

THE RHETORICAL ROLLER COASTER TO WAR:
SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE HEADLINES 8/2/90—1/15/91

"We are in a universe where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning."

—Jean Beaudrillard

The Implosion of Meaning in the Media

Was U.S. military victory over Iraq also a White House political and psychological victory over the American people? Many media critics (Bennett 1988; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Hertsgaard, 1988; Entman, 1989; Bagdikian, 1990; Lee & Solomon, 1990) have explicated the vast governmental public relations machinery designed to manage both the press and public opinion on a daily basis. During the months leading up to the Gulf War, charges of such media manipulation were widespread, but little documentation beyond the fact of overt censorship has become available.

We believe we now have data to suggest that public opinion may have been managed during the prewar buildup with the same sophistication and zeal as the deployment of troops and weaponry. While opinion polls never favored a military solution during the prewar months, the "emotional roller coaster" people experienced during the fall 1990 buildup kept public opinion off-balance and neutralized antiwar mobilization efforts. The *Nation* editorialized on 12/3/90 that the point of this "roller coaster ride plotted by President Bush" where "radical military escalations are followed by reassurances of peace" was "to create so much confusion that rational public response is impossible." Those at the other end of the political spectrum reported a similar emotional ride. Operation Yellow Ribbon founder Gaye

Jacobsen remarked in a November 1990 television interview that “the roller coaster is emotional. Those of us with loved ones in the Middle East are going crazy” (Jacobsen, 1990).

In communicational terms, a roller coaster experience describes a predictable response to a series of mixed messages, in this case juxtaposed messages threatening war and offering peace. Decades of clinical experience and experimentation in double binds (Bateson, 1972; Sluzki & Ransom, 1976), hypnotherapy (Haley, 1973; Crasilneck & Hall, 1985), brainwashing (Schefflin, 1978), and even Zen practice (Watts, 1958; Kraft, 1988) confirm that keeping people psychologically confused and off-balance through a series of mixed messages makes them especially vulnerable and open to suggestion. One must assume that government public opinion-makers are versed in these change strategies, as we know they make widespread use of marketing and public relations techniques. Regardless of intent, we were interested in the relationship between the reported “emotional roller coaster” experience and the course of public opinion during the Gulf War buildup.

The hypothesis of this study was that, while the U.S. military buildup followed a steady upward trajectory from August 1990 through January 1991, lead news reports during the same period would reveal a pattern of continuous fluctuation between war and peace messages.

Method

To discern if this roller coaster ride was more real than imagined, the 167 lead *San Francisco Chronicle* headlines from 8/2/90 through 1/15/91 were collected. We were trying to recapture some of readers’ initial reactions to the major message of each morning in terms of how much it gave the impression that “war” or “peace” was in the offing. The *Chronicle’s* tabloid-style headlines seemed well-suited for tapping into such first impressions because their simplicity and succinctness make a single response possible, especially when compared to the more discursive *New York Times* headlines which are harder to categorize.

Using a modified Q-methodology (Stephenson, 1953), ten regular newspaper readers were assigned the task of sorting these headlines into four categories:

BAD NEWS—SOUNDS LIKE WAR

e.g. 8/8/90 "GIs Ordered to Saudi Arabia"

MIXED NEWS—COULD MEAN WAR OR PEACE

e.g. 9/18/90 "Air Force Chief of Staff Fired"

GOOD NEWS—SOUNDS LIKE PEACE

e.g. 10/2/90 "Bush Offers Opening to Saddam"

