

When Threats are Internal:  
National Identity and Cascading Frames, From My Lai to Abu Ghraib

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**Abstract**

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This dissertation explored the role of national identity in shaping how political actors, journalists and citizens interact and respond to moments in which America's image has been threatened by the transgressions of the U.S. military. I focused on what types of national identity frames tend to emerge within public discourse in these moments, what kind of contestation is advanced by political opponents and journalists, and how the public responds to these dynamics. Three studies were conducted. I began by analyzing the communication environment surrounding two nationally dissonant moments in U.S. history—the My Lai Massacre and the Abu Ghraib Prison Scandal. In these studies, I systematically examined: (1) White House and U.S. military communications to determine whether and what extent these officials articulated national identity frames; (2) Congressional communications to measure the degree to which these officials echoed or challenged the frames; and (3) news coverage to assess whether the range of debate in official discourse was matched by parallel disagreements in news content. As a final

step, I conducted an experiment to test the effects of these national identity frames—when echoed or contested in the press—on citizens in response to a news article about U.S. military transgressions. Methodologically, I combined quantitative content analysis with experimental methods. The results suggest that frames designed to protect and restore the nation’s identity in nationally dissonant moments broadly resonate within the citizenry and, in turn, encounter diminished resistance as they cascade downward in the framing hierarchy from political opponents to journalists and finally into the public. By examining political communication in these three important areas—political messages, news content, and public opinion—I sought to illuminate the complex process through which the press aligns its coverage with government communications and how national identity plays a crucial role in this process. This work has important implications for our understanding of press-state relations and how Americans perceive and evaluate the nation, its leaders, and its policies.

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## **DEDICATION**

For Evelyn, my sweet little girl.

## CHAPTER ONE:

### National Identity, Political Leadership, the Press, and Public Opinion

On May 5, 2004, the White House held its first major press briefing following the publication of photographs showing U.S. military personnel brutalizing Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib prison. In his opening remarks, Press Secretary Scott McClellan (2004a) declared:

[W]hat took place is appalling and it is shameful...It does not represent what America stands for, nor does it represent our values. We do not tolerate prisoner abuse, and when it comes to light we take steps to address it...That stands in stark contrast to regimes like Saddam Hussein's, who...tolerated, encouraged, and praised such activity.

The gathered press corps could have responded in countless ways, from shock to outrage to denial to defense of the nation. Veteran White House reporter Helen Thomas asked whether President George W. Bush was scrutinizing other military prisons controlled by the U.S. government, to which McClellan responded, “[O]ur military adheres to high standards of conduct.” Thomas interrupted: “We don’t need that lecture. We know that. We believe in our country.” Moments later, another reporter said, “Scott, you say the actions that were taken were contrary to American values, and I think I and everybody else can agree with you on that.” At a moment when substantive, critical self-examination of the nation and its policies were essential, some within the vanguard of the U.S. press were quickly ready to support America—which is exactly what the White House wanted.

Political leaders have long understood the power of appealing to a shared sense of nationhood when attempting to gain favor among a citizenry. Messages affirming the nation permeate daily political discourse and are routinely echoed within the press—so much so that a process of reifying the nation becomes “banal” (Billig, 1995) and goes largely unnoticed within the public. There are moments, however, when such communications are particularly crucial:

when the image of the nation is threatened. In such cases, the public may come to expect, and even demand, nation-affirming discourse. Notably, scholarship has shown such rhetoric to be omnipresent in both politics and news in moments when the national image is perceived to be at risk from external, or outgroup, threats (Hutcheson et al., 2004; Kellner, 1992; Mishler, 1965). Such was the case after the September 2001 terrorist attacks when President Bush affirmed America's virtues and journalists and citizens stood with him.

Minimal scholarship, however, has examined how political officials, news media, and the public respond when the national image is threatened by the transgressions of *ingroup* members. For example, the 1968 My Lai Massacre and the 2004 Abu Ghraib scandal are instances in which U.S. self-image was threatened by the behavior of American citizens. In these cases, it was widely publicized that members of the U.S. military—due, at least in part, to policies put in place by the U.S. government—behaved in ways inconsistent with what are perceived to be American values, triggering a potential sense of collective shame and humiliation among Americans. My Lai occurred at the height of the Vietnam War when a company of U.S. soldiers raped, tortured, and killed more than 500 unarmed South Vietnamese civilians (Bilton & Sim, 1992). At Abu Ghraib, U.S. military brutalized dozens of Iraqi prisoners, resulting in two confirmed homicides and the suspicious deaths of others (Shamsi & Perlstein, 2006; International Committee of the Red Cross, 2004; Danner, 2004). Such *internal threats* to the national image necessitate among political leaders—particularly those potentially implicated—a sophisticated public response to minimize the political damage and restore the national image. Such communications are politically valuable because journalists and citizens gravitate toward nation-protective behavior when such threats arise (Edelman, 2001; Stephan & Stephan, 2000;

Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Wohl & Branscombe, 2008), making them particularly receptive to messages aimed at maintaining and bolstering the nation.

With this in mind, this dissertation examines the dynamic relations among political leaders, the press, and the public when internal threats to the national image arise. I began by conducting a content analysis of the communications by political officials about the My Lai and Abu Ghraib scandals, focusing on the type and extent of nation-protective frames promulgated by White House and U.S. military, and the degree to which these frames were contested in Congress. Next, I conducted a content analysis of U.S. news coverage for each of these incidents to determine both the extent to which these frames were echoed in the press and whether such coverage reflected the range of debate among political officials. Finally, to test the potential resonance of these nation-protective frames within the broader public when nationally dissonant moments arise, I conducted an experiment in which I manipulated news coverage about an actual incident in which the image and reputation of the nation was threatened by ingroup transgressions. Taken together, these three components in this dissertation provide insight into what types of nation-supporting frames tend to emerge in public discourse when internal threats to the nation arise, what kind of contestation is advanced by other political officials and journalists, and how the public responds to these messages.

In the following sections of this chapter, I present the scholarship, concepts, questions, and hypotheses that guided my research. Specifically, I begin by discussing the prevailing scholarly models on press-state relations and situate my dissertation within this body of scholarship. I then clarify and elaborate on the significance of what scholars call *cultural resonance*—the extent to which an individual frame receives wide recognition and acceptance among citizens—as a conceptual tool for understanding and explaining the framing process.

Drawing upon social psychology scholarship, I theorize about how political leaders, journalists, and citizens are likely to respond to internal threats to the nation. Next, I discuss my expectations regarding national-identity framing for each of my chapters on My Lai and Abu Ghraib, offering predictions for governmental and news discourses and the extent to which such frames served to shape the public's understanding of these scandals. Finally, I discuss my experiment, offering predictions for the effects of nation-protective frames—both when echoed and contested by officials within the press—when American identity is threatened by internal acts. I close the chapter with an outline of the rest of my dissertation.

#### Cascading Activation, Cultural Resonance, and National Identity

A prevailing scholarly framework for the process by which the public communications of political leaders and news media align is the “cascading activation” model (Entman, 2003, 2004). This framework seeks to explain why and how some ideas dominate the public arena more easily and more thoroughly than others. Within this model, there are several key actors who shape and influence public discourse—including White House and U.S. military officials, members of Congress, ex-government officials, academics, policy experts, news media, and the public. Cascading activation likens the communication environment to that of a waterfall: some ideas introduced at the “top,” usually by White House officials, cascade downward past a number of potential obstacles—including, for example, Congressional opponents or the news media—and into public consciousness. Others, however, encounter fierce resistance or outright blockage along the way. What largely determines the trajectory of a particular idea is the extent to which it triggers or “activates” certain receptive thoughts and emotions for other actors. When the White House, for example, offers an interpretation of an issue or event that appeals to what is familiar or resonant for other individuals—be they Congressional officials, journalists or citizens—it is

likely to be embraced or amplified. Conversely, an interpretation that neglects or conflicts with these tendencies is likely to be challenged or even blocked entirely by the other actors.

At the center of this framework is the amplification or contestation of the White House's interpretation—or “frame”—by other officials, the news media and citizens. To be specific, a frame is an “interpretive package” that gives meaning to an issue or an event by emphasizing certain features of the topic while omitting or downplaying others (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Snow & Benford, 1988). In the context of political and news discourse, to frame “is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). *Problem definition* establishes what the issue is about, *causal interpretation* suggests what factors are thought to have led to the issue, *moral evaluation* judges the perceived causal factors and their effects, and *treatment recommendation* indicates how the issue should be addressed. In this sense, frames structure how we come to understand a particular policy issue or event, and they shape the policy solutions we are likely to support. It is, therefore, critically important to understand how frames manifest in political and news discourse, and the manner in which these frames shape public opinion, particularly when internal threats to the nation occur.

