<sup>242</sup> J. Dao and L. Alvarez, "Soldier in Iraq Shooting Had been Ordered to Receive Psychological Counseling," *New York Times*, May 13, 2009.

<sup>243</sup> E. Smith, "Military Mental Health Crisis Exposed with Camp Liberty Killings," *Bloomberg News*, July 31, 2012, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-08-01/military-mental-health-crisis-exposed-with-camp-liberty-killings.html>.

<sup>244</sup> R. Nordland, "Report Finds Lapses in Handling of G.I. Accused of Murders in Iraq," *New York Times*, October 21, 2009, [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/21/world/middleeast/21iraq.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/21/world/middleeast/21iraq.html?_r=0); J. Dao and P. Zielbauer, "Among 5 Killed at Military Clinic, a Member of Heartache and a Struggling Private," *New York Times*, May 17, 2009; "Soldiers' Murder," *CNN Evening News*, May 11, 2009.

Russell had a long history of psychological problems leading up to the shooting—he had been behaving erratically for weeks, threatening to commit suicide. Two days prior to the shooting, Russell’s First Lieutenant, Mark Natale, removed the firing pin from Russell’s weapon, concerned about his increasingly combative mental state, referring Russell again to counseling. Later, another officer, unaware of Natale’s actions, confiscated Russell’s weapon entirely.<sup>245</sup>

On May 10, the day before the shooting, Russell had an appointment at the stress center with Lieutenant Colonel Michael Jones, one of the 14 Army psychiatrists in Iraq at the time. According to Army prosecutors in the later court-martial proceedings, Russell asked Jones to advocate for his retirement on mental disability grounds—allegedly because of his concern that a threatened sexual harassment suit could derail his career. Jones refused.<sup>246</sup> After an hour-long appointment, Jones diagnosed Russell with anxiety, concluded that he did not pose a danger to himself or others, and prescribed Russell an antidepressant.<sup>247</sup> According to his escort, First Lieutenant David Vasquez, Russell’s mood, which had been deteriorating over the last several days, seemed to lift temporarily

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<sup>245</sup> R. Nordland, “Report Finds Lapses in Handling of G.I. Accused of Murders in Iraq,” *New York Times*, October 21, 2009, [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/21/world/middleeast/21iraq.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/21/world/middleeast/21iraq.html?_r=0); E. Smith, “Military Mental Health Crisis Exposed with Camp Liberty Killings,” *Bloomberg News*, July 31, 2012, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-08-01/military-mental-health-crisis-exposed-with-camp-liberty-killings.html>.

<sup>246</sup> K. Murphy, “Five Killings at Camp Liberty in Iraq: Calculation or Despair?” *Los Angeles Times*, May 11, 2013, <http://www.latimes.com/nation/nationnow/la-na-nn-camp-liberty-russell-20130511-story.html>.

<sup>247</sup> E. Smith, “Military Mental Health Crisis Exposed with Camp Liberty Killings,” *Bloomberg News*, July 31, 2012, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-08-01/military-mental-health-crisis-exposed-with-camp-liberty-killings.html>.

after the appointment. By 5 a.m. the following day, however, Russell got out of bed crying and shaking, utterly despondent, rousing Vasquez.

In the early predawn hours of May 11, Vasquez took Russell to the battalion's chaplain, Captain Peter Keough, where Russell expressed suicidal thoughts. "He said he just wished someone would put a bullet in his head," Keough told investigators.<sup>248</sup> Alarmed, Keough called Jones, the psychiatrist, at 7:50 a.m. In a follow up email the morning of the shooting, Keough expressed alarm about Russell's psychological state. "I believe he is deteriorating," Keough wrote. "He does not trust anyone, does not think any of us care for him, including me ... and believes he is better off dead." Keough went on to request in-patient care for Russell, urging the Army to provide him round-the-clock psychiatric care. "I know when something is outside my lane," Keough concluded. "[T]his case is beyond my skill set."<sup>249</sup> Jones responded by setting an appointment for Russell at the stress clinic for that day at noon, writing that it was acceptable for Russell to have his weapon as long as the firing pin had been removed.

At 11:20, Russell entered the stress clinic, where he signed in for his appointment. A few minutes into his appointment with Jones, however, he angrily stormed out of the office. Jones instructed Russell's escort, Staff Sergeant Enos Richard, to call military police while he went after Russell. A shouting match ensued in the parking lot between Jones and Russell, during which Russell reportedly threatened again to kill himself.

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> P. Keough to M. Jones and D. Vasquez, May 11, 2009, *Business Week*, [http://images.businessweek.com/bloomberg/pdfs/chaplains\\_e-mail.pdf](http://images.businessweek.com/bloomberg/pdfs/chaplains_e-mail.pdf).



Military police arrived, and Russell asked to be arrested. Instead, on the advice of Jones, the MPs decided to turn Russell over to his escort, Sergeant Richard, in a breach of military policy, which dictates that any soldier threatening suicide must be turned over only to his first sergeant or unit commander.<sup>250</sup> Shortly thereafter Russell left, in the custody of Richard, while clinic staff attempted (and failed) to contact his commanding officers.<sup>251</sup>

Alone, Sergeant Richard drove Russell back to his battalion. Once they arrived at the battalion offices, Russell grabbed an unsecured M-16 that was lying in the back seat of the Ford Explorer, and forced Richard at gunpoint to turn over the keys to the SUV. Panicked, Richard burst into the battalion offices and reported that Russell had taken the weapon and may have been on his way to the clinic. Around 2 p.m., after driving the 40 minutes back to the clinic, Russell returned to the stress clinic (a weapon-free zone on base), and opened fire after slipping in a back door. Moving quickly through the single-story building, Russell fired upon everyone he saw, including many soldiers pleading with him to put down his weapon.<sup>252</sup> In the melee, during which frantic patients fled in all directions, bolting out of doors, jumping from windows and hiding under bunks, five soldiers were killed: Navy Commander Charles K. Springle, 52, a psychiatrist; Private

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<sup>250</sup> To L. Little, memorandum, July 20, 2012, *Business Week*, [http://images.businessweek.com/bloomberg/pdfs/admiral\\_little\\_report.pdf](http://images.businessweek.com/bloomberg/pdfs/admiral_little_report.pdf); M. McCloskey, "Inquiry into Iraq stress clinic shooting reveals institutional failures," *Stars and Stripes*, <http://www.stripes.com/news/inquiry-into-iraq-stress-clinic-shooting-reveals-institutional-failures-1.95669>.

<sup>251</sup> E. Smith, "Military Mental Health Crisis Exposed with Camp Liberty Killings," *Bloomberg News*, July 31, 2012, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-08-01/military-mental-health-crisis-exposed-with-camp-liberty-killings.html>.

<sup>252</sup> R. Anderson, "James Culp: Military Massacre Lawyer," *Seattle Weekly*, <http://www.seattleweekly.com/2012-03-28/news/james-culp-military-massacre-lawyer>.

First Class Michael Edward Yates Jr., 19; Specialist Jacob D. Barton, 20; Sergeant Christian E. Bueno-Galdos, 25; and Major Matthew P. Houseal, 54. As military police—who had managed to contact a Camp Stryker clinic to alert them that Russell was on the loose, but had not reached the Camp Liberty clinic in the time since Russell commandeered his escort’s SUV—converged on the doorway, Russell laid his weapon down.<sup>253</sup>

Russell was promptly taken into custody and charged with five counts of murder and one count of aggravated assault. The day after the shooting, military officials announced that they were launching a probe to identify shortcomings in mental health treatment for troops deployed in war zones—just four days after the Army Surgeon General had issued a triumphant report touting “significantly lower” mental-health problems in Iraq than at any time since 2004.<sup>254</sup>

In the early days after the shooting, Russell’s family was swift to reach out to the press with accounts that were sharply critical of the military’s dealings with Russell. William Russell, John Russell’s father, was quoted saying that the military “broke” his son, and that Russell had “snapped” from the pressures placed on him.<sup>255</sup>

They overstressed him. They broke him. They ruined his life. They told him, "You're an idiot. You don't belong in here. We're going to break you. We're going to get you out of here."<sup>256</sup>

Nearly four years after the shooting, in April 2013, Russell struck a plea deal with military prosecutors to avoid the death penalty, pleading guilty to the deaths of his five

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<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> E. Londo, “Base Slayings Spur Probe of Mental Health Care,” *Washington Post*, May 13, 2009.

<sup>255</sup> “Iraq War / Soldiers’ Murder,” *NBC Nightly News*, May 12, 2009.

<sup>256</sup> “Stress Discussion,” *CNN Evening News*, May 12, 2009.

victims. The plea deal followed years of court-martial proceedings to determine the level of his guilt and premeditation. Defense attorneys argued that Russell's mental state was precarious, weakened by repeated combat tours and extreme stress. A forensic scientist testified that Russell suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and psychosis at the time of the shooting. But prosecutors argued that Russell's actions—the theft of the vehicle, the long drive back to the clinic, the choice to enter through a back door—indicated premeditation. Further, Army prosecutors alleged that the entire shooting was a premeditated attack on Jones specifically, in retribution for his perceived refusal to help Russell.<sup>257</sup>

On May 16, 2013, Russell was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole. "You are not a monster," said Colonel David Conn, the judge who sentenced Russell. "But you have knowingly and deliberately done incredibly monstrous things."<sup>258</sup>

### **Broadcast media coverage of the shooting**

ABC, CBS and NBC News all prominently featured the Camp Liberty shooting in their evening broadcasts on May 11, the day of the shooting. ABC and CBS led their broadcast with the story, while NBC covered the story near the top of the hour. CNN Evening News also led its May 11 newscast with a five-minute segment covering the shooting. In-depth follow-up coverage continued for a few days after the shooting on all

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<sup>257</sup> K. Murphy, "Five Killings at Camp Liberty in Iraq: Calculation or Despair?" *Los Angeles Times*, May 11, 2013, <http://www.latimes.com/nation/nationnow/la-na-nn-camp-liberty-russell-20130511-story.html>.

<sup>258</sup> E. Johnson, "Soldier who Killed Fellow U.S. Troops in Iraq Gets Life Sentence," *Reuters*, May 16, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/05/16/us-usa-iraq-court-martial-idUSBRE94F0G620130516>.

four networks—comprising nine total segments that made up 18 minutes and 20 seconds of total coverage on broadcast networks—but swiftly tapered off by mid-week, with the final segment airing on May 14. *The New York Times* published a total of nine articles about the shooting, following the case through Russell’s plea deal with prosecutors in 2013.<sup>259</sup> *USA Today* published three articles about the shooting—the first two simply listing troop casualties, and the third referencing the Camp Liberty shooting within the context of the late Fort Hood shooting the same year. Meanwhile, the *Washington Post* published seven articles about the shooting, following the court-martial proceedings through 2011, when Russell faced a military hearing determining whether or not he should stand trial for the killings.<sup>260</sup>

### **Frames**

Three consistent frames emerged in coverage of the Camp Liberty shooting. First, a focus on nationalism and patriotism was combined with the exceptional primacy of military sources to frame the event as an inevitable tragedy that could only be properly understood or parsed by those who had served in the “theater” of war (a term that recurred often in coverage). Second, “combat stress” was offered as the primary explanation for the shooting, bolstered in broadcast media by frenetic imagery. Third, there was a near-total absence of discussion regarding military policies on guns/weaponry, and very little criticism of the military itself—despite evidence of

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<sup>259</sup> “Washington: Plea Deal Reported In Killings In Iraq,” *New York Times*, April 20, 2013.

<sup>260</sup> “Soldier Held in Troop Killings Faces Hearing,” *Washington Post*, August 10, 2011.

multiple breaches of military policy that led to the shooting—representing a sharp turn from coverage of Fort Bragg.

### **Nationalism, patriotism, and the primacy of the military**

By far the most consistent theme in broadcast coverage of the shooting involved an aggressive vein of nationalistic and patriotic imagery. American flags waved softly in the background behind nearly every anchor who delivered information about the shooting, B-roll footage featured uniformed troops engaged in frenetic missions in Iraq, and on-screen icons used to “brand” the shooting depicted stylized gun sights, bullet holes, and figures of uniformed soldiers in full combat gear, wielding rifles.<sup>261</sup>

This intense nationalistic focus was bolstered by the near-universal presence of military sources who were quoted and interviewed for broadcast segments. All but one of the broadcast segments covering the shooting prominently included interviews—many in-studio—with current or former, often high-ranking, members of the military. The expertise of these military sources was given primacy both in terms of parsing the reasons for the shooting and for offering possibilities for the meaning of the event. Often, this reliance on military sources was paired with the implication (both implicit and explicit) that only those who had served in the “theater of war,” a euphemism that recurred frequently, were qualified to weigh in on the shooting:

PAUL RIECKHOFF, FOUNDER, IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN VETERANS OF AMERICA: Well, it's tragic. I mean, it's deeply disturbing, but I don't think folks who have been in theater are surprised. I mean, our friends are over there

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<sup>261</sup> “Iraq War / Soldiers’ Murder,” *ABC Evening News*, May 12, 2009.

daily. They're facing a tremendously tough work environment, threats from the enemy and repeated tours.<sup>262</sup>

These sources—especially current members of the military and high-ranking soldiers—also tended to use the opportunity to weigh in on the shooting to defend the military and its handling of the case, often suggesting a certain inevitability to the killings as a natural consequence of war:

Brian Williams: [H]ow do you prevent a senseless murder [on a military base] any more than you would in civilian life?

Colonel Jack Jacobs (Retired, NBC News Military Analyst): Well, you can't, actually. And the military establishment's done a lot to make sure that they keep eyes on people who are not doing well. There are support systems back in the States for them and their families when they return, and also support systems in country, just like this stress clinic. Troops are told to keep an eye out for those who are not doing well, to report them to the chain of command so that they can be helped. And this is just one that just didn't make it, fell through the cracks.<sup>263</sup>

Rather than a preventable phenomenon, the shooting was consistently framed by military sources as a tragic, but unavoidable side effect of the demands placed on soldiers—and of what they described as insufficient resources, too few military personnel and inadequate military funding. In a May 11 segment for CBS News, correspondent David Martin introduced an email “sent from Afghanistan last year,” which he described as “captur[ing] the strain of too much mission for too few soldiers.” The email, which appeared on-screen without any explanation as to its origin or recipient, read, “We are so short now over here that we are starting to see signs of some folks really stressing out. And in the end, it’s all due to our personnel shortages.”<sup>264</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> “Reickhoff Interview,” *CNN Evening News*, May 11, 2009.

<sup>263</sup> “Iraq War / Soldiers’ Murder,” *NBC Nightly News*, May 11, 2009.

<sup>264</sup> “Soldiers’ Murder / Stress,” *CBS Evening News*, May 11, 2009.

In the same segment, General Peter Chiarelli, the Vice Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, sat down for an in-studio interview.

GEN. PETER CHIARELLI, VICE CHIEF OF STAFF, U.S. ARMY: As long as the demand on forces stays what it is right now and the supply of forces remains the same, it will be very difficult for us to do anything with that stress. But we've got to help soldiers understand how they can cope with that stress.<sup>265</sup>

### **Combat stress**

The most common explanation offered by broadcast media for the shooting—often explicitly tied to the view that Russell “snapped”—was “combat stress.” In the nine segments devoted to covering the shooting, the phrase “combat stress” was used 21 times. In contrast, “PTSD” or “post-traumatic stress disorder” was used a total of nine times, often in a context that suggested that the more nebulous and generic term “combat stress” was a less-serious, far more prevalent precursor to PTSD. This characterization of the underlying reasons for the shooting, which chalked up Russell’s motive for the shooting to the daily stress of military life and multiple deployments (rather than underlying severe mental illness) bolstered a narrative that presented the shooting as an unpreventable tragedy, simply another terrible cost of war.

*Commander Carrie Kennedy, a neuropsychologist and aerospace experimental psychologist with Marine Corps Embassy Security Group, describes combat stress as “an expected and predictable reaction to combat experiences”—as opposed to PTSD, which represents a far more serious (and less prevalent) “psychological disorder [that] impairs*

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

functioning.”<sup>266</sup> Combat stress, which is considered a normal and expected human response to the psychological stressors of war, is thought to affect many or most soldiers experiencing combat or close proximity to the battlefield, and its existence (including symptoms such as hyperstartle reactions, hypervigilance, irritability, and bad dreams) has been documented throughout recent history. Indeed, descriptions of “shell shock,” “battle fatigue,” or “soldier’s heart” in medical and popular literature date back to the American Civil War.<sup>267</sup>

Conversely, the more precise and clinical term for long-term psychological trauma, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, only first appeared in the American Psychological Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in 1980. Since then it has undergone several revisions in terms of classification and diagnostic criteria.<sup>268</sup>

Combat stress, however, as it was presented by broadcast media coverage of the Camp Liberty shooting, was uniformly presented as an unfortunate but widespread and unavoidable side effect of multiple deployments, the strain of military life, and the intensity of battle. In a press conference aired by ABC News on May 11, Admiral Michael Mullen said the shooting would be “investigated” to examine whether the stress of multiple deployments contributed to Russell’s decision to commit the shooting.

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<sup>266</sup> C. Kennedy, “Combat Stress vs. PTSD: How to Tell the Difference,” *Defense Centers of Excellence*, [http://www.dcoe.mil/blog/13-10-03/Combat\\_Stress\\_vs\\_PTSD\\_How\\_to\\_Tell\\_the\\_Difference.aspx](http://www.dcoe.mil/blog/13-10-03/Combat_Stress_vs_PTSD_How_to_Tell_the_Difference.aspx).

<sup>267</sup>“‘Soldier’s Heart’ and ‘Shell Shock’: Past Names for PTSD,” *Frontline*, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/heart/themes/shellshock.html>.

<sup>268</sup> M. Friedman, “PTSD: National Center for PTSD: PTSD History and Overview,” *U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs*, <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/PTSD-overview/ptsd-overview.asp>.



