U.S. National Identity, Political Elites, and a Patriotic Press Following September 11

JOHN HUTCHESON, DAVID DOMKE, ANDRE BILLEAudeauX, and PHILIP GARLAND

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C. on September 11, 2001, U.S. government and military leaders often articulated distinctly pro-American themes in their public communications. We argue that this national identity discourse was at the heart of the U.S. government’s attempt to unite the American public and to mobilize support for the ensuing “war on terrorism.”

With this perspective, we content analyzed Time and Newsweek newsmagazines for the five weeks following September 11 to identify potential communication strategies employed by government and military leaders to promote a sense of U.S. national identity. Findings suggest (a) that government and military officials consistently emphasized American core values and themes of U.S. strength and power while simultaneously demonizing the “enemy,” and (b) that journalists closely paralleled these nationalist themes in their language.

Keywords journalism, national identity, news media, political elites, September 11

That the events of September 11, 2001, were and are important for U.S. national security, foreign policy, and the economy is self-evident; it is our premise that these events also were critical for U.S. national identity. In the weeks following September 11, it became commonplace for U.S. political leaders to publicly emphasize the strength, values, and vision of America as a nation and Americans as people. For example, in his address before Congress and a national television audience nine days after the attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., President George W. Bush (2001) included these comments:

I know there are struggles ahead and dangers to face. But this country will define our times, not be defined by them. As long as the United States of America is determined and strong, this will not be an age of terror. This will

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John Hutcheson is a public affairs officer in the U.S. Air Force. David Domke is an associate professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Washington. Andre Billeaudeauau is a lieutenant in the U.S. Coast Guard. Philip Garland is a doctoral student at Stanford University. Hutcheson, Billeaudeauau, and Garland were graduate students at the University of Washington when the research was conducted.

Address correspondence to John Hutcheson, University of Washington, Department of Communication, Box 353740, Seattle, WA 98195, USA. E-mail: jsh2@u.washington.edu

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be an age of liberty here and across the world. Great harm has been done to us. We have suffered great loss. And in our grief and anger we have found our mission and our moment. Freedom and fear are at war. The advance of human freedom, the great achievement of our time and the great hope of every time, now depend on us.

Such nation-affirming rhetoric seems a clear example of what Manheim (1991, 1994) has termed “strategic political communication,” in which political leaders craft their public language and communications with the goal to create, control, distribute, and use mediated messages as a political resource. Such careful management of the political and news environments by political elites has become widespread in modern politics (see Domke, Watts, Shah, & Fan, 1999; Herman, 1993; Pfetsch, 1998; Protess et al., 1991; Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999; Zaller, 1992), and seems particularly likely to occur in the context of a national crisis such as the events and aftermath of September 11, when political leaders expect citizens—including journalists—to look to them for guidance and vision. With this in mind, we examine news content during this period with three goals: (a) to gain insight into U.S. government and military leaders’ usage of what might be termed national identity communication strategies; (b) to compare these U.S. leaders’ discourse about national identity with that of nongovernment opinion leaders and citizens, both of whom had less motivation than government officials to emphasize themes of national identity; and (c) to compare the language of these three populations with the discourse of journalists in news coverage.

**The Concept of National Identity**

National identity, considerable scholarship suggests, is a constructed and public national self-image based on membership in a political community as well as history, myths, symbols, language, and cultural norms commonly held by members of a nation. Further, Schlesinger (1991) describes national identity as a specific form of collective identity that is simultaneously “one of inclusion that provides a boundary around ‘us’ and one of exclusion that distinguishes ‘us’ from ‘them’” (p. 301).

Much of the scholarship surrounding nations, nationalism, and national identity has focused on theories of the origins of nations and reasons for their emergence. “Primordialists” contend that the nation is an entity deeply rooted in history, culture, and myth and embedded in human nature; according to this view, formation of nations was inevitable as populations engaged in an ongoing process of self-realization (Smith, 1971, 1986). In contrast, “modernists” posit that the nation is essentially a modern invention, arising more as a result of political forces than cultural awakening. These forces include industrialization (Gellner, 1983), emerging capitalist economic systems (Hobsbawm, 1990), and the rise of vernacular languages in a burgeoning system of print capitalism that produced mass numbers of books and newspapers (Anderson, 1991).

This research aligns with the modernist perspective and contains the assumption that invented or “imagined” nations (Anderson, 1991) necessarily must construct and continuously reconstruct their identities in a public manner. Niebuhr (1967), for example, argues that each nation develops a positive “social myth” to distinguish it from other nations, justify its existence, and defend its interests; these myths appeal to the “collective self of the nation” by framing historical events in positive lights and establishing a sense of superiority over other nations (p. 40). Such myths are propagated by national leaders and through political and cultural institutions such as schools, churches, and the mass media (Deutsch, 1953).
Notably, however, Bloom (1990) suggests that these myths are not enough to sustain a nation. He argues that a nation-state, once created, will endure only if its mass citizenry form a psychological identification with the nation that prompts an internalization of national symbols. Scholars argue that this psychological identification with the nation is necessary, particularly in the arena of international relations, to ensure that the mass public will suppress competing sub-national identities (e.g., ethnic, family, religious) and mobilize to defend the nation if it is threatened (Rivenburgh, 2000). If citizens make a strong psychological identification with the nation and internalize national symbols, political leaders are better able to mobilize public sentiment toward a political goal in times of crisis by using communication strategies that emphasize positive themes of national identity (Cottam & Cottam, 2001).

National Identity and the United States

This research takes as a given the argument that specification of a singular American national identity is a challenging, perhaps impossible task (Calabrese & Burke, 1992). Nonetheless, such a conclusion does not mean that the concept of national identity is irrelevant to the ways in which politics and mass communication play out in the United States. For example, Beasley (2001) found that U.S. presidents since George Washington often have articulated American uniqueness as grounded in certain civil-religious beliefs and core values of liberty, equality, and self-government. Indeed, Calabrese and Burke (1992) describe these core, democratic ideals as “the mythology of American individual freedom” (p. 62). They note that while the reality of these individual freedoms often has not lived up to the myth, these values nonetheless remain central to U.S. idealism. Further, as a military, economic, and cultural “super-power,” the United States derives much of its identity from its position vis-à-vis other nations (Poole, 1999). For example, a core part of U.S. identity for decades was the nation’s oppositional role to the Soviet Union; stopping the spread of communism was not just policy, it defined Americans’ sense of purpose and shaped interactions with other nations (Bloom, 1990).

Notably, several scholars (Hutchinson, 1994; Niebuhr, 1967) highlight the ability and motivation of U.S. government leaders to manipulate national discourse and symbols in order to engender and mobilize support among the mass public for specific political goals. In the Gulf War, for example, the Bush administration stressed the United States’ role in promoting a “New World Order” while demonizing Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi regime (Kellner, 1992). Indeed, by claiming that culturally embedded symbols are threatened by another nation or international actor, U.S. leaders at times have been able to activate strong nationalist feelings that typically reside below the surface in the absence of international conflict (Mishler, 1965). This body of scholarship, then, suggests that U.S. government elites often strategically articulate a conception of American national identity that will engender public support and embed a strong sense of collective identity; analysis of such strategies, we believe, may offer insight into the relations among political elites, mass communication, and the sense of U.S. nationhood.