Within Entman's cascading activation model, the power to frame is stratified across several levels of U.S. political players, suggesting a hierarchy in which some actors have more power than others to push their ideas into news and subsequently upon public opinion. Specifically, executive branch officials operate at the highest level, followed by Congress, policy experts and ex-government officials at the middle level, and the press at the lowest level. The general public is largely regarded as a dependent variable, though there are some opportunities

for citizens to influence higher levels through feedback loops such as voting, protesting, and organizing. Frames that originate at the highest level—from the White House—possess the greatest strength to control broader public debate and opinion. This stems from the president’s policymaking power and ability to drive the political agenda, particularly on foreign policy issues and when national crises arise (Nacos, 1990; Rudalevige, 2006; Schlesinger, 1989); the result is often a heavy attention to White House officials by journalists (Bennett, 1994; Sigal, 1973; Zaller & Chiu, 1996). Congressional leaders also possess considerable ability to push messages into the public debate, though these often tend to be counterframes—that is, *responses* to frames initiated by the White House. This is an important point given that a powerful initial frame can set parameters of subsequent political debate, thus limiting the range of viable counterframes that can be offered. Finally, counterframes can and often do emerge from middle and lower levels by ex-government officials, policy experts and journalists, but such frames are far more likely to gain traction within the public discourse when taken up by White House or Congressional officials.

### *Cultural Resonance*

A particularly crucial element in the cascading activation model is the idea of cultural resonance, which suggests that the content of frames matters—deeply so—in shaping public discourse around an issue or event. Specifically, culturally resonant frames are messages that are especially aligned with the cultural schemas *habitually* used by large numbers of citizens to make sense of information and events. They tend to elicit a common response among the citizenry by appealing to broad cultural values, identity and expectations. In Gamson’s words (1992), “[S]ome frames have a natural advantage because their ideas and language resonate with a broader political culture. Resonances increase the appeal of a frame by making it appear natural

and familiar. Those who respond to the larger cultural theme will find it easier to respond to a frame with the same sonorities” (p. 135).<sup>1</sup> Given this reality, frames that effectively tap into and resonate with cultural values—by celebrating, accentuating, or at least aligning with them—will be more difficult to challenge; in contrast, frames that do not engage with prevailing cultural values, or go so far as to overtly challenge them, will be more likely to elicit contestation by other political actors, journalists, and the public. In this sense, culturally resonant frames possess the most potential to cascade through the framing hierarchy, and thus shape the broader public understanding and interpretation of an event.

Cultural resonance is an important concept in framing research, but more work is needed to clarify its meaning and to expand on its significance within the scholarly debate over press-state relations. For example, the notion of what constitutes a culturally resonant message is vague; culture is notoriously difficult to define and its parameters vary depending on the context of the event or topic. With this in mind, this dissertation seeks to sharpen and enrich the concept by, first, delimiting which cultural values are at stake when internal threats to the nation occur, and second, articulating the underlying mechanisms through which frame resonance appeals to the public in these moments. Specifically, I posit that in nationally dissonant moments when the image and reputation of the nation is put at risk—for example, by the actions of U.S. military personnel at My Lai or Abu Ghraib—the most culturally resonant frames will be those that protect American national identity. This may make intuitive sense—after all, citizens possess deep psychological motivations to protect the nation when it is perceived to be threatened (Wohl & Branscombe, 2008, 2009)—but assessing how this plays out in political and news discourse and among the citizenry demands further elaboration.

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<sup>1</sup> Notably, Entman offers a similar notion, calling it “cultural congruence.” I employ Gamson’s term of “cultural resonance” rather than Entman’s terminology, however, because cultural resonance focuses exclusively on messages while cultural congruence has sometimes referred to events as well as messages.

Notably, the framework of cascading activation differs in important ways from “indexing,” which is the other prevailing model of press-state relations. Indexing suggests that journalists, in covering an issue, “index” the range of opinion allowed in news columns to that expressed by official sources (Bennett, 1990; Livingston & Bennett, 2003; Zaller & Chiu, 1996). In this sense, news media are thought to rarely offer critical analysis of issues or policy decisions unless some within government leadership have done so first (Mermin, 1999)—a view that is more limiting of the press than cascading activation. In addition, within the indexing model virtually all frames promulgated by political officials are treated equally by the press, regardless of content; that is, what is most important in determining news discourse is not the *type* of frames offered by political officials, but rather the *amount* of frame contestation (i.e. disagreement) among officials. As a result, the indexing model does not provide a conceptual framework for understanding when or why frame contestation among political officials is likely to occur in the first place, or why some frames might resonate in the press and among the public more than others. Interest in these pieces leads me to draw upon the cascading activation framework in seeking to understand the political and news discourse that surrounded the My Lai and Abu Ghraib incidents.

#### *National Identity and Political Leadership*

The key to the cultural resonance of nation-protective themes in nationally dissonant moments lies in the individual psychology of group attachments. Social identity theory suggests that an individual’s self-identity is heavily shaped by the social groups that one belongs to and the value attached to them. According to this perspective, through largely unconscious cognitive processes, individuals who closely identify with their social group tend to take on characteristics and exhibit behaviors consistent with the positive attributes of their group identity (Hogg, 2001;

Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Further, individuals do more than identify with social groups: they also derive comfort, self-esteem and security from such memberships (Mercer, 1995; Rivenburgh, 2000). As a result, individuals often engage in favoritism towards their own social group (Brewer, 1999; Dasgupta, 2004; Transue, 2007) and denigration of other social groups (Sherif, 1996; Smith & Bond, 1999). In the words of Triandis (1994), it is “natural to help or cooperate with members of our in-group, to favor our in-group, to feel proud of our in-group, and to be distrustful of and even hostile towards out-groups” (pp. 251-252). This ingroup bias and outgroup hostility have been shown to be particularly pronounced when one’s ingroup is “threatened” physically or psychologically (Branscombe & Miron, 2004; Branscombe & Wann, 1994; Entman, 1991). In such scenarios, members of the threatened social group behave in ways that seek to protect or enhance the group identity (Moore, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Wohl & Branscombe, 2008, 2009). Because the broader social group serves as a source of self-esteem and security, its maintenance and preservation is crucial for members.

Social identities can take many forms—for example ethnic, religious, partisan—but among the most omnipresent and potent is *national* identity. It is omnipresent because it potentially encompasses the entire political unit of the nation-state, and it is potent because national identity has special emotional significance for citizens residing in an “imagined community” as large as modern nation-states (Anderson, 1983; also Druckman, 1994; Huntington, 2004; Van Evera, 1994). The modern political age is defined in terms of nations, but scholars point out that there is nothing “natural” nor pre-destined in the way nations are organized, let alone ordered and maintained (Gellner, 1983). Instead, cultural myths, shared stories, and embedded social narratives are used and repeated daily by citizens and group leaders to appeal to, affirm and maintain citizens’ identities as members of a national group (Bar-Tal,

2005; Billig, 1995; Bloom, 1990). In this way, nations come to command “profound emotional legitimacy” (Anderson, 1983, p. 4). Thus, national identity is a particularly powerful form of social identity: it is capable of uniting entire groups of people, and of motivating citizens to fight, kill, and even die for their country. Its importance in the modern world cannot be overstated.

A considerable amount of scholarship has shown that national identity considerations are often emphasized in political communications. For example, Hutcheson et al. (2004) documented the concerted use of “nation-affirming” themes by Bush administration officials to control the post-September 11 political environment. Stuckey (2005) tracked the differential appeals to national identity employed by the 2004 presidential candidates at their nominating conventions, Sheets et al. (*in press*) found that presidential candidates invoked national identity to a greater degree when the national mood was particularly uncertain, and Domke (2004) and John, Domke, Coe and Graham (2007) demonstrated how the Bush administration infused nationally resonant ideas in its public communications to shape news coverage and gain citizen support between September 11 and the Iraq War. Such employment of nation-bolstering language is consistent with what Manheim (1991, 1994) and others (see Zaller, 1992; Domke et al., 1999; Pfetsch, 1998) have called strategic political communication in which, according to Hutcheson et al. (2004, p. 28), “political leaders craft their public language and communication with the goal to create, control, distribute, and use mediated messages as a political resource.” While the construction of nationally resonant messages is crucial for effective politics, repetition and placement of these messages is no less important (Entman, 1993). Such techniques ensure that these messages are more noticeable, understandable, meaningful, and memorable to the intended audience.

In moments of national vulnerability, then, I argue that national identity goes far to determine which political and news messages will be culturally resonant. When *external* threats arise, scholarship suggests that group members maximize the perceived danger of the outgroup, seek to unify the ingroup, and exalt the positive values of the ingroup (see Barlow 2000; Hutcheson et al., 2004; Khan & Liu, 2008; Pettigrew, 1979, 1982;). In the cases of My Lai and Abu Ghraib, however, U.S. military were the transgressors, and therefore the national group was directly implicated. To deal with this reality, political actors were compelled to construct frames that protected the nation while simultaneously separating the transgressors from it. As Edelman (1993) has suggested, expressive political messages that appeal to underlying cultural beliefs can serve to reorient how the public perceives the causes, consequences, and solutions for an event such as My Lai or Abu Ghraib. Within this context, I expect four frames to function particularly well: *minimization* of the transgressions, *contextualization* of the transgressions, *disassociation* of the transgressors, and *reaffirmation* of the nation's identity.<sup>2</sup> Such frames by political leaders would do much to discourage—among journalists and the general public—substantive, critical self-examination of what took place in these incidents. In the words of Bandura (1990, p. 37), “As long as the detrimental results of one's conduct are ignored, minimized, distorted, or disbelieved, there is little reason for self-censure to be activated.” In short, these nation-protective frames serve to bolster the national image *as well as* discourage critical assessment of what took place both among journalists and the general public. As a result, any collective, national effort to derive lessons from such an incident or explore its broader causes and consequences is often lost in the process.

