8-1-2006

Why Did The United States Launch The War On Terror?

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Recommended Citation
https://scholars.unh.edu/news/1235
DURHAM, N.H. -- When the Bush administration launched its “war on terror” immediately following the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, it did so without a “war narrative” – a cohesive and consistent story firmly developed in the minds of the public that prepared them politically and psychologically for the conflict, according to a new study co-authored by a University of New Hampshire professor.

“War Narratives: Framing Our Understanding of the War on Terror” is co-authored by Melvin Dubnick, professor of public administration at UNH. It appears in the July/August 2006 issue of Public Administration Review. The study also is co-authored by Kathe Callahan, assistant professor of public administration, and Dorothy Olshfski, associate professor of public administration, both at Rutgers University-Newark.

“In past U.S. wars, a central narrative was a critical element in developing support and directing the war effort. This has not been the case with the present ‘war on terror.’ The United States declared the war on terror with no established or emergent ‘state-of-war narrative,’ ” according to the researchers.

Relying on four major narratives found in past American wars, the researchers interviewed three groups of public officials whose work was affected directly or indirectly by the Sept. 11 attacks. Using Bush administration statements about the war on terror widely reported in the media, the study aimed to determine which, if any, of the four narratives informed these federal, state and local officials regarding their roles in the war on terror. Those interviewed represented mid- to upper-level managers from the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey; the Newark District Office of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) in Newark, New Jersey; and the township of Montclair, New Jersey.

Instead of finding one clear narrative identified by the three groups of administrators, the researchers found the officials clustered into two groups, one concerned about the protection of civil liberties and the other identifying with a need to be vigilant and do what is necessary to prevent future acts of terrorism and reduce the threat of war.

“What has been absent in the case of the declared war on terror is an established or emergent narrative, generated from the political center with the intent of signaling a coherent response during a time of war. Although we identified four narratives emerging from top political figures in the Bush administration, none of these narratives captured the hearts and minds of the public officials in this study,” according to the researchers.

“Rather, those who participated in our study crafted narratives based on their own values and
experiences. They chose statements about war that seemed to reflect their own interpretation of the role of government in society and the appropriate governmental reaction to a specific external threat. Thus, their narratives had a particularly conservative or liberal bent. The conservative narrative targeted vigilance and maintaining security, whereas the liberal narrative focused on civil liberties and the temporary nature of the disruption,” the researchers found.

The lack of a narrative for the war on terror is unique in American history. Although Americans associate past wars with a specific event such as the Sept. 11 attacks — the bombardment of Fort Sumter, the sinking of the battleship USS Maine, the attack on Pearl Harbor — in each case the road to these wars was well paved materially, politically, and psychologically over an extended period of time preceding those events, according to the researchers.

For example, the fall of Fort Sumter in the U.S. Civil War followed events that had unfolded over several months after Lincoln’s election and after many years of heated national debate. The public had been clamoring for war with Spain for several years when the USS Maine sank in Havana Harbor in February 1898 – and even then, two months passed before Congress declared war. And although the attack on Pearl Harbor was a military surprise, it took place amid debate over plans for mobilization and ongoing preparations for war that had been building for at least two years.

“The war on terror that was triggered by the events of Sept. 11 had no such gestation period. The state of war was declared by President George W. Bush and others without hesitation, but it was also done without any troops or plans in place to confront this particular enemy. Just as important, it occurred in a context of public indifference to or ignorance of the threat posed by terrorists,” according to the researchers.

Intellectual communities had been discussing possible “blowbacks” and a coming “clash of civilizations,” and warnings were issued in a series of federal reports, but little attention was given before Sept. 11 to establish a scenario for a war on terror. “Terrorist threats remained stories of law enforcement, criminal investigations, and the prosecution of bombers and their co-conspirators,” the researchers said.

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