“It speaks to the issue of multiple deployments,” Mullen said, “increasing dwell time, all of those things that we're focused on to try to improve to relieve that stress.”<sup>269</sup>

In a May 11 segment on CBS News, correspondent David Martin described the many stressors that soldiers have to grapple with, contextualizing the shooting with data on military suicide rates, which he described as “one of the most extreme consequences of stress.”

MARTIN: This was not suicide, of course, but murder. We don't know the motive of the Army sergeant who pulled the trigger, but it seems safe to say that both he and the five mental health workers who were supposed to help him were all victims of combat stress.<sup>270</sup>

This focus on the daily stressors of life on the battlefield was reinforced by the near-ubiquitous presence of frenetic, quick-cut, shaky, B-roll footage accompanying most broadcast segments. This footage, which was usually spliced together from multiple shots and angles, showed American soldiers in full combat gear in Iraq and Afghanistan, wielding rifles, rushing through streets, engaging in gunfights, ducking, running from explosions, shouting, and storming into buildings. Some of this background footage included sound (such as a commanding officer shouting “Go! Go! Go!” as his troops stormed a building or engaged in a gunfight), but most appeared in the background as a sort of overlaid subtext that reinforced the stressful environment of the war zone, emphasizing the frenetic and panicked nature of battle. This video imagery also occasionally included locals, but usually in the background—Arab men in sweeping robes, and black-clad women wearing hijabs.

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<sup>269</sup> “Iraq War / Soldiers’ Murder / Afghanistan War,” *ABC Evening News*, May 11, 2009.

<sup>270</sup> “Soldiers’ Murder / Stress,” *CBS Evening News*, May 11, 2009.

This consistent focus on “combat stress”—and the military sources who emphasized its prevalence—led to teasers like this one from Katie Couric, in a CBS News broadcast on May 12:

Also tonight, did stress push a soldier over the edge? A sergeant on his third tour in Iraq is charged with murdering five other U.S. soldiers.<sup>271</sup>

The question of whether combat stress pushed Russell over the edge was repeated by many anchors and sources, including Russell’s son and father, who asserted that the stress of military life—and the cruelty of his squadmates—caused Russell to simply “snap,” killing his fellow soldiers in the clinic.

The terminology used to describe the shooting underlined the focus on combat stress. The shooting was described repeatedly as a “tragic accident” or a “tragic incident,” highlighting a sort of fatalistic attitude toward the military’s role in preventing similar shootings. One thing most coverage consistently agreed upon, however, was the senseless nature of these deaths in contrast to ordinary combat casualties at the hands of a known enemy. “After more than seven years of war in Afghanistan and Iraq,” said Katie Couric, at the beginning of the May 11 CBS News segment devoted to the shootings, “it’s easy to become numb to the mounting U.S. death toll; and then something so terrible happens it simply stuns us.”<sup>272</sup>

### **Absence of military policy/weaponry**

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<sup>271</sup> “Iraq War / Soldiers’ Murder / Russell,” *CBS Evening News*, May 12, 2009.

<sup>272</sup> “Soldiers’ Murder / Stress,” *CBS Evening News*, May 11, 2009.

Finally, elements that were most notable in their *absence* from broadcast coverage were any in-depth discussion of two pertinent breaches of military policy in this shooting: (1) how Russell was able to obtain a loaded firearm after being disarmed (and the many lapses in established military policy that led to the chain of events that enabled him to obtain the rifle he used in the weapons-free zone of the clinic) and (2) how Russell’s clear and disturbing recent history of mental illness failed to trigger red flags that should have prevented the shooting. These questions regarding weaponry, accessibility, mental illness and military policy were replaced by a narrative upholding the primacy (and the progressive efforts) of the military, and reducing Russell’s rationale for the shooting to “combat stress” or the considerably more problematic idea that he simply “snapped.”

In fact, the only sources who appeared in broadcast coverage of the shooting overtly criticizing military policy in Russell’s case were Russell’s family members. Unlike coverage of the Fort Bragg shooting, however, interviews with these family members—most notably, Russell’s son and father—were not taped as in-studio close-ups but rather as impromptu on-the-spot interviews, filmed in casual (camouflage-patterned) clothing and squinting in the sunlight on the lawn of Russell’s family home.

WILBURN RUSSELL (FATHER OF SERGEANT JOHN RUSSELL):  
[T]hey broke him. They told him, you're out of here, man. You know just any one of us can sign a piece of paper and you're - you're washed up. And his whole life was the military. He, he was so proud of that military.<sup>273</sup>

Military sources largely avoided the topic of Russell’s specific history mental of illness, although many decried, in general, the stigma associated with seeking help for mental or psychological illness in the military. Most, however, packaged these concerns

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<sup>273</sup> “Iraq War / Soldiers’ Murder,” *ABC Evening News*, May 12, 2009.

with reassurances that the military had made great strides in recent years in terms of attempting to address and adequately treat mental illness among service members, especially PTSD:

ANDERSON COOPER: The fact that there is a stress clinic, for lack of a better word in theater, is actually a good sign. I mean, that's a new -- that's a relatively new development.

PAUL RIECKHOFF, FOUNDER, IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN VETERANS OF AMERICA: It is. It's huge progress. We didn't have that when I was in theater.

COOPER: But there's still such stigma about seeking help. I mean, in society, in general, but in the military, in particular.

RIECKHOFF: Tremendous stigma. I mean, that's why we launched a massive public service announcement campaign to address that stigma, to talk about what veterans face when they come home. And we set up a Web site too, [communityofveterans.org](http://communityofveterans.org), veterans can go there and get support from other veterans. They can get mental health resources and look for the warning signs.<sup>274</sup>

## Conclusion

The Camp Liberty shooting, which took place ten years after the Columbine shooting, was frequently described as a “spree” or a “rampage shooting” in broadcast coverage immediately following the event. One segment referred to it as a “mass shooting.” Most often, however, it was described as a “tragedy,” a “tragic incident,” or a “tragic accident,” underlining both the unusual and surprising senselessness of this soldier-on-soldier shooting, as well as a sense of fatalistic inevitability—the shooting was tragic, but it was an “accident” or an “incident,” a (perhaps) unforeseen but largely unpreventable cost of war.

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<sup>274</sup> “Reickhoff Interview,” *CNN Evening News*, May 11, 2009.

These frames stand in marked contrast to earlier coverage of the Fort Bragg shooting, which did not frame that shooting as inevitable. Fort Bragg coverage was explicitly critical of military policy in the run-up to the 1995 shooting, picking apart everything from prosecutors' notes in court-martial documents to the many warning signs of mental illness—including Kreutzer's own explicit pleas for help—prior to the shooting. No similar level of critical evaluation of military protocol occurred in the Camp Liberty case, aside from a few off-the-cuff remarks from Russell's family members. Despite the fact that the breaches to military policy leading to the shooting were numerous and well-documented—Russell, for example, should not have been allowed to leave the clinic after threatening suicide in the company of a lone chaperone, nor should any loaded weapons have been allowed in the clinic, a policy without any actual measures for enforcement—broadcast coverage failed to raise these issues. One factor that may account for some of these differences in coverage is the fact that the Fort Bragg shooting took place on an American military base in peacetime, while the Camp Liberty shooting, for all its similarities, occurred in the “theater of war” in the midst of a bitter and ongoing conflict far from American soil.

The narrative of “combat stress” replaced most other explanations for the event in broadcast coverage, often extending—both explicitly and implicitly—to the conclusion that the stressors of military life led Russell to simply “snap.” This frame is problematic for two reasons. First, it disregards Russell's considerable and well-documented descent into mental illness and despair that preceded the shooting. Second, it reproduces a prominent (but inaccurate) trope about violence and mental health. People do not simply

“snap.”<sup>275</sup> The road to extreme and indiscriminate violence is almost always marked by clear warning signs, mental illness, substance abuse, or some combination of the three. People who commit mass shootings do not “snap”—they consistently and fairly predictably move down a path toward violence.<sup>276</sup> As such, “combat stress” alone is a woefully inadequate explanation for what happened at Camp Liberty. A constellation of factors led to this shooting, of which the stress of battle may have been one—but it alone does not account for the shooting.

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<sup>275</sup> D. Swink, “The Pentagon Shooting: They Don’t ‘Just Snap,’” *Psychology Today*, March 6, 2010, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/threat-management/201003/the-pentagon-shooting-they-don-t-just-snap>.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid.; M. Follman, “Mass Shootings: Maybe What We Need Is a Better Mental-Health Policy,” *Mother Jones*, November 9, 2012, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/11/jared-loughner-mass-shootings-mental-illness>.

## Chapter 5: The 2009 Fort Hood Shooting

In this chapter I will review the facts of the 2009 mass shooting on the Fort Hood military base. I will discuss the social, political and cultural climate that preceded the shooting—the most deadly mass shooting to date to take place on an American military base. I will also examine the frames that emerged in broadcast media coverage of the shooting, comparing the choices made by these media (inclusions, omissions, primary sources) to what we now know about the facts of the event, and the personal history of the shooter, Army Major Nidal Hasan. Finally, I will discuss the role this coverage played in upholding norms and cultural scripts of the Iraq War period in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century—the infallibility of the military (and its role in the aftermath of this shooting as a stand-in for the American people), the framing of the event as an act of “terror” closely akin to the Oklahoma City bombings or September 11, and the reinforcement and repetition of latently Orientalist “East vs. West” tropes in coverage that firmly positioned Hasan as an un-American other.

In sum, across the entire population of broadcast media segments that covered the Fort Hood shooting, the words “terror,” “terrorist” or “terrorism” were used 1,258 times in coverage. Nearly half of these terms (556) appeared in Fox coverage alone. In contrast, the terms “mass shooting,” “spree” or “lone gunman” appeared a total of 82 times across all segments, typically appearing early on in coverage and in on-screen headlines (See Table 2).

|       | “terror”/”terrorism” | “mass shooting” | “spree” or “lone gunman” |
|-------|----------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| FOX   | 556                  | 2               | 14                       |
| MSNBC | 198                  | 5               | 5                        |
| CNN   | 326                  | 19              | 10                       |
| NBC   | 13                   | 2               | 2                        |
| ABC   | 49                   | 1               | 0                        |
| CBS   | 165                  | 12              | 10                       |

Table 2: the prevalence of descriptive terms for the Fort Hood shooting, by media outlet

### **Violence and mass shootings in Killeen and Fort Hood**

The 2009 shooting at Fort Hood took place nearly six months to the day after the Camp Liberty shooting, six years into the American occupation of Iraq and near the very end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The shooting was not the first incident of large-scale violence to afflict the town of Killeen, which is home to Fort Hood, a sprawling complex with 45,000 soldiers and airmen and nearly 9,000 civilian employees.<sup>277</sup> Eighteen years prior, in 1991, George Hennard, a resident of Belton, Texas, crashed his pickup truck into a busy Killeen restaurant, Luby’s Cafeteria, and opened fire on the customers within. Hennard killed 23 people and injured 20, exchanging gunfire with police before committing suicide.<sup>278</sup> The

<sup>277</sup> Fort Hood Public Affairs Office, Fort Hood Fact Sheet No. 0703, <http://www.hood.army.mil/facts/FS%200703%20-%20Fort%20Hood%20Overview.pdf>.

<sup>278</sup> T. Hayes, “Gunman Kills 22 and himself in Texas Cafeteria,” *New York Times*, October 17, 1991, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/10/17/us/gunman-kills-22-and-himself-in-texas-cafeteria.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>; B. Chasnoff, “Luby’s Rampage Victim



1991 Killeen shooting remained the deadliest American mass shooting until it was surpassed by the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting and later by the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary shooting in Newtown, Connecticut. The shooting at Luby's Cafeteria remains the deadliest American mass shooting to date that did not take place at a school.

Fort Hood has seen other high-profile incidents of violence in recent years. In September 2008, a 21-year-old 1st Cavalry Division soldier shot his lieutenant to death and then killed himself. Specialist Jody Wirawan, of Alaska, shot himself to death after killing his lieutenant, Robert Fletcher, 24, of Florida.<sup>279</sup>

In 2014, another mass shooting, carried out by 34-year-old Specialist Ivan Lopez, claimed the lives of three soldiers and wounded 16 more. Lopez reportedly moved throughout the base in his own car throughout the rampage, shooting individuals at three separate buildings on base before killing himself, just one mile away from the building where the 2009 shooting took place.<sup>280</sup>

In 2015, two murder-suicides shook the base: the first, in January, involved two deaths—the shooter, Franklin Aguilar, and his victim, Christina McDaniel. The second,

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Revisiting Grief,” *The Houston Chronicle*, November 7, 2009, <http://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/article/Luby-s-rampage-victim-revisiting-grief-1586688.php>.

<sup>279</sup> “Gunman Kills 12, Wounds 31 at Fort Hood,” *NBCNews.com*, [http://www.nbcnews.com/id/33678801/ns/us\\_news-crime\\_and\\_courts/t/gunman-kills-wounds-fort-hood/#.VKiV7ye1f-A](http://www.nbcnews.com/id/33678801/ns/us_news-crime_and_courts/t/gunman-kills-wounds-fort-hood/#.VKiV7ye1f-A).

<sup>280</sup> M. Fernandez and A. Blinder, “Army Releases Detailed Account of Base Rampage,” *New York Times*, April 7, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/08/us/officials-give-account-of-fort-hood-shooting.html>.

in February, involved 30-year-old Specialist Ata-se Giffa, who fatally shot himself and three others, injuring one non-fatally, in Killeen.<sup>281</sup>

### **The shooting**

Army Major Nidal Malik Hasan, who was 39 at the time of the Fort Hood shooting, was a single, childless American-born son of immigrant parents. He was born in Arlington County, Virginia, where he lived with his two brothers and parents, who had emigrated to the U.S. from a Palestinian town near Jerusalem. Hasan joined the Army directly out of high school, against his parents' wishes.<sup>282</sup> The Army put him through medical school, where he trained to be a psychiatrist. He received his undergraduate degree in biochemistry at Virginia Tech and went to medical school at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in Bethesda, Md.<sup>283</sup>

Hasan's introduction to the military came during a period of consistently lowered recruitment standards—the proportion of new Army recruits with high school diplomas plunged nearly 25 percent between 2003 (the beginning of the Iraq War) and 2007, from 94 percent to 70.7 percent.<sup>284</sup> Other loosened measures (which some attributed to attempts to grow the Army during wartime in the midst of a particularly unpopular war)

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<sup>281</sup> M. Schehl, "Fort Hood Soldier Shoots Four and Himself, Police Say," *Army Times*, February 24, 2015, <http://www.armytimes.com/story/military/crime/2015/02/24/ata-se-giffa-shooting-fort-hood/23963507/>.

<sup>282</sup> "Profile: Major Nidal Malik Hasan," *BBCNews.com*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8345944.stm>.

<sup>283</sup> J. Dao, "Told of War Horror, Gunman Feared Deployment," *New York Times*, November 6, 2009.

<sup>284</sup> F. Kaplan, "Dumb and Dumber: The U.S. Army Lowers Recruitment Standards . . . Again," *Slate.com*, [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/war\\_stories/2008/01/dumb\\_and\\_dumber.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/war_stories/2008/01/dumb_and_dumber.html).

included waivers for criminal and medical problems that previously would have rendered applicants unfit for service.<sup>285</sup>

Hasan spent six years, beginning in 2003, practicing as a psychiatrist during his residency at what was then the Walter Reed Army Medical Center.<sup>286</sup> During his time at Walter Reed, Hasan's practice and training included a fellowship in disaster and preventive psychiatry.

His behavior and comportsment at Walter Reed reportedly raised concerns among his peers and superiors, who later described his behavior as "disconnected, aloof, paranoid, belligerent, and schizoid," antagonizing fellow students during his training, and espousing extremist Islamic views.<sup>287</sup> Hasan's worrisome behavior sparked a series of discussions in the spring of 2009 among psychiatrists and other officials at Walter Reed, seriously examining whether Hasan was mentally unstable and unfit to serve as an Army psychiatrist.<sup>288</sup> Ultimately, however, both because of the protracted and difficult process associated with dismissing Army doctors, the dearth of soldiers with medical credentials amid lowered recruitment requirements, and the lack of specific evidence at the time, Army officials at Walter Reed declined to pursue his dismissal, assuming his superiors at

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<sup>285</sup> S. Inskip and T. Bowman, "Army Documents Show Lower Recruiting Standards," *NPR: Morning Edition*, April 17, 2008, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=89702118>.

<sup>286</sup> The former Walter Reed Army Medical Center, located in Washington, D.C., served as the primary flagship medical center from 1909 (when it was known as the Walter Reed General Hospital) until 2011, when it merged with the National Naval Medical Center to form the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center.

<sup>287</sup> D. Zwerdling, "Walter Reed Officials Asked: Was Hasan Psychotic?" *NPR: All Things Considered*, November 11, 2009, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=120313570>.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*

Fort Hood, where he was due to be transferred after his residency, would follow up with support and monitoring.<sup>289</sup>

Federal law enforcement officials later reported that nearly a year prior to the Fort Hood shooting, in December 2008, Hasan had come to the attention of a joint terrorism task force overseen by the FBI because of his internet activity – alleged posts on Islamic extremist websites discussing suicide bombings and making threats.<sup>290</sup> The FBI also became aware of communications between Hasan and a well-known radical Yemeni cleric, Anwar, al-Awlaki. However, the task force concluded that Hasan’s communications with al-Awlaki were “fairly benign” and consistent with his research on post-traumatic stress.<sup>291</sup> Hasan’s supervisors at Walter Reed were not aware of this investigation.

