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What We Talk about When We Talk about Terrorism: Elite Press Coverage of Terrorism Risk from 1997 to 2005

Joshua Woods

The risk of terrorism in the United States has gained a great deal of attention from researchers, policy makers, the public, and the press. This article focused on how one of these actors—the press—portrayed the risk during an eight-year period centered on the attacks of 9/11. The three goals of this study were to identify the dimensions of terrorism risk that are most likely to increase public perceptions of the danger, describe how these dimensions were portrayed in newspaper content, and explain how these portrayals were associated with other important news topics including the use of military force, the protection of civil liberties, and the image of the Muslim religion.

Keywords: *terrorism; risk; religion; war; civil liberties*

Before the terrorist attacks on 9/11, few Americans perceived the risk of terrorism as one of the nation's most important problems.¹ Although the media covered the issue periodically, it only captured the public's attention for short periods. After 9/11, public concerns about terrorism spiked and remained high for several years. According to national polls conducted as late as 2006, almost half the population was still worried about becoming a victim of terrorism.² To a large extent, these concerns reflected the extraordinary character of the 9/11 events and the great uncertainty about whether new attacks were imminent. As Slovic (2002) suggested, 9/11 represented a new species of trouble—an unbounded threat that could not be assessed with quantitative risk analysis. Unlike natural hazards such as hurricanes and earthquakes, the risk of terrorism has no fixed geography. And unlike common hazards such as car accidents and illness, the number of major terrorist attacks in U.S. history is so small that robust statistical estimates are not possible. These limitations have been noted by several experts on risk assessment and highlighted in a number of reports by government agencies.³

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The lack of specific information about terrorism risk, however, has not limited the public's demand for it or the willingness of the news media to cover this topic. In the years both before and after 9/11, the media discussed numerous aspects of terrorism risk, including the nation's porous international borders, the vulnerability of the food and water supply, and the weakness of security in almost all areas of the country's critical infrastructure, such as airports, seaports, chemical factories, and the postal system. There were public debates on whether an airplane could breach a nuclear power plant. Commentators, experts, and politicians talked about the threat of dirty bombs, cyber-terrorism, bioterrorism, and corporate sabotage (Chapin 2002). The media routinely reported changes in the Department of Homeland Security's Advisory System, which described terrorism risk with vague, color-coded modifiers such as *severe*, *high*, and *elevated* (Gray and Ropeik 2002). In many cases, government officials warned the public of an increased risk without identifying a particular city or region of the country (Friedman 2005; Zimbardo and Kluger 2003).

There was also a great deal of public debate about the possible strategies of the terrorists. Would they target only large urban centers and symbolic structures, or would they attack anywhere to spread fear and chaos across the country? This discussion took on an important political dimension in the post-9/11 period as public officials grappled over the formula for dispensing federal funds from the Department of Homeland Security.⁴ Each state could point to a number of possible terrorist targets, which not only justified the increase in federal funding for first responders and other aspects of the local antiterrorism effort but also served as news fodder for local newspapers and broadcasters. For instance, our study found that the *Anchorage Daily News* published a series of reports on the terrorist threat to the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, while a Nebraska newspaper, the *Lincoln Journal Star*, offered extensive coverage on the risk of anthrax delivered through the postal system.

The risk of terrorism represents a highly visible news topic that encompasses many different story elements and risk dimensions. Given the great diversity of this coverage, the three main goals of this study are (1) to identify the dimensions of terrorism risk that are most likely to increase public perceptions of the danger, (2) describe how these dimensions were portrayed in actual newspaper content, and (3) explain how these portrayals were associated with other important news topics including the use of military force, the protection of civil liberties, and the image of the Muslim religion.

Story Elements as Indicators of Terrorism Risk

One of the theoretical tools we use to identify "high risk" story elements is known as the psychometric paradigm—a leading perspective in risk perception research (Fischhoff et al. 1978; Sjöberg 2005; Covello 1992; Slovic 2004).

The model draws on cognitive scales and multiple regression methods to identify the qualitative characteristics of risks that affect the way people perceive them. Two dimensions in particular—"newness" and "dread"—are thought to influence public perceptions of risk (Fischhoff et al. 1978). Dangers perceived as being new are judged as more risky than dangers perceived as old, even when the old danger has a greater statistical probability of causing harm. Dreaded dangers—that is, hazards that could harm many people, cause catastrophic damage, or have lasting effects on society or the environment—are also known to inflate risk perceptions. As discussed in detail later, both of these dimensions represent common story elements in news coverage of terrorism risk.