The importance of examining the post–September 11 interplay between national identity and U.S. elites within news content is highlighted by public opinion data that indicate the “news interest” of U.S. adults was markedly high during this period. For example, well into December 2001 roughly half of randomly sampled U.S. adults indicated they were “very closely” following news about the September 11 attacks and subsequent U.S. campaign against terrorism, the highest level of sustained public interest in the news in more than a decade (Pew, 2001). In such an environment, it seems highly likely that political leaders would engage in “strategic” communications, with a
particular focus on affirming elements of U.S. national identity. Further, some scholars (Calabrese & Burke, 1992; Zaller, 1994a, 1994b) suggest that elites exert their greatest influence over news coverage and, ultimately, public opinion during moments of crisis when greater-than-usual numbers of citizens pay attention to politics and news coverage. If so, a crisis such as September 11 and its aftermath represents an ideal context to analyze the appropriation and manipulation of national identity by U.S. leaders as they attempt to mobilize and engender support among a mass public.

**Theoretical Argument**

It is our view that in the weeks immediately following September 11, 2001, President Bush and members of his administration crafted their public communications with a central goal of restoring confidence among Americans and building support both domestically and abroad for the “war on terrorism.” In particular, we posit that a core element of the U.S. rhetorical campaign that preceded the U.S. military campaign was the usage of national identity communication strategies—that is, utilization of specific language and images by the president and key government leaders with the goal of fostering, maintaining, and reinforcing a collective U.S. identity. To be specific, we suggest that these communication strategies included the following:

- affirmation of American values and ideals that drew upon the U.S. “mythology” of individualism, liberty, and equality;
- affirmation of U.S. international power and dominance, thereby tapping into the nation’s long-established self-image as a world super-power;
- emphasis on unification among Americans across ideological and racial lines, which paralleled a pattern in presidential inaugural rhetoric of emphasizing national unity within diversity;
- shifting of blame for the September 11 attacks away from the United States and portrayal of the international community as united behind a U.S. campaign against terrorism, both of which positioned the United States as a moral leader among nations;
- and, finally, demonization of the “enemy,” which followed a familiar good-versus-evil discourse employed effectively during the Cold War and the Gulf War.

The use of such communication strategies by U.S. government and military elites, in particular, seems likely to have served at least two purposes. First, it undoubtedly helped to mobilize and galvanize public support for the “war on terrorism,” as reflected in public opinion polls showing unprecedented levels of approval for President George W. Bush and sustained high support for the U.S. military campaign against terrorism (Gallup, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c). Second, it served as a reminder of the benefits and challenges that accompany citizenship in the United States, which likely contributed to a revival of American patriotism evident in rituals such as flying flags and singing national hymns like “God Bless America” in public settings, and in the outpouring of charitable donations to various September 11 relief funds.

In contrast, other U.S. sources who were not representatives of the nation-state, such as nongovernment opinion leaders and “average” U.S. citizens, were almost certainly less likely in public conversation to strategically emphasize elements of national identity, because the job of mobilizing and leading the nation was not theirs. As a result, these two groups may have been more likely to express opinions that conflicted with the
official U.S. government position or simply were less nationalistic. For example, statements by U.S. cultural elites unaffiliated with government—such as interest group leaders, think-tank researchers, university professors, and the like—may have been more likely to present a viewpoint that emphasized *analysis* rather than *advocacy* of the U.S. position. Further, these individuals were more likely to address issues that U.S. government officials wished to avoid, such as whether U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East may have contributed to the September 11 events. Likewise, U.S. citizens, while perhaps likely to follow the views of government leaders (see Watts et al., 1999; Zaller, 1994a), typically do not speak with mobilization goals in mind. As a result, these individuals have expressed patriotic sentiments in the aftermath of September 11 but likely not to the extent of U.S. officials. With this in mind, we offer our first hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1: U.S. government and military officials were more likely than U.S. nongovernment elites and U.S. citizens to engage in U.S. national identity-affirming discourse in the weeks following September 11, 2001.

Our second interest is the relationship of U.S. government and military officials with the U.S. news media in the weeks following September 11. Specifically, we posit (a) that if themes of national identity were indeed present in U.S. government and military leaders’ public discourse, such themes also were likely to be present in journalist statements, and (b) that statements of journalists were more likely to parallel over time the perspectives of U.S. government and military officials than those held by other U.S. elites or U.S. citizens, for several reasons.

First, most journalists at U.S. news outlets are U.S. citizens, and their reporting almost inevitably reflects ethnocentric biases (see Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978). As members of the national in-group, journalists are likely to possess many of the same cultural values and beliefs that other members of the nation possess—values and beliefs that act as a filter through which news content is produced (Gerbner, 1964). Ethnocentric reporting has been found to be most acute in coverage of U.S. involvement in international events (Gans, 1979) and seems likely to reflect nationalist themes in crisis situations in which there is a perceived threat to national interests or national security (Brookes, 1999). In the case of the September 11 events, it seems probable that U.S. journalists’ sense of national identity—like that of many other citizens—became heightened, and that this increased sense of American-ness would be reflected in subsequent news coverage.

Second, the high level of political bipartisanship for the “war on terrorism” fostered a one-sided discourse among U.S. government elites, offering the news media few alternative viewpoints to choose from within official circles. U.S. government debate in autumn 2001 was markedly similar to the early stages of the Gulf War build-up, when Democrats and Republicans were largely in agreement about deployment of U.S. troops to Saudi Arabia (see Zaller, 1994a, 1994b). As a result, journalists following the routine of “indexing” their coverage and language to that of U.S. government elites (e.g., Althaus, Edy, Entman, & Phalen, 1996; Bennett, 1990; Entman & Rojecki, 1993) had little choice but to adopt a U.S. identity-affirming discourse.

Finally, industry economic pressures and the need to maintain audience interest likely encouraged news media to echo nationalist sentiment. If, as Zaller (1994b, p. 267) argues, “National unity is good politics,” then it also may be good business for the news media. Fox News, which was accused by some (e.g., Rutenberg, 2001) of overly patriotic coverage post-September 11, also experienced significant ratings increases after September
11, consistently surpassing rival CNN. In a similar vein, countless news organizations—including national television networks—incorporated the colors of red, white, and blue into their promotions during this period. In combination, then, these sets of reasons provide the rationale guiding our second hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2:** U.S. news coverage were more likely to parallel the perspectives of U.S. government and military officials than the perspectives of U.S. nongovernment elites and U.S. citizens in the weeks following September 11, 2001.

**Method**

The purpose of this study is to examine national identity language by U.S. government and military officials, other U.S. opinion leaders, U.S. citizens, and U.S. news media in the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001. With this goal, we content analyzed *Time* and *Newsweek* newsmagazines for the five issues published after September 11, which were among the highest selling issues in the history of these publications (Sutel, 2002).¹ Newsmagazines were chosen as the medium of study because they are generally able to provide more in-depth analysis than daily newspapers and television news programs, and thus seem more likely to reflect patterns in communication strategies used by sources. As Entman (1991, pp. 8–9) notes:

> News magazines arguably summarize the dominant news and editorial emphases of the national media in the United States; their less frequent deadlines usually allow them to canvass official sources (and other media) thoroughly, distilling the results in a narrative reflecting the principal themes in the news.