In July, 2009, Hasan was transferred to Fort Hood. He moved to a small apartment near base, in a low-income neighborhood. He worshipped at the Islamic Community of Greater Killeen, where his fellow worshippers described him as a quiet, shy man who usually left the mosque directly after prayers. He occasionally wore his Army uniform to the mosque, on days when he was set to report to duty.<sup>292</sup> Cousins and family members interviewed after the shootings said that although they perceived Hasan as becoming more devout after the deaths of his parents, he was a sensitive introvert, and

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

<sup>290</sup> “Gunman Kills 12, Wounds 31 at Fort Hood,” *NBCNews.com*, [http://www.nbcnews.com/id/33678801/ns/us\\_news-crime\\_and\\_courts/t/gunman-kills-wounds-fort-hood/#.VKiV7ye1f-A](http://www.nbcnews.com/id/33678801/ns/us_news-crime_and_courts/t/gunman-kills-wounds-fort-hood/#.VKiV7ye1f-A).

<sup>291</sup> “Answers Sought on Fort Hood Suspect’s Link to Imam,” *NPR: Morning Edition*, November 10, 2009, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=120266334>.

<sup>292</sup> C. Krauss and J. Dao, “Details Trickle out as Army Tests Sole-Killer Theory,” *New York Times*, November 7, 2009.

they couldn't remember him ever specifically espousing anti-American views, although he told relatives in Virginia that other soldiers harassed him because he was a Muslim, calling him insulting names and scraping an Islamic bumper sticker off his car. Primarily, they said, he was interested in finding a wife.<sup>293</sup>

According to military prosecutors, Hasan purchased the weapons used in the Fort Hood shooting in late July 2009, at a gun shop in Killeen called "Guns Galore." Hasan entered the store on July 31 and asked the manager to show him the most technologically advanced weapon they carried that had the highest magazine capacity. According to eyewitnesses (including Fort Hood resident Army Specialist William Gilbert, a regular visitor to the store, who reportedly took an hour to explain the weapon's capabilities to Hasan), he took a cell phone video of the manager showing him how to clean, disassemble and operate the gun he recommended, an FN 5.7 semiautomatic pistol. In the weeks prior to the shooting, Hasan also reportedly visited Stan's Outdoor Shooting Range, south of Killeen, several times, practicing his marksmanship on a rifle range with silhouette targets.<sup>294</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> B. Casselman, A. Zimmerman, and M. Bustillo, "A Helper With Worries of His Own: Coming Deployment to Iraq Said to Have Upset Maj. Hasan, Who Specialized in Treating Other Soldiers," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 6, 2009, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB125748027248433099>; A. Blomfield, "Fort Hood Shooter is Deeply Sensitive Introvert, say Palestinian relatives," *The Telegraph*, November 7, 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/6521037/Fort-Hood-shooter-is-deeply-sensitive-introvert-say-Palestinian-relatives.html>.

<sup>294</sup> S. Huddleston, "Hasan Sought Gun with 'High Magazine Capacity,'" *MySanAntonio.com*, <http://blog.mysanantonio.com/military/2010/10/hasan-sought-gun-with-high-magazine-capacity/>.

On Wednesday, the day before the shooting, Hasan began emptying his apartment of his belongings, telling his neighbors he was about to be deployed to either Iraq or Afghanistan. He gave away most of his belongings, including furniture, an alarm clock, bags of vegetables, and copies of the Qur'an, to his neighbors in his apartment complex.  
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In the early morning hours of the day of the shooting, November 5, 2009, Hasan telephoned another neighbor, William Bell, whose wireless internet he sometimes used, and asked him to switch on his internet system, bidding Bell goodbye. He then attended predawn prayers at the mosque, where fellow worshippers described him as calm and relaxed.<sup>296</sup>

Around 1:30 p.m., Central Time, Hasan entered the waiting room of his workplace, the Soldier Readiness Processing Center, a medical center on base where soldiers who were deploying overseas—or newly returning—visited to complete their medical paperwork, and to receive immunizations and screenings.<sup>297</sup> Hasan was armed with both the FN 5.7 semiautomatic pistol, to which he had affixed two laser sights, and a

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<sup>295</sup> J. Brady, "Portrait Emerges of Hasan as Troubled Man," *NPR: All Things Considered*, November 11, 2009, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=120317524>; P. Sherwell and N. Allen, "Fort Hood Shooting: Inside Story of how Massacre on Military Base Happened," *The Telegraph*, November 7, 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/6521578/Fort-Hood-shooting-inside-story-of-how-massacre-on-military-base-happened.html>.

<sup>296</sup> P. Sherwell and N. Allen, "Fort Hood Shooting: Inside Story of how Massacre on Military Base Happened," *The Telegraph*, November 7, 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/6521578/Fort-Hood-shooting-inside-story-of-how-massacre-on-military-base-happened.html>.

<sup>297</sup> "Gunman Kills 12, Wounds 31 at Fort Hood," *NBCNews.com*, [http://www.nbcnews.com/id/33678801/ns/us\\_news-crime\\_and\\_courts/t/gunman-kills-wounds-fort-hood/#.VKiV7ye1f-A](http://www.nbcnews.com/id/33678801/ns/us_news-crime_and_courts/t/gunman-kills-wounds-fort-hood/#.VKiV7ye1f-A).

.357 Magnum revolver.<sup>298</sup> In his pockets, he carried 16 magazines loaded with rounds of ammunition, some containing as many as 30 rounds.<sup>299</sup>

According to accounts from eyewitnesses, Hasan first sat down, as if to begin helping soldiers with their paperwork, then stood on a desk, shouting “Allahu Akhbar!” (“God is Great!”) before opening fire on nearby soldiers, all of whom were unarmed, in keeping with base policies.<sup>300</sup> Witnesses who testified at Hasan’s later court-martial proceedings described Hasan opening fire in a “fanlike motion” across the waiting area, hunting down wounded soldiers in an attempt to finish them off.<sup>301</sup> Capt. John Gaffaney, a 56-year-old reservist from Serra Mesa, California, charged at Hasan with a chair before being shot and killed; another soldier, Spc. Logan Burnett, tried to throw a table at Hasan, but was wounded in the hip before he was able to reach him. In the melee, 30-year-old

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<sup>298</sup> C. Cuomo, E. Friedman, S. Netter, and R. Esposito, “Alleged Fort Hood Shooter Nidal Malik Hasan Was ‘Calm,’ Methodical During Massacre,” *ABCNews.com*, <http://abcnews.go.com/story?id=9012995>; “Prosecution to Rest in Ft. Hood Massacre Trial,” *CBSNews.com*, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/prosecution-to-rest-in-ft-hood-massacre-trial/>.

<sup>299</sup> D. Zucchini, “Police Officers Describe Fort Hood Gunfight,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 21, 2010, <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/oct/21/nation/la-na-fort-hood-20101021>.

<sup>300</sup> P. Sherwell and N. Allen, “Fort Hood Shooting: Inside Story of how Massacre on Military Base Happened,” *The Telegraph*, November 7, 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/6521578/Fort-Hood-shooting-inside-story-of-how-massacre-on-military-base-happened.html>; J. Rubin and M. Smith, “‘I am the shooter,’ Nidal Hasan tells Fort Hood court-martial,” *CNN*, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/08/06/justice/hasan-court-martial/>; P. Baker and C. Krauss, “President, at Service, Hails Fort Hood’s Fallen,” *New York Times*, November 10, 2009, [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/11/us/11hood.html?scp=1&sq=Fort%20Hood%20memorial%20service&st=cse&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/11/us/11hood.html?scp=1&sq=Fort%20Hood%20memorial%20service&st=cse&_r=0).

<sup>301</sup> J. Schwartz, “Witnesses in Fort Hood Shooting Hearing Say Hasan Returned to Shoot Same Victims Over and Over,” *American-Statesman* (Austin, TX), October 15, 2010, <http://www.statesman.com/news/news/state-regional/witnesses-in-fort-hood-shooting-hearing-say-hasan-/nRyKN/>.

Johnny Kallon, a human resources specialist about to be deployed to Iraq, was among those who called 911.<sup>302</sup>

Testimony by eyewitnesses at Hasan's court-martial proceedings suggested that Hasan passed up several opportunities to shoot civilians that he found hiding beneath desks, instead firing point-blank at uniformed soldiers.<sup>303</sup> Witnesses described Hasan as calm and methodical, firing continuously upon his victims, who ran for cover amid slippery pools of blood.

As Hasan ran outside the processing center, he encountered Fort Hood civilian police officers Kimberly Munley and Mark Todd, who ordered him to halt and exchanged gunfire with Hasan. Hasan opened fire first on Munley, striking her in the hand, thigh and knee. Hasan walked up to Munley and kicked her pistol out of reach, at which point Todd returned fire, shooting Hasan five times. Hasan, who was handcuffed by Todd and lost consciousness shortly thereafter, was eventually paralyzed from the waist down as a result of his injuries.

The entire shooting, which lasted about ten minutes, resulted in the deaths of 13 people—12 soldiers and one civilian. The victims ranged in age from 19 to 62; ten men and three women, including a pregnant private, Francheska Velez.<sup>304</sup> There are some

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<sup>302</sup> P. Sherwell and N. Allen, "Fort Hood Shooting: Inside Story of how Massacre on Military Base Happened," *The Telegraph*, November 7, 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/6521578/Fort-Hood-shooting-inside-story-of-how-massacre-on-military-base-happened.html>.

<sup>303</sup> D. Zuchino, "Police Officers Describe Fort Hood Gunfight," *Los Angeles Times*, October 21, 2010, <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/oct/21/nation/la-na-fort-hood-20101021>.

<sup>304</sup> J. Schwartz, "Witnesses in Fort Hood Shooting Hearing Say Hasan Returned to Shoot Same Victims Over and Over," *American-Statesman* (Austin, TX), October 15, 2010,



discrepancies in the Army's reports of the number of people injured non-fatally in the attack, ranging from 32<sup>305</sup> to 42<sup>306</sup>; ultimately, however, Hasan was formally charged with 13 specifications of murder and 32 specifications of attempted murder.<sup>307</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the shooting, Hasan's death—and the death of Sergeant Munley, who survived the shooting—was widely (and erroneously) reported.<sup>308</sup> Along with the other victims, Hasan was transported to a nearby hospital, where Fort Hood officials reported that he had lapsed into a coma. Investigator Kelly Jameson testified that 214 cartridge casings fired from Hasan's pistol were recovered from the shooting scene. When Hasan was finally felled by Todd's shots, he still had 177 rounds of unused ammunition on his person.<sup>309</sup>

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<http://www.statesman.com/news/news/state-regional/witnesses-in-fort-hood-shooting-hearing-say-hasan-/nRykN/>; P. Baker and C. Krauss, "President, at Service, Hails Fort Hood's Fallen," *New York Times*, November 10, 2009, [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/11/us/11hood.html?scp=1&sq=Fort%20Hood%20memorial%20service&st=cse&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/11/us/11hood.html?scp=1&sq=Fort%20Hood%20memorial%20service&st=cse&_r=0).

<sup>305</sup> *Nidal M. Hasan v. Gregory Gross* 71 M.J. 416, Nos. 13-8011/13-8012/AR (Armed Forces App. 2012), <http://www.armfor.uscourts.gov/newcaaf/opinions/2012SepTerm/13-8011-8012.pdf>.

<sup>306</sup> *Protecting the Force: Lessons from Fort Hood*, Department of Defense Report: January 2010, [http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/DOD-ProtectingTheForce-Web\\_Security\\_HR\\_13Jan10.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/DOD-ProtectingTheForce-Web_Security_HR_13Jan10.pdf).

<sup>307</sup> *Nidal M. Hasan v. Gregory Gross* 71 M.J. 416, Nos. 13-8011/13-8012/AR (Armed Forces App. 2012), <http://www.armfor.uscourts.gov/newcaaf/opinions/2012SepTerm/13-8011-8012.pdf>.

<sup>308</sup> P. Sherwell and N. Allen, "Fort Hood Shooting: Inside Story of how Massacre on Military Base Happened," *The Telegraph*, November 7, 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/6521578/Fort-Hood-shooting-inside-story-of-how-massacre-on-military-base-happened.html>.

<sup>309</sup> D. Zucchini, "Police Officers Describe Fort Hood Gunfight," *Los Angeles Times*, October 21, 2010, <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/oct/21/nation/la-na-fort-hood-20101021>.

Hasan was swiftly identified as the alleged shooter, and in the immediate aftermath of the shooting, amid conflicting reports of multiple gunmen and erroneous reports of Hasan's death, many mass media—especially broadcast media—speculated widely about possible links to broader terrorist organizations.<sup>310</sup> Eight hours after the shootings, however, Lieutenant General Robert W. Cone, a base spokesman, described Hasan as the “sole gunman,” and noted that the preliminary evidence suggested no link to terrorism.<sup>311</sup> Ultimately, in a decision that raised criticism from politicians and victims of the shooting, the military declined to categorize the shooting as an act of “terrorism,” instead categorizing the shooting as an act of workplace violence.<sup>312</sup>

In January, 2010, the Department of Defense (DoD) released an 86-page report titled “Protecting the Force: Lessons from Fort Hood.” The report included findings from an independent review conducted to investigate military and DoD policies and procedures aimed at identifying and mitigating threats of violence among service members. According to the final summary report based on the conclusions of the January DoD report, major holes in military procedure and policy existed that may have exacerbated the effects of the Fort Hood shooting:

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<sup>310</sup> E.g., “Shooting at Fort Hood,” *Fox News: Hannity Show*, November 5, 2009; “12 Killed in Shooting Spree at an Army Base,” *Fox Special Report with Bret Baier*, November 5, 2009; “Fort Hood, Texas Shootings,” *NBC Nightly News*, November 8, 2009; “Fort Hood, Texas Shootings / Hasan,” *CNN News*, November 5, 2009.

<sup>311</sup> R. McFadden, “Army Doctor Held in Ft. Hood Rampage,” *New York Times*, November 5, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/06/us/06forthood.html>.

<sup>312</sup> C. Burton, “Terror Act or Workplace Violence? Hasan Trial Raises Sensitive Issue,” *Associated Press*, August 11, 2013, [http://tucson.com/news/national/terror-act-or-workplace-violence-hasan-trial-raises-sensitive-issue/article\\_be513c51-a35d-5b4f-b3a0-13654f019ea6.html](http://tucson.com/news/national/terror-act-or-workplace-violence-hasan-trial-raises-sensitive-issue/article_be513c51-a35d-5b4f-b3a0-13654f019ea6.html).

The Independent Review found that DoD programs, policies, and procedures that address identification of indicators for violence and radicalization are outdated, incomplete and fail to include key indicators of potentially violent behaviors. There is no risk assessment system available to supervisors and commanders to help them identify and mitigate internal threats.<sup>313</sup>

The report also found that background checks on civilians entering the military or DoD civilian workforce were incomplete, limited in scope, or not conducted at all.

Guidelines for adjudicating security clearances were vague, and training on how and to whom significant information reports were made was described as insufficient. The report also recommended reviewing pre- and post-deployment screening procedures for identifying factors for post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injuries, substance abuse, depression, and other potential violence indicators. The existing policies for screening relied almost entirely on self-reporting, and devoted just one question to assessing whether service members had serious conflict with others.<sup>314</sup>

Before the formal court-martial proceedings began, Hasan's decision to grow a long beard—in violation of military standards for grooming—became a major point of contention, leading the judge initially assigned to Hasan's case to issue him six contempt citations, one for each appearance Hasan made in court with an unshaven face. The military judge, Gregory Gross, who served as the Chief Circuit Judge at Fort Hood,

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<sup>313</sup> R. Gates to Secretaries of the Military Departments et al., memorandum, "Final Recommendations of the Fort Hood Follow-On Review," August 18, 2010, <http://www.defense.gov/news/d20100820FortHoodFollowon.pdf>, 4; *Protecting the Force: Lessons from Fort Hood*, Department of Defense Report: January 2010, [http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/DOD-ProtectingTheForce-Web\\_Security\\_HR\\_13Jan10.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/DOD-ProtectingTheForce-Web_Security_HR_13Jan10.pdf).

<sup>314</sup> Ibid.

ordered that Hasan be forcibly shaved. Gross described Hasan’s beard as “a disruption to this trial, and a violation of [military uniform].”<sup>315</sup>

Hasan filed an interlocutory appeal to both halt the order that he be forcibly shaved and to request the removal of Judge Gross on the basis of bias. His appeal was granted. The order to forcibly shave Hasan was vacated, and Gross was removed from the case on the basis of the appearance of bias.<sup>316</sup> The opinion in the case cited a previous ruling that required a judge to recuse himself from the court proceedings following the Oklahoma City bombing for similar reasons—most notably his physical and social proximity to the bombing (a factor shared by Judge Gross, who was on-base with his family during the Fort Hood shootings). The opinion also noted that Gross had displayed considerable animus against Hasan during court proceedings, in one case accusing Hasan of smearing feces in the court bathroom (the substance turned out to be mud, tracked in by a guard).<sup>317</sup>

The U.S. government spent nearly \$5 million to court-martial Hasan, who served as his own attorney.<sup>318</sup> At the opening of his court-martial proceedings, on August 6, 2013, Hasan acknowledged that he was the shooter.

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<sup>315</sup> *Nidal M. Hasan v. Gregory Gross* 71 M.J. 416, Nos. 13-8011/13-8012/AR (Armed Forces App. 2012), <http://www.armfor.uscourts.gov/newcaaf/opinions/2012SepTerm/13-8011-8012.pdf>.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>318</sup> B. Woosley, “Fort Hood Trial Cost Government \$5 Million,” *Christian Science Monitor*, October 5, 2013, <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Latest-News-Wires/2013/1005/Fort-Hood-trial-cost-government-5-million>.