Previous studies have also shown that the salience (or "cognitive availability") of a risk increases public perceptions of its likelihood of materializing (Slovic 2004). When people lack information about a given danger, they tend to assess its likelihood of causing harm by whether an example of the danger easily comes to mind (Tversky and Kahneman 1974). As explained by Sunstein (2004), "In the aftermath of a terrorist act, and for a period thereafter, that act is likely to be both available and salient, and thus to make people think that another such act is likely, whether or not it is in fact" (p. 121). In this way, news organizations may increase public risk perceptions not only by describing the threat as something "new" or "dreaded" but also by making it widely available in the public mind.

The salience dimension may be conceptualized as the number of stories that mention the threat of terrorism during a given time period or as the centrality of this topic within a given article. This distinction is important because while it is apparent that the general level of news coverage of terrorism risk rose dramatically after 9/11, it is not clear whether the salience within articles also increased. In fact, the level of within-article salience may have declined after 9/11, because the risk was increasingly linked to extraneous news topics such as the stock market, travel, and politics.

While high levels of dread, newness, and salience may amplify perceptions of terrorism risk, other dimensions are likely to moderate it. One of the basic precepts of "good journalism" is to offer balanced accounts of important social issues (Bunton 1998). There are at least two reasons to assume that balanced portrayals of terrorism risk would tend to diminish risk perceptions. First and foremost, a balanced account directly questions some aspect of the risk itself. A message containing counterarguments or contrasting information about the risk would likely decrease the target's perceived susceptibility. This assumption is consistent with the literature on fear appeals. A meta-analysis by Witte and Allen (2000), for instance, demonstrated that strong fear appeals (unbalanced messages) produced higher levels of perceived susceptibility than low or weak fear appeals (balanced messages). Second, research also shows that people desire a sense of control over their lives when facing uncertainty or potential danger (Brown and Siegel 1988). A balanced account—that is, a message that

supplies a rationale for questioning the risk of terrorism—may help people rationalize their low levels of perceived susceptibility and their high levels of perceived control. An unbalanced portrayal, on the other hand, would likely only increase public perceptions of the danger.

As described in detail later, we used the four dimensions discussed above—newness, dread, salience, and unbalanced portrayals—as the theoretical basis for identifying specific aspects of newspaper content that are likely to increase public perceptions of terrorism. While each of these dimensions will be operationalized separately as a quantitative variable, we will also combine these measures in a single index to indicate the overall level of terrorism risk represented in articles.

Factors Related to Terrorism Risk

There are several factors that may be associated with the level of terrorism risk portrayed by the press. The first factor we consider is the nearness of the newspaper to the sites of the 9/11 attacks. Given the previous research on this topic, the effect of proximity is unclear. On one hand, a study by Fischhoff et al. (2003) found that judgments of terrorism risk were higher among people living within one hundred miles of the World Trade Center. If this tendency held for editors and journalists as well, we might expect that newspapers located in New York City and Washington, D.C. (the sites of the 9/11 attacks) would produce articles with higher risk levels than newspapers from geographically remote cities (we used the *Anchorage Daily News* in Alaska and the *Lincoln Journal Star* in Nebraska for the comparison). On the other hand, the acts of 9/11 were widely covered in the local press via wire services, which may have homogenized the imagery and framing of the attacks across the nation. Moreover, as described by Traugott and Brader (2003), “conventional media models” and “the standard criteria of newsworthiness are thought to apply to a news story about terrorism” (p. 183), which may have also diminished differences in coverage between newspapers located near and far from the sites of the 9/11 attacks. Given these opposing rationales, we examine the influence of proximity from an exploratory perspective with the following research question:

Research Question 1: Is the level of terrorism risk greater in articles published in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* than in the *Anchorage Daily News* and *Lincoln Journal Star*?