NO NEWS—MESSAGE UNRELATED TO GULF CRISIS

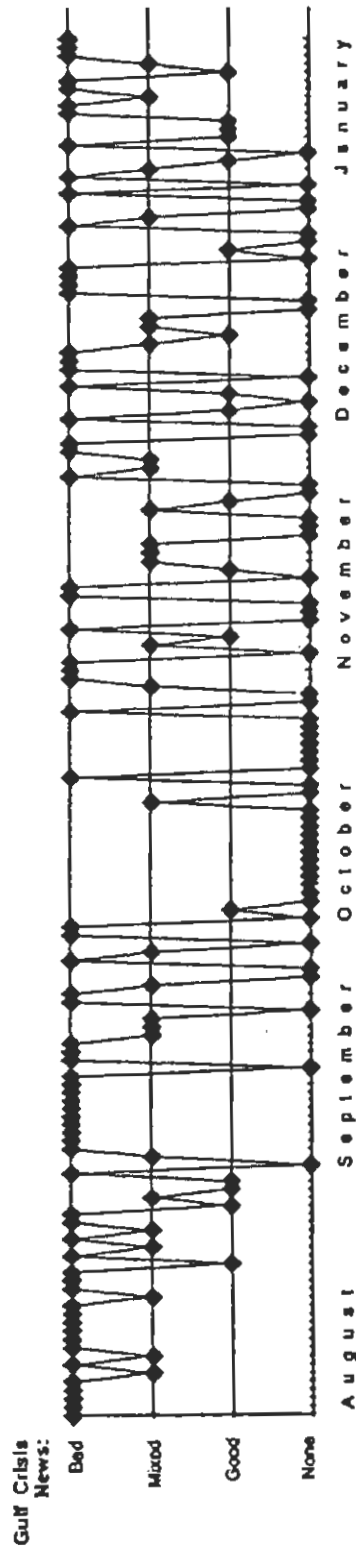
e.g. 10/6/91 "Bush Allows Shutdown of Government to Begin"

Items with .7 agreement and above were coded into the designated category. Items below .7 agreement were coded as, by definition, mixed messages. Inter-rater reliability was .87 and our subsequent review of *New York Times* headlines revealed nearly identical patterns.

Findings and Discussion

1. The Roller Coaster to War

When the data were plotted chronologically, it became apparent that a roller coaster metaphor for prewar sentiment was more nearly a literal representation of the good news/bad news headline pattern. In all, 41% of the headlines were "Bad News," 17% "Mixed News," 10% "Good News," and 32% "No News," and there was nearly continuous fluctuation during the five and one-half months under study (see Figure 1).



The Rhetorical Roller Coaster to War
Profile of *San Francisco Chronicle* Headlines
August 2, 1990 — January 15, 1991
Figure 1

2. *War/Peace Couplets*

Other patterns emerged around the dozen "Good News" peace points that occurred with nearly rhythmic regularity every few weeks during the months under study. With only 10% of the total headlines judged "Good News," the prognosis for peace was never rosy, yet optimism and denial were widespread and these periodic peace points took the steam out of incipient antiwar activism.

Strikingly, nearly all of the peace points we identified appeared immediately before or after strong "Bad News" headlines, forming a sequence of war/peace couplets (see Figure 2).

These patterns of pairing and oscillation can be explained in part as a series of messages designed to play to Bush's two primary audiences of the American public and Saddam Hussein, whose cooperation required acceptance of contradictory signals. While Hussein had to be led to believe that the U.S. would stop at nothing to defeat him, at the same time, in order to neutralize antiwar inclinations, the American people had to be convinced that their cost would be negligible.

This was corroborated in October 1990 by a "senior State Department official" quoted in the *Washington Post* as saying "We have two very distinct audiences. Saddam Hussein is listening to all of this, and you hope he cracks or falls on the floor and comes to Jesus. But at the same time, you have to be careful with the domestic audience" (Hoffman, 1990). The way to accomplish this rhetorically is to speak with forked tongue while at the same time denying one is doing so.

In *The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam*, Daniel Hallin has documented similar patterns of mixed messages during the early Vietnam War, when under Kennedy "the North Vietnamese had to be convinced that the American commitment was in the end unlimited; the American public, that it was so limited it did not threaten war at all." Hallin concluded that it was not surprising given this dilemma "that the administration relied heavily on deception and secrecy, nor that these were hard to maintain" (1986, 35-36).