Our analysis includes undated special editions of *Time* and *Newsweek* published only a few days after September 11, which will be referred to as the September 11 issues. Subsequent issues analyzed were September 24 and October 1, 8, and 15 (the September 17 issues were not included because they already had been published by September 11, released a week ahead of their cover dates in the fashion typical for weekly newsmagazines). All stories that dealt in some way with September 11 events, their aftermath, and the subsequent “war on terrorism” were included in the analysis. A total of 210 stories were analyzed, 117 in *Time* and 93 in *Newsweek.*²

We used the source as the unit of analysis because of our interest in identifying potential differences across *types of sources* in (a) use of national identity language and (b) the valence (i.e., directionality) of their comments. To be specific, we were interested in *what* aspects of U.S. identity were discussed in media content, *who* was speaking, and *how* they talked about the United States. Each source quoted or paraphrased in an article was coded separately, and the entirety of each source’s statements in the article was taken into account when coding for the presence and valence of national identity discourse.

For the overall project of which this article is part, 17 categories of sources were identified, including U.S. and foreign sources and journalists. In this study, our focus is on the four U.S. source categories:

**U.S. government and military officials:** This category consisted of seven subcategories: (a) President Bush; (b) the administration’s “war cabinet” of Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of State Colin Powell, and Attorney General John Ashcroft; (c) the rest of the Bush administration (other Cabinet
officials, major political appointees, presidential spokespersons, advisors, aides, and so on); (d) members of Congress, as well as their aides; (e) other federal government officials, including representatives from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Central Intelligence Agency, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, and Immigration and Naturalization Services; (f) state and local government officials; and (g) U.S. military officials. In our analysis, we sometimes collapse these officials into one category, and other times we leave them as distinct.

Other U.S. elites: These included nongovernment or nonmilitary “experts” present in news coverage because of their knowledge or experience with a particular domain, such as think-tank scholars, interest group representatives, former government and military officials, foreign policy analysts, university professors, and professional researchers.

U.S. citizens: This category contained U.S. sources not identified as members of government or military, or as “experts” in news content; for example, people on the street were included in this category.

U.S. journalists: Because one goal is to examine the link between government and military officials and news media, the writer of each story was coded for use and valence of national identity themes. Notably, journalists’ presentation of source statements was not included in coding for this category, because these statements rightfully belong to other sources.

A total of 1,145 sources were coded across these four categories: 318 U.S. government and military officials, 284 other U.S. elites, 333 U.S. citizens, and 210 journalists. Sources’ statements were coded for the presence and accompanying valence of the following national identity-related themes.

Attribution of blame: Sources were coded as “1” for this variable if their statements placed blame for the terrorist attacks solely on the United States. Sources were coded as “2” if their statements attributed blame to both the United States and to the accused terrorists or Al-Qaeda network. Sources were coded as “3” if they attributed blame solely to the terrorists or Al-Qaeda. Sources who did not make an attribution of blame did not receive a code on this variable.

Treatment of “U.S. enemy”: This variable focused on language about Osama bin-Laden, the Al-Qaeda network, September 11 terrorists, and Afghanistan’s Taliban regime. Sources were coded as “1” if their statements portrayed these individuals or groups in a positive light, as “2” if their statements contained a mix of positive and negative judgments or were neutral statements of fact about these individuals or groups, and “3” if their statements portrayed these individuals or groups in a negative light. Sources did not receive a code if they did not mention any of these individuals or groups.

Reference to American values: This variable focused on the presence of language about values and ideals commonly considered as part of the “American” ethos, including freedom, equality, capitalism, tolerance, justice, compassion, moral courage, progress, and innovation. Sources were coded as “1” if their statements were critical of U.S. values (e.g., “America’s me-first attitude and disregard for cultures other than their own has bred resentment around the world”). Sources were coded as “2” if their statements offered both positive and negative judgments or only neutral statements regarding U.S. values. Sources were coded as “3” if their statements affirmed U.S. values and ideals (e.g., “The U.S. has been a land of freedom and opportunity for immigrants for over two centuries”). Sources did not receive a code if they made no reference to U.S. values.

Reference to U.S. strength: Sources were coded as “1” for this variable if their statements portrayed the United States as humbled, weakened, or humiliated as a result of September 11. Sources were coded as “2” if their statements portrayed the United
States as wounded yet defiant or resolute after the attacks. Sources were coded as “3” if their statements portrayed the United States as an unchallenged world leader without significant ill effects of September 11. Sources did not receive a code if they made no reference to U.S. strength.

Reference to U.S. history: Sources were coded as “1” if they alluded to negative events in U.S. history, including past military defeats, previous terrorist attacks, or periods of national unrest. Sources were coded as “2” if they had a mix of positive and negative references to U.S. history or if they offered neutral factual statements containing historical referents. Sources were coded as “3” if they alluded to positive events in U.S. history, including the founding of the nation, past military victories, and periods of national unity. Sources did not receive a code if they made no mention of U.S. history.

Reference to U.S. public sentiment: This variable focused on language about U.S. public opinion and/or feelings in the aftermath of September 11. Sources were coded as “1” if their statements described U.S. sentiment as divided. Sources were coded as “2” if they described U.S. sentiment in a neutral or mixed fashion—not clearly divided nor united. Sources were coded as “3” if they described U.S. sentiment as united. Sources did not receive a code if they made no mention of U.S. public sentiment.

Reference to world opinion: This variable focused on statements regarding international sentiment about the United States’ planned “war on terrorism.” Sources were coded as “1” if they described international opinion as against the United States. Sources were coded as “2” if their statements were only neutral or included a mix of “for” and “against” judgments of international opinion. Sources were coded as “3” if they described international opinion as supporting America’s position. Sources did not receive a code if they made no mention of international sentiment.

Two people conducted the content analysis coding, with an overlap of approximately 10% of sources. For the type of source, these coders agreed on 94 of 104 in-common codings, yielding a .90 reliability coefficient, which was determined to be 87% greater than by chance (see Scott, 1955). For the national identity variables, the coders agreed on 661 of 728 in-common codings, yielding a .91 reliability coefficient, which was 88% greater than by chance.

Upon completion of this coding, we constructed two additional variables. The first captures the total number of themes about U.S. national identity present in each source’s comments, regardless of whether the specific statements were positive (affirmative) or negative (critical) toward U.S. national identity. This variable was created in two steps. First, all valence codings for the U.S. national identity-related themes were converted to 0 (did not mention theme) or 1 (mentioned theme). Second, these variables were summed across the thematic categories, resulting in a range of 0 to 7 themes mentioned for each source.