A well-established finding in media research is that journalists rely heavily on official sources for framing the content of stories (Gans 1979; Cohen 1963). According to Bennett (1994), “The dominance of official, particularly executive branch, sources is even more pronounced in national security stories

than for the news as a whole” (p. 23). In the case of 9/11 coverage, Li and Izard (2003) found that newspapers and television networks relied more on government sources than other sources during the crisis. A report by the Project for Excellence in Journalism (2002) showed that government officials were not only commonly used as information sources but that “the press heavily favored pro-Administration and official U.S. viewpoints—as high as 71% early on” (p. 2). Other studies of 9/11 coverage have made similar claims (Entman 2003; Traugott and Brader 2003; Norris et al. 2003).

Meanwhile, following the attacks on 9/11, the Bush administration made it clear to the nation and to Congress that the United States would respond to the threat using military force. The heightened risk of terrorism was used, directly or indirectly, by numerous government officials as well as a host of pundits and commentators to justify the military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq (White House 2002; Daalder et al. 2002). Based on this research and reasoning, we offer two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Articles that used more government sources than nongovernment sources will have greater risk levels than articles that used more nongovernment sources.

Hypothesis 2: Articles that favored a military response will have greater risk levels than articles that did not favor a military response.

In addition to using military actions as a remedy for controlling terrorism, the Bush administration introduced several security measures, known as the USA Patriot Act, that increased law enforcement powers, reduced the free flow of information, and limited other civil liberties. The new laws gained a great deal of attention from politicians, scholars, media, and the public (e.g., Leone and Anrig 2003; Baker and Stack 2006; Cole and Dempsey 2002; Graber 2003). Some authors argued that an unjustified or exaggerated level of public concern about terrorism had pushed officials to support the intrusions on civil liberties and that the media played an important role in creating and sustaining these concerns (Sunstein 2003, 2004; Huddy et al. 2003). We therefore offer the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Articles that supported the Patriot Act (or similar measures that reduced civil liberties) will have greater risk levels than articles that did not support the Patriot Act.

In the first days after the 9/11 attacks, many commentators and public officials framed the conflict in religious terms or referred to the perpetrators as Islamic extremists or Muslim radicals. By the mid-2000s, according to public opinion polls, the idea that Islam encouraged violence more than did other religions was supported by a large percentage of Americans.⁵ While the popular

association between Islam and terrorist violence is likely rooted in a long series of past events, from the Iranian hostage crisis in 1979–1981 to the bombing of the *USS Cole* in 2000, this association likely became more prominent in the public mind as media coverage of terrorism risk greatly increased after 9/11 (Nacos and Torres-Reyna 2003; Nacos 1994; Traugott and Brader 2003). The prediction here is not that the press used negative or stereotypical news frames to describe Muslim Americans or Islamic groups within the United States but that the topic of religion, Islam in particular, often emerged in articles that discussed the identity of the terrorists, the cause of 9/11, or the possible motivation for terrorist attacks in the future. Specifically, we offer the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4: Articles that mentioned the suspected terrorists' religion will have greater risk levels than articles that did not mention the terrorists' religion.

Method

The aim of this study was to measure terrorism risk in the “elite press” in the United States. Based on previous studies (Ten Eyck and Williment 2003; Horvit 2003; Swain 2003; Hertog 2000), we chose *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* as proxies of the elite press. These newspapers are known for playing key roles in national decision making (Gitlin 1980; Gans 1979). Moreover, the two papers were used in a similar study of terrorism coverage (Li and Izard 2003), which may offer an opportunity for cross-study comparisons. In addition, we analyzed the *Anchorage Daily News* and the *Lincoln Journal Star* to test the relationship between geography and the level of terrorism risk in articles. These newspapers are located in remote cities in two of the least populated states in the nation.⁶

The unit of analysis was the article. The electronic archive Lexis-Nexis was used to select all the related articles published between September 11, 1997, and September 11, 2005.⁷ Articles that contained one of seven different search terms were collected and categorized.⁸ In most cases, the entire population of relevant articles was included in the sample. A systematic random sample was taken for *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* during the post-9/11 period because the number of relevant articles was exceedingly high (the sample included roughly two hundred articles from each newspaper).⁹ The total sample included 753 articles.

Measurement

Dependent Variables

As discussed, there are certain abstract dimensions of terrorism risk—newness, dread, salience, and unbalanced portrayals—that are likely to increase public

perceptions and concerns about the danger. In this section, we describe how these dimensions were identified in newspaper content and operationalized as quantitative variables. Starting with the newness dimension, we found that some articles portrayed the risk as something that was new to the United States, that was increasing, elevated, or worsening, or that suggested that the nation's ability to defend itself against terrorism had weakened. Articles that included these or similar descriptors were coded as 1; articles without these descriptors were coded as 0.