“On November 5, 2009, 13 U.S. soldiers were killed and many more injured,” Hasan said. “The evidence will clearly show that I am the shooter.”<sup>319</sup> He went on to say that he had been on the wrong side of a war against Islam, and had “switched over.”<sup>320</sup>

On August 23, 2013, after a short trial during which he called no witnesses and offered no testimony, Hasan was convicted on 13 charges of premeditated murder and 32 of attempted murder by a panel of senior officers.<sup>321</sup> Three weeks later, on August 28, Hasan was sentenced to death.<sup>322</sup>

Following years of pressure from the families of victims and an expansion of eligibility by Congress changing the criteria for recognition, Army Secretary John McHugh announced on February 6, 2015, that victims of the 2009 shooting would be eligible to receive the Purple Heart, and its civilian counterpart, the Defense of Freedom medal.<sup>323</sup>

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<sup>319</sup> B. Kenber, “Hasan Admits to Shooting Fort Hood Soldiers,” *Washington Post*, August 6, 2013, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trial-of-nidal-hasan-accused-fort-hood-gunman-to-begin-tuesday-after-delays/2013/08/06/dae4dfe6-fe9b-11e2-96a8-d3b921c0924a\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trial-of-nidal-hasan-accused-fort-hood-gunman-to-begin-tuesday-after-delays/2013/08/06/dae4dfe6-fe9b-11e2-96a8-d3b921c0924a_story.html).

<sup>320</sup> Ibid.

<sup>321</sup> B. Kenber, “Nidal Hasan Convicted of Fort Hood Killings,” *Washington Post*, August 23, 2013, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/nidal-hasan-convicted-of-fort-hood-killings/2013/08/23/39c468c8-0c03-11e3-9941-6711ed662e71\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/nidal-hasan-convicted-of-fort-hood-killings/2013/08/23/39c468c8-0c03-11e3-9941-6711ed662e71_story.html).

<sup>322</sup> B. Kenber, “Nidal Hasan Sentenced to Death for Fort Hood Shooting Rampage,” *Washington Post*, August 28, 2013, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/nidal-hasan-sentenced-to-death-for-fort-hood-shooting-rampage/2013/08/28/aad28de2-offa-11e3-bdf6-e4fc677d94a1\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/nidal-hasan-sentenced-to-death-for-fort-hood-shooting-rampage/2013/08/28/aad28de2-offa-11e3-bdf6-e4fc677d94a1_story.html).

<sup>323</sup> D. Lamothe, “Army Approves Purple Hearts for Soldiers Wounded in 2009 Fort Hood Shooting,” *Washington Post*, February 6, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2015/02/06/army-approves-purple-hearts-for-soldiers-wounded-in-2009-fort-hood-shooting/>.

### **Broadcast media coverage of the shooting**

MSNBC, CNN and Fox News all broke from their regular programming to cover the shooting as it unfolded, and ABC, CBS and NBC all led their 30-minute evening nightly news programs with extended coverage of the event—over 13 minutes on NBC, 10 minutes on ABC (The ABC program *Nightline* also devoted 25 of their 30-minute broadcast on November 5 to covering the shooting), and 13 minutes on CBS.

Intense coverage continued the following day, with all three major evening network news broadcasts again devoting over half of their 30-minute broadcasts to coverage of the Fort Hood shooting.

On November 10, when a large memorial service—at which President Obama spoke—was held to commemorate the shooting and recognize the victims, all three major cable networks (Fox, MSNBC, and CNN) covered the memorial service live and nearly in its entirety, comprising close to an hour of coverage on each network devoted to the service. CBS and ABC also covered the memorial service live, but covered shorter portions—18 and 22 minutes of the program, respectively.

Altogether, broadcast coverage of the Fort Hood shooting comprised 91 segments, representing a total of 12 hours and 31 minutes of coverage—over 20 times more coverage than the Fort Bragg and Camp Liberty shootings combined.

There was also considerably more print coverage of the Fort Hood shooting than there had been of the Fort Bragg or Camp Liberty shootings. In the years following the shooting, the *Washington Post* published 35 articles covering the shooting, *The New York Times* published 34, and *USA Today* published 23. The majority of print coverage was

devoted to the legal aftermath of the shooting, charting the minutiae of the court-martial process: the contention over Hasan's beard, his decision to represent himself, the removal of the initial judge in the case, problems with the jury, and a lawsuit filed by several victims against military officials at Fort Hood.

### **Frames**

One of the largest differences between the broadcast coverage of the Fort Hood shooting and the Fort Bragg and Camp Liberty shootings was the sheer volume of coverage—20 times more coverage than the other two shootings combined. Some of the differences between coverage of Fort Hood and the other two shootings can be attributed to the scope of the event. The Fort Hood shooting was more deadly than previous shootings, and it took place on a military base in a community with a rather long history of high-profile incidents of indiscriminate violence. But there were several other marked departures from coverage of previous shootings in broadcast media. Among the most prevalent frames that were represented in this coverage, the most common were the following. First, a sustained focus on the preeminence and nobility of the American military as an institution, and its role as a stand-in for the American people in the aftermath of the shooting—a role that was bolstered by the extremely public nature of the grieving process after the shooting, including a widely televised memorial at which the president himself eulogized each victim at length. Second, there were considerable divisions and questions raised in coverage about the framing of the shooting as an act of “terror” vs. a mass shooting or “killing spree,” often drawing upon Hasan's history of

interest in extremist Islam to bolster the argument for the former, despite officials' refusal to categorize the shooting as an act of terror. Third, much broadcast coverage lapsed into (or, in a few cases, pushed back against the perception of) the reinforcement and repetition of latently Orientalist and Islamophobic tropes that positioned Hasan squarely as an outsider to American culture and society (and contextualized his identity foremost as an Arab Muslim).

### **The preeminence and nobility of the American military**

One of the most visible frames in broadcast media, particularly in the immediate aftermath of the Fort Hood shooting, was a consistent focus on the legacy and cultural prominence of the institution of the American military, with a particular emphasis on its history of multiculturalism, progressivism, inclusivity, volunteerism and heroism. The Fort Hood shooting led to an outpouring of nationalistic and patriotic frames that were far more pervasive and prominent than in the aftermath of the Fort Bragg or Camp Liberty shootings, and the American military (particularly in the context of the memorial service, or high-ranking officials' comments about the shooting) was frequently held up as a stand-in for the American people.

Military sources, particularly highly ranking current and former military officials, were particularly visible in broadcast coverage of the shooting, called upon to emphasize American soldiers' spirit of service and sacrifice, the unflagging patriotism of military service members, and their consistent reflection of uniquely American values.



At the televised memorial service, for example, General George Casey, the Army Chief of Staff, described the victims—and the soldiers in the Army in general—as uniquely emblematic of American values:

Our soldiers and Army civilians lived the warrior ethos that day just as our soldiers and civilians live it every day in Afghanistan, Iraq, and around the world. "I will always place the mission first. I will never accept defeat. I will never quit. And I will never leave a fallen comrade." Our ethos and values are woven into the very fabric of our Army. Our soldiers are cut from the cloth of this great country—a country they love and serve in a time of war.<sup>324</sup>

In an internet address the week of the shooting, President Obama also emphasized the multiculturalism of the U.S. military, reflecting upon how the diversity of military service members reflects the diversity of America as a whole:

They're Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus and nonbelievers. They are descendants of immigrants and immigrants themselves. They reflect the diversity that makes this America, but what they share is a patriotism.<sup>325</sup>

The live-streaming of the memorial service, at which President Obama spoke before a solemn array of the combat boots, rifles and portraits of each fallen victim, further solidified the position of the military as a uniquely American institution standing in for the broader U.S. population in the aftermath of the shooting. In several segments, journalists and commentators explicitly compared Obama's reassuring leadership role in the wake of the shooting to previous moments of presidential comfort and national unity following events like September 11 or the Oklahoma City bombings—Fox News anchor Bret Baier even described Obama's role as "comforter-in-chief."<sup>326</sup> These comparisons positioned the Fort Hood shootings as a tragedy that happened not just to the victims at

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<sup>324</sup> "Barack Obama Speech at Ft. Hood Memorial," *CNN Newsroom*, November 10, 2009.

<sup>325</sup> "Ft. Hood, Texas / Shootings / Hasan / Munley," *NBC Nightly News*, November 7, 2009.

<sup>326</sup> "Special Report with Bret Baier," *Fox News*, November 10, 2009; "Barack Obama Speech at Ft. Hood Memorial," *CNN Newsroom*, November 10, 2009.

Fort Hood (whose deaths represented a final measure of heroism in service to a country they loved) but to *all* Americans. Consequently, the many examples of outpourings of support featured by broadcast media—Killeen residents holding signs indicating their support of the troops, civilians proudly waving American flags, massive Veteran’s Day parades—illustrated the degree to which individual Americans unaffiliated with the military were presented as grieving the shooting as a particular moment of American communal loss and tragedy, an opportunity to rally around the troops. At a Veteran’s Day parade a few days after the shooting, for example, NBC Evening News interviewed a parade-goer named April, who explained that her presence at the parade was intended to show support for military members in the wake of the Fort Hood shooting. “After what happened, going through [the shooting], you really realize what they go through, and it feels more important to show your support and that you appreciate them.”<sup>327</sup>

Interestingly, much of this coverage of the military explicitly coded it as a Christian institution. Many segments on CNN featured footage of Killeen residents waving large signs of military support by the highway outside the base, signs that usually also contained Bible verses and assurances that the residents were praying for Fort Hood. At the televised memorial service, the commanding general of Fort Hood quoted from the book of Isaiah, a soldier sang a Christian hymn, and a Christian chaplain led the assembled attendees in prayer.

A handful of media segments, primarily on CBS, did offer clear and explicit criticism of the military, beyond a perceived failure of political correctness. In a

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<sup>327</sup> “Ft. Hood, Texas / Shootings / Hasan,” *NBC Nightly News*, November 11, 2009.

November 8 broadcast of *Face the Nation*, for example, journalist Bob Schieffer offered an editorial comment about the shooting at the very end of the broadcast, weighing in on the many opportunities military officials had to identify Hasan's troubling pattern of behavior:

SCHIEFFER: Finally today, the president has asked the nation not to jump to conclusions about what happened at Fort Hood, which is usually good advice, but it's also what government officials generally say when the government fouls up.

Good advice or not, I am jumping to an obvious conclusion. This should not have happened. That doctor should not have been at Fort Hood. I don't care how hard-up the Army is for mental health professionals. A government psychiatrist with bad performance ratings who has been trying to get out of the Army and who had been saying what Dr. Hasan had been saying about the war on terrorism should not have been shipped off to Fort Hood to give grief counseling ...

Certainly no officer with his record would have been allowed to lead soldiers into combat. But sadly, this shows the Army still does not take protecting soldiers' mental health as seriously as it does training them to shoot.

And then there is the other part that often happens in government. Don't deal with the problem, shuffle it off to somewhere else. When he had problems at Walter Reed hospital, the doctor was just packed off to Fort Hood.<sup>328</sup>

### **The straitjacket of “political correctness”: a pervasive sub-frame**

Overall, in broadcast coverage, there was very little overt criticism of the military as an institution. A few segments did raise the question of whether the military should have caught the many red flags that were present in Hasan's military history—a problem that military officials argued was impossible to address adequately because of widespread “political correctness” in the military—but very few thoroughly dug into specific policy or organizational failures that led to Hasan's descent into violence. Instead, this narrative

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<sup>328</sup> *CBS's Face the Nation*, November 8, 2009.

of a stifling culture of “political correctness” that impeded the military’s ability to catch extremists like Hasan was repeatedly emphasized.

Fox News, in particular, presented some criticism of the military’s failures to catch the warning signs present in Hasan’s military history. But these criticisms were primarily focused on what Fox commentators described as the military’s inability to overcome endemic political correctness, a position that they argued (rather than gun policy or other breaches of military policy) reflected a refusal to take terrorism seriously and led directly to the shooting. On the November 6 O’Reilly Factor, for example, the day after the shooting, Bill O’Reilly invited Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Peters to weigh in on the shooting:

LT. COL. RALPH PETERS, FOX NEWS STRATEGIC ANALYST: Bill, we just need to get a grip on this and put it in perspective ... What happened yesterday at Fort Hood was the worst terrorist attack on American soil since 9/11. It was committed by a Muslim fanatic, who shouted ‘Allah is great’ and gunned down 44 unarmed innocent soldiers and civilians. And our president tells us not to rush to judgment, to wait until all the facts are in.

What facts are we waiting for? This was an Islamist terrorist act. And I’m sorry if it’s inconvenient for Washington to face the facts. But there is no question about it. It was a terrorist act. It was committed by an Islamist. We knew he was an Islamist. The military did nothing about it out of political correctness. So, Bill, what am I missing?<sup>329</sup>

When O’Reilly responded that it was still unclear whether Hasan was mentally ill, part of a larger conspiracy, or simply “snapped,” Peters responded:

PETERS: Yeah, well, first of all, the charge. You know, he was harassed and he broke. Good God. You know, every soldier goes through a little harassment. But let me tell from personal experience, if there’s harassment toward a minority or a religious minority in our military, man, your career is over for harassing him. And this guy filed a charge that was found there was no foundation to the charge. He’s been a troublemaker and a sad sack for a long time. But because he was part of a

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<sup>329</sup> “Impact,” *The O’Reilly Factor*, November 6, 2009.

protected species, a protected minority, the Army let him slide, just reassigned him. And what happens, 13 soldiers, well, 12 soldiers and civilian dead. 28 seriously wounded. A few more lightly wounded. And what do we say? Oops.

No, it's time to get rid of the PC culture in the Army, in society, in the media. And Bill, I believe your viewers understand that this was an act of Islamist terror. And the media is not going to fool them. And President Obama's not going to fool them. And at some point, we need to stop focusing on how tormented this poor Major Hasan was. And remember, how many of the names do we know of the dead? What about the names of the wounded? Have the media covered the family lives that have been destroyed? The lives that have been destroyed? No, it's all about poor Major Hasan. And I am ready to puke.<sup>330</sup>

In other words, the military—held up in most broadcast coverage as a uniquely American institution with a strong history of inclusivity and multiculturalism, was presented as having been *too* tolerant and inclusive in the case of Hasan—its “political correctness” was presented as a weakness that blinded military officials to the impending radicalization and violence that Hasan had apparently grown to embrace. This sub-frame is particularly ironic in light of the many deeply troubling realities that continue to plague the U.S. military—disproportionately high rates of sexual assault faced by female soldiers, for example, as well as the many horrific examples of very un-politically-correct abuses that have come to light in places like Abu Ghraib and other American detention centers in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Often, former and current politicians and policymakers drove this argument. Arizona Senator John McCain, Michigan Representative Peter Hoekstra, former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani, and former Connecticut Senator Joe Lieberman were among the prominent political figures who were quoted saying that that shooting resulted from political correctness in the military. On the CBS Evening News, for example,

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<sup>330</sup> Ibid.

Senator McCain was quoted saying that the military “ought to make sure that political correctness never impedes national security.”<sup>331</sup>

In a November 12 conversation with CNN’s Anderson Cooper (in a broader conversation about political correctness in the military), retired JAG officer Tom Kenniff conflated “political correctness” with what he described as the military’s forward-thinking history of inclusion and multiculturalism:

KENNIFF: Yes, there's a wonderful side to [political correctness]. And look, in a lot of ways the military has been on the forefront of civil rights in this issue. I mean, African-Americans served admirably in the U.S. Army during the Civil War, during the 1940s and 1950s. The military really integrated well before the rest of society.

COOPER: Right.

KENNIFF: And that was a very courageous move because the military has always been heavily Southern Army. So at the time when, you know, areas of the south had Jim Crow laws and so forth, it was a desegregated military. So there's no question that political correctness can be a very good thing.<sup>332333</sup>

### **“Terrorism” or “mass shooting?”**

Beginning with the earliest coverage of the shooting, as news began to break out of Killeen, the question of how to categorize the shooting swiftly arose. As MSNBC reporter Pete Williams said on the afternoon of the shooting, as news began to break:

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<sup>331</sup> *CBS Evening News*, November 12, 2009.

<sup>332</sup> *Hardball*, November 5, 2009.

<sup>333</sup> Notably, Kenniff’s recounting of this period of military history omits the fact that the military was desegregated (in the face of strong opposition by most top military officials at the time, including the Army Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General Walter Smith) *by executive order*, not out of a preemptive willing commitment to progressivism and multiculturalism. Further, this forced desegregation and what Kenniff describes as a culture of “political correctness” are not even mildly comparable.

“You know, the question on everybody’s mind when this first happened was, is this an act of terrorism?”<sup>334</sup>

At the very first news conference following the shooting, General Bob Cone, who was then the commander of Fort Hood, was asked if the military was treating the shooting as an act of terrorism, or as a concerted effort involving multiple individuals. Cone noted that while three people (who were never identified) were initially held as suspects and interviewed, all evidence pointed to a single shooter being responsible for the shooting (which he described in the initial press conference as a “tragic incident”), indicating that the evidence they had did not support categorizing the shooting as a terrorist attack.<sup>335</sup> Despite pressure and criticism from victims, commentators and policymakers, the U.S. Department of Defense and federal law enforcement officials repeatedly declined to characterize the shooting as an act of terrorism, categorizing it instead as an act of workplace violence.<sup>336337</sup>

In broadcast media coverage, however, the question of how to characterize the shooting was far more contentious and less clearly defined. While the White House and

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<sup>334</sup> *Hardball*, November 5, 2009.

<sup>335</sup> “On the Record with Greta Van Susteren,” *Fox News*, November 5, 2009.

<sup>336</sup> C. Burton, “Terror Act or Workplace Violence? Hasan Trial Raises Sensitive Issue,” *Associated Press*, August 11, 2013, [http://tucson.com/news/national/terror-act-or-workplace-violence-hasan-trial-raises-sensitive-issue/article\\_be513c51-a35d-5b4f-b3a0-13654f019ea6.html](http://tucson.com/news/national/terror-act-or-workplace-violence-hasan-trial-raises-sensitive-issue/article_be513c51-a35d-5b4f-b3a0-13654f019ea6.html).