We also calculated a mean valence score for each source category, in which we combined all of the national identity-related themes addressed by each type of source and then calculated the mean. In creating this measure, for each theme we assigned a code of “3” to statements that affirmed U.S. identity, a “2” for statements that were neutral or a mix of positive and negative toward U.S. identity, and a “1” for statements that were critical of U.S. national identity.

Results

Our analysis is presented in two stages. First, we examine patterns in national identity-related discourse among U.S. sources in *Time* and *Newsweek*. Second, we explore potential
links between the types of sources and journalists’ language regarding U.S. national identity. To provide insight into this analysis, we offer some excerpts from news content.

**Hypothesis 1**

Hypothesis 1 posited that U.S. government and military sources were more likely than other U.S. elites and U.S. citizens to engage in U.S. national identity-affirming discourse. We approached this hypothesis in two ways: First, we examined the *volume* of national identity-related themes present in the discourse within each source category; second, we examined the *valence* of these themes by source type, to more specifically identify any differences among sources in their use of U.S. national identity-affirming discourse.

As a first test of the hypothesis, therefore, we ran a crosstab between source type and the number of themes about U.S. national identity in their comments (see Table 1). For this analysis, so as to maintain reasonable cell sizes, the variable was collapsed into three categories: 0 = no national identity themes mentioned, 1 = one national identity theme present, and 2 = two or more national identity themes present.

The results in Table 1 indicate that U.S. government and military sources were significantly more likely than other U.S. elites or U.S. citizens to include national identity-related themes in their comments. A total of 30% of U.S. government and military sources included one national identity theme in their comments, and 24% more included at least two themes. This latter category was much higher than that for other U.S. elites (15%)

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National identity themes</th>
<th>Type of source (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S. govt/military</td>
<td>Other U.S. elites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or more</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\chi^2 = 26.9, df = 4, p &lt; .05$</td>
<td>$n = 318$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Government and military sources by subcategory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National identity themes</th>
<th>President Bush</th>
<th>&quot;War cabinet&quot;</th>
<th>Other pres. admin.</th>
<th>Congress</th>
<th>Other federal officials</th>
<th>State and local govt.</th>
<th>Military</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or more</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$n = 30$</td>
<td>$n = 17$</td>
<td>$n = 60$</td>
<td>$n = 46$</td>
<td>$n = 104$</td>
<td>$n = 25$</td>
<td>$n = 36$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
mentioned two themes) and U.S. citizens (10% mentioned two themes). Overall, 54% of U.S. government and military officials included at least one national identity-related theme in their statements, compared to 44% of other U.S. elites and 42% of citizens.

Further, the additional frequency analysis of U.S. government and military sources in the lower tier of Table 1 is revealing about both differences and similarities among these sources in the volume of national identity-related themes in their comments. Not surprisingly, President Bush was by far the most likely to employ national identity themes in the news coverage—97% of the time, with the vast majority of those codings containing two or more themes. At the same time, the administration’s “war cabinet” of Cheney, Rumsfeld, Powell, and Ashcroft; other federal government officials; and U.S. military officials all addressed at least one theme in more than half of their comments, while congressional officials were slightly lower with national identity themes in 46% of their statements. Finally, other members of the Bush administration and state and local government officials included national identity themes in 33% and 24% of their comments, respectively. Looking closely at these sources, then, we find, with the notable and unsurprising exception of the president, a similar amount of national identity discourse across the major players in the U.S. federal government.

As a second way to examine the volume of national identity-related themes in the discourse following September 11, we analyzed the presence of these themes over time by source. Specifically, we ran an analysis of variance test of source (government and military officials, other U.S. elites, citizens) by date on volume of national identity-related themes (uncollapsed range of 0 to 7); this analysis revealed significant main effects for source, \( F(2, 920) = 16.3, p < .05 \), and date, \( F(4, 920) = 11.5, p < .05 \), as well as an interaction, \( F(8, 920) = 2.8, p < .05 \). We then plotted the total number of national identity-related themes present for each source type for each week of newsmagazines analyzed (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 shows that U.S. government and military sources consistently outpaced other U.S. elites and U.S. citizens in the use of national identity-related themes in their discourse. The greatest spike for all three groups occurred in the September 24 issue, with U.S. government and military sources well above other U.S. elites and citizens in the number of references to identity-related themes. After September 24, each group declined in the number of U.S. national identity-related references; nonetheless, U.S. government and military officials continued consistently to engage in more identity-related discourse than the other source categories. These plots also shed light on the statistical interaction: Other U.S. elites, beginning in the October 1 issue, surpass citizens in their usage of national identity themes. The implications of this over-time shift in the sourcing pattern will become apparent shortly.

Analysis so far has demonstrated two things: First, U.S. government and military officials were more likely than other U.S. elites and U.S. citizens to include national identity-related themes in their comments; second, President Bush engaged in the highest usage of such discourse, while other major federal officials were similar in their use of national identity themes. We now turn to the valence of these statements in order to examine potential differences across source groups in the affirmation of U.S. national identity. To examine these relationships, we ran crosstabs between source type and each of the seven U.S. national identity-related thematic categories: attribution of blame, treatment of “enemy,” reference to American values, reference to U.S. strength, reference to U.S. history, reference to U.S. public sentiment, and reference to world opinion. In the interests of parsimony and to facilitate interpretation of these findings, we present all of the crosstabs in one table (see Table 2).
The highly U.S. identity-affirming nature of the language by U.S. government and military sources is readily apparent in these results. Beginning at the top of the table and working down, of discourse that attributed blame for the September 11 attacks 94% of U.S. government and military sources placed the blame squarely on the terrorists, compared to only 58% of other U.S. elites and 80% of U.S. citizens. President Bush’s statements following the terrorist attacks typified the rhetoric of blame that prevailed in statements by government and military officials: “This conflict was begun on the timing and terms of others” (Newsweek, September 24, p. 7). Likewise, in a Newsweek opinion piece that he authored, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell said, “The mass murders that were committed on Sept. 11 under the direction of Osama bin Laden and his Qaeda network have united the world against international terrorism” (October 15, p. 53). Notably, the U.S. government and military officials who did attribute blame to the United States emphasized law enforcement and intelligence failures that allowed the attacks, rather than U.S. foreign policy or cultural influence in the Middle East. Representative Dana Rohrabacher of California expressed this sentiment: “Where is the CIA? Where is the FBI? We should do a clean sweep, sweep them away” (Newsweek, September 24, p. 28).