We measured the dread dimension using three components. One component was found in articles that speculated about "nuclear," "chemical," or "biological" attacks being carried out in the United States. The second component of dread was seen in articles that described the terrorists as "suicide bombers" or discussed their willingness to die to harm others. The third component consisted of a pooled category that included several other dread-related words and phrases such as *potentially catastrophic*, *uncontrollable*, *severe*, *high*, and *real*. When used to describe terrorism risk, these three components—nuclear and so on, suicide, and other dread-related words—are all likely to increase public risk perceptions and concerns as a function of the dread dimension. However, we separated the components to account for their unique and substantively interesting characteristics. We also wished to draw a quantitative distinction between articles that contained zero, one, two, or all three of these distinct components. Articles containing none of these components were coded as 0; articles containing one, two, or three of the components were scored as 1, 2, and 3, respectively. For example, an article that discussed the "high" risk of "nuclear" attacks by "suicidal" terrorists would receive a score of 3 on the dread dimension.

We measured the salience dimension with two components. For the first component, we determined whether more than 50 percent of the paragraphs in the given article mentioned the risk of terrorism to the United States (if yes, 1; if no, 0).¹⁰ Second, we counted the number of times the article used the words *terror*, *terrorist*, or *terrorism*; this component was then scored based on a scale ranging from 0.1 (one occurrence) to 1.0 (ten or more occurrences). Combining the two components, the highest score on the salience dimension would be 2, in which case, more than half the article would be on-topic and the term *terrorism* would be mentioned ten or more times.

The unbalanced-portrayals dimension, like the newness dimension, was measured with a simple dichotomous variable. We found that some articles questioned the scope or intensity of the threat or balanced high-risk assessments with low-risk accounts, while others did not. Articles from the first category were coded as 0 and articles from the second as 1.

The final component was based on a qualitative assessment of the articles. In pretesting the protocol, we came to believe that the seven manifest components described above may not account for all aspects of terrorism risk in articles.

Much of the commentary on this topic contains subtle details, nuances, stylistic elements, and a particular tone that cannot be gauged by a rigid quantitative scale. In our attempt to account for these subtleties as well as to substantiate the validity of the index (as discussed later), we included the coder's overall subjective judgment of each article based on a scale ranging from 0 to 1. It should be noted, especially for those concerned about including a qualitative component in a quantitative index, that the relative weight of this component in the overall index was quite small and that the results of this study would not change significantly if we took the qualitative component out of the index.

To summarize, this study was designed to measure four abstract dimensions of terrorism risk—newness, dread, salience, and unbalanced portrayals. The newness and unbalanced dimensions were each based on one component of newspaper content, while dread and salience were based on three and two components, respectively. These seven components were measured using a quantitative content analysis. An eighth component was developed using a qualitative assessment of the articles. Combining these components in a single index, each article was rated on a scale between 0.1 and 8 (the higher the rating, the greater the terrorism risk). To offer both a specific and general assessment of terrorism risk in newspaper content, we will report the results for each of the four dimensions as well as the overall index.

Independent Variables

All the independent variables were dichotomous—that is, the article either included the given content characteristic or did not. If the article associated the terrorist threat with the Muslim religion in any way, we coded it as 1 (if not, 0). If a military response to terrorism was advocated in more than half of the article's relevant paragraphs, it was coded as 1 (if not, 0). If the Patriot Act (or similar measures) was supported in more than half of the article's relevant paragraphs, it was coded as 1 (if not, 0). If the article described the risk of terrorism using more government sources than nongovernment sources, it was coded as 1 (if not, 0). Finally, articles from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* (newspapers located near the 9/11 sites) were coded as 1; articles from the remote newspapers, the *Anchorage Daily News* and the *Lincoln Journal Star*, were coded as 0.

Validity

The validity of our terrorism risk index was supported by a comparison between two operationally distinct measures. As discussed, the index comprised seven manifest characteristics of content and one qualitative assessment made by the coders. The first type of measure assumed that specific words and phrases such as *dirty bomb* or *bioterrorism* captured a particular dimension of terrorism risk that tends to increase public perceptions of the danger. The second

measure was based on the commonsense assumption that people can use their own personal judgments and interpretations to rate the level of danger portrayed in articles. Given the universal nature of risk, we also supposed that most people would offer similar ratings of the risk (this assumption was supported by an intercoder reliability test, as noted below).