<sup>337</sup> Notably, however, both the National Counterterrorism Center and the State Department count Fort Hood among their lists of terror attacks that took place in 2009. Neither source lists the Fort Bragg or Camp Liberty attacks as an act of terror. Further, the decision to award Purple Hearts to victims of the Fort Hood shooting (an honor that has traditionally been restricted to soldiers injured in battle) underlines the idea that this shooting represented a battle in the “War on Terror”—and the domestic presence of that war in the United States.

military officials avoided the “terror” label, journalists and commentators wrestled with the correct way to describe the shooting, often grappling over which elements signified “terror.” On the evening of the shooting, CNN’s Anderson Cooper raised the question of how to categorize the shooting based on what they knew at the time about the case:

TOM FUENTES, FORMER FBI ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: The motivation in a case like this is what separates, you know, all of the things that we're concerned about. Was it an act of terror in his mind? You know, we've had other present, former military officers do such things. The McVeigh bombing, for example. He had been trained in the military.

So if you want to know, did he commits these acts as an act, in his mind, of terrorism against the United States and his fellow soldiers, or is it a case of being mentally disturbed and something triggered him to act in a violent manner, and it wasn't based on hatred of the United States or the U.S. Army or wanting to kill fellow soldiers? So that's going to be the most difficult thing to determine, because he's the one that is in a position to answer that definitively.

COOPER: That's -- that's a really good point to bring up. I mean, that difference in his mind. How did he see what he was doing? Did he see it as a rational act of political theater, of terrorism, or did he see it as -- or was it some sort of impulsive acting out or anger?<sup>338</sup>

Broadly, most sources and commentators in these broadcast media texts identified several consistent elements that triggered the use of the word “terror” to describe the event: Hasan’s premeditation, the visible and symbolic nature of a the venue—an American military base—and a personal history that pointed to a clear descent into a specific genre of Islamic extremism. In particular, Hasan’s reported link to the Yemeni cleric Anwar al-Awlaki was often invoked as clear evidence that Hasan himself should be categorized as a terrorist. Some broadcasts even referred to al-Awlaki as Hasan’s “spiritual adviser.” Other broadcasts noted that Hasan did not seem to be a part of any

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<sup>338</sup> “Fort Hood, Texas Shootings / Hasan / A Discussion,” *CNN Evening News*, November 5, 2009.



broader plot, and that the 2008 FBI investigation into his contact with al-Awlaki concluded that their interactions were innocuous.

In many broadcasts, journalists attempted to dig into Hasan's past links to al-Awlaki and other individuals and groups who may have been extremists. On CNN, in a segment featuring the on-screen headline "TERROR TIES?" investigative reporter Drew Griffin looked into Hasan's past attendance at an area mosque that may have been visited by al-Awlaki, trying to parse what that history meant for the larger question of whether Hasan himself was a terrorist:

GRIFFIN: The Army says their major was in contact or trying to reach out to a radical Islamic cleric in Yemen, or at least thought to be hiding in Yemen, and most definitely linked to radical Islamic ideology.

Senior investigative officials say there have been as many as 10 to 20 communications that took place. But, in the end, this is what they determined. The conversations were consistent with the Army major's work as a psychiatrist. In other words, the terror investigators thought Nidal Hasan was strictly doing research for his work with soldiers.

So, the investigation just ended. And, while they won't name names, it turns out Nidal Hasan may have been in contact with this same radical cleric eight years ago, when the cleric and Nidal Hasan worshipped at the same mosque just outside Washington.

GRIFFIN: It was inside this suburban Washington mosque that Nidal Hasan may have first heard radical anti-American views. It is a mosque identified in this, the 9/11 Commission report on the attacks of the morning of September 11, 2001.

Now, eight years on, the FBI is looking at whose paths may have crossed here at the Dar al Hijrah Islamic Center. It was in early 2001 a cleric named Anwar al-Awlaki, a U.S. citizen, arrives at the mosque. He had already been the subject of several terrorism investigations, but was never arrested or charged.

By April of that year, the 9/11 Commission reports two of the 9/11 hijackers were attending services here. And, just weeks later, Nidal Hasan chose to hold his mother's funeral services at this same mosque. There is no evidence Nidal Hasan attended the mosque regularly at that time, nor that he ever met with or was influenced by the cleric al-Awlaki, who left the United States a year later. ...

ANDERSON COOPER: So, Drew, if the FBI, as of right now, is find nothing no co-conspirators, in fact, no real motive or any connection to a broader terrorist plot, what do they have?

GRIFFIN: You know, Anderson, as strange as this may sound, a federal law enforcement source very close to the investigation says, don't discount the idea this may be a disgruntled employee, a person who may have had some kind of jihadist views.

But just because he went to Web sites or looked at jihadist Web sites doesn't mean anybody directed him or steered him or influenced him to do this act. He may have just acted alone. And the motive may have been just frustration at work or his own personal problems.<sup>339</sup>

Several broadcast texts raised the question of whether Hasan was a “homegrown” terrorist—a headline that often appeared on-screen in CNN broadcasts, and a descriptor that appeared often on Fox as well, although it did not appear on other channels. There were also clear channel-specific distinctions in coverage of the “terror” question—MSNBC was careful to offer caveats in early coverage that any assertions about terror ties were still speculative, while Fox pursued the terror angle early and often, usually referring to the shooting as an act of “Islamic” or “Islamist” terror, and to Hasan as an “Islamic,” “Islamist” or “Muslim” terrorist—invoking a particular kind of vision of terror that explicitly drew upon a post-September 11 communal American history. Packaging coverage of the shooting, and of the memorial service, with references to large-scale domestic and international terrorist attacks (such as September 11, the London subway bombings, and the Oklahoma City bombings) further underlined the implied categorization of the shooting as an act of terror aimed at the United States itself.

CNN and MSNBC, in particular, argued that Hasan’s characterization as a “terrorist” vs. a “mass shooter” or “lone gunman” came down to his motives—what he

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<sup>339</sup> “Ft. Hood, Texas Shootings,” *CNN Evening News*, November 9, 2009.

intended, and how he thought of himself. In one CNN segment, headlined on-screen as “Lone Gunman or Jihad Soldier?” Drew Griffin argued that if Hasan really was a “jihadist” following orders to kill U.S. troops, he would have been more inconspicuous about his beliefs:

According to a federal source familiar with the investigation, had Nidal Hasan been a classic terrorist like the 9/11 hijackers or the London subway bombers, he would have hid his religion, masked his beliefs, blended in, followed the guidance in the al Qaeda terrorist handbooks, which directs [sic] would-be Jihadists to keep secrets and conceal information even with the closest people where deceiving the enemies is not easy.

Instead, Hasan made no attempt to hide his religion or his conservative Muslim ideology which is exactly why some experts are convinced Nidal Hasan is not a terrorist.<sup>340</sup>

In the same segment, Griffin interviewed Pat Brown, a criminal profiler, who argued that rather than viewing Hasan through the prism of September 11, he and his actions could be more appropriately viewed as belonging to the type of mass shooting event typified by Columbine:

BROWN: He was simply a lone guy who had issues, problems, psychopathic behaviors that then escalated to the point where he wanted to get back at society. And he took it out on his workmates like most of them do.

GRIFFIN: The profile of a loser, a loner, seems to fit the life Nidal Hasan was leading. And Washington local Imams who knew him say Hasan had few if any friends, called him isolated and at two separate mosques was having no luck finding a wife.<sup>341</sup>

This interpretation—Hasan-as-mass-shooter, rather than Hasan-as-terrorist—was prevalent on CBS, which featured the following description by Dr. Alan Lipman, a clinical psychologist, who explicitly compared the shooting to Columbine:

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<sup>340</sup> “Ft. Hood, Texas Shootings / Tribute,” *CNN Evening News*, November 10, 2009.

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*

DR. ALAN LIPMAN: You know, I think that there has been over the course of these many years, when we've seen these events—Columbine, Virginia Tech, just for two examples and now of course Fort Hood and Orlando. There's the idea that people snap because we don't see what's building up beforehand.

What actually happens, though, when there was a Secret Service study that was done back in, I believe '85 that showed this across a large number of cases that I was a part of that-- that shows that these people are building anger for a very long time, Chris ...

They become more and more enraged, more and more persecuted. And finally, it becomes too much and there's a triggering event.

CHRIS WRAGGE: Yeah.

DR. ALAN LIPMAN: A crisis, a loss of a job ... the deployment, and that raises the anger to the point where the trigger is fired and they explode.<sup>342</sup>

Fox News coverage, on the other hand, came down firmly on the side of "Hasan-as-terrorist," and savagely condemned the Obama administration's decision not to refer to

Hasan as such:

GLENN BECK: I may have -- I may have missed this, so if I have, call me. Has anybody over at the White House labeled Nidal Malik Hasan, you know, the terrorist who killed 13 and wounded 30 more at Fort Hood an extremist? I mean, I've heard him referred to as a shooter, which implies there was a gun. Better yet, I've heard him referred to several times as a gunman -- oh, those evil guns.

He's been called troubled, harassed. Did you hear the story of about a bumper sticker scratched off his car?

I know he didn't want to be deployed. His cousin, on this network, called him a good American.

But extremist -- I can't say that I've heard that from the White House. Of course, you wouldn't want to offend anybody.

America, are we this politically correct? Is this who we are? I mean, the ship is sailing. Is this where you want to go? ...

This is what the political arm of Obama said, quote, "Across the country, members of Congress who support reform are being shouted down, physically assaulted." Where? "Hung in effigy, receiving death threats." You want to see my mail? "We can't let extremists hijack this debate or confuse Congress about where the people stand," end quote.

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<sup>342</sup> *The Early Show*, November 7, 2009.

That is extremist. Yes, extremism in America today. But killing 13 people? No, no, no. Hey, don't get hasty. Don't you jump to any conclusions here.

If there was anyone who could be labeled extremist, you would think it might be somebody who spoke of Islamic jihad to his fellow soldiers and then acted on those feelings by picking up a weapon and then killing his fellow soldiers with that weapon. But, no, no, no -- real extremists pick up signs. They make these signs with their kids at night. They're nutjobs. They're protesting the government.

I'm an extremist because I dare expose what no one else will, that there are anti-free market officials, yes, admirers of Mao, Marxists and socialists. ...

But Nidal Malik Hasan? No, no, no. He was just picked on. Yes, he's misunderstood. He's quite. He was a good American. He just snapped.<sup>343</sup>

This viewpoint was ubiquitous on Fox. On November 11, Bill O'Reilly echoed

Beck's vision of Hasan's motivation for the attack:

O'REILLY: As "Talking Points" strongly stated last night, the massacre at Fort Hood is not a crime, not a tragedy, not the action of a man snapping. It is an act of war perpetrated by a Muslim terrorist, who believes that infidels should die.

Now, we all know the Obama administration and many other Americans have trouble with that kind of definition. They don't want to be seen demonizing Islam. I understand that ...

It is important for America to teach the world that terrorism must be confronted, not misdefined. With all due respect to President Obama, you don't win hearts and minds by avoiding the problem. The problem is fanatical Muslims trying to kill innocent Americans and other so-called infidels. That's the problem.<sup>344</sup>

On MSNBC, Keith Olbermann invited former FBI profiler Clint Van Zandt to help him parse Hasan's motives, clearly arguing that Hasan's motives—how he viewed himself and his actions—carried the most weight in determining whether he would be categorized as a terrorist or not.<sup>345</sup> Several days later, Van Zandt offered his own definition of what constitutes a terrorist on MSNBC's "The Ed Show":

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<sup>343</sup> *The Beck Show*, November 11, 2009.

<sup>344</sup> "Talking Points Memo and Top Story," *The O'Reilly Factor*, November 11, 2009.

<sup>345</sup> *Countdown*, November 5, 2009.

ED SCHULTZ: All right. Clint Van Zandt, it just seems to me that all of a sudden us Americans, we're timid. We're afraid to call it what it is. I think it's terrorism. I'm sure other people see it differently.

What's the definition? Are we going to have this academic discussion in this country about what a terrorist attack is?

CLINT VAN ZANDT, FORMER FBI PROFILER AND MSNBC ANALYST: Well, I don't - I don't think we should. As you say, the 9/11 hijackers, they were terrorists. Timothy McVeigh was a domestic terrorist. The DC Snipers were terrorists.

When you are attacking a large group of people who - who have done you no wrong whatsoever and when you're trying to instill terror into a body of people, that's a terrorist. Ed, the challenge here was that - it wasn't a case of connecting the dots, it was a lot of people have the dots, Ed, and they kept the dots in their pocket. They didn't put them out on the table.<sup>346</sup>

Author Dick Morris, a guest on Fox's Hannity show, echoed this characterization of the elements that constitute an act of "terror" versus a mass shooting:

HANNITY: So you're saying political correctness could have kept colleagues in our own government.

DICK MORRIS: Yes.

HANNITY: ... from stopping somebody that they knew was dangerous because they didn't want to take on somebody because radical Islamic roots?

MORRIS: Precisely. And I also think that the hoops that Obama has been jumping through to avoid you calling this terrorism, it's an act of violence, they're comparing it to the Columbine shooter.

Look, you don't have to have a group to commit a terrorist act. A lone wolf can do it. The difference between murder and terrorism is motivation. And this guy obviously had a political motivation which makes it terrorism. It makes the first domestic occurrence on American soil since 9/11.<sup>347</sup>

Policymakers also helped drive the debate over whether Hasan was a terrorist or a lone gunman. On NBC, in in-depth coverage that described the military review of the factors that led to the shooting, NBC's Pentagon correspondent Jim Miklaszewski quoted several senators who called the shooting a "terrorist attack," noting that leaders such as

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<sup>346</sup> *The Ed Show*, November 12, 2009.

<sup>347</sup> "Analysis with Dick Morris," *The Fox Hannity Show*, November 9, 2009.

Senator John McCain and General Jack Keane, the former Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, suspected that political correctness was behind the military's failure to "connect the dots."<sup>348</sup>

### **Orientalist tropes in coverage**

A final theme that pervaded much broadcast coverage of the Fort Hood shooting was the repetition of latently (or, on some occasions, overtly) Orientalist tropes in coverage. This coverage often explicitly positioned Hasan as an outsider to American culture, an unambiguous "other" in American society.

### **Hasan's exclusion from the category of American identity**

In most broadcast coverage, Hasan was coded primarily according to his identity as an Arab Muslim, rather than by his identity as an American citizen and soldier. Several factors sustained this characterization. First, most coverage referred to Hasan using his full name, Nidal Malik Hasan, emphasizing its relative peculiarity and unambiguous Arabic roots.<sup>349</sup> In an environment that clearly coded the American military as a Christian institution, Hasan's name, and his identity as a Muslim soldier, stood in stark contrast. Second, Hasan's religious identity was nearly ubiquitous in broadcast texts. Nearly every segment that took up the shooting mentioned (at least in passing) Islamic extremism in

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<sup>348</sup> "Ft. Hood, Texas / Shootings," *NBC Nightly News*, November 19, 2009.

<sup>349</sup> The use of Hasan's full name—in particular, his Arabic middle name—also reflects, interestingly, the use of Barack Obama's middle name (Hussein) during the 2008 presidential elections, where it was often used to implicitly position him as an American outsider.

general, or Hasan's specific identity as a Muslim soldier. There were some channel-specific variations in the degree to which Hasan's religious identity was invoked as a prominent part of the story—Fox News contained the most references to Islam, or to Hasan's identity as a Muslim (507 references). CBS contained the fewest references to Islam or Hasan's Muslim identity (110 references). Many segments featured the mosque in Killeen where Hasan worshipped, interviewing imams and other attendees about the shooting, putting the "Muslim community" in a position to speak for Hasan. Third, when channels like CNN and Fox reached out to Hasan's extended family, most of whom lived overseas, for comment about the shooting, family members went out of their way to emphasize their love and respect for America, suggesting that the family was already acutely aware of Hasan's status as an implicit outsider. On CNN, for example, Hasan's first cousin was quoted in the following statement:

As Nidal Hasan's first cousin, and because his parents are no longer alive, I wanted to issue a statement on behalf of my family. We are shocked and saddened by the terrible events at Ford Hood today. We send the families of the victims our most heartfelt sympathies. We, like most of America, know very few details at this time. Here's what we do know about our cousin. Nidal was an American citizen. He was born in Arlington, Virginia, and raised here in America. He attended local high schools and eventually went on to attend Virginia Tech. We are filled with grief for the families of today's victims. Our family loves America. We are proud of our country, and saddened by today's tragedy.<sup>350</sup>

Interestingly, in several segments, CNN tried to offer some balance to the issue by interviewing individual Muslim leaders<sup>351</sup>, who offered a clear argument that Hasan's ideology did not fit with their understanding of Islam. Accompanied by footage of a vast

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<sup>350</sup> "Ft. Hood, Texas Shootings / Hasan / A Discussion," *CNN Evening News*, November 5, 2009.

<sup>351</sup> Although notably, the leaders interviewed for these segments were not local to the Killeen community, or even to Texas.



array of multiethnic Muslim men at midday prayer, CNN investigative correspondent

Drew Griffin interviewed a New York City imam:

GRIFFIN: For 20 years, the Muslim faithful have been drawn to this gleaming mosque in the heart of New York. It is time for afternoon prayers; American Muslims and Muslims from overseas as many as 4,000 visit here every day. They come to praise Allah, give thanks, and to pray for peace.

Imam Shamsi Ali preaches against terror here, against the violence that right now sweeps many Muslim countries. But just outside the gates to his mosque, radical Muslims are preaching a very different view.

GRIFFIN: How big a threat are these people who come here, who may be here today, and trying to reach your congregation?