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that these frames do not clearly map onto Entman's (1993) conception that a frame promotes a specific problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation. Nonetheless, when taken together, I argue that these frames achieve a comparable effect.

Each frame merits elaboration. First, *minimization* involves downplaying the seriousness and scope of deviant behavior by group members (Blatz et al., 2009; Marques & Paez, 1994). This allows the group to limit or outright avoid aversive emotional reaction and guilt triggered by the behavior. Scholarship has found that minimization typically manifests in two primary ways. The first consists of characterizing the aberrant behavior of group members as isolated or limited in scope, thus downplaying the extent and severity of the activity by obscuring or distorting the harm caused (Bandura, 1990). The second involves placing blame for the behavior on the actions of peripheral or lower-level group members instead of extending responsibility to central or higher-level leaders (Bandura, 1999; Grey & Martin, 2008). In essence, minimization seeks to limit the damage caused by transgressions, suggesting that the behavior is neither serious nor widespread. In nationally dissonant moments, officials—especially those who may be implicated—would, therefore, be expected to employ the minimization frame as a way to contain damage. Likewise, the public would be expected to be receptive to such messages because they serve to bound the actions and protect the integrity of the national in-group.

Second, *contextualization* involves characterizing deviant behavior as situational and, therefore, not indicative of the character and values of the group members who committed the acts or the group itself (Entman, 1993; Hewstone, 1990; Hogg & Terry, 2000). Two explanations are typically associated with this group-protective tendency. First, it consists of blaming the deviance on environmental circumstances such as confusion, stress, or peer influence (Gifford-Smith, Dodge, Dishion, & McCord, 2005). Claims, for example, that the behavior was caused by the “fog of war,” the level of isolation or stress, or normative pressure from associates are consistent with this group protective tendency (Zimbardo, 2007). Each posits the diminished capacity of group members to exercise sound judgment due to environmental pressures, with the

goal to convince people that the behavior was compelled because the actors were, in the words of Zimbardo (2008), “seduced into doing really bad things—but only in *that* situation.” Second, contextualization justifies the deviance by highlighting the existence and severity of some external threat posed to the group. Because such a threat, it is reasoned, could significantly harm the physical well-being of the ingroup, group members are, therefore, justified in taking extreme measures to ensure the safety and security of the ingroup (Baumeister, 1999). In this sense, the deviant behavior was compelled by external provocation and the supreme need to protect the ingroup. Thus, contextualization is about blaming aberrant behavior on the situation rather than the disposition of the perpetrators or the in-group itself.

Third, *disassociation* is to take measures to remove the deviant actors from the group. In particular, there are two forms of disassociation that might manifest. First, this may involve characterizing the deviants as unworthy of group membership—for example, as “un-American” (Eidelman, Silvia, & Biernat, 2006). This is consistent with the “black sheep effect” in which group members who transgress are portrayed as unrepresentative of the group due to their alleged inferiority and, therefore, should be stripped of such membership (Marques & Paez, 1994; Marques, Yzerbyt & Leyens, 1988). In effect, this serves to preserve the moral sanctity of the group. Second, disassociation may involve taking material measures to punish the deviant actors (Eidelman et al., 2006). Punishment has the effect of restoring group identity by ensuring that any future deviation from acceptable group behavior will face material consequences. In essence, a purging from the group of the deviant members enables the collectivity to suggest that the behavior in question is not characteristic of the group and will not be tolerated, thereby allowing for the preservation of positive group identity.

Finally, *reaffirmation* shifts attention from the transgression to events or aspects of the group that portray it in a more positive manner (Tajfel, 1982). Once attention has been diverted, group members can then engage in explicit affirmation of positive group identity (Capozza, Bonaldo, & Di Maggio, 1982). Reaffirmation also manifests in two primary ways. The first involves group members emphasizing idealized group values, attributes and behavior, perhaps invoking resonant historical myths and cultural symbols (Billig, 1995; Hutcheson et al., 2004). The second consists of group members engaging in what Bandura (1990) has referred to as “advantageous comparisons”: the highlighting of aspects or actors within selected out-groups that reflect poorly upon those groups. This approach enables group members to proclaim that their actions are not as bad as what out-group actors have done. The result, inevitably, is that members of the group reestablish themselves in a pre-eminent position relative to out-groups, thus restoring positive social identity. Thus, when internal threats to the national image arise, an important strategy for officials seeking to limit the political damage caused by the incident is to reorient citizens towards ideals and attributes that make them feel good about the nation. Such a move is likely to have wide appeal in nationally dissonant moments.

Scholarship has found that citizens articulate some of these strategies in response to national crises—including ones instigated by internal actors. For example, Lipstadt (1994) noted that large portions of citizens in Germany and Italy reported “doubts” about whether the European Holocaust was as severe as traditionally depicted in history texts, thus minimizing the harm enacted by their nations. Shin and Chang (2004) have shown how North and South Koreans seek to disassociate themselves from one another—often labeling the other as “internal traitors” to ethnic Korean identity—as a way to reconcile their belief in the supremacy of Korean identity to the differences between them. And finally, Marques, Paez, and Sera (1997)

documented how Portuguese nationals sought to reaffirm the national group by embracing the belief that Portugal's behavior was no worse than that of other colonial powers. Although these strategies have been found on an individual psychological level, they have not been synthesized into a coherent public communications framework, nor have they been linked with the concept of cultural resonance in an attempt to theoretically connect political discourses with news coverage. These represent my goals in this dissertation.

Ultimately, nationally dissonant moments such as My Lai and Abu Ghraib demand a sophisticated and forceful response from political leaders, especially by those who could be implicated in the scandal. In particular, the collective shame and humiliation that these aversive moments potentially produce within the citizenry make it imperative for leaders to construct and communicate culturally resonant messages geared to restore the national image. Failure to do so can result in disastrous political consequences for these officials. Therefore, given the cultural potency of *minimization*, *contextualization*, *disassociation*, and *reaffirmation* when internally triggered threats to the nation arise, I offer my first hypothesis: White House and U.S. military officials consistently and broadly emphasized these national identity frames throughout the period in which the My Lai and Abu Ghraib scandals dominated political and news discourse (H1). I expect that they did so, in part, because they would have perceived such messages to be politically beneficial. Examination of these communications is crucial, I argue, because, White House and military officials are typically the generators of political frames, particularly on foreign policy issues and when national crises arise. I start my framework, then, at the beginning of the potential frame hierarchy and cascade.

### Frame Adoption, Contestation, and a Partisan Congress

Within the cascading activation model, a frame's cultural resonance does not eliminate the possibility of contestation; rather, the model suggests that a highly resonant message will be *less and less likely* to be contested as it cascades downward to other political officials, the news media, and finally the public. In particular, challenges to White House frames are likely to be more common among actors higher up in the frame hierarchy than among actors lower in the frame hierarchy. This occurs because as one moves down the hierarchy, each set of actors possesses (a) a diminished platform in the public arena, (b) less access to accurate and reliable information, and (c) a decreased ability to formulate a policy response. As a result, the White House is often able, at least initially, to "construct reality" regarding the character, causes, and consequences of these incidents. This is crucial because a frame in the earliest stages of news coverage of an event, particularly one that is culturally resonant, can dominate subsequent discourse. In effect, first impressions that trigger what is familiar and resonant can become, in the words of Entman (2004, p. 7), increasingly "difficult to dislodge" as the frame cascades to the other actors within the framing hierarchy. Given this reality, the more the initial frames emphasized by the White House appeal to broader values, identity, and expectations of the nation, the more difficult it becomes for other political officials and news media to challenge or alter this reality. Culturally resonant frames, therefore, limit the sphere of legitimate debate available to Congress and the press.

It becomes important, then, to theorize about the expected communication efficacy of actors at different levels of the framing hierarchy. At each level the political and professional motivations of the actors significantly affect how they might communicate in response to nationally dissonant events such as My Lai or Abu Ghraib. Scholarship has demonstrated that

members of Congress often infuse nation-bolstering frames into their public communications—especially when external threats to the nation arise—because it is politically advantageous to do so (Hutcheson et al., 2004; Zaller & Chiu, 1996). Minimal scholarship, however, has explored how members of Congress might communicate publicly in situations when the image and reputation of the nation has been internally threatened by ingroup transgressions. In the My Lai and Abu Ghraib cases, I argue that countervailing partisan and electoral pressures would likely have compelled Congressional opponents to contest the White House’s preferred interpretation of events. Such contestation would have been encouraged by the fact that these scandals were caused by ingroup behavior that could be potentially linked to the policies of the president, thereby increasing the necessity for officials, journalists and citizens to delve into the actions in news stories. As a result, Congressional opponents may have sought to weaken the president and, therefore, gain politically by associating him with the negative national considerations linked to these incidents. This is partisan politics in action.