Although conceptually and operationally distinct, the two measures were essentially intended for the same purpose: to indicate the level of terrorism risk in articles. To explore this assumption empirically, we tested the association between each of the seven manifest components and the coder's overall assessment. Based on a multiple regression analysis in which the coder's evaluation was treated as the dependent variable and the manifest components as predictors, our assumption was strongly confirmed. Each manifest characteristic of terrorism risk had a significantly high, independent, positive association with the coder's subjective evaluation of the articles. This finding supports the validity of both measures. Also worth noting is the high R^2 value (.760; $p < .001$), which indicates that the manifest components represent a strong set of explanatory variables.

Reliability

Moving to the issue of reliability, intercoder agreement tests were conducted on all the variables, using 8 percent of the total articles in the sample (a systematic random sample was used for choosing the test articles). A correlation analysis was used to measure the intercoder reliability of the terrorism risk index; we found that the correlation between coders was sufficiently high ($r = .87$). The percentage of agreement on the five independent variables ranged from 89 percent to 100 percent. Scott's pi, which corrects for chance agreement, ranged from .77 to 1.0 on these variables.

Analysis

Our analysis consists of four parts. We begin with a brief review of the study's descriptive statistics. Next, we describe how the level of terrorism risk in the press fluctuated over time. Third, we use Pearson correlation coefficients to determine the strength of the relationship between the five independent variables (published near 9/11 sites, government-source dominant, supports military response, supports liberties reduction, religion associated with terrorism) and each of the four dependent variables (newness, dread, salience, and unbalanced portrayals) as well as the combined terrorism risk index. The fourth section includes a multiple regression analysis that allows us to test the influence of each independent variable while controlling for the other variables.

Descriptive Statistics

A total of 753 articles were analyzed in this study. Three-quarters of the articles were published in the post-9/11 period, one-quarter during the pre-9/11 period. Articles from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* composed 73 percent of the sample, while 27 percent came from the *Anchorage Daily News* and the *Lincoln Journal Star*. Government officials were the most prevalent sources in 47 percent of the articles; nongovernment sources were dominant in 53 percent of the articles. One in five articles (20 percent) associated the threat of terrorism with religion, and the great majority of these made references to Islam. Roughly the same percentage of articles was mostly in favor of a military response to terrorism (19 percent), while the number of articles that supported the Patriot Act or similar security measures was much smaller at 5 percent.

Terrorism Risk Portrayals over Time

As expected, the number of articles on terrorism risk increased dramatically after 9/11.¹¹ *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, for instance, published roughly three times more articles on this topic in the first three months following 9/11 than in the four preceding years. However, while the level of terrorism risk in articles also spiked after 9/11, it declined rather quickly and generally fluctuated during the eight-year period (see Figure 1).¹² Overall, the average terrorism risk level was slightly higher in the pre-9/11 period (3.44) than after the attacks (3.09). The same results were found for three of the four dimensions of terrorism risk (newness, dread, and salience). Unbalanced portrayals, however, were more common in the post-9/11 period (59 percent of pre-9/11 articles compared to 64 percent of post-9/11 articles were unbalanced).

Correlation Analysis

Newspapers located near the sites of 9/11 (*The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*) tended to publish articles with higher levels of newness, dread, and salience than the remote newspapers (*Anchorage Daily News* and *Lincoln Journal Star*). However, nearness to the 9/11 sites was not associated with the level of unbalanced portrayals. As shown in Table 1, there was a significant positive correlation between nearness to the 9/11 sites and three of the four dimensions of terrorism risk as well as the combined index ($r = .114$; $p < .01$). Given the relative weakness of these correlations, however, we considered these results as more illustrative than definitive.