IMAM SHAMSI ALI: Islam is about peace. Islam is about moderation. Islam is about friendship. Islam opposes any kind of hatred against anybody.<sup>352</sup>

Each time CNN aired footage of these positive remarks in the context of covering the Fort Hood shooting, however, the quotes were packaged with another segment featuring a radical American Muslim extremist group called “Revolution Muslim.” Although the link between this group (which appears to consist primarily, if not solely, of two men, a former Israeli Jew who converted to Islam and a white American convert to Islam) and the Fort Hood shooting was tertiary at best—the group briefly praised Hasan and his actions on its website—CNN aired an extended interview with these two members of the group on three separate occasions, highlighting their reverence for Osama bin Laden, their hatred of America, and their avowed support of terrorism:

DREW GRIFFIN: In separate and disturbing interviews, both look to one man as the true living model of Islam, Osama bin Laden.

YOUSEF AL-KHATTAB, REVOLUTION MUSLIM: love Osama Bin Laden. [I swear], I love him like I can't begin to tell you because I haven't seen that he's really done anything wrong from the Sharia. I love him like -- more than I love myself.

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<sup>352</sup> “Ft. Hood, Texas / Shootings / Homegrown Hate,” *CNN Evening News*, November 6, 2009.

GRIFFIN: What they want is U.S. forces to be defeated. For a Muslim holy land stretching from China to Rome and yes, they yearn for the day Israel will vanish. So you would like Israel to be bombed, Jews to...

AL-KHATTAB: Well, I think that -- do you think that's a rational comeback?

GRIFFIN: I'm asking you.

AL-KHATTAB: I would like to see Israel wiped off the map. I would like to see a mushroom cloud over it.<sup>353</sup>

CNN's national security analyst, Peter Bergen, went on to argue that groups like Revolution Muslim can serve as a "precursor" to terrorism—implying that the Fort Hood attack fit the "terror" mold. In an in-studio interview where Bergen spoke in a small on-screen box over footage of the two Revolution Muslim adherents screaming at passersby on a New York street, he tied their ideology to individuals like Hasan:

BERGEN: Well, they remind me a little bit of these sort of al Qaeda support groups that exist in Britain, which also have tended to position themselves as groups that don't send people to fight. But, you know, some people misunderstand this message. And they hear an incitement to actually go and do terrorism.

So, I mean, these sorts of groups are often a precursor for impressionable young men.<sup>354</sup>

### **"Balance" in coverage of Hasan's Muslim identity**

On Fox News, many commentators, like Bill O'Reilly, were often careful to caveat some of the more egregiously offensive and sweeping statements about the evils of Islam from sources like Pamela Geller or Pat Robertson with assurances that many Muslim-Americans are good and peaceful people.<sup>355</sup> Fox, however, consistently

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<sup>353</sup> Ibid.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid.

<sup>355</sup> On some occasions on Fox, however, Robertson's comments—"Islam is a violent—I was going to say religion but it's not a religion. It's a political system. It's a violent

presented a vision of Islam as an inherently dangerous religion, and of Muslim-Americans in general (and Muslim-American soldiers specifically) as dangerous. Specifically, the threat of infiltration by “jihadi” Muslims was invoked repeatedly, often in the context of critiquing Obama administration or military failures to combat a lax culture of political correctness:

ERIC BOLLING: All right, Michelle. What did we do wrong? How do we not stop this from happening? What did we miss?

MICHELLE MALKIN, COLUMNIST: Well, I have said many times over the years, Eric, that political correctness is the handmaiden of terror, and this is yet another case of that. Because apparently, even military officials seem to worship the false god of diversity over putting national security and the safety of their own officers first.

I think the main agenda item should not be, as it seems to be from Department of Homeland Security officials, to prevent some sort of anti-Muslim backlash. The main agenda should be to figure out why nobody stopped this man from infiltrating the military and then slaughtering American soldiers on American soil.

BOLLING: Michelle, the president, the day it happened last Thursday, came out and he made a speech. Some people are upset with him. He spent about a minute and a half - two minutes, shouting out some people before he went into the actual shooting and the deaths of the 13 people in Fort Hood. Is he doing enough?

MALKIN: Well, it was bizarre. It was debilitating, obviously, for him. And of course, we're dealing with an administration that doesn't even want to say the words "jihad," "Islamic jihad."

We've got an administration that thinks that the real threat is so-called right-wing terrorists and right-wing extremists and has never issued a report from DHS about the threat from Islamic jihad.

The other day I listed case after case of Muslim soldiers with attitude - it's what I called them over the years - who have been able to infiltrate themselves and insinuate themselves in the Armed Forces despite all sorts of warning signs about their hatred for America and their jihadist intentions.<sup>356</sup>

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political system, bent on the overthrow of the governments of the world and world domination. That is the ultimate aim”—were aired without additional comment.

<sup>356</sup> “Fort Hood Shooter Reportedly Attended the Dar al Hijrah Islamic Center in Falls Church, Virginia,” *The Beck Show*, November 9, 2009.

Similarly, after airing footage from MSNBC in which unnamed Muslims were quoted on the street about their concerns and fears of backlash related to being lumped into a group with extremists like Hasan, whom they described as mentally ill, Fox's Bill O'Reilly responded:

O'REILLY: Amazing. Now here on "The Factor", we've reported the story straight. Hasan is a Muslim terrorist. Period. He killed out of blind hatred. He's a villain. And there's no excuse for his rampage ... The evidence was there about Hasan, but political correctness prevented action. To a large extent, the media drives the PC insanity in this country. And it's appalling. You just heard it. Muslims are the source of much terrorism on this planet. There's no question about it. So when an American Muslim begins sympathizing with jihad as Hasan did, action must be taken. Let's stop the nonsense. People are dying.<sup>357</sup>

In the same segment, O'Reilly's guest, Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Peters, explicitly argued that Islam itself, not Hasan, was the problem:

PETERS: And Bill, when you played those clips just now, where you had the rambling with Chris Matthews and the bit about , oh, well, every religion's got its nuts. Yeah, but where are the Southern Baptists suicide bombers? Where are the Methodist marketplace massacre types? It's clear that the problem is Islam.

And the other thing that offended me in all of the speeches at Fort Hood today, not one mention of terror, terrorist, terrorism. I didn't expect them to mention Islamist terrorism. That'd be too far for Obama, but what does it take? What evidence does it take for our president to admit this was an act of terror? Good God.

O'REILLY: That's a good question. It's a good question. And it was an act of terror.<sup>358</sup>

This construction of Hasan as a "villain" (several Fox segments also described him as an "assassin," a word with considerable historical Islamic roots) underscored Hasan's position as an outsider in the military, an individual whose identity was primarily reflected in his religious and ethnic identity as an Arab Muslim.

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<sup>357</sup> "Talking Points Memo and Top Story," *The O'Reilly Factor*, November 10, 2009.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid.

A few broadcast media segments pushed back against the perception of Islamophobia or anti-Muslim sentiment in their coverage of the shooting. CBS and MSNBC were responsible for almost all of the coverage that took on the question of whether media coverage that relied on simplistic binaries between “Islam” and “America” could be harmful. MSNBC’s Chris Matthews, for example, invited Nihad Awad, the executive director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) to discuss the issue. Awad, who explicitly condemned the shooting, voiced his displeasure with President Obama’s decision to discuss Hasan’s religion at the memorial service, and opined that Hasan was mentally ill, an isolated outlier:

AWAD: But I’m really not happy to see that his religion is becoming the subject, when we have crimes committed against our soldiers and against our civilians inside the United States and outside the United States, and hardly the religion, if it plays into the motives of those who are committing these acts, it does not become the story in the United States press, except when he or she is a Muslim. And this is unfortunate.<sup>359</sup>

Awad went on to argue that even his invitation onto the program to discuss the shooting revealed underlying Islamophobic bias in media coverage:

AWAD: Even if he was Christian and he said, "Jesus is lord..."

MATTHEWS: And he began firing?

AWAD: ... would -- would the -- a main Christian leader be brought to this program, or others, and be asked...

MATTHEWS: Oh, no, no, no. We want -- look, you were invited because of the concern...

AWAD: I know.

MATTHEWS: ... our producers have that people will draw ...

AWAD: Exactly.

MATTHEWS: ... Which is, all Islamic people are terrorists.<sup>360</sup>

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<sup>359</sup> *Hardball*, November 6, 2009.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*

## **Conclusion**

In the earliest hours of coverage, much like the Camp Liberty shooting, the Fort Hood shooting was described many times by officials and commentators as a “tragedy,” or a “tragic incident.” Once Hasan was identified as the shooter, however, coverage shifted markedly toward contention over how to correctly define the attack. Unlike the Fort Bragg or Camp Liberty shootings, the question of whether the shooting was an act of terrorism—and whether Hasan himself was a terrorist—was predominant.

Ultimately, however, while most broadcast media presented a vision of “terror” that relied upon Hasan’s motives—trying to parse Hasan’s intent in carrying out the shooting—it is clear that Hasan’s identity as an Arab Muslim triggered much of the initial speculation about whether he was a terrorist. Long before journalists and commentators became aware of Hasan’s history of contact with al-Awlaki, his online comments, or other factors that may have pointed more clearly to a clear link to existing terror organizations or terrorist ideologies, the question was immediately raised both by on-air commentators covering the initial aftermath of the attack, and by journalists at the first press conference with General Cone: “Is this an act of terrorism?”

Furthermore, many attempts at “balance” in coverage were problematic. CNN’s approach to balance, in particular, involved cursorily interviewing friendly and seemingly innocuous Muslim-Americans, then immediately interviewing two rabidly extremist American Muslims. This vision of journalistic “balance” brought a sense of two-sidedness to an issue (the question of whether American-Muslims are friendly or threatening) that did not require it.

Other issues that cried out for additional attention and true journalistic balance—the question of whether the Army has sufficient mental health resources, or effective communication between departments (or, indeed, any communication between different branches of the American government), or the basic ability to ensure that gun-free zones on military bases remain gun-free—were conspicuously absent. Although some attention was paid to the gun shop at which Hasan purchased his weapons off base, the question of military policy surrounding gun safety on Fort Hood (a military installation in a community with a long and troubling history of precisely this kind of large-scale shooting event) was entirely absent from coverage. Many segments described the Fort Hood community as “peaceful,” but its history would suggest that it has considerable work to do toward the goal of creating truly safe and well-secured environment.

The consistent focus among some broadcast texts on the “homegrown” nature of Hasan’s dangerous brand of violence positions this shooting as unusual—something we do not expect to happen in America. This frame is ironic, because the United States has the dubious distinction of the highest proportion of gun deaths and injuries of any developed nation in the world, as well as a uniquely violent history of mass shootings. The real irony here—unspoken—is that we seem to have bred a “homegrown” *terrorist*. Focusing on salacious and extreme groups “Revolution Muslim” also positions “homegrown terror” as a more pressing threat than gun violence, which it is not—not by any statistical empirical standard.

The pervasive sub-frame of “political correctness” also inflected coverage in ways that steered explanatory narratives firmly away from Fort Hood’s own troubling history

of precisely this type of shooting. Instead, this sub-frame generated a whole different constellation of themes surrounding Hasan's radicalism and the military's ostensible helplessness to address the many warning signs that presented themselves in his case, driven by a culture of "political correctness" beyond their control. Had the shooting been framed in terms of the base's long history of mass shooting events, coverage might have looked very different—journalists might have presented this shooting, for example, as yet another case of a mentally ill soldier (possibly suffering from some form of PTSD) who was missed (again) by egregious lapses in communication between governmental agencies that had repeatedly declared their public commitment to better communication in the wake of September 11. Instead, these broadcast media presented a passive vision of nebulous, unidentified forces of "political correctness," at whose feet the blame for having missed Hasan's descent into violence was placed, rather than at the feet of the officials who failed to learn the lessons of the many similar prior events on base.

Finally, Hasan's identity as an American Muslim of Arab descent added an layer of complexity to the ways broadcast media described both the shooting itself and Hasan, who was described in some texts as a "classic terrorist," drawing upon the recent 21<sup>st</sup> century history of events like September 11, or the London subway bombings. Unlike Kreutzer or Russell, whose crimes were viewed through a prism of military failure and mental illness/combat stress, respectively, Hasan was held up as a fundamentally evil individual, a villain who was inherently bent on anti-American destruction. Much of this frame was reflected in notable absences in coverage—the frenetic B-roll footage of combat, which accompanied coverage of the Camp Liberty, was not present in coverage



of Fort Hood, even though one often-raised potential explanation for Hasan's motivations involved his reported fear of combat. Additionally, unlike the family members of the two other shooters, Hasan's family members were held at a distance from coverage, appearing only in written statements or brief interviews conducted over the phone.

In addition to the scope of the event, which may have been one factor that led to an exponentially higher amount of coverage of this shooting, the potential link to the looming specter of "terror," and the fact that the case fit an existing narrative, seems to be the primary factor that made this shooting substantially more newsworthy than the other two cases.

## Conclusion

In the immediate aftermath of the Fort Bragg shooting, on October 27, 1995, William Kreutzer, visibly distraught, was escorted by military police to the local United States Army Criminal Investigation Command (CID) office for interrogation. Shortly thereafter, in his car—parked in the darkened wooded area from which he had fired upon his fellow soldiers—investigators found a suicide note. The note was dated October 21, 1995.

The bad dreams just won't end. I don't care where I go as long as its [sic] away from here. I'm a loser who just keeps on losing. I have nothing to look forward to. Fuck the world!

Suicide is the ultimate test of faith. It shows one is ready to risk all to see if his God will accept him. I love my parents, my sisters, my brother, and my closest friends, but I must leave them. I don't want to hurt them, but there is no other way.

AA Self-Storage – sell the contents of unit A-130 to pay for the funeral – sell my car too.<sup>361</sup>

En route to the CID office, Kreutzer was clear: he believed God had told him to commit the shooting, and he was ready to die in the pursuit of his divine obedience. “It was God’s way,” Kreutzer insisted. Shortly thereafter, at the CID office, Kreutzer was interviewed by Dr. Wendi Diamond, the psychiatrist for the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division. In her recorded notes, Diamond wrote: “Never in my life had I ever seen someone in so much psychic distress.” She described Kreutzer’s anguish, his clarity of purpose, and his proffered explanations for the shooting. Kreutzer was insistent that the shooting was God’s will, stating repeatedly that if the shooting had not been a preordained act of divine

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<sup>361</sup> *United States v. Kreutzer*. 70 MJ 444, No. 11-0231/AR (Armed Forces App. 2012), <http://www.armfor.uscourts.gov/newcaaf/opinions/2011SepTerm/11-0231.pdf>.

will, God would have stepped in to stop him.<sup>362</sup> In fact, he added, he had asked God to stop him, or to give him a sign, if committing mass homicide was not the right thing to do. Because God did not stop him, he had decided it was the right thing to do—to send a message to an organization (the military) that he felt had mistreated him, and “brainwashed him to be an assassin.”<sup>363</sup> He told the psychiatrist that he felt he was doing his fellow soldiers a favor by “freeing” them of the shackles of the military, and, at the same time, sending a message to the broader world that the military did not care about its men.

Fourteen years later, on a different domestic American military base, a Muslim-American Army major—Nidal Hasan—bowed his head briefly in prayer, then leapt upon a desk, shouting “Allahu Akbar!” before opening fire upon a waiting room full of unsuspecting soldiers. In his later court-martial proceedings, where he represented himself, Hasan was clear about his motives: he believed he had been on the wrong side of a global religious war against Islam, and told the court he had chosen to switch over, to defend the interests of Muslims—whom he felt had been targeted by the U.S. in an unjust and immoral war, particularly with regard (paralleling Kreutzer’s concerns about the military’s unjust treatment of its men) to the military’s treatment of Muslim civilians in the Middle East.<sup>364</sup> Hasan offered no defense, and even tried to plead guilty before the

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<sup>362</sup> Ibid.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>364</sup> B. Kenber, “Nidal Hasan Sentenced to Death for Fort Hood Shooting Rampage,” *Washington Post*, August 28, 2013, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/nidal-hasan-sentenced-to-death-for-fort-hood-shooting-rampage/2013/08/28/aad28de2-0ffa-11e3-bdf6-e4fc677d94a1\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/nidal-hasan-sentenced-to-death-for-fort-hood-shooting-rampage/2013/08/28/aad28de2-0ffa-11e3-bdf6-e4fc677d94a1_story.html); “Fort Hood Shooting Suspect Nidal Hasan to Represent Himself at Trial,” *Associated Press*, June 3,

proceedings began, but was prohibited from doing so by military law because the case involved the death penalty.

A week after having been sentenced, from his cell on death row, Hasan addressed a hand-written letter to Islamic State leader Abu Bakr Baghdadi, requesting to join ISIL. “It would be an honor for any believer to be an obedient citizen soldier,” Hasan wrote, in a letter that provoked widespread outrage from his surviving victims.

Alonzo Lunsford, who was shot and injured in the Fort Hood attack, called the letter “further proof that this man was a terrorist . . . How much more does this administration have to let this man do before they see that if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, then it’s a duck?”<sup>365</sup> This response reflected the most common reaction to the Fort Hood shooting, and to Hasan’s specific twisted form of religious fervor—an unambiguous and unanimous certainty that Hasan’s actions were those of a terrorist. He could be nothing else. He could not be, for example, a mentally ill man with religious delusions, driven to make a point about an unjust war.

These two men—and these two shootings—were covered very differently by American broadcast media, despite the many similarities between them. There is no question, for example, that both men suffered from severe preexisting mental illness (manifesting itself in the form of psychosis and obsession). Both men were loners who

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2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/03/fort-hood-nidal-hasan-trial?guni=Network%20front:network-front%20main-3%20Main%20trailblock:Network%20front%20-%20main%20trailblock:Position6>.  
<sup>365</sup> “Fort Hood Shooting Suspect Nidal Hasan to Represent Himself at Trial,” *Associated Press*, June 3, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/03/fort-hood-nidal-hasan-trial?guni=Network%20front:network-front%20main-3%20Main%20trailblock:Network%20front%20-%20main%20trailblock:Position6>.

felt alienated by their military peers. Both men offered similar motivations for their respective attacks: a deluded vision that their shocking violence dutifully served what they perceived to be “God’s will,” and an understanding of themselves as foot soldiers in a divine war, ready and willing to die for their beliefs.