When each of these scandals was first publicly revealed, the respective presidents were in first terms and facing middling approval ratings in the polls: Presidents Nixon and Bush were at 56% and 48% respectively (Gallup, 1969; Pew, 2004). Nixon faced a Democratic Party-controlled Congress that was primed to take advantage of the anti-Vietnam War sentiment that was cresting across the nation. Bush was deep into a competitive bid for reelection against Democrats hoping that Bush’s handling of the Iraq War might cost Republicans both the White House and Congress. These partisan and electoral dynamics gave Congressional opponents considerable motivation to pin each incident on the president. Further, because each incident was a military scandal, Congressional opponents were armed with the ability to level one of the most potent criticisms any president can face—the accusation that he is incompetent as commander-

in-chief. With this in mind, I offer my second hypothesis: Congressional opponents articulated significant challenges to the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames emphasized by the administration in the My Lai and Abu Ghraib cases (H2).

Further, among the frames I posit that minimization is the most ripe for partisan-driven challenges, and therefore I expect this White House message to have been the most vigorously contested by Congressional opponents. Specifically, emphasizing that the nationally dissonant incident is not isolated but rather part of a broader White House policy would enable Congressional critics to implicate the president in the scandal, and thus expose him politically, while at the same time limiting the potential for the critics to be branded as “un-American.” In this sense, contesting the minimization frame carries the least political risk for Congressional opponents—because it emphasizes expanding the circle of responsibility from a few soldiers to high-level officials within the White House *without calling into question the broader values and identity of the nation*. To be clear, I expect Congressional opponents to challenge the contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames as well, but with less vigor due to overt national identity considerations. Put simply, it is harder for oppositional actors to argue against a White House contextualization frame that emphasizes the extraordinary pressures that U.S. soldiers face in war, a disassociation frame that characterizes the perpetrators as un-American, or a reaffirmation frame that puts the spotlight on mythic and positive American values. Given the cultural resonance of these messages when internal threats to the nation arise—specifically, the protection of national identity that each makes explicit—challenges to these frames leads to increased political danger for officials. Such rhetorical volleys could boomerang. I offer, then, my third hypothesis: a minimization frame put forward by the White House was

more likely to be challenged by rival party leadership than the contextualization, disassociation and reaffirmation frames by the White House (H3).

### Frame Adoption, Contestation, and a Selective Press

In this dissertation I seek to move all the way through the framing hierarchy. Entman (1991) and Fishman and Marvin (2003) have demonstrated that psychological tendencies impel journalists to respond to stories that internally threaten the image of the nation by minimizing the emotional impact and rationalizing what occurred. Because most journalists at U.S. news outlets are U.S. citizens, they are likely to have general social identity beliefs, needs, and priorities that are at least roughly congruent with other group members. Specifically, scholarship suggests that news frequently contains ethnocentric biases (Gans, 1979; Levine & Cambell, 1972; Rivenburgh, 1997; Tuchman, 1978). For example, Rivenburgh (2000) showed that national media engage in nation-protective strategies in response to negative actions by ingroup members abroad to preserve national favorability. Likewise, Wolfsfeld, Frosh, and Awabdy (2008) have suggested that journalists exhibit a defensive mode when reporting situations in which national members killed innocent civilians from another nation. In particular, journalists “intellectualized” such events by relying extensively upon military sources and perspectives to explain the behavior. Often, this resulted in the usage of technical and strategic terminology, thereby reducing the visceral nature of the incident (Entman, 1991). Given, then, that ethnocentrism is an “enduring news value” (Gans, 1979), U.S. news media would be inclined to embrace the nation-protective frames emphasized by the White House in the aftermath of nationally dissonant moments such as My Lai or Abu Ghraib.

Likewise, business imperatives make nation-affirming messages especially appealing to news media. Even when journalists do not strongly identify with the nation or share the same

personal values as their audience, it is still professionally advantageous for them to construct stories that culturally resonate with the broader public because it is good for business (Hutcheson et al., 2004). Stories that challenge the national image run the risk of a patriotic backlash from the citizenry. Thus, even when national scandals such as My Lai and Abu Ghraib emerge with characteristics that appeal to the sensationalistic nature of the news (Bennett, 2011; Sabato, 1991), mainstream news coverage of these stories will rarely involve serious critical analysis. In particular, building on Zaller's (1994) notion that "national unity [is] good politics" (p. 267), Hutcheson et al. (2004) argue that national unity is also good journalism; the business imperative to win over and appease audiences—especially in times of crisis when viewership tends to increase due to a "rally 'round the flag effect" (see Baum, 2002)—makes nation-affirming coverage commercially tempting to news outlets. Audiences respond in kind: as John, Domke, Coe and Graham (2007) note, ratings were especially high for Fox News after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, despite critiques that its coverage was overly patriotic—even nationalistic—in tone. Thus, there are commercial incentives for journalists to reaffirm national identity when the national image and reputation been threatened due to ingroup transgressions.

Given these tendencies, it is likely that journalists would be reluctant to challenge the nation-affirming frames emphasized by the White House in the aftermath of My Lai and Abu Ghraib, even if such frames were contested by other officials. This is to be expected, I argue, because the national identity frames disseminated by the White House were likely to be more culturally resonant than those emphasized by Congressional opponents. Notably, in each case, the White House was responding directly to nationally dissonant incidents, seeking to limit the political damage by aggressively protecting and bolstering the national identity. Thus, its political interests were aligned with the psychological tendencies of most Americans who

undoubtedly preferred to believe that these were isolated acts committed by a few deviant, un-American soldiers. In contrast, Congressional opponents hoping to benefit politically were compelled to highlight the extent and heinousness of the crimes and aggressively implicate the White House—which would put them at odds with what most Americans likely preferred to hear, believe, and want to do about the scandal, and left the Congressional officials open to criticisms of putting politics before the good of the nation.

Ultimately, by examining the level of contestation of White House frames by Congressional opponents *and* news coverage, I am able to test the two prevailing models of press-state relations—cascading activation and indexing. Indexing suggests that if frame contestation was present among political officials in response to the My Lai and Abu Ghraib scandals, there should be a concomitant range of frames present in press coverage of these scandals. Thus, if members of Congress substantially contested the White House version of these events, then the press should have manifested this debate in news columns. Alternatively, cascading activation suggests that even if there was considerable frame contestation among Congressional officials, there may not have been contestation by the press *if the frames introduced by the White House and military officials were especially culturally resonant*. With this in mind, I expect a decline in the contestation of White House frames in news coverage about My Lai and Abu Ghraib as they cascade downward towards the press due to the cultural resonance of these messages and the diminishing returns of the cascade—that is, news media are lower down in the framing hierarchy and, thus, find it increasingly difficult to resist the initial, culturally resonant frames offered by the White House. Thus, I offer my fourth hypothesis: U.S. news largely *echoed*, not challenged, the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames offered by the White House and U.S. military after these events (H4).

That said, consistent with my expectations of Congressional discourse, I expect that the minimization frame received greater scrutiny in the press than the contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames. This will occur, I argue, because it possesses less cultural resonance relative to these other frames. Specifically, the minimization frame is more politically vulnerable than the others—as noted, it is easier for political opponents to direct their attacks at the administration without implicating the nation. These dynamics cascade through to the press as well because it becomes easier for the press to initiate or at least include *some* of this contestation and, therefore, maintain the norm of objectivity, without alienating its nation-loving audience. In this sense, the less culturally resonant a frame is, the more we would expect it to be challenged in news coverage. With this in mind, I offer my fifth hypothesis: the minimization frame cascaded past the press less vigorously than the contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames (H5). This occurred, I argue, because challenges to the minimization frame inflict less carnage on the national identity than do challenges to the contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames.

#### Frame Adoption, Contestation, and Public Opinion

Within the framing process, the public generally is thought to function as little more than a dependent variable, rarely introducing alternative views into the discourse. The dominant perspective is a top-down one in which citizens rely upon frames offered by political leadership and the press, particularly when it comes to foreign affairs. This view is based, in large part, on the assumption that the public's views on foreign affairs tend to be unstructured and uninformed, enabling leaders to *guide* rather than *respond* to public opinion when formulating foreign policy (Cohen, 1973; Converse, 1964; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1991; Sobel, 1989; Zaller, 1992, 1994).

More recent research, however, has chipped away at this view of public opinion,

emphasizing that Americans do in fact possess coherent and stable attitudes on general foreign policy issues—such as, for example, how much the United States should be involved in the international system, whether the United States should comply with international law, and what are acceptable uses of force—just not on highly specific issues that require more detailed information (Eichenberg, 2003; Jentleson & Britton, 1998; Page & Shapiro, 1992;). In this sense, the public’s role in the framing process is not simply that of an opinion receptacle; rather, it can and very often does exhibit thoughtful scrutiny and sometimes even pushback to the policies and ideas promoted by political officials and discussed in news.