The results found in the case of government-source dominance were more decisive. We should first note that the social actors categorized as “government sources” offered similar portrayals of terrorism risk, regardless of their particular occupation or political affiliation. As shown in Table 2, the mean risk levels

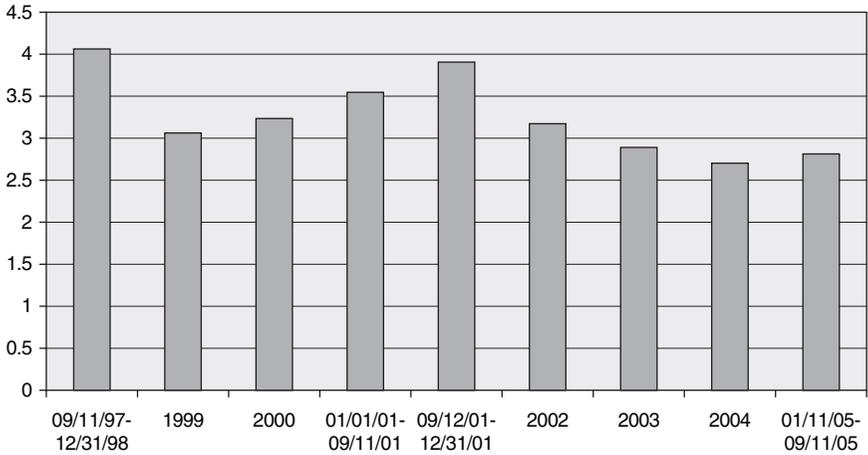


Figure 1
Average Terrorism Risk Level in the Press from 1997 to 2005

Table 1
Correlations between terrorism risk and other variables in newspaper articles

Independent Variables	Pearson Correlation Coefficients				
	Newness	Dread	No Balance	Salience	Overall Index
Published near 9/11 sites	.099**	.102**	.016	.080*	.113**
Government-source dominant	.194**	.166**	.012	.119**	.208**
Supports military response	.137**	.248**	.243**	.166**	.327**
Supports liberties reduction	.033	.122**	.107**	.150**	.175**
Religion associated with terrorism	.079*	.171**	-.052	.287**	.221**

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

for almost all types of government officials (Clinton administration, Bush administration, Republicans, Democrats, and other officials) were greater than the mean for nongovernment sources, with one exception found in the relatively few articles dominated by Senator John Kerry. There was a significant positive relationship between government-source dominance and three of the four risk dimensions, as well as the combined index ($r = .208$; $p < .01$).

An even stronger relationship was seen in the case of articles that favored a military response. This variable was strongly and significantly correlated with all four dimensions of terrorism risk and the combined index ($r = .327$; $p < .01$). Support for measures that reduced civil liberties was significantly correlated with three of the four risk dimensions and the combined index ($r = .175$; $p < .01$).

Table 2

Average terrorism risk level by source dominance

Dominant Source	<i>M</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>SD</i>
Bush administration	4.22	77	1.54
Clinton administration	4.20	22	1.99
Senator John Kerry	2.47	12	1.98
Other officials identified as Democrats	2.83	26	1.82
Other officials identified as Republicans	3.13	13	1.59
Other officials (no political affiliation mentioned)	3.47	204	1.78
Nongovernment sources (newspaper staff, ordinary people, others)	2.78	389	1.82
Foreign sources	4.02	10	1.97
Total	3.18	753	1.85

Finally, articles that associated the risk of terrorism with Islam had greater risk levels than articles that did not. Again, as shown in Table 1, this variable was significantly correlated with three of the four dimensions and the combined index ($r = .221$; $p < .01$).

Multiple Regression Analysis

To answer Research Question 1 and test the four hypotheses stated above, we conducted a multiple regression analysis. Terrorism risk, as measured by the combined index, was the dependent variable. The five theoretically relevant aspects of newspaper content were treated as independent variables. In constructing the model, the basic assumptions and potential shortcomings of regression modeling were considered and found to be unproblematic.¹³

As shown in Table 3, all five variables contributed significantly to the explained variance of terrorism risk ($R^2 = .198$; $p < .001$). Addressing Research Question 1, we found that the nearness of a newspaper to the 9/11 sites was a weak but significant predictor of terrorism risk in articles ($\beta = .076$; $p < .05$). (Note that β refers to standardized regression coefficients.) Confirming Hypotheses 1 through 4, the variables government-source dominant ($\beta = .163$; $p < .001$), supports military response ($\beta = .278$; $p < .001$), supports liberties reduction ($\beta = .137$; $p < .001$), and religion associated with terrorism ($\beta = .181$; $p < .001$) proved to be strong and significant predictors. Each of these characteristics increased the level of terrorism risk portrayed in articles.