Figure 2 — War/Peace Couplets
 Profile of *San Francisco Chronicle* Headlines
 August 2, 1990—January 15, 1991

08/16	Iraq Hurls More Threats
08/17	U.N. Chief Steps in to Mediate Gulf Crisis
08/20	Iraq Offers to Release Some Foreigners
08/21	President Assails Iraq for Holding Hostages
08/30	Iraqis Claim Women, Children to be Freed Today
08/31	U.S. Plans to Attack if Talks Fail
11/04	Iraq Offers to Free Hostages in Exchange for No Attack
11/05	Defense Department to Call up Reserve Combat Units
11/19	Saddam Says He Will Free Hostages by March—Bush Calls Plan 'Cruel'
11/20	Soviets Stall Bush on Gulf Attack
11/30	U.N. Issues Ultimatum to Iraq
12/01	Bush Offers to Talk with Iraq
12/03	Baker Sees 'Excellent Chance' that Iraq Will Be Put Out of Kuwait
12/04	Cheney Says War Is Surest Way to Free Kuwait
12/10	950 Mideast Hostages Fly to Freedom
12/11	Hostages Arriving Home—U.S. Says Crisis Isn't Over
12/16	Iraq Cancels Peace Talks
12/17	Iraq-U.S. Peace Talks Still Possible, Baker Says
01/02	Gulf Showdown Most Urgent Issue Since World War II, Bush Declares
01/03	U.S. Suggests a Compromise on Iraqi Talks
01/05	Iraq Agrees to Gulf Talks
01/06	Bush Warns that 'Time Is Running Out' to Avoid War
01/10	U.S. Iraqi Talks Fail in Geneva
01/11	New Tries for Gulf Peace

3. *No News is Good News*

Hallin also documents Kennedy's and Johnson's pervasive efforts to keep the Vietnam War out of domestic politics. This fact came to mind when, on second look at the roller coaster, we observed an anomalous flat stretch of almost no fluctuation during the five-week period preceding the November 6th election where there was little headline news about the Gulf Crisis.

In fact, the percentage of "No News" headlines during this pre-election period was more than twice the overall average (70% versus 32%) and more than three and one-half times that of "No News" headlines either side of the five-week pre-election window (70% versus 20%) (see Figure 3).

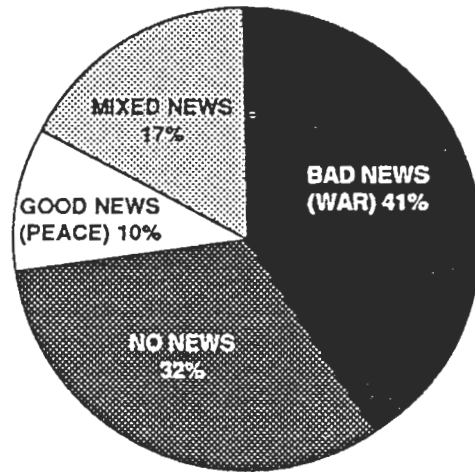
In other words, in the month before the November 1990 election, the Gulf Crisis virtually disappeared from the headlines, replaced largely with budget problem headlines that reveal a sequence of squabblings and changes of course, for instance: 10/10 "Bush Waffles on Higher Taxes"; 10/11 "Bush Shifts Again on Taxes." Only time will tell how much of the budget controversy was manufactured to keep the unpleasant prospect of war out of the minds of the impressionable American electorate, but by design or default war news took a back seat during this crucial time.

Bob Woodward reports in *The Commanders* that by at least October 24th Bush told Cheney "he was leaning toward adding the forces necessary to carry out offensive operations" but that "nothing could be announced for two weeks, until after the November 6 elections, because any move would be assumed to be an attempt to influence the elections" (1991, 311).