In particular, scholarship has demonstrated that public opinion can create powerful *constraints* on the range of foreign policy options available for leaders. Often, this involves what Jentleson (2010) calls “parameter setting” in which political officials anticipate which policy options can be “sold” to the public and which are “nonstarters” based on the public mood (see also Holsti, 2004; Jentleson, 1992). These outlooks, in turn, help determine the extent to which the public can shape and influence foreign policy decisions. In the words of Glynn, Herbst, O’Keefe and Shapiro (1999, p. 12), “The president, Congress, and the State Department typically make foreign policy within ideological boundaries determined by American values and priorities...public opinion [therefore] determines the broad framework within which foreign affairs are debated.” Thus, the public exerts considerable *foundational or cultural* influence in the framing process: it does not determine but it certainly encourages what frames are introduced in official and news discourse and it does the same regarding which frames will resonate. Thus, at the heart of this dynamic are culturally agreed-upon ideas of what is good or appropriate.

In general, citizens possess a core set of society-based needs, values, and beliefs that impact how they might respond to frames as they cascade down the framing hierarchy. These

predispositions play a crucial role in determining whether a particular message will be culturally resonant. In the words of Page (1996, pp. 87-88), “[E]ven when...citizens’ policy preferences are uncertain and subject to change...[their] underlying *values* and criteria for judgment are usually quite firm.” In this sense, just as not all sources possess equal power in the framing process, not all frames wield the same power to influence public opinion. Frames that appeal to and reinforce the underlying values and identity of the public, therefore, stand the best chance to shape how the public understands and responds to a particular issue or event. Likewise, frames that do not engage with these tendencies, or go so far as to explicitly challenge them, are likely to be spurned by the public. Thus, in the cases of My Lai and Abu Ghraib, I expect messages aimed at protecting and restoring the *national identity* to be particularly resonant among the public. This is because the transgressions committed by American soldiers in each of these incidents offered considerable challenge to both the image and reputation of the nation. Most Americans, therefore, would likely be receptive to such nation-affirming frames.

Nonetheless, as Entman’s (2004) cascading activation model suggests, whether and to what extent an individual frame successfully cascades into public consciousness is contingent upon the degree to which it is contested—or not contested—by actors high up within the framing hierarchy. This dynamic has received little empirical examination. Specifically, Entman’s model implies that such contestation from political officials, if manifest in the press, should diminish the cascade of an initial frame and, therefore, undermine public support for it, even if the frame is culturally resonant. Thus, official resistance at the top of the framing hierarchy—provided that such resistance directly challenges the very foundation of the initial frame and that it is articulated by credible sources—should increase public resistance at the bottom (Hass & Linder, 1972; Pornpitakpan, 2006). This stems from the fact that the public lacks the necessary

information to effectively scrutinize and potentially resist frames introduced at the top of the cascade. Competing frames in official and news discourse, therefore, provide an alternative interpretation of an issue or event and invite the public to engage in more critical analysis, increasing the probability that a frame offered at the top of the cascade—by White House and military officials—will encounter resistance as it enters the public domain.

Contestation of White House and military frames by Congressional officials—if given voice in the press—should, therefore, garner the attention of the public and serve to generate some degree of uncertainty about the character, causes or potential consequences of an incident such as My Lai or Abu Ghraib. This is because Congressional officials are perceived as credible sources—due to their power to shape policy and their access to timely and privileged information—and, as Zaller (1992) suggests, the public tends to look to government sources for cues when forming opinions around a particular policy issue or event (Bennett, 1990; Zaller & Chiu, 1996). Thus, Congressional frame contestation should have the effect of tempering public receptivity to White House and military frames. This effect is likely to be particularly pronounced in nationally dissonant moments when nation-affirming frames are likely to have been initially offered. I expect this to be so because contestation of these types of frames so rarely manifests within the press (see Gans, 1979; Rivenburgh, 2000; Tuchman, 1978); thus, it is likely to trigger considerable public attention. After all, contestation of nation-affirming frames is a potentially risky endeavor for political officials and journalists—while it may diminish receptivity to the initial frame, it also risks a patriotic backlash (Zaller, 1994; Hutcheson et al., 2004; John et al., 2006). The sources of such counterframes must, therefore, walk a fine line, between implicating the administration and its policies for the transgressions, and directly challenging the values and identity of the nation.

Given my focus, then, on the cultural resonance of nation-protective frames in nationally dissonant moments and the extent to which official contestation of these frames might undercut the public's receptivity to them, it becomes crucial to analyze the framing process at the micro-level. Specifically, I am interested in examining how individual citizens might process and respond to these competing frames when internal threats to the image and reputation of the nation arise. With this in mind, I conducted an experiment in which I manipulated news coverage of an actual incident in which American soldiers had committed acts of violence against non-combatants. My goal was to examine how differential framing by White House, military, and Congressional officials—expressed through the news—influenced how respondents perceived the character, causes, and broader consequences of the incident. In particular, I sought to determine: (a) the extent to which the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames resonated among individuals in response to the incident; and (b) whether contestation by other officials diminished the public's acceptance of these frames.

The tendency among citizens to derive comfort, security and self-esteem from the nation and, therefore, fiercely protect it when it is perceived to be internally threatened, makes it likely that the mass public would embrace messages aimed at rationalizing a nationally dissonant incident in nation-protective ways. Citizens are likely to gravitate towards the *minimization* and *contextualization* of the transgressions, *disassociation* of the transgressors, and *reaffirmation* of the nation's identity because these lines of argument allow them to limit collective shame and humiliation encouraged by such an incident and, in turn, to protect and restore the national identity. Thus, these frames should broadly resonate among respondents. I offer, then, my sixth hypothesis: respondents exposed to news coverage in which the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames were *present*—offered by White House and U.S.

military officials and then either echoed or challenged by Congressional officials—would be more likely to perceive the incident less negatively than those exposed to news coverage in which these frames were absent (H6). Specifically, I expected that respondents exposed to the minimization frame would be more likely to downplay the severity of this incident; respondents exposed to the contextualization frame would be more likely to attribute the causes of this incident to situational stress; respondents exposed to the disassociation frame would be more likely to believe that those involved will be appropriately punished; and respondents exposed to the reaffirmation frame would be more likely to perceive America as a moral leader in the world.

In addition, I expected that respondents exposed to news coverage in which the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames were *present* would identify more strongly with the nation than those exposed to news coverage in which these frames were absent (H7). This is due to the fact that citizens tend to engage in nation-protective behavior in moments when the nation is perceived to be seriously threatened. Because these frames explicitly appeal to these tendencies, even if they are challenged by some political actors, I expected them to activate among respondents a stronger attachment with the nation.

Contestation by members of Congress should, however, limit the public's receptivity to the White House and military frames. Specifically, exposure to coherent counterframes offered by Congressional officials in the press should invite skepticism and doubt among respondents about the initial frames, thereby potentially diminishing the cascade. This is likely to occur, I argue, because the mere presence of counterframes compels respondents to critically assess—or at least subconsciously rationalize—why one set of frames is more credible than another. With this in mind, I offer my eighth hypothesis: respondents exposed to news coverage in which the White House and military frames of minimization, contextualization, disassociation and

reaffirmation were *contested* by Congressional officials would be more likely to perceive the incident more negatively than those exposed to news coverage in which these frames were *echoed* by members of Congress (H8). Specifically, I expected that respondents exposed to news coverage in which the minimization frame was challenged would be less likely to downplay the severity of this incident; respondents exposed to news coverage in which the contextualization frame was challenged would be less likely to attribute the causes of this incident to situational stress; respondents exposed to news coverage in which the disassociation frame was challenged would be less likely to believe that those involved will be appropriately punished; and respondents exposed to news coverage in which the reaffirmation frame was challenged would be less likely to perceive America as a moral leader in the world.

Finally, given these dynamics, I also expected that respondents exposed to news coverage in which the national identity frames were *contested* by Congressional officials would identify less strongly with the nation than those exposed to news coverage in which these frames were *echoed* by members of Congress (H9). Specifically I expected that the simple presence of the frames would impact national attachment, and that this impact would be moderated by whether they were echoed or contested in news coverage.

### Outline of Chapters

This dissertation explores the interaction among political leaders, the news media, and the public in the framing process. Specifically, I examine the types of frames that are likely to emerge when U.S. national identity is threatened due to the transgressions of American citizens, how these frames are likely to be treated in political and news discourse, and whether these frames are likely to resonate among the public. In so doing, I seek to clarify and elaborate on the importance of cultural resonance as a conceptual tool for understanding and explaining the

framing process, particularly when the national image has been put at risk. In particular, drawing upon social psychology research, I theorize about the tendencies that politicians, journalists and citizens are likely to exhibit in response to such nationally dissonant moments, suggesting that frames aimed at protecting and restoring the national identity are most likely to resonate. Ultimately, it is my hope that this research will shed further light on the press-state relationship as well as illuminate why certain frames are more likely to move through the public arena's framing hierarchy when internally triggered threats to the nation arise.