Conclusion

The issue of how and to what extent the United States is threatened by international terrorism is deeply interwoven in other important news topics

Table 3

Regression model showing standardized regression coefficients for five predictors of terrorism risk in newspaper articles

Independent Variables	Standardized Regression Coefficients
Published near 9/11 sites	.076*
Government-source dominant	.163***
Supports military response	.278***
Supports liberties reduction	.137***
Religion associated with terrorism	.181***
R^2	.198***

Note: Published near 9/11 sites was scored as follows: 0 = articles from the *Anchorage Daily News* and *Lincoln Journal Star* and 1 = articles from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*; government-source dominant was 0 = nongovernment source and 1 = government source; supports military response was 0 = military response not supported and 1 = military response supported; supports liberties reduction was 0 = liberties reduction not supported and 1 = liberties reduction supported; religion associated with terrorism was 0 = religion not associated with terrorism and 1 = religion associated with terrorism.

* $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$.

and social issues. In the wake of 9/11, given the perceived increase in terrorism risk, numerous politicians, experts, and commentators called for a swift and mighty response from the U.S. military. The threat of terrorism was commonly used as a justification for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as a proposed surge in American troop levels in Iraq in early 2007. As our study showed, the elite press clearly reflected the strategic and rhetorical link between risk and war. Articles that made a case for a military response tended to contain higher levels of terrorism risk than articles that did not. The same association was found between the threat of terrorism and the need for enhanced homeland security measures such as the USA Patriot Act, which effectively degraded some of the freedoms and civil liberties enjoyed by Americans.

A strong relationship also existed between source selection and press portrayals of the risk. Supporting the findings of Bennett (1994) and others, the journalists in our sample relied heavily on official sources when describing the threat of terrorism. Nearly half of the articles in the sample (47 percent) included more government sources than nongovernment sources. Our study also showed that government officials, administration officials in particular, tended to describe the risk of terrorism in more ominous and weighty terms than did nongovernment officials. It should be noted, however, that we did not find a partisan bias in this respect. For example, as shown in Table 2, articles dominated by the Clinton and Bush administrations exhibited, on average, almost exactly the same level of terrorism risk.

The subject of religion, Islam in particular, was another important issue that often emerged in press portrayals of terrorism. In fact, every fifth article in our sample associated religion in one way or another with the threat. While previous studies have shown that the media avoided making specific negative statements about Muslim Americans and Islamic organizations in the United States, there was still a tendency to link Islam in general to some of the scariest accounts of the terrorist threat.

This finding is relevant to a growing debate about the causes of terrorism and the strategies proposed for responding to it. On one side, some authors argue that the religious character of terrorism is indisputable, that culture matters most in international conflicts, and that appreciating this fact is crucial to the proper formulation of U.S. foreign policies. Other authors claim that the supposed religious motive of terrorism is dubious, that placing the emphasis on this motive distracts policy makers from the real causes of terrorism, and that the perpetuation of this stereotype is counterproductive to the struggle against it (Pape 2005). While this study cannot speak to the cause of terrorism itself, we can conclude that the former argument prevailed in the elite press and that religious identities and motives were often associated with the most frightening portrayals of terrorism risk in the United States.

Our study revealed a weaker relationship between the closeness of a newspaper to the sites of 9/11 and the level of terrorism risk in articles. On one hand, given the enormous scope and intensity of the 9/11 events, it was not surprising that the risk level in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* exceeded that of the geographically remote newspapers from Nebraska (*Lincoln Journal Star*) and Alaska (*Anchorage Daily News*). On the other hand, the statistical significance of this relationship was not strong enough to warrant a decisive conclusion on the effects of proximity. While we found these data interesting, further research is needed, especially studies that take into account a larger sample of newspapers from across the country, to develop this perspective.

One of our project's most surprising findings was that while the level of terrorism risk spiked after 9/11, it leveled off and declined rather quickly. The average risk level in articles published in 2002 was roughly equivalent to the level in 2000. In fact, the average risk level in pre-9/11 articles was slightly higher than in post-9/11 articles. One possible explanation is that pre-9/11 articles were generally more focused on the risk itself, whereas after 9/11, the issue often played a secondary role in a wider range of news topics, which would have moderated the average level of terrorism risk during this period.