In contrast, many nongovernment U.S. elites approached this topic more analytically, and a significant minority offered some criticism of the United States. Philip Lamy, professor of sociology and anthropology at Castleton College in Vermont, spoke about how distrust of America and globalization may have inspired the attacks:

[They] fear that these changes will eradicate their language. Their religion. Their way of life. Westernization as the major lifestyle. Capitalism as the

Figure 1. Sum of U.S. national identity-related themes by source in news content.
Table 2
Source in news content by valence of discourse related to U.S. national identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>U.S. govt/ military (%)</th>
<th>Other U.S. elites (%)</th>
<th>U.S. citizens (%)</th>
<th>(\chi^2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Blame for 9-11 attacks</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>21.33, df = 4, (p &lt; .05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed/both</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrorists</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>(n = 52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(n = 24)</td>
<td>(n = 20)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Treatment of “U.S. enemy”</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12.25, df = 4, (p &lt; .05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed/neutral</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>63</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>(n = 104)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(n = 48)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>U.S. core values</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticism</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18.48, df = 4, (p &lt; .05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed/neutral</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affirm</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>(n = 58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(n = 51)</td>
<td>(n = 94)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>U.S. strength</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humbled</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>12.09, df = 4, (p &lt; .05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wounded but defiant</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unchallenged leader</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>(n = 53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(n = 35)</td>
<td>(n = 10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>U.S. historical legacy</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>9.11, df = 4, (p = .06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed/neutral</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>(n = 17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(n = 23)</td>
<td>(n = 7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>U.S. public sentiment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divided</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed/neutral</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>57</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>(n = 12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(n = 5)</td>
<td>(n = 7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>World public opinion</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposed to U.S.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed/neutral</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive of U.S.</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>(n = 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(n = 1)</td>
<td>(n = 0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
major economic system. English as the major language. Tourism as a major industry. These things scare them. This is not just a madman’s mindset. (Time, September 24, p. 34)

Kevin Reinhart, a professor of religion at Dartmouth, cited years of U.S.-led sanctions against Iraq as one reason for deep-seated resentment in the Muslim world:

Would we tolerate this kind of boycott, the starving of Czechs, for example? No, we’ve done some specific things that are perceived as reflecting either an indifference to or hostility to Muslims. (Time, October 1, p. 46)

Finally, citizen sources mostly resisted in-depth examination of the motivations behind the attacks and placed the blame squarely on the terrorists. For example, a New York college student said:

It made me angry to hear my acquaintances try to justify atrocious terrorist attacks. Many of these students don’t see the difference in mentality between Us, the majority of people in the world who desire peace, and Them, the people who are willing to make themselves into human bombs to destroy thousands of lives. These terrorists despise our very existence. (Newsweek, October 1, p. 34)

In regard to treatment of “the enemy,” U.S. government and military officials were more likely than the other source categories to vilify and denigrate America’s “enemies.” Such demonization of the September 11 terrorists, for example, is reflected in the following comments by President Bush:

They are 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. And they will follow that path all the way to where it ends in history’s unmarked grave of discarded lies. (Time, October 1, p. 16)

U.S. citizens were slightly less negative in this category (63% of statements about the “U.S. enemy” were negative for these sources), due in large part to neutral statements by citizens who had interactions with the September 11 terrorists in the weeks and months leading up to the attacks. Nonetheless, many citizens were explicit in their dis-like of the terrorists, including one citizen who stated, “We are dealing with the worst form of envy, the most vicious form of evil—human evil that will not be appeased” (Time, October 15, p. 15). Another stated, “It’s time to eradicate man-hating terrorists from the face of the earth” (Time, October 8, p. 15).

Of discourse that made reference to American values, 81% of U.S. government and military sources affirmed those values. In fact, President Bush (Time, October 1, p. 16) defined the conflict in terms of American ideals: “We’re in a fight for our principles, and our first responsibility is to live by them.” Shortly after the attacks, Bush equated the United States with the very notion of freedom: “Freedom itself was attacked this morning by a faceless coward, and freedom will not be defeated” (Newsweek, September 11, p. 26). U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell (Newsweek, October 15, p. 53) made it clear the United States would continue to promote American values around the world while fighting the war on terror:
We will continue to advance our fundamental interests in human rights, accountable government, free markets, non-proliferation and conflict resolution, for we believe that a world of democracy, opportunity and stability is a world in which terrorism cannot thrive.

While U.S. citizens closely mirrored government and military officials on this theme, with 80% of these sources who mentioned U.S. values doing so in a positive manner, the comments of other U.S. elites were a marked contrast: Of other U.S. elites who made reference to U.S. values, only 51% did so in a positive manner, 29% were neutral or mixed, and a full 20% were critical. For example, Rabbi Michael Lerner (Time, October 1, p. 77) criticized American attitudes toward the rest of the world:

We live in a society that daily teaches us to look out for No. 1, to keep our focus on our own financial bottom line and to see others primarily as instruments to help us achieve our goals and satisfactions. . . . It never occurs to us that when the U.S. manages over the course of several decades to shape global trade policies that increase the disparity between rich and poor countries, this directly produces some of the suffering in the lives of 2 billion people who live in poverty.

Of the U.S. citizen sources who made reference to American values, Nada El Sawy’s sentiments were in the minority, as she criticized Americans’ shallow understanding of other cultures: “Americans seem to believe that backpacking through Europe or keeping up with the news gives them an understanding of everything about cultures, religions and traditions that differ from their own” (Newsweek, October 15, p. 10).

Next, of the U.S. government and military sources who made statements about the status of U.S. power, 34% described the U.S. position as one of unchallenged leader and 47% described the nation as wounded, yet resolute in the aftermath of September 11. Senator John McCain of Arizona exemplified the sentiment of U.S. resolve when he stated: “I say to our enemies, ‘We are coming. God may show you mercy. We will not’” (Newsweek, September 24, p. 7). In contrast, only 14% of other U.S. elite sources and no U.S. citizen sources described the United States as that of an unchallenged world leader; instead, these sources were more likely to characterize the U.S. position as wounded but resolute (40% and 60% for other U.S. elites and citizens, respectively) or as humbled (46% and 40% respectively). For example, other U.S. elites often focused on U.S. vulnerability. One professor at Harvard Medical School stated: “We as a country have been living as though the catastrophes in the rest of the world don’t apply to us, disaster doesn’t happen on our soil. But from now on, we can no longer deny that we are vulnerable” (Newsweek, September 11, pp. 42–43).

Of discourse that made reference to U.S. historical moments, U.S. government and military officials again were much more likely to affirm U.S. national identity. While the bulk of the historical references (47%) by U.S. government and military officials were in the mixed/neutral category, 29% of the statements nonetheless were positive, typically alluding to military victories in the Gulf War and World War II or to the founding of the United States. In contrast, more than half (52%) of historical references by other U.S. elites were negative, alluding to events such as internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, U.S. failures in the Vietnam War, and previous terrorist attacks on U.S. soil. U.S. citizens’ use of historical references was limited but mostly negative (86%).
Fewer than expected sources discussed U.S. public sentiment or the views of other nations, but the patterns nonetheless continued: U.S. government and military leaders affirmed U.S. national identity by describing public sentiment as united (83% of references) and world public opinion as supportive of the United States (70% of references). Several times, President Bush and other officials described the war on terror as not just his nation’s fight, but “civilization’s fight.” Interestingly, other U.S. elite sources had only one reference to world opinion (describing it as against the United States), and U.S. citizen sources made no statements related to world opinion. Due to the small number of sources in these thematic categories, statistics were not calculated.