In the next chapter I discuss my methodological approach to each of the empirical studies that constitute this dissertation. I begin by providing a brief overview of the two cases I examined—the My Lai Massacre and the Abu Ghraib Prison Scandal—by highlighting some of the key similarities and differences between them. Next, I discuss the content analyses I conducted on White House, military, Congressional, and news discourse for each of these cases. I conclude the chapter with an explanation of my study design and sampling decisions for my experiment on the effects of minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames on individual respondents when these frames are either echoed or contested by political officials in the news in response to a nationally dissonant moment.

In Chapter Three, I present results from the content analyses I conducted on White House, military, Congressional, and press discourse in the aftermath of the My Lai Massacre. Specifically, I explore the extent to which minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames were employed by the Nixon administration and U.S. military following public disclosure of the scandal, the degree to which these frames were echoed or contested by members of Congress, and whether the level of frame contestation in official discourse was matched by parallel disagreements in news content.

In Chapter Four, I present results from the content analyses I conducted on White House, military, Congressional and press discourse in the aftermath of the Abu Ghraib Scandal. Consistent with Chapter Three, I explore the extent to which minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames were employed by the Bush administration and U.S. military following public disclosure of the scandal, the degree to which these frames were echoed or contested by members of Congress and whether the level of frame contestation in official discourse was matched by parallel disagreements in news content. Together, the findings in Chapters Three and Four contribute to scholarship on press-state relations and speak to the importance of cultural resonance and national identity in the framing process, particularly when the national image is put at risk.

In Chapter Five, I present results from an experiment in which I created and then manipulated news stories about an incident in which the image and reputation of the nation were threatened. My goal was to determine which of the identified frames resonate best in such situations and whether contestation of these frames by officials in the press undercuts the public's receptivity to the frames. The findings in this chapter contribute to overall understanding of framing effects and the role of the public in the framing process.

Finally, in Chapter Six I summarize and interpret my major findings. I then discuss how these findings relate to and contribute to scholarship on press-state relations and the framing process. I close this chapter with some suggestions for future research.

## CHAPTER 2

### Research Design

This dissertation focuses on the relationships among political officials, the press, and the public in the framing process. Through this research, I seek to shed light on press-state relations and the importance of cultural resonance and frame contestation in explaining why certain messages are more likely to move through the public arena's framing hierarchy. Specifically, I am interested in exploring what types of nation-protective frames tend to emerge in public discourse when internal threats to the nation arise, what kind of contestation is advanced by political officials and journalists, and how the public responds to these dynamics. To address these first two pieces, I analyzed the communication environment surrounding two nationally dissonant moments in U.S. history—the My Lai Massacre (1968) and the Abu Ghraib Prison Scandal (2004). For both, I conducted three content analyses. First, I analyzed White House and U.S. military communications in the aftermath of each scandal to determine whether and to what extent these officials articulated nation-affirming frames. Second, I analyzed Congressional communications to measure the degree to which these officials echoed or challenged the White House and U.S. military frames. Finally, I analyzed news coverage to assess whether frame contestation in official discourse was matched by parallel disagreements in news content.

As a final, separate step in this dissertation, I conducted an experiment in which I manipulated news coverage of an actual incident in which American identity was threatened by internal transgressions. My goal was to test the effects of the four identified nation-protective frames—both when they are echoed and when they are contested by officials in the press—on individual respondents. Thus, my goal in this dissertation was to systematically examine the framing process from start to finish. Taken together, these four methodological components

clarify and elaborate the complex relations among officials, the press, and the public in the framing process, and serve to illuminate the crucial role that cultural resonance and frame contestation plays within it. In this chapter, I begin by providing a brief summary of what happened in the My Lai and Abu Ghraib cases, how each of these scandals was first broadcast to the American public and who was ultimately punished. Next, I discuss the design and sampling decisions for my content analyses on White House, military, Congressional, and press messages. I then close the chapter by explaining the key manipulations and sampling decisions for my experiment.

### My Lai and Abu Ghraib

On March 16, 1968, U.S. soldiers killed more than 500 unarmed South Vietnamese civilians, the majority of whom were women, children, and elderly men, in a village known as My Lai.<sup>3</sup> Charlie Company, which consisted of roughly 105 American soldiers, entered My Lai on a “search and destroy” mission to sweep out Viet Cong thought to be hiding in the village (Bilton & Sim, 1992). The Company was ordered to burn houses, kill livestock, destroy foodstuffs, close the wells and “wipe [the enemy] out for good” (Peers, 1970). When the soldiers arrived and found no Viet Cong, they rounded up civilians into large groups and killed them. Many were gang-raped, beaten with rifle butts, stabbed with bayonets and tortured with a signature of “C Company” carved into their chests (“Murder in the Name of War – My Lai,” 1998). The incident lasted four hours. In the end, Charlie Company suffered one casualty—a soldier intentionally shot himself in the foot to avoid participating in the massacre—and just three enemy weapons were confiscated.

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<sup>3</sup> Henry Kamm (1969), a correspondent for the *New York Times*, reported the number of dead to be 567. Seymour Hersh (1970) has put the number at 504, which is consistent with the number of names listed on the monument that was created for the victims after the war.

The reality of My Lai was revealed to the American public on November 13, 1969—almost two years after the incident—when freelance journalist Seymour Hersh (1969) published a story through the news agency *Dispatch News Service*.<sup>4</sup> Hersh drew on several sources, including Lieutenant William Calley, who was a platoon leader at My Lai and was believed to have ordered his soldiers to kill many of the victims. One day after Hersh’s story was published, it was picked up by more than 30 major U.S. newspapers (Bilton & Sim, 1992). This was followed one week later by the release of grisly photographs of My Lai in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and *Life* magazine (Haeberle, 1969a, 1969b), as well as a prime-time television interview on CBS News of former U.S. soldier Paul Medlo (1969), who described his involvement and provided graphic details of the killings at My Lai. Together, these stories and images seared the “My Lai Massacre” into the consciousness of the American public and posed a serious threat to American identity. In the wake of the controversy, Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1971) stated: “I think there is a good deal of evidence that we thought all along that we were a redeemer nation... There was a lot of illusion in our national history. Now it is about to be shattered” (McFadden, 1971). My Lai certainly challenged the national image.

More than three decades later, throughout 2003 and part of 2004, U.S. military engaged in inhumane treatment of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Prisoners were threatened with dogs, subjected to mock electrocution, forced to simulate sexual acts, sodomized, raped and severely beaten by U.S. military and CIA personnel (Hersh, 2004; Mapes & Roberson, 2004; Danner, 2004). There were reports of at least two homicides at the prison, including the death of Manadel al-Jamadi who suffocated after he had his wrists bound behind his neck and he was hanged from a barred window during interrogation (Hettena, 2005; Shamsi & Perlstein, 2006;

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<sup>4</sup> Notably, details of the massacre had appeared in two separate French publications—*Sud Vietnam en Lutte* and *Bulletin du Vietnam*—in May 1968 (Hersh, 1970).

McKelvey, 2008). Because Abu Ghraib prison was known as Saddam's notorious torture chambers, these incidents carried a symbolism. Moreover, given that part of the rationale provided by the Bush administration for the Iraq war was to eliminate human-rights atrocities, public exposure of these incidents had the potential both to threaten the U.S.-led war effort in Iraq and to severely damage America's image both at home and abroad. For several months, however, the U.S. public remained in the dark about these incidents.

In spring 2004, photos and stories started to emerge in U.S. news media depicting the brutal treatment at the prison. On April 28, CBS News program "60 Minutes II" released photographs showing U.S. military beating and humiliating Iraqi prisoners (Mapes & Roberson, 2004). Notably, this story had been delayed for two weeks due to pressure from the Bush administration not to release the photos.<sup>5</sup> Two days later, Seymour Hersh (2004) published an article in *The New Yorker* attributing blame to the policies of the Bush administration and higher-ups in the U.S. military. The photos and Hersh's accusations put the White House and U.S. military in a precarious position: Americans wondered if what had taken place constituted torture, who should be blamed, and whether the actions at Abu Ghraib extended to other U.S. prisons in Iraq, Afghanistan, Cuba, and elsewhere (Danner, 2004; McKelvey, 2008). Ultimately, 11 lower-level soldiers were convicted of various charges, with three sentenced to more than one year in prison. None were convicted of murdering detainees. Moreover, no superior military officers or political officials were charged with having played a role in the scandal. The significance of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal was suggested by photojournalist Susan Sontag (2004): "[T]he defining association of people everywhere with the war that the United States

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<sup>5</sup> It was not until CBS learned that *The New Yorker* was going to publish an article about the scandal that they decided to ignore the pressure from the White House and run the "60 Minutes II" program.

launched pre-emptively in Iraq last year will be photographs of the torture of Iraqi prisoners by Americans in the most infamous of Saddam Hussein's prisons, Abu Ghraib."

Ultimately, the My Lai and Abu Ghraib incidents were nationally dissonant moments in which the image and reputation of the nation were internally threatened. In each of these cases, revelations of U.S. soldiers brutalizing foreign civilians in some of the worst ways imaginable served to potentially engender a sense of collective shame and humiliation among Americans. These incidents also occurred at the height of two controversial wars, thus potentially elevating the significance of these transgressions among the American public. At minimum, the public was confronted with considerable uncertainty about the character, causes, and consequences of these horrible events. It is therefore crucial to examine the manner in which the framing process unfolded following each of these incidents.