The events of 9/11 transformed the way Americans think and talk about terrorism. In the years following the attacks, references to and speculation about this strategic danger were offered by all spectrums of society, from government officials, military leaders, and terrorism experts to political pundits, private security companies, religious leaders, artists, writers, and athletes.

Once a unique national security issue discussed primarily by politicians and security officials, the risk of terrorism now ranks among the most important social problems of the twenty-first century—one with numerous links to other public issues and personal relevance to almost everyone.

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Notes

1. The Gallup Organization has asked the open question “What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?” since the early twentieth century. In the two decades before 9/11, terrorism never made the list of America’s most important problems. After 9/11, terrorism became a top concern (mentioned by 46 percent of respondents in October 2001) and stayed on the list until the time this article was written in 2006 (see Mark Gillespie, “Terrorism Reaches Status of Korean and Vietnam Wars as Most Important Problem. Economy Ranks a Distant Second,” *Gallup News Service*, Nov. 19, 2001).
2. A Gallup poll conducted in January 2006 found that 43 percent of Americans were “very” or “somewhat” worried that they would become victims of terrorism (“Terrorism in the United States,” *Gallup News Service*, April 25, 2006; and D.W. Moore, “Terrorism, Spread of Weapons of Mass Destruction Most Critical Threats. Few Partisan and Socioeconomic Differences on Rankings of Threats,” *Gallup News Service*, March 8, 2004). For a review of other related polls, see Sjöberg (2005).
3. In a lengthy report by the Office of Homeland Security (2002), the assessment of terrorism risk was portrayed as difficult because “our society presents an almost infinite array of potential targets that can be attacked through a variety of methods” (p. vii). Likewise, a risk assessment of food terrorism issued by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (2003) stated plainly that “it is difficult for FDA to predict with any certainty the likelihood that an act of food terrorism will occur.”
4. See, for instance, T.H. Kean and L.H. Hamilton, “A Formula for Disaster,” *New York Times*, Dec. 5, 2005: 23; S.M. Collins and J.I. Lieberman, “Steps to Protect Our Homeland,” *New York Times*, July 19, 2005: 20; and “Votes in Congress” (editorial), *New York Times*, July 17, 2005:31.
5. See a survey by the Pew Research Center (2004), which found that “A plurality of Americans (46 percent) believes that Islam is more likely than other religions to encourage violence among its believers.” See also a Gallup Poll report that 51 percent of Americans perceive “Islamic Fundamentalism” as a “critical threat” to the “vital interests of the United States” (D.W. Moore, “Terrorism, Spread of Weapons of Mass Destruction Most Critical Threats. Few Partisan and Socioeconomic Differences on Rankings of Threats,” *Gallup News Service*, March 8, 2004).
6. According to census data from 2000, the Alaskan population was 626,932 (third smallest) and Nebraska’s was 1,711,263 (tenth smallest).

7. This period of coverage represents the largest symmetrical time frame (i.e., four years before and after 9/11) that could be constructed when the collection of data began.
8. The search terms included *threat of terror!*, *terror! threat*, *terror! alert*, *terror! warning*, *risk of terror!*, *terror! risk*, and *war on terror!*. The exclamation point represents a wildcard function that allows the search engine to find all variations of the term *terror*, including *terrorism*, *terrorist*, and *terrorists*.
9. We computed the sample size ($n = \pi[1 - \pi](z/B)^2$), taking the safe but conservative approach of setting $\pi(1 - \pi) = .25$. Setting the bound (B) on error at .05 with a 95 percent confidence interval ($z = 1.96$), a sample size of 384 was chosen for the study.
10. If there was an equal number of "on topic" and "off topic" paragraphs, the decision was based on the number of sentences.
11. For a detailed analysis of the trends in media coverage of terrorism, see Kern et al. (2003).
12. Based on the combined index, the average terrorism-risk level in articles published between September 11, 1997, and December 31, 1998, was 4.07. After a one-point decline in 1999, the average increased each year until 2002, when it reversed course and trended downward.
13. The dependent variable was normally distributed; we also checked for multicollinearity (i.e., when the independent variables are highly correlated and have little unique explanatory power) and found that the four significant predictors in the model had relatively weak correlations with each other and strong correlations with the dependent variable terrorism risk. By adding these variables into the model one at a time, we also found that each increased R^2 substantially.

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