As a follow-up for this analysis, we compared the mean valence score for each source category; thematic categories were aggregated into one mean valence calculation to increase the number of sources in each type (this analysis focuses only on those sources who included at least one national identity-related theme in their comments). A one-way analysis of variance test, $F(2, 435) = 12.9, p < .05$, accompanied by post-hoc tests revealed significant differences between nongovernment U.S. elites ($M = 2.20$) and both government and military officials ($M = 2.59$) and citizens ($M = 2.50$), but not between the latter two (see Table 3). These findings, when combined with U.S. elites’ over-time surpassing of U.S. citizens that we saw in Figure 1, are suggestive that these sources provided a counter, particularly to government leaders, in news content. We will return to this point in the Discussion section.

We then went one step further to look again inside the category of U.S. government and military officials, this time in their affirmation of U.S. national identity. We again ran a one-way analysis of variance, $F(6, 165) = 4.2, p < .05$, with accompanying post-hoc tests (see Table 3).

Results in the lower tier of Table 3 indicate that affirmation of U.S. identity was consistently strong across the differing types of government and military officials in news coverage, with the notable exception of congressional officials and other federal government officials. Members of Congress had a mean valence of 2.19 in their national

### Table 3

Sources in news content by mean valence of discourse related to U.S. national identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>U.S. govt/military</th>
<th>Other U.S. elites</th>
<th>U.S. citizens</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean valence</td>
<td>$2.59^a$</td>
<td>$2.20^b$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>($n = 172$)</td>
<td>($n = 126$)</td>
<td>($n = 140$)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Government and military sources by subcategory

| President Bush “War cabinet” Other pres. admin. Congress Other federal officials State and local govt. Military |
|-------------------------|------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|------------------|
| Mean valence            | $2.77^a$               | $2.95^a$        | $2.80^a$                | $2.19^b$          | $2.47^c$        | $2.67^a,b,c$    |
| ($n = 29$)              | ($n = 9$)              | ($n = 20$)      | ($n = 21$)              | ($n = 67$)        | ($n = 6$)       | ($n = 20$)      |

*Note.* Means with different superscripts are significantly different ($p < .05$) using least significant differences post hoc test.
identity discourse, and other federal officials (e.g., FBI, CIA, INS officials) had a mean valence of 2.47, both of which were still affirmative but were nonetheless significantly less so than all of the other federal government and military official categories, whose valence ranged from 2.75 to 2.95. We will return later to these findings, too.

The results presented in Tables 1–3 and Figure 1, then, provide strong support for hypothesis 1—U.S. government and military officials were significantly more likely than other U.S. elites and U.S. citizens to engage in U.S. national identity-affirming discourse, as reflected in news content in *Time* and *Newsweek*.

**Hypothesis 2**

We now turn our attention to Hypothesis 2, which focused on the relationship between the discourse of government and military officials and journalists’ language regarding U.S. national identity. Specifically, Hypothesis 2 predicted that on topics related to U.S. national identity, U.S. news coverage were more likely to parallel over time the perspectives of U.S. government and military sources than other U.S. elites or U.S. citizens. Indeed, the following passages from *Time* and *Newsweek* illustrate that national identity-affirming rhetoric from the newsmagazines’ writers was often pointed and unflinching. For example, journalists emphasized core American values:

> So much that was precious has died, but as though in a kind of eternal promise, something new has been born. We are seeing it in our nation and sensing it in ourselves, a new faith in our oldest values, a rendezvous with grace . . . when a free people, who invented the idea of liberty as a form of government rediscover its power, there is no telling where it might go. (Gibbs, 2001, p. 17)

They also emphasized U.S. strength and resolve:

> While we prepare to strike back against terrorism and secure our skies and our homes, the challenge to our leaders and to all of us is to show that no terrorist group will be allowed to extinguish the beacons of freedom and democracy. (Goodwin, 2001, p. 98)

Finally, they described the nature of the “U.S. enemy”:

> When the rules don’t apply, when inconceivably cold-blooded evil is in command, the victims are truly helpless. In the face of unfathomable evil, decent people are psychologically disarmed. What is so striking—and so alien to civilized sensibilities—about the terrorists of radical Islam is their cult of death. Their rhetoric is soaked in the glory of immolation: immolation of the infidel and self-immolation of the avenger. Not since the Nazi rallies of the 1930s has the world witnessed such celebration of blood and soil, of killing and dying. (Krauthammer, 2001, p. 79)

To explore Hypothesis 2 systematically, we compared the mean valence score for each source type on a weekly basis. The thematic categories were aggregated into one mean valence calculation for two reasons: (a) to increase the number of sources each week so as to have greater confidence in the findings (in an approach parallel to Table
and (b) because our interest here is in the link between sources and journalists’ language regarding national identity, generally, rather than for any specific thematic category. Using this data, we ran an analysis of variance test of source (government and military officials, other U.S. elites, citizens, and journalists) by date on the mean valence for all national identity-related discourse; this analysis revealed significant main effects for source, $F(3, 608) = 11.6, p < .05$, and date, $F(4, 608) = 3.3, p < .05$. We then plotted these results on a weekly basis for each edition analyzed (see Figure 2).

The over-time plots in Figure 2 show that, with the exception of the September 11 special issues, the mean valence of journalists’ language about U.S. national identity closely paralleled the discourse by U.S. government and military officials. The over-time patterns indicate that the mean valence of government and military officials consistently was highly positive during the five-week analysis period, starting at 2.45 and rising to 2.67 by the last issue of the analysis period. The mean valence of journalists’ national identity-related language also trended upward, beginning at 2.06 in the September 11 issues and ending at 2.51 each of the last two weeks. In contrast, other U.S. elites started off somewhat positive with a mean valence of 2.09 and spiked at 2.44 in the September 24 issues but then steadily moved downward over time; by the October 15 issues, their mean valence had fallen to 1.89, indicating that on average their statements about U.S. national identity had become neutral to slightly critical. Citizens followed a pattern roughly similar to the other U.S. elites, starting off positive at 2.38 and spiking in the September 24 issue at 2.64 before trending downward toward 2.30 in the October 15 issue. Correlational analysis among the weekly means revealed a strong linkage ($r = .95, p < .05$) between journalists and government and military leaders, in contrast to negligible correlations between journalists and other U.S. elites ($r = .13, p = .42$) and journalists and citizens ($r = .10, p = .44$).

![Figure 2. Mean valence of discourse related to U.S. national identity by source in news content.](image-url)
These results, then, offer strong support for Hypothesis 2—in the weeks following September 11, the language of national identity present in U.S. news coverage was much more closely aligned with the perspectives of U.S. government and military sources than the perspectives of other U.S. elites or U.S. citizens.

Discussion

These findings indicate that U.S. national identity was a clear emphasis in public discourse in the United States in the weeks following the events of September 11, 2001. With this in mind, we wish to emphasize two points. First, content analysis results in the tables and Figure 1 suggest that in the month after September 11 (a) U.S. government and military officials were particularly likely to affirm elements of U.S. national identity in their public comments, and (b) other U.S. elites and U.S. citizens also at times used a high degree of U.S. national identity-affirming language. Second, ANOVA results and data in Figure 2 indicate that the discourse of U.S. journalists about U.S. national identity in the aftermath of September 11 closely paralleled that of government and military officials. Several facets of these findings, we believe, offer insight into relations among American political elites, U.S. national identity, and the news media, particularly when the pressure for patriotism increases in moments of crisis.