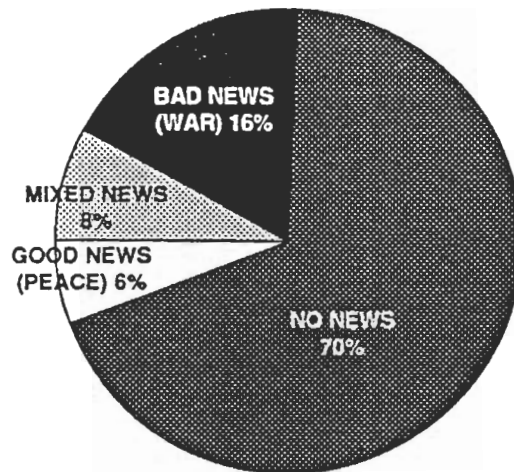
4. *Iraq vs. U.S. Sourced Headlines*

Saddam Hussein provided such a perfect villain that all but the most outrider peace activists felt compelled to preface statements with "not that Hussein isn't a bad guy. . ." But how rhetorically belligerent was he?

Figure 3
Gulf News Headlines
San Francisco Chronicle



Pre-War 8/2/90 — 1/15/91



Pre-Election 10/1/90 — 11/6/90

We found that, contrary to the image of Hussein as the sole and unilateral aggressor, Iraq sourced headlines (e.g. 1/5 "Iraq Agrees to Gulf Talks") were nearly four times more likely (47% versus 12%) than U.S.-sourced headlines (e.g. 1/13 "Bush Wins Vote on War") to be judged "Good News—Sounds Like Peace." Conversely, U.S.-sourced headlines were more than twice as likely (71% vs. 35%) as Iraq-sourced headlines to be judged as "Bad News—Sounds Like War" (see Figure 4).

In other words, Iraq's occupation of Kuwait notwithstanding, from a strictly "who said what" perspective, the U.S. was far more rhetorically aggressive.

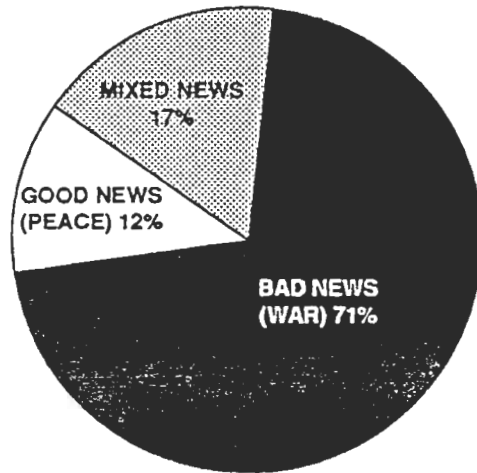
Conclusion

We do not have the Pentagon Papers for the Gulf War (yet), and it remains to be seen how much of the roller coaster effect we observed was a function of government public opinion management strategies designed to entrance the American people and how much was due to chance or typical of most symmetrical escalations of conflict. Still, the confirmation of our hypothesis of a clear pattern of mixed messages during the prewar months raises serious questions.

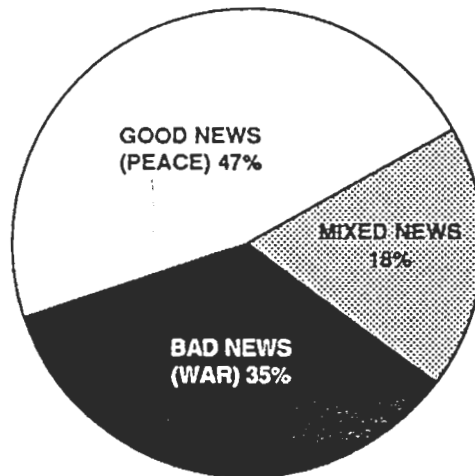
How much of a role did the White House play in keeping the Gulf Crisis off the front pages during the pre-election weeks? Was the American public so blinded by the dehumanized face of the enemy that Iraq's overtures for peaceful resolution were completely discounted? What was the White House program for controlling public opinion and neutralizing dissent? Does the attribution of intent even matter now that we can at least establish the powerful effect of these mixed message patterns?

Whatever the case, the military devastation of Desert Storm could not have been accomplished without the complicity and consent of the American people and press, whose propensities for denial and diversion make public opinion management a demagogue's dream.

Figure 4
Gulf News Headlines
San Francisco Chronicle
8/2/90 — 1/15/91



U.S. Sourced Headlines
N=49



Iraq Sourced Headlines
N=17

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