### Content Analysis

To examine White House, military, Congressional, and press communications in the aftermath of My Lai and Abu Ghraib, I conducted three content analyses. Content analysis systematically and quantitatively examines manifest content in communications (Berelson, 1952). Neuendorf (2002, p. 10) notes that it relies on the scientific method, emphasizing intersubjectivity, reliability, validity, generalizability, replicability, and hypothesis testing. Often, content analysis is employed in research on mass mediated communication because it allows for the statistical analysis of a large number of texts through the construction of a precise coding scheme and the quantification of sources and language within each text (Lombard, Snyder-Duch & Bracken, 2002). In particular, scholarship has shown how content analysis can be used to examine the first several of the primary levels of analysis identified by Lasswell (1948) in communication research: "who says what, to whom, why, to what extent and with what effect"

(Holsti, 1969; Riffe & Freitag, 1997). This may involve, for example, identifying patterns in the presence of a particular theme or source within a text or set of texts, or analyzing the flow of information from one source to another. Ultimately, the benefit of content analysis is that it allows one to empirically test predictions, systematically and quantitatively, through direct examination of the content and internal features of a large number of communication texts.

I employed content analysis to examine government and news discourses surrounding the My Lai and Abu Ghraib incidents because I was interested in understanding and explaining the framing process following each of these scandals. Specifically, I focused on whether and to what extent nation-protective frames were manifest in White House and military communications, and the extent to which these frames were amplified or challenged in official and news discourse; it was imperative, therefore, that I carefully content analyze White House, military, Congressional and news texts. Doing so enabled me to systematically examine a large number of texts and, through a quantification of the language and sources within these, to determine whether patterns existed in the discourse. In this sense, content analysis provided the most effective method for clarifying and delineating the process by which frames move through the public's framing hierarchy. In sections that follow, I explain how I conducted each of my three content analyses.

#### *White House & U.S. Military*

For White House and military communications, I was particularly interested in examining an emphasis on nation-affirming frames—minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation—by these officials in response to the My Lai and Abu Ghraib incidents. Such frames, I argue, would likely be culturally resonant in these moments because of the threat that these incidents posed to the national identity, and the tendency among citizens to seek to protect and restore the national identity when such threats arise. As Entman (2004) suggests, frames that

originate at the top of the framing hierarchy—the White House and military—often possess the greatest strength to control broader public debate and opinion. Conceptually, then, it makes sense that I begin by conducting a content analysis of White House and military communications.

For both the My Lai and Abu Ghraib cases, White House and military statements were collected from four sources: *The American Presidency Project* website, *State Department Bulletin*, *LexisNexis Congressional*, and government documents. The unit of analysis was the individual communication, which included speeches, interviews, press conferences, press releases, and Congressional testimony. *The American Presidency Project* contains every unedited public statement made by the President or the White House Press Secretary during the time period in which that President is in office. *The State Department Bulletin* includes every unedited public statement made by a member of the U.S. State Department. *LexisNexis Congressional* carries unedited transcripts of every Congressional hearing in which a member of the White House or military publically testified. Finally, I examined government documents at the National Archives and Library of Congress in Washington D.C. to identify any public statements made by White House, besides the president or press secretary, or military officials in the aftermath of the My Lai and Abu Ghraib incidents.<sup>6</sup>

When analyzing these documents, I employed the same coding scheme across the two incidents. Specifically, within each statement I examined whether each speaker emphasized themes of *minimization*, *contextualization*, *disassociation*, and *reaffirmation*. Minimization was operationalized via two sub-frames: (1) *Delimiting blame*—references blaming the incident on the actions of a few; and (2) *Delimiting severity*—references implying that the acts were isolated,

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<sup>6</sup> The National Archives and Library of Congress also maintain documents—such as, for example, internal memos, meeting notes and telephonic transcripts—from the White House and U.S. military. I examined these documents in a qualitative manner rather than including them as part of my content analyses, because they were fewer in number and were not public documents. These internal communications sometimes provided insight into the public communications of these institutions.

unique, anomalous or not as severe as what had been alleged. Contextualization was operationalized via two sub-frames: (1) *Fog of war*—references blaming the incident on environmental circumstances, such as confusion, stress or peer influence; and (2) *Enemy threat*—references blaming the acts on the existence of a legitimate threat posed to the United States or the American soldiers involved in the incident. Disassociation was operationalized via two sub-frames: (1) *Appropriating justice*—references emphasizing that the perpetrators would be punished or “brought to justice”; and (2) *Un-American behavior*—references to the behavior as “un-American” or inconsistent with American values. Finally, reaffirmation was operationalized via three sub-frames: (1) *Positive American values*—references to positive American values, attributes and behaviors; (2) *Humanitarianism*—references emphasizing U.S. adherence to international law and humane treatment of prisoners; and (3) *Advantageous comparisons*—references highlighting supposedly inferior attributes of other nations or people.

In the My Lai case, 48 relevant White House and military statements were identified between November 13, 1969—the date when the My Lai incident was first revealed to the American public by Hersh (1969)—and December 31, 1971—two weeks after the final court trial on My Lai was completed.<sup>7</sup> I examined speeches ( $n=19$ ), press conferences ( $n=10$ ), interviews ( $n=4$ ), Congressional hearing statements ( $n=13$ ), and press releases ( $n=2$ ). To collect these statements, I began by using online search engines from the *American Presidency Project* website, HeinOnline for the *State Department Bulletin*, and *LexisNexis Congressional*. The following search terms were employed: “My Lai” or “Mylai” or “Song My” or “Songmy” or “Son My” or “Pinkville” or “Calley.” The first six terms each had appeared at different times in official and news discourse as a descriptive name to identify the location of the incident, and

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<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that these 48 statements do not comprise the entire universe of statements made by White House and military officials during this time period. Some statements were unattainable due to restrictions to primary documents containing these communications.

Calley was at the center of the actions. I read every statement from the *American Presidency Project* and *State Department Bulletin* as well as every hearing held by the Armed Services, Foreign Affairs and Select Intelligence committees in both the U.S. Senate and U.S. House of Representatives during the specified time period. As a final step, I conducted research at the National Archives and Library of Congress in Washington D.C. to identify potential additional public statements made by White House or military officials not present in these other selected publications and to locate internal communications that occurred privately within the Nixon administration and the U.S. military—such as administration memos, meeting notes, and telephone transcripts—about My Lai.

For the Abu Ghraib case, 153 relevant White House and military statements were identified between April 28, 2004 and July 6, 2004. April 28 was the date that the Abu Ghraib photos were first released on CBS' "60 Minutes II" and July 6 was the date after which news coverage (see Bennett et al., 2007; Rowling, Jones & Sheets, 2011) and White House communications about Abu Ghraib dropped off precipitously. I identified speeches ( $n=22$ ), press conferences ( $n=55$ ), interviews ( $n=33$ ), Congressional hearing statements ( $n=37$ ), and press releases ( $n=6$ ). To retrieve these statements, I followed the same procedures as I did for My Lai. First, I used the online search engines from the *American Presidency Project* website, HeinOnline for the *State Department Bulletin*, and *LexisNexis Congressional*. The search terms employed were "Abu Ghraib" or "Prison" AND "Iraq." Next, I read every presidential and press secretary statement from the *American Presidency Project* and *State Department Bulletin* as well as every hearing held by the Armed Services, Foreign Affairs and Select Intelligence committees in both the Senate and House during the specified time period. Finally, I conducted research at

the National Archives and Library of Congress in Washington D.C. to uncover additional White House or military statements not present in these other selected publications.

### *Congress*

The next step was to analyze the communications of members of Congress to assess the extent to which the White House frames were echoed or contested by officials from the rival party. For both My Lai and Abu Ghraib, the Congressional communications that I examined consisted of statements made by Senate and House members—both Democratic and Republican—on the floor of Congress or in Congressional hearings. The search terms and date ranges were identical to those used to gather White House and military texts. Each statement made on the floor of Congress was collected from the *Congressional Record*, which serves as the official record of the proceedings and debates of the United States Congress. Each Congressional hearing was collected from *LexisNexis Congressional*, which carries unedited transcripts of all Congressional hearings that have not been classified. The unit of analysis was the individual statement. Specifically, each speech by an individual member on the floor of Congress was analyzed. When minor interruptions to individual statements occurred—by, for example, procedural questions or requests for clarification—I analyzed the statement before and after the interruption as one continuous message. Likewise, each statement made during a Congressional hearing was analyzed in the same manner. Finally, I read the entire *Congressional Record* during the specified time periods to ensure I had retrieved the entire universe of relevant statements made by members on the floor of Congress. Ultimately, 388 Congressional statements were identified for My Lai (231 by Democrats and 157 by Republicans), and 415 were identified for Abu Ghraib (260 by Democrats and 155 by Republicans).