First, it is the case that there are only modest differences in Table 1 and Figure 1 between U.S. government and military officials, other U.S. elites, and U.S. citizens in their usage of national identity-related themes in their statements. However, much greater distinctions between these types of sources became clear in Tables 2 and 3 when looking at the valence of these themes. This pattern of findings is particularly noteworthy because journalists wield great power in choosing who gets to speak in news coverage, whereas what sources say is entirely determined by the sources. The overwhelmingly positive valence of government and military officials’ statements about U.S. national identity suggests the presence of conscious, strategic communications on their part to mobilize public sentiment. In contrast, statements by other U.S. elites were relatively much less affirmative of U.S. identity, particularly in the categories of blame attribution for September 11, American values, and U.S. strength. This finding may be a combination of the likelihood that opinion leaders not affiliated with government are more likely to offer analysis of the U.S. position, rather than outright advocacy for the U.S. position, and that journalists strive for “critical balance” in news coverage (Cook, 1998; Zaller & Chiu, 1996). The result is that nongovernmental opinion leaders functioned as a valence counterweight to the fervent national identity language of government leaders. The only category in which other U.S. elites were similar to government and military officials is treatment of the “U.S. enemy,” which, we suspect, may be due to two reasons: First is the nature of the September 11 attacks, for which it may have been difficult for virtually all Americans—even perhaps ones critical of U.S. policies—to offer any conclusion except that they were heinous; second is the culturally embedded nature of “self” versus “other” outlooks and discourse, a point to which we now turn.

Second, the strongest national identity-affirming topics for U.S. government and military officials in Table 2—American values, U.S. strength, blame for the September 11 attacks, and treatment of the “U.S. enemy”—can be grouped into two general categories, which we might simply call “self” and “other.” By affirming positive aspects of the “U.S. self” through emphasis upon mythic American values and U.S. strength and at the same time denigrating the “other” through blame attribution and demonization of the “enemy,” U.S. political and military leaders framed the conflict in the historically familiar
good versus evil terms that marked U.S. discourse during two world wars, the Cold War, and the Gulf War. Indeed, if the claim of Brands (1999, p. 239) that Americans are “obsessed with the apocalyptic struggle of good and evil” is accurate, then these communication strategies by government and military leaders seem highly likely to have helped to assure Americans of their nation’s distinctiveness and to mobilize the U.S. public against an “enemy.”

Third, it is noteworthy that while U.S. government and military officials as a group were overwhelmingly affirming of U.S. national identity in their statements, distinctions did emerge among these sources that further highlight the roles of differing governmental actors in publicly emphasizing nationalist themes. As shown in Table 3, President Bush, members of his administration (including his top advisers), and U.S. military officials were the most affirming of national identity in their statements in the news coverage, while congressional and other federal officials had a positive, yet significantly lower, mean valence. That the administration sources were consistently more nation-affirming in their statements than other government sources is highly suggestive that these individuals, as the heads of the government and military, were strategic in their public language. We offer two potential explanations for why, conversely, congressional officials and other federal officials (e.g., FBI, CIA, INS) quoted in *Time* and *Newsweek* were less affirming of U.S. national identity. First, the more diffused nature of leadership in Congress and among other federal government agencies may have created a relatively “safer” context for these individuals to be less nation-affirming in their public comments (although, again, we emphasize that these comments were still generally quite positive about U.S. national identity). Alternatively, it seems plausible that any U.S. government official offering comments even remotely approaching criticism of the United States would be considered newsworthy and therefore would receive emphasis by journalists, who faced a unified White House and Congress in the period following September 11.3 Further, law enforcement and intelligence officials made up the bulk of the “other federal officials” category, and their comments often acknowledged failures within their organizations to prevent the September 11 attacks; these admissions were reflected largely in the “U.S. strength” coding category and, to a limited extent, in the “blame” category.

In turning our attention to the national identity-related statements of the news-magazines, these findings indicate that the language of journalists closely paralleled that of U.S. government and military officials during the period of study. Several factors, we believe, may have contributed to the strong identity-affirming discourse of *Time* and *Newsweek* journalists in the weeks following September 11. Most obviously, it is likely that many of the journalists are Americans, and scholarship suggests that news reporting almost inevitably reflects ethnocentric biases (Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978), particularly in times of crisis and war. Indeed, some writers expressed patriotic sentiments typical of a military commander motivating the troops. For example:

> A day cannot live in infamy without the nourishment of rage. Let’s have rage. What’s needed is a unified, unifying Pearl Harbor sort of purple American fury—a ruthless indignation that doesn’t leak away in a week or two. . . . Anyone who does not loathe the people who did these things, and the people who cheer them on, is too philosophical for decent company. . . . The worst times, as we see, separate the civilized of the world from the uncivilized. This is the moment of clarity. Let the civilized toughen up, and let the uncivilized take their chances in the game they started. (Morrow, 2001, p. 48)
Further, the news media relied heavily on government officials as sources and were exposed to consistent expressions of bipartisanship and unity among U.S. political leaders following September 11. For example, Dennis Hastert, member of the Republican Party and Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, stood with Republicans and Democrats several days after September 11 and said: “When Americans suffer and when people perpetrate acts against this country, we as a Congress and as a government stand united and stand together.” He added that both parties would “stand shoulder to shoulder to fight this evil” (Time, September 11, p. 47). With few dissenting voices within official circles, news media were likely to “index” their coverage (e.g., Althaus et al., 1996; Bennett, 1990; Entman & Rojecki, 1993) accordingly, echoing many of the same nationalist themes as government leaders.

In addition, news organizations may have determined that a certain level of pro-American coverage was both appropriate and necessary to attract readers and viewers. In the wake of September 11, journalists had to find a balance between dispassionate neutrality that could alienate audiences and overly jingoistic reporting that could ultimately undermine their credibility. There are some indications that the American public believed the news media succeeded. In October 2001, 85% of randomly sampled U.S. adults evaluated the news media’s performance as either good or excellent (Pew, 2001), while in a November 2001 poll, 69% of Americans said that the media were “standing up for America” since September 11 (Pew, 2001). In sum, it is our view that a variety of influences upon news media from within (ethnocentric bias), above (government officials, bipartisanship), and below (audience expectations) contributed to engender a journalistic discourse that strongly affirmed a sense of U.S. national identity in the weeks following September 11.

It also seems noteworthy that U.S. citizens, while not as likely as government and military officials to employ national identity-related themes in their statements in these data, nonetheless exhibited a positive valence that often paralleled that of both government officials and news media. A number of reasons for this similarity of citizen discourse to the rhetoric of elites and news media seem plausible. First, the September 11 events likely had a galvanizing effect on citizens irrespective of their exposure to any interpretive discourse by political leaders or journalists. This “reawakening” of American identity in the weeks following September 11 was manifested in a variety of activities, from the flying of U.S. flags to an outpouring of donations to relief funds to the singing of patriotic songs at public events. These behaviors support the contention of some scholars (Kowalski & Wolfe, 1994; Mishler, 1965) that nationalist sentiment thrives in the presence of conflict, particularly when the nation itself has been threatened or national interests are at stake.