So what accounts for the differences in coverage? Why did journalists, commentators and other media-makers frame these two events so differently? Why did the Fort Hood shooting garner 40 times more coverage than the shooting at Fort Bragg? What triggered the association with religious terrorism (and the fear that his shooting somehow represented a larger, looming threat to the U.S. Armed Forces) in Hasan’s case, but not Kreutzer’s?

### **The September 11 effect**

One element that clearly sets the Fort Hood case apart from the Fort Bragg shooting is the fact that the Fort Hood shooting occurred in a post-September 11 environment of hyper-vigilance and fear, in an immersive context of intense, uncritical nationalism. The specter of “terror” is a powerful signifier in the post-September 11 world, and narratives of fear and danger pervade almost all mass media messages on the subject of national security.<sup>366</sup> Hasan’s name and identity, as a Muslim-American, triggered existing frames about Islamic identity and terror that had intensified on and

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<sup>366</sup> B. Nacos, “Terrorism as Breaking News: Attack on America,” *Political Science Quarterly* 118 (2003): 23–52; B. Nacos, *Mass-Mediated Terrorism: The Central Role of the Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007); D. Altheide, “Terrorism and the politics of fear,” *Cultural Studies <-> Critical Methodologies* 6, no. 4 (2006): 415-439.

after September 11 (explored in greater length in the “Hasan’s Identity as a Muslim-American” section of this chapter). But many other differences in coverage pre- and post-September 11 were evident as well.

### **Covering the Shootings: Causes and Consequences**

In coverage of the 1995 Fort Bragg shooting, for example, the journalistic approach to the military (and military sources) was markedly different than in coverage of the Camp Liberty and Fort Hood shootings. Broadcast media featured far fewer military sources, and journalists asked more probing, difficult questions about the military and military policy. Only the Fort Bragg shooting prompted any meaningful, explicit and sustained journalistic critique of the military policies (and the many policy breaches) that led to the shooting.<sup>367</sup>

Fort Bragg was also the only shooting that broadcast media covered in its entirety—all the way through the court-martial process and to Kreutzer’s ultimate sentence of death.<sup>368</sup> Broadcast journalists carefully picked over the military prosecutors’ notes in the court-martial case, highlighting problematic phrases or inconsistencies. They also gave a platform to Kreutzer’s friends and relatives to contextualize his mental state and history. These were not afterthoughts or brief asides: relatives were invited to speak in-studio, with professional lighting and makeup that presented these subjects as capable and informed sources.

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<sup>367</sup> With the notable exception of CBS’s coverage of Fort Hood.

<sup>368</sup> Although broadcast media did not continue coverage of the appeals process over the next several years—only print media reported on the ultimate reversal of Kreutzer’s death sentence.

In the post-September 11 Camp Liberty and Fort Hood shootings, in contrast, broadcast coverage, while intense in the first few days (or weeks, in the Fort Hood case) petered out fairly quickly after the shooting. Broadcast coverage followed neither Russell nor Hasan's court-martial proceedings—this task fell almost entirely upon print media. Interestingly, the largest volume of *print* coverage of both the Camp Liberty and Fort Hood attacks was skewed heavily toward events that occurred during the shooters' respective legal cases, covering the minutiae of the appeals processes and court hearings. Broadcast coverage, on the other hand, was skewed heavily toward coverage of the shootings incidents, with subsequent coverage simply proffering explanations or speculation about the shooters' motives, rather than following the military procedures that led to the court-martial proceedings and sentences for each man. These patterns in broadcast reporting underline the uncritical, shallow approach that the 24-hour news cycle can produce. In broadcast coverage of these events, emphasis is given to sound bites, shocking imagery and "breaking" news, often to the detriment of factual reporting (erroneous or inaccurate early reports of the number of deaths, or the identity and number of culprits, plague reporting on mass shootings, for example) and the larger, contextualized truth about an event.

### **Questioning Weapons Procedures on Military Bases**

Another difference between coverage of the Fort Bragg shooting and the post-September 11 shootings emerged in the way in which the shooters' access to weapons was addressed by broadcast media. All three shootings took place in spaces on-base that

were explicitly designated as weapons-free, and in all three cases, the many clear signs of the shooters' mental illness before each shooting should, according to existing military policy, have resulted in (at least) the removal of each man's weapon, if not dismissal from the military entirely. But only Fort Bragg shooting coverage delved into policy-level issues around weaponry. Journalists dug into the history of the gun shop at which Kreutzer purchased his weapons, including the history of its shady dealings, its legal past, and the effect that this shooting may have on future gun policy. Broadcast coverage also carefully noted the specific types of weapons Kreutzer chose, although it did not, interestingly, speculate about how Kreutzer was able to bring weapons, unchecked, into a weapon-free space on-base (or the policies in place for keeping weapons-free spaces actually weapons-free).

This focus on weaponry simply was not present in the 2009 shootings. Although there were many journalistically salient questions to be asked about the weapons that both shooters procured in the 2009 shootings (according to base policy, for example, Russell never should have been alone in a Jeep in the company of a single escort with an unsecured rifle in the backseat after his outburst, and there are many legitimate questions to be raised about the permissive Texas gun laws that contributed to the existence of gun superstores like the one at which Hasan easily and legally purchased his weapons), broadcast coverage never examined any of the legal or policy-level elements that enabled both Russell and Hasan to easily access the deadly semi-automatic weapons they used in each attack; nor did any broadcast coverage even address the question of base security. When these issues were raised (cursorily), they were often dismissed with a sense of



fatalism about the enactment of any more stringent gun control legislation—surely, the argument went, the NRA and the powerful gun lobby made such changes impossible, and therefore any debate over gun policy was moot.

### **One of Us, Gone Astray, or Not One of Us at All: Outliers in the Military**

Many of these differences in coverage point to one interesting and consistent frame that pervaded the two post-September 11 shootings: the sense that the two men who were responsible for these 2009 attacks were not representative of the military. Russell and Hasan were presented as outliers, and their violence was framed as unfortunate but unavoidable. Kreutzer, on the other hand, was consistently framed as “one of the military’s own,” a soldier who could be anyone. Indeed, much of what was presented as surprising about the Fort Bragg case was the fact that a soldier would choose to fire upon his fellow soldiers. The media’s humanization of Kreutzer through interviews with and commentary by family members and friends constructed him as “one of us.” This frame was also reinforced by the on-screen icons used by broadcast coverage to “brand” each attack: in coverage of the Fort Bragg shooting, both CBS and ABC featured on-screen icons that accompanied coverage of the shooting, while coverage of the 2009 Camp Liberty and Fort Hood shootings featured no such icons. These icons featured a silhouetted (male) soldier, holding a rifle, with cross-hairs or stylized bullet holes superimposed over the figure. As Roderick noted in his analysis of the use of silhouettes in military training materials, this vision of a “shadow warrior” positions the soldier as an “everyman,” and represented the soldier’s body as the literal “esprit de

corps.”<sup>369</sup> In this sense, Kreutzer was presented as a soldier who could have been anyone. Indeed, broadcast coverage clearly suggested, any soldier, confronted with the kind of untreated (and trivialized) mental illness that Kreutzer suffered from, could have conceivably been in his position, especially in a military environment that was consistently unresponsive to the many preexisting red flags and explicit cries for help that preceded the shooting.

In coverage of Camp Liberty and Fort Hood, on the other hand, neither Russell nor Hasan were afforded the humanizing presence of in-studio interviews with those who knew them and loved them before the shooting. Interviews with friends and family members were haphazard and cursory, appearing only by phone or in out-of-studio contexts where the subjects seemed unprepared and taken aback by the presence of news media. The friends and family of Russell and Hasan were simply not afforded a comparable platform to present a prepared and cogent pre-shooting representation of their son, sibling, father, cousin or friend. This sourcing decision further reinforced Hasan and Russell’s exceptional status—the fact that these two men were not representative of soldiers, or the American military, as a whole (although Russell’s violence was attributed to external factors, such as the stress of deployment, while Hasan’s was largely attributed to personal internal failings, i.e. his religious beliefs).

The near-omnipresent role of high-ranking military brass as sources in post-September 11 broadcast coverage was largely responsible for highlighting this frame of

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<sup>369</sup> I. Roderick, “Bare Life of the Virtuous Shadow Warrior: The Use of Silhouette in Military Training Advertisements,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 23, no. 1 (2009): 77-91.

exceptionalism. Military sources (of whom there were considerably more post-September 11 than in coverage of the Fort Bragg shooting—almost every broadcast segment on both the Camp Liberty and Fort Hood shootings featured at least one military source) were quick to defend military policies as thorough and effective, quick to praise the military as a just, equitable and successful American institution, and equally quick to dismiss Russell and Hasan as tragic but unavoidable outliers who had fallen victim to combat stress and religious extremism.

### **Supporting Our Troops: The Military Media Complex and Scrutiny of Policy**

#### **Lapses**

The aforementioned military sources affirmed and emphasized a final key difference in framing between the Fort Bragg shooting and the attacks that took place after September 11: a far more pervasive and overt focus on nationalism and patriotism that informed the coverage of these post-September 11 shootings. Unlike coverage of Fort Bragg, which featured fewer military sources and represented the shooting as a preventable incident at the hands of a flawed but human shooter<sup>370</sup>, broadcast coverage of Camp Liberty and Fort Hood interpellated audiences as *Americans first*, encouraging viewers to think about these shootings in reference to American identity and (in the case of Fort Hood) national security. This interpellation was accomplished in several ways. One way audiences were hailed as Americans in reference to these two shootings was

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<sup>370</sup> Although the Fort Bragg shooting was certainly presented within the bounds of a discourse of national identity and American patriotism as well—to a lesser degree, however, than the Camp Liberty or Fort Hood shootings.

reflected in the pervasive flag imagery that accompanied most broadcast coverage, exemplified by B-roll footage of waving flags, or softly rippling American flags appearing behind news anchors in-studio. In coverage of the Camp Liberty shooting, this focus was highlighted by footage of uniformed American soldiers in the “theater of war” in Iraq—footage that accompanied nearly all coverage of the Camp Liberty shooting. Another way this was accomplished was in terms of the ways in which the Fort Hood shooting was memorialized—with a nationally televised and highly choreographed service at which the commander-in-chief himself personally eulogized each victim. This meme of “nation-in-mourning” clearly (and often explicitly) reflected back to September 11, presenting a sense that the Fort Hood shooting was an attack that had happened to *all of us* as Americans, not just to the victims of the shooting itself.

### **Hasan’s identity as a Muslim-American**

A second factor that had a powerful effect upon the ways these shootings were framed was Hasan’s identity as a second-generation Muslim American with an unambiguously Arabic name. Long before the full context of Hasan’s mental illness and history of religious fundamentalism came to light, when only his name and rank had been released, the question journalists were asking, early and often, was: is this an act of terrorism?<sup>371</sup> These terminological choices (and the specter of the broader scope of the

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<sup>371</sup> Before Hasan’s name and identity were released to the press, the shooting was described in very different terms—for example, NBC news described the shooting as an act of “mass murder,” while CNN described it as a “rampage.” The earliest comments from President Obama, who was asked about the shooting shortly after it took place at an unrelated press conference at the Department of the Interior, described the attack as a

sign of “terror” that accompanied them) are one factor that led the Fort Hood shooting to garner over 20 times more coverage than the Fort Bragg and Camp Liberty shootings combined. While Camp Liberty was framed primarily through the prism of Columbine, as a mass shooting featuring a bullied/alienated shooter (broadcast coverage described the shooting as a “rampage,” a “mass murder,” or a “killing spree,” in addition to occasional references to it as a “tragic incident” or “tragic accident”) coverage of Fort Hood was far more focused on the question of finding the correct prism through which to understand the shooting: mass murder or terror?

Although Hasan’s personal and religious beliefs certainly aligned with a twisted form of religious fundamentalism that he believed justified, and even required, indiscriminate violence, Hasan did not belong to any larger terrorist organization; nor did he have a network of associates beyond himself in the pursuit of his premeditated attack. He was also mentally ill. Many broadcast segments dismissed these elements as irrelevant, however, arguing that Hasan’s *intent*—his internal motivation—was enough to qualify him as a terrorist.<sup>372</sup>

The many debates that followed in broadcast media segments parsing the definition of “terror” or “terrorist” underline the powerful signifying role of these media. Policy and scholarly definitions of terrorism did not drive this debate. Despite the fact that journalists and commentators featured in these broadcasts could reasonably access

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“tragic shooting,” and in his first press conference about the shooting, General Cone, then the commander of Fort Hood, described the shooting as a “tragic incident.”

<sup>372</sup> “Ft. Hood, Texas Shootings,” *CNN Evening News*, November 5, 2009; “Ft. Hood, Texas, Shootings / Tribute,” *CNN Evening News*, November 10, 2009; “Terrorism / Plane Bomb Plot / Awlaki,” *CNN Evening News*, January 1, 2010; *Hannity*, November 9, 2009; “Was Fort Hood Massacre Terrorism?” *Hannity*, November 11, 2009.

these policy definitions—and although the American government has offered a handful of clear definitions for terrorism—the meaning of these words are still bitterly contested in media. Further, simply the introduction of the specter of “terror” to coverage of this event was enough to raise the newsworthiness of and salience of the shooting considerably. The invocation of this “terror” frame tied the shooting to a broader narrative of fear, nationalism and potential victimhood that recalled fraught environment of the U.S. immediately after September 11. In fact, in one CNN segment a few days after the shooting (rather inexplicably featuring a very small but vocal extremist Muslim sect based in New York) journalist Drew Griffin referred to the September 11 hijackers as “classic terrorists,” and then compared Hasan to the standard and definition embodied by these men to answer the question of how to properly categorize the shooting.

### **Redefining Terrorism**

The idea that the September 11 hijackers represent a now-“classic” vision of terrorism represents a somewhat different definition of “terror” than those that pervaded the pre-September 11 landscape, and represents a shift in how journalists define “terrorism” in the popular American imagination. This considerable shift is based in the powerful iconography that accompanied media coverage of the September 11 attacks, reinvigorating and transforming old Orientalist tropes. Hasan’s “otherness” in media coverage that clearly and unambiguously framed him as an outsider (both in the military and in the American public in general), upheld a long history of Orientalist representations that set Arab and Muslim bodies apart as uniquely menacing and

dangerous—a reductive and binary characterization that positions these identities as diametrically opposed to (and incompatible with) American identity (See Chapter 6). The other side of this coin—the latitude and external justifications, such as stress or mental illness, that are proffered to explain away the violence of white male subjects—is evident in coverage of the Fort Bragg and Camp Liberty shootings, where the (white male) culprits were primarily framed through the prism of external stressors that caused them to “snap” (See Chapters 4 and 5).

Indeed, Hasan’s identity as a Muslim was remarkably predominant in broadcast media descriptions—he was most often introduced using his full name (Nidal Malik Hasan), emphasizing its Arabic roots and relative peculiarity in America, and descriptors of his religious identity (most often as a “Muslim-American”) were pervasive. In all, these broadcast segments contained 937 references to “Islam” or “Muslim,” underlining the central role this identity category played in framing the attack. Additionally, although many broadcast outlets attempted to present a sense of “balance” in coverage—MSNBC’s repeated cautions against rushing to judgment, or Bill O’Reilly’s frequent caveats that many American Muslims were good and productive and peaceful people—these attempts at “balance” largely cleaved to the same set of problematic Orientalist assumptions. For example, in many segments, when journalists highlighted extremist or “jihadi” elements within Islam, they also pointedly included interviews with imams or nearby mosque attendees describing Islam as a religion of peace. This sense of balance positioned journalistic diligence as a matter of presenting some “good” Muslims alongside the “bad” Muslims—a deeply problematic frame that further emphasized the

deep divide between the categories of “Muslim” and “American” in these media accounts. When Hasan’s extended family was reached for comment about the shooting, they revealed their understanding of this implicit binary by strenuously emphasizing the devotion and admiration their family felt for the United States. Notably, other, seemingly more salient, elements of journalistic balance—such as “balancing” the near-omnipresent voice of high-ranking military sources with timely questions about the myriad policy failures, miscommunications and inefficiencies that led to the Fort Hood shooting—were wholly absent.

### **Homegrown (Muslim) Terrorism in America**

Two final elements that were pervasive in broadcast coverage firmly positioned the Fort Hood shooting (and Hasan himself) as belonging to the September 11 and “terrorist”/“terrorism” category rather than the Columbine-inflected category of “mass shootings”/“rampage shootings”/“shooting sprees.”