When analyzing Congressional statements, I employed the same coding scheme across the two cases. Specifically, within each statement I coded whether the speaker echoed or challenged the *minimization*, *contextualization*, *disassociation*, and *reaffirmation* frames put forth by the administration. Each frame was coded as “1” if it was *congruent* with the administration’s messages (i.e., affirmed minimization, contextualization, disassociation or reaffirmation frames), “2” if it was *mixed/neutral* (i.e., either both affirmed and challenged the minimization, contextualization, disassociation or reaffirmation frames, or did neither) and “3” if it *challenged* the administration messages (i.e., contested minimization, contextualization, disassociation or reaffirmation frames). For example, a Congressional statement that imposed blame for the scandal on the actions of a handful of lower-level soldiers was coded as “1” for the minimization frame; a statement that suggested that the scandal *may* extend beyond the actions of the low-level soldiers was coded as “2” for the minimization frame; and a statement that imposed blame for the scandal on higher level officials in the White House or the military was coded as “3” for the minimization frame.

### *News Coverage*

The next step in my analysis was to examine whether the level of frame contestation in official discourse was matched by parallel disagreements in the press. The cascading activation model suggests that even when considerable frame contestation manifests, those frames (or counterframes) that are most culturally resonant are most likely to cascade into the press. With this in mind, I sought to determine the extent to which the nation-affirming frames introduced by the White House and military were echoed or contested within press coverage. I then compared this with the level of contestation offered by rival officials in Congress.

For both My Lai and Abu Ghraib, I collected news content from three sources: the *New York Times*, CBS Evening News, and *Time Magazine*. The search terms and date ranges were identical to those used to gather White House, military, and Congressional texts. The *Times* was chosen for analysis because it is considered one of the most influential newspapers in the United States (Entman, 1991). In particular, it is commonly considered the “newspaper of record” and has been cited as a driver of inter-media agenda-setting among mainstream news outlets (Danielian & Reese, 1989). CBS News was chosen because it is one of the three major news networks in the United States and it was particularly instrumental in reporting on both of the scandals. Specifically, CBS News was the first television network to air a full interview of a former U.S. soldier involved in the My Lai Massacre a few days after Hersh broke the story and it was credited with breaking the Abu Ghraib story when it released photographs from the prison on its news program “60 Minutes II.” Further, studies show that more Americans get their news from television than from any other medium (Pew, 2008). Finally, I analyzed *Time* because it was one of the leading newsweeklies and it was at the forefront of press coverage of the My Lai incident. Because news magazines allow for more in-depth coverage than television or traditional newspapers, and journalists tend to engage in greater analysis within those forums (Entman, 1991), *Time* serves as an effective complement to my other news sources.

The unit of analysis for the news coding was the source. Specifically, in this content analysis my goals were to: (1) identify the primary sources that journalists drew upon when covering the scandal; (2) determine whether patterns emerged across types of sources in their emphasis on identity-related themes in messages about My Lai and Abu Ghraib; and (3) assess the valence (i.e., directionality) of sources’ claims about these events. I coded the first five sources quoted or paraphrased in each *Times* and CBS News story due to the press’ reliance on

the inverted pyramid style, in which the information deemed most important is presented first in a story (see Bennett et al., 2007), and because citizens have a tendency to scan the news environment for the most prominent information rather than read articles to the end (Schudson, 1998). For *Time*, the first fifteen sources in news stories were coded because these articles tend to be much lengthier than news stories on television or in traditional newspapers, and magazine content is often read in a more lengthy manner. The entirety of each source's statements was included in the analysis.

News sources were grouped into seven general categories: (1) *White House and military officials*; (2) *Congress*; (3) *Other government officials*; (4) *other U.S. elites*; (5) *the accused*; (6) *other U.S. sources*; and (7) *foreign sources*. White House and military officials consisted of the President, White House Press Secretary, Cabinet secretaries, lower level White House officials, and ranking officials within the military. Congress comprised Republican and Democratic members of Congress as well as their staffs. Other government officials included unidentified government officials. Other U.S. elites comprised academics, members of think tanks, members of non-governmental organizations, and former government and military officials. The accused included the indicted low-level soldiers as well as their lawyers and families. Other U.S. sources included members of the U.S. news media and U.S. citizens. Finally, foreign sources consisted of government officials, experts, media, and citizens from countries other than the United States.

Source statements were coded for the presence and accompanying valence of the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation themes. Consistent with my coding of Congressional texts, each statement was coded as "1" if it was *congruent* with the administration messages, "2" if it was *mixed/neutral*, and "3" if it *challenged* the administration

messages. Again, this was done to determine the extent to which press coverage echoed or contended the White House and military frames.

For My Lai, I retrieved all relevant news articles or transcripts from the *Times*, CBS News, and *Time* via online search engines. I used ProQuest to identify *Times* articles, the Vanderbilt Television News Archive to collect CBS transcripts, and the archive from the *Time* website.<sup>8</sup> Due to the large number of texts, I coded every second *Times* news story ( $n=298$ ), every second *Times* editorial and opinion piece ( $n=43$ ), every second CBS broadcast ( $n=101$ ), and every *Time* story ( $n=51$ ). Overall, 1,983 source statements were identified within these texts and coded for valence.

For Abu Ghraib, I retrieved all relevant news articles or transcripts from the *Times*, CBS, and *Time* via online search engines. Specifically, I used LexisNexis for *Times* and CBS transcripts and the website archive from *Time*. The search terms and time period were again the same as those used to retrieve White House and military communications. Again, due to the large number of texts, I coded every second *Times* news story ( $n=125$ ), every second *Times* editorial and opinion piece ( $n=33$ ), every second CBS broadcast ( $n=72$ ), and every *Time* story ( $n=25$ ). Overall, 776 source statements were identified within these texts and coded for valence.

Five main variables were subjected to inter-coder reliability tests: *minimization*, *contextualization*, *disassociation*, *reaffirmation*, and *source*. Approximately 10 percent of all White House, military, Congressional, and press communications were randomly selected and analyzed by two coders. As an initial step, these communications were analyzed to assess whether or not the variables were present. For White House and military texts, inter-coder reliabilities (calculated via Scott's pi) indicated strong beyond-chance agreement: *minimization* ( $\pi=.89$ ), *contextualization* ( $\pi=.81$ ) *disassociation* ( $\pi=.89$ ) and *reaffirmation* ( $\pi=.90$ ). For

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<sup>8</sup> For Vanderbilt Television News Archive, I searched abstracts to identify relevant news stories about My Lai.

Congressional texts, inter-coder reliabilities were: *minimization* ( $\pi=.89$ ), *contextualization* ( $\pi=.83$ ) *disassociation* ( $\pi=.81$ ) and *reaffirmation* ( $\pi=.86$ ). Finally, for news articles, inter-coder reliabilities were: *source* ( $\pi=.89$ ), *minimization* ( $\pi=.83$ ), *contextualization* ( $\pi=.80$ ) *disassociation* ( $\pi=.83$ ) and *reaffirmation* ( $\pi=.85$ ).

Next, Congressional and news communications were analyzed to assess valence of the frames. For Congressional texts, inter-coder reliabilities again indicated strong beyond-chance agreement: *minimization* ( $\pi=.85$ ), *contextualization* ( $\pi=.80$ ) *disassociation* ( $\pi=.81$ ) and *reaffirmation* ( $\pi=.84$ ). Finally, for news articles, inter-coder reliabilities were: *minimization* ( $\pi=.84$ ), *contextualization* ( $\pi=.81$ ) *disassociation* ( $\pi=.81$ ) and *reaffirmation* ( $\pi=.83$ ).

### Experiment

As the final step in this dissertation, I sought to determine the extent to which the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames resonate among individuals when encountering nationally dissonant moments and whether contestation by other officials in the news diminished the public's acceptance. Given that citizens exert influence in the framing process insofar as they encourage and ultimately embrace culturally resonant messages, exploring how these particular frames might be received in such moments is critically important. Further, because frame contestation is likely to encourage citizens to more critically evaluate the initial frames offered by the White House and military, thereby increasing the probability that these frames might encounter resistance once they enter the public domain, it is also important to assess how the public might respond to such nation-affirming frames when they are juxtaposed with coherent counterframes in official and news discourse. With this in mind, I conducted an experiment in which I created differing news stories about a nationally dissonant incident with two goals in mind: (a) to test the potentially differential effects of minimization,

contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames on individual respondents; and (b) to test the potential effects of explicit contestation of these frames on individual respondents.

I employed an experiment because I was interested in the psychological processes that guide how individual citizens respond to nation-affirming frames—and the contestation of these frames—in official and news discourse when nationally dissonant incidents occur. Several scholars have demonstrated (see Clark, 2009; Druckman 2001; Nelson, Clawson & Oxley, 1997; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981) that experiments are valuable for understanding how individuals psychologically process frames. Specifically, through random assignment of subjects to conditions, systematic manipulation of the independent variables—the types of nation-affirming frames and the degree of contestation—and control over extraneous sources of variance, an experiment effectively tested my predictions regarding framing effects. This design allowed me to empirically examine how the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames, when echoed or contested in news stories, might exert influence on individual attitudes about a nationally dissonant incident.

### *Design and Procedure*

Participants were presented with a simulated news article about a recent incident in which a group of U.S. soldiers were accused of having killed several innocent