Second, it seems likely that, just as in previous conflicts (see Baker & O’Neal, 2001; Zaller, 1994a, 1994b), the nationalist rhetoric from political leaders documented in this research mobilized and solidified public support for the U.S.-led “war on terrorism.” Indeed, public opinion polls in the weeks and months after September 11 indicated high levels of approval for President Bush (Gallup, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c), high levels of support for the U.S. military campaign against terrorism (Gallup, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c), and a willingness among the American public to commit to the military campaign even if it meant significant U.S. casualties (Gallup, 2001c). And third, it seems plausible that journalists, at least during times of high crisis, seek out and emphasize citizen voices that match the dominant narrative established by government leaders. For the news media to do otherwise, particularly early in a crisis period such as during these
five weeks after September 11, is to run the significant risk of a patriotic backlash among a news-purchasing citizenry. The implication seems clear: A commercial press, by definition, will always be a patriotic press when the nation is threatened.

All of this, then, points to the inexorable intertwining of political leaders and mass media, particularly news media, in the construction, articulation, and dissemination of national identity. Even in noncrisis contexts, government elites and media organizations play vital day-to-day roles in the production and re-production of national identity, and certainly not only in the United States. Billig (1995) and Law (2001) refer to this process as “banal nationalism,” in which subtle reminders of membership in the national community—such as the words “we,” “us,” and “our”—permeate everyday public discourse. These and other commonly used signifiers are the foundation for the mundane yet pervasive and, we posit, politically necessary construction of national consciousness in modern societies. The daily production of banal nationalism by elites and in the media naturalizes the idea among the mass public that “the nation” takes precedence over other forms of collective identity and perpetuates notions of distinctiveness and superiority over other cultures (Edensor, 2002). In times of national crisis, however, reliance on subtle signifiers is too risky; instead, political leaders and news media both assume a more overt role in the construction and articulation of national identity. For example, in his examination of New York Times editorials following September 11, Lule (2002) argues that in its tributes to victims and heroes the Times assumed the role of “chief priest and state scribe,” attempting to mend America’s social fabric (p. 287). Indeed, the goals of political leaders of giving meaning to the events and aftermath of September 11, coupled with the news media’s dependence on the strategic communications of these same officials to help determine that meaning, ensured that a government-centric view of national identity permeated public discourse.

Finally, it is imperative to emphasize that the prominence and prevalence of U.S. national identity in the post–September 11 public discourse did more than generate support for the president and his administration’s “war on terrorism.” It also helped foster public support for—or at least acquiescence to—government measures that curtailed civil liberties and expanded federal law enforcement powers in the name of national security. The prime example, of course, is the USA Patriot Act, proposed by Attorney General John Ashcroft within a week of September 11 and passed a month later by a 98–1 vote in the U.S. Senate. Among its many components, this legislation granted to the U.S. government expanded ability to monitor phone and e-mail communications and to conduct searches of suspects’ homes and offices. Further, in a larger sense, the linkage of national identity to national security helped to create a climate in which dissent and opposition became equated with anti-Americanism. For example, White House press secretary Ari Fleischer warned that “people have to watch what they say and watch what they do” after television talk-show host Bill Maher made comments critical of previous U.S. responses to terrorism, and Ashcroft told a congressional panel that critics of the Bush administration “only aid terrorists” because such commentary “gives ammunition to America’s enemies, and pause to America’s friends” (Carter & Barringer, 2001; Lewis, 2001). The backlash against dissenting views spread to the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, which issued a November 2001 report identifying 117 statements or behaviors by U.S. academic faculty and public officials that ACTA described as “blaming America first” and “giving comfort to America’s enemies” (ACTA, 2001). That the strategic communications of government leaders and an echoing, patriotic press contributed to this climate is clear.
Notes

1. We recognize that studying government leaders’ communication strategies by analyzing news content means that we are studying elites’ communications as filtered by news media. While this media “filter” has the potential to mask certain strategies or overemphasize others, government leaders are certainly aware of this; as a result they strategically craft public statements with the goal of creating, distributing, and controlling mediated messages as a political resource (e.g., Manheim, 1991, 1994). Further, political leaders wishing to disseminate, inculcate, and affirm certain views widely among the citizenry are fully aware that virtually the only possible way to do so in modern nation-states is via the mass media. Notably, it also seems likely that non-government opinion leaders would be successful in getting their voices and viewpoints into the media. Journalists have become increasingly sensitive to their too-great reliance upon government sources, so they often look elsewhere for “expert” viewpoints; as a result, the same non-government opinion leaders—particularly those with a flair for public communication—often are regularly approached by news media. Over time, of course, it is only to be expected that these non-government opinion leaders come to craft and present their perspectives in strategic ways. In contrast, citizens seem to be the least strategic among the news source populations we studied and, therefore, the most likely to be at the “mercy” of journalist discretion. With this in mind, in the final section of the article we address the role of citizen voices in news coverage.

2. In our coding, we did not distinguish between news stories and opinion pieces, for two reasons. First, the number of opinion pieces was limited, typically no more than three per issue, which would have limited our ability to make valid statistical comparisons. Second, our assumption is that all of the news texts are equally potentially persuasive on public opinion; to make a distinction between news and opinion is to suggest otherwise. Following this same logic, we did not focus on the placement of the stories in the newsmagazines. In addition, we did not make distinctions between story subject, because many stories, particularly early in the crisis, dealt with multiple issues in the same story, including the September 11 attacks, clean-up efforts, the impending military campaign, and the law enforcement investigation.

3. One additional possibility is that members of Congress and other federal officials had greater ability than members of the presidential administration to appear as anonymous sources in news coverage; such anonymity could have provided a “safer” context for critical comments about the nation. With this in mind, we coded for anonymity of sources. A t test revealed no differences between anonymous and named sources in the mean valence of their national identity discourse. Notably, only members of government appeared as anonymous sources; other U.S. elites and citizens never did so.

4. We consider it important to note that Time consistently was more “nationalist” in its sources and language than Newsweek. For example, 52% of non-journalist sources in Time expressed national-identity themes compared to 42% of sources in Newsweek; the mean valence of national-identity discourse among nonjournalist sources was 2.49 in Time and 2.40 in Newsweek; and the mean valence of national-identity discourse among journalists was 2.53 in Time and 2.40 in Newsweek. All of these examples are statistically significant at p < .05. Nonetheless, for two reasons we have chosen not to focus on these differences in our analysis while we also, in our discussion, generalize our findings from Time and Newsweek to news coverage generally. First, although these findings are significantly different in statistical terms, Newsweek still offers a picture of the world that is strongly affirming of U.S. national identity; in short, to emphasize these differences between news organizations would distract from the clear role of both of these news organizations in the post–September 11 national identity discourse. Second, previous research (e.g., Gans, 1979; Entman, 1991) has found, in a similar manner, only relatively minor differences in news coverage between major U.S. news organizations—whether they are newspapers, network television newscasts, or newsmagazines.

References