First, the frequent invocation of Hasan’s identity as a “homegrown” extremist/fanatic positioned the shooting as the direct result of dangerously infectious theology and a specific vision of fundamentalist Islam<sup>373</sup>, rather than alternate interpretations surrounding cultural scripts of masculinity, for example, or mental illness. Indeed, the use of the adjective “homegrown” in broadcast coverage describing Hasan (a term that appeared 10 times in spoken segments and in 12 on-screen headlines) positions

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<sup>373</sup> The frequent use of “radicalize” as a verb in this coverage also underlines this frame of imminent threat and “terror within”—as if violent extremism is a communicable disease one could inadvertently “catch.”



the shooting clearly as belonging to the “terror” category, crowding out explanations that might focus on issues or elements more traditionally associated with the question of how to mitigate the American problem of “mass shootings.” The term “homegrown” clearly signifies the broader threat of terror in a post-September 11 environment. As Alsultany noted, even ostensibly well-meaning media accounts that featured Arab and Muslim identities during this period often include references to an underlying sense that terror cells or “sleeper cells” operating *within America* (often embodied by Americans of Arab descent) pose an imminent threat to the country. Further, this “threat” is often framed as justifying extrajudicial or racially problematic measures (like profiling, or extralegal detention) that would not be perceived as tolerable in other circumstances.<sup>374</sup>

### **P.C. Excess Fosters Terrorism**

The second element, the sub-frame of “political correctness” (and the myth of the American military as a hyper-progressive, politically correct cultural space) further emphasized Hasan’s descent into radicalism as a predictable result linked to his identity as an Arab as a Muslim. Indeed, according to many sources quoted in broadcast segments, only a paralyzing culture of “political correctness” (and the implicit fear of offending Muslims or Muslim groups) prevented the military from thwarting a shooting that was positively replete with red flags and warning signs preceding the event. Military sources and policymakers primarily drove this particular sub-frame, which pervaded much of the debate over whether Hasan could have been stopped.

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<sup>374</sup> E. Alsultany, *Arabs & Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

### **Camp Liberty and the “theater of war”**

A final element that influenced the coverage of these three events was the environment in which the Camp Liberty shooting took place, an fraught context of violence and instability that affected reporting (and the slate of possible explanations offered for the event) in interesting ways.

First, every broadcast segment but one covering the Camp Liberty shooting included interviews with high-ranking military (or former military) officials—colonels, commanders and generals. These military officials, none of whom were present during the attack, were granted primacy by broadcast journalists to define and frame the event on their own terms. This ubiquitous presence of high-ranking military officials as sources crowded out the serious examination of other contextual information that may have been salient in the coverage of this event—rising military suicide rates, for example, or the lack of responsiveness on the part of the military to reforms suggested by policymakers to mitigate the endemic problem of untreated mental illness and post-deployment PTSD from which soldiers like Russell suffered. Unlike coverage of the Fort Bragg shooting, in which some broadcast journalists enjoyed the leeway to question military policy and to highlight the negligence or communication failures that led to that attack, the omnipresence of military officials (as well as the prevalence of a sort of zero-sum form of patriotism that required universal support of the troops and the war) in Camp Liberty coverage seems to have had a chilling effect on the lines of questioning and potential schema that were offered to explain this shooting.

Second, although Russell’s precarious mental state was highlighted repeatedly by media in coverage of the shooting—the term “mental health” appeared 17 times in broadcast coverage of the Camp Liberty case (compared to three references in Fort Bragg coverage and four in the much more expansive coverage of Fort Hood)—this focus was presented inextricably hand-in-hand with a “support-the-troops” frame that shunted responsibility firmly away from the military’s existing policies and safety nets for identifying these kind of troubled soldiers. Indeed, much of this coverage featured fatalistic narratives that suggested these kinds of outbreaks of mass violence were wholly unpreventable, in part because the military (despite a 2009 federal defense budget of \$698 billion), simply did not have the resources to commit to addressing the problems that led to Russell’s violence.

In a May 11, 2009 CBS News broadcast covering the shooting, for example, CBS National Security Correspondent David Martin featured an email on-screen that he described as being “sent last year from Afghanistan,” (offering no other information about its specific origins) that read: “We are so short now over here that we are starting to see signs of some folks really stressing out. And in the end, it’s all due to our personnel shortages.”<sup>375</sup> In a follow-up in-studio interview in the same segment, General Peter Chiarelli, the Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, restated this argument:

As long as the demand on forces stays what it is right now and the supply of forces remains the same, it will be very difficult for us to do anything with that stress. But we’ve got to help soldiers understand how they can cope with that stress.<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>375</sup> “Iraq War / Soldiers’ Murder / Stress,” *CBS Evening News*, May 11, 2009.

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*

This focus on the military as an overextended but well-intentioned institution simply doing its best deflected focus away from the many egregious policy violations that preceded the shooting—Russell, who had had his weapon removed from him prior to the shooting, should, according to existing base policy, have been immediately handed over to his commanding officer after threatening suicide in his therapist’s office. Instead, he was released to the custody of a single chaperone (another breach of military policy) who escorted him alone back to his barracks with an unsecured, loaded rifle in the back seat (a third breach of policy). Finally, there were no measures in place beyond an “honor system” to ensure that the weapons-free space of the stress clinic remained actually weapons-free. But because of a pervasive and overarching focus on the military as a noble and well-intentioned institution pushed beyond its limits by the strain of a just war with a small volunteer army (an argument bolstered considerably by the omnipresence of high-ranking military officials in news broadcasts), journalists failed to address these considerable violations of existing military policy, or to ask probing questions about how such policies could be strengthened or upheld in the future to prevent future attacks.

The frenetic imagery that accompanied broadcast coverage of the Camp Liberty case further emphasized the enormous stress service members in Iraq had to grapple with—ubiquitous shaky handheld video footage featured marching uniformed soldiers shouting, running, bursting into buildings, and diving from explosions. But again, instead of using this footage as a pivot point to seriously discuss the military’s approach to dealing with combat stress and PTSD, coverage largely avoided asking pressing questions about how to prevent future attacks. Instead, military sources (and the

journalists who interviewed them), cursorily acknowledged the stigma attached to seeking help for mental illness, particularly for soldiers, but spent most of their time praising the military's ostensible efforts to increase accessibility to mental health resources. The fact that the stress clinic (the site of the shooting) existed at all was even repeatedly lauded as admirable progress, despite the fact that staff members failed to follow basic procedures about monitoring unstable soldiers and keeping clinics free of weapons.

### **Media coverage of violence, critical terrorism studies and future research**

The results of this research strongly support the findings of many other scholars who study violence and media, such as Brigitte Nacos, who, in decades of research on the relationship between terrorism and the media, has consistently found that American mass media increasingly reject the coverage of broader realities and big-picture contextual information in favor of spectacle and “interesting” (as opposed to “important”) information.<sup>377</sup> These findings also underline another undercurrent of Nacos' work: the substantial effect the specter of “terror” has in terms of raising the relative salience and newsworthiness of a story.<sup>378</sup> These trends also emphasize the powerful effect that “discourses of fear” have upon the post-September 11, 21<sup>st</sup> century media landscape, a

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<sup>377</sup> B. Nacos, *Terrorism and the Media: From the Iran Hostage Crisis to the Oklahoma City Bombing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); B. Nacos, *Mass Mediated Terrorism: The Central Role of the Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007).

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*; also B. Nacos, “Terrorism as Breaking News: Attack on America,” *Political Science Quarterly* 118 (2003): 23–52.

context in which narratives of fear, victimhood and risk increasingly pervade coverage, raising the profile of events like the Fort Hood shooting considerably.<sup>379</sup>

The results described in this study also continue to find the widespread reliance of mass media upon official sources—in this case, most often military sources—and the ways these sources function to (and have a vested interest in) actively reproduce the existing social order, often stymying change and critical questioning.<sup>380</sup> Further, this analysis continues to find many of the problematic trends that scholars like Travis Dixon, Carol Stabile and Evelyn Alsultany have delineated regarding the unique ways that nonwhite actors are framed far more negatively than white actors in media coverage of crime and violence—particularly, in a post-September 11 environment, identities that are coded as Arab or Muslim.<sup>381</sup> In these case studies, these marked differences are most evident in the comparison of media coverage of the Fort Hood shooting to the Fort Bragg

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<sup>379</sup> D. Altheide, “Terrorism and the Politics of Fear,” *Cultural Studies <-> Critical Methodologies* 6, no. 4 (2006): 415-439

<sup>380</sup> E.g., R. Ericson, P. Baranek, and J. Chang, *Representing Order: Crime, Law, and Justice in the News Media* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991); K. Beckett, *Making Crime Pay* (New York: Oxford Press, 1997); S. Chermak, “Marketing Fear: Representing Terrorism After September 11,” *Journal of Crime, Conflict and the Media* 1, no. 1 (2003): 5-22; S. Chermak and J. Gruenewald, “The Media’s Coverage of Domestic Terrorism,” *Justice Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (2006): 428–461; D. Hayes and M. Guardino, “Whose Views Made the News?: Media Coverage and the March to War in Iraq,” *Political Communication* 27, no. 1 (2010): 59-87.

<sup>381</sup> E. Alsultany, “Selling American Diversity and Muslim American Identity through Nonprofit Advertising Post-911,” *American Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (2007): 593-622; E. Alsultany, *Arabs & Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); E. Alsultany, “Protesting Muslim Americans as Patriotic Americans: The All-American Muslim Controversy,” *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 27, no. 2 (2012): 145-148; C. Stabile, *White Victims, Black Villains: Gender, Race and Crime News in US Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2006); C. Stabile, “No Shelter from the Storm,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 4 (2007): 683-708; C. Stabile, “Toxic Coverage: The National Media Imaginary on Gendered Gun Violence,” (Conference paper, American Studies Association Session, November 22, 2013).

and Camp Liberty shootings. Not only did the Fort Hood shooting garner far more extensive coverage than the other two incidents, it produced a narrative that assigned *internal* blame to the culprit (Hasan, allegedly motivated by Islamic, terrorist faith tradition), versus the narratives of *external* blame to the other two (white, non-Muslim) shooters (allegedly pushed to the brink by combat stress and mental illness).

Although very little research has been explicitly applied to mass media coverage of the American military (and military bases) in a domestic context, particularly in peacetime, many other scholars have outlined the ways in which the American news media have often (particularly in the run-up to the second Iraq War) failed their function as the “fourth estate,” granting the military uncritical and even sycophantic coverage that diminished the visibility of opposition voices and positioned the media as a supportive arm of the American military itself.<sup>382</sup> Indeed, as early as 1993, Brigid Schulte found that, in their coverage of potential domestic military base closings, American news media adopted a “base-boosting” mentality that positioned the media as an entity that had an obligation to “help” the military.<sup>383</sup> This study builds upon existing literature in this field

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<sup>382</sup> R. Stahl, *Militainment, Inc.: War, Media and Popular Culture* (Routledge: New York, 2009); A. DiMaggio, *When Media Goes to War: Hegemonic Discourse, Public Opinion, and the Limits of Dissent* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010); S. Munshi, “Television in the United States from 9/11 and the U.S.’s Continuing ‘War on Terror’: Single Theme, Multiple Media Lenses,” in *Media, War and Terrorism: Responses from the Middle East and Asia*, ed. P. van der Veer and S. Munshi (New York: Routledge, 2004), 46-60; S. Bonn, *Mass Deception: Moral Panic and the U.S. War in Iraq* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010); D. Hayes and M. Guardino, “Whose Views Made the News?: Media Coverage and the March to War in Iraq,” *Political Communication* 27, no. 1 (2010): 59-87.

<sup>383</sup> B. Schulte, “Off Base,” *American Journalism Review* 15, no. 7 (1993): 28.

by charting the ways in which news media frame violence that takes place on American military installations—both during peacetime and in the context of an active war zone.

Finally, this study aligns neatly with the relatively new field of critical terrorism studies (CTS), which arose in response to criticisms of traditional or orthodox scholarship on terrorism. Primary among these criticisms were (1) an overly prescriptive “problem-solving” policy focus, (2) the strong links between many influential scholars of terrorism and state entities that define terror policy, and (3) a lack of historicity. To combat these problems, CTS approaches the study of terrorism critically, with an eye toward the inherent ontological instability of the ‘terrorism’ category.<sup>384</sup> Indeed, the fluidity, instability and subjectivity of terms like “mass shooting” and “terrorism” are key to this analysis, as is the critical approach with which this study was undertaken.

There are a few elements to these cases, and to this coverage, about which I still do not have complete information. I have been unable to secure, for example, the entire sum of the court-martial documents for the Camp Liberty and Fort Hood cases (although I have been able to access many pertinent materials and legal documents for both of these cases). In future iterations of this study, I plan to file FOIA requests for the full court-martial records in each of these cases. In the future, I also plan to examine media coverage of the 1994 Fairchild Air Force Base shooting, as well as coverage of the 2013 Navy Yard shooting, to further broaden the scope of the coverage this study analyzes.

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<sup>384</sup> R. Jackson, "The Core Commitments of Critical Terrorism Studies," *European Political Science* 6, no. 3 (2007): 244-251; L. Jarvis, "The Spaces and Faces of Critical Terrorism Studies," *Security Dialogue* 40, no. 1 (2009): 5-27.



### **Moving forward: covering mass shootings and large-scale violence**

Broadcast coverage of all three of these shootings replicated longstanding problems and tropes evident in coverage of breaking broadcast news—inaccurate information (in these three cases, often regarding allegations of multiple shooters), erroneous reports of deaths, early allegations made by tertiary, anonymous or unqualified sources that turned out to be incorrect, and an obsession with up-to-the-minute minute breaking details that had little relevance to the larger context of the event.

Another, more troubling, common element of coverage of mass shootings that these texts reproduced is a relentless focus on the search for a motive in each case. In a theme that strongly echoed Columbine coverage, these broadcast media (particularly in coverage of the two 2009 shootings) were zealously focused on discovering *why* each culprit carried out each shooting. What prompted each man to “snap?” What perceived slights or mistreatment pushed these men to engage in deadly violence against their own fellow soldiers? These broadcast media devoted considerable time to plumbing the depths of each man’s psyche, assessing the factors that they identified as having led to the anger and resentment that produced the conditions for each attack: alienation from colleagues, stress, fanaticism, or perhaps some combination of all three.

However, this tendency in coverage, this obsession with parsing the minute details of each man’s pre-shooting thought process, is not only misguided—it is a dangerous red herring. Examining the history of mass shootings in the United States, two factors are predominant in nearly every case: (1) severe, preexisting, untreated mental illness, and (2) easy (usually legal) access to high-powered weaponry, despite the fact

that the majority of mass shooters (as did all three mass shooters highlighted in this study) suffer from the type of mental illness that should have prevented them from accessing firearms. In the case of each of these severely disturbed men (and indeed, one must be severely disturbed to even seriously contemplate this type of violence—well men do not commit mass shootings) identifying the specific element or factor that ostensibly pushed each man to the “brink” of this violence is irrelevant. Mass shooters do not “snap”—they consistently and predictably move down a path toward these episodes of violence. For mass shooters like Kreutzer, Russell, and Hasan, it is often not a question of “if,” but “when.”<sup>385</sup>

News media must thoughtfully and critically consider the substantial role that mental illness plays in these shootings—and they must be equally cautious of falling prey to the fatalism surrounding the role of the NRA that often pervades coverage. Too often, as evidenced by the texts examined in this project, journalists fall back on NRA talking points around mental illness and gun ownership (talking points that use mental illness as a point in favor of *more lax* gun laws, rather than pointing to the overwhelming and disturbing evidence that American mass shooters with severe preexisting mental illness are often easily and legally able to build up enormous arsenals of deadly weapons). Looking to the examples of the U.K. and Australia, which enacted much stricter legislation regarding gun ownership in the wake of two 1996 shootings, it is clear that

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<sup>385</sup> D. Swink, “The Pentagon Shooting: They Don’t ‘Just Snap,’” *Psychology Today*, March 6, 2010, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/threat-management/201003/the-pentagon-shooting-they-don-t-just-snap>; K. Newman, *Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

tightened gun legislation can be stunningly effective at dramatically lowering rates of gun violence, as well as nearly eliminating mass shootings entirely.

Moreover, these trends in coverage tend to frame each case as an isolated incident, rather than a consistent and disturbing trend of uniquely American (and primarily white and masculine) violence. The fact that these shootings are almost solely committed by men—with only one exception in the last 30 years—has largely escaped examination by mass media, which tend to view these events as one-off cases that are not informed by any particular trends surrounding gender or identity.<sup>386</sup> This facet of mass shootings (the role of masculinity, as well as masculine cultural scripts that often inform the men who commit these crimes) deserved considerable examination. The role of media themselves in replicating and endlessly reproducing the problematic frames (and cultural scripts that inform future mass shooters) surrounding these types of events has also largely escaped examination in the coverage of these shootings. As Carol Stabile noted in her examination of suicide-mass shootings:

Instead of the usual pattern of news media coverage of suicide-mass shootings as isolated instances of non-gendered, non-raced individuals who “snap,” these events follow distinct social patterns. First, these were all men who committed explicit, physical forms of masculine domination prior to and as part of their suicides. Second, the most violent of these suicide-mass shootings came with posthumous new media press kits (Columbine, Virginia Tech, Newtown, and Isla Vista). These press kits explicitly documented their triumphs and failures in masculine domination, exploiting a hungry and unethical news cycle and

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<sup>386</sup> C. Stabile, "Toxic Coverage: The National Media Imaginary on Gendered Gun Violence," (Conference paper, American Studies Association Session, November 22, 2013); *Tough Guise 2: Violence, Manhood and American Culture*, DVD, directed by Jeremy Earp (2013; Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 2013); D. Kellner, "Media Spectacle and Domestic Terrorism: The Case of the Batman/Joker Cinema Massacre," *Review of Education, Pedagogy & Cultural Studies* 35, no. 3 (2013): 157-177.

encouraging other “pathetic isolates” who might seek to imitate or top these acts of revenge.<sup>387</sup>

The role of mass media in helping to perpetuate the conditions that continue to lead to these shootings is considerable and inescapable. Rather than focusing on parsing minute and irrelevant information about the mental processes of clinically ill men, these media would be far better served to use their considerable resources and their national platforms to pursue the difficult questions regarding the two factors that we *know* contribute to almost every mass shooting: mental illness and permissive American gun legislation that often allows these men unfettered legal access to deadly weapons. If broadcast media continue to uncritically evade these two key components, they are simply contributing to an environment that ensures these types of mass shootings will continue.

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<sup>387</sup> C. Stabile, "Toxic Coverage: The National Media Imaginary on Gendered Gun Violence," (Conference paper, American Studies Association Session, November 22, 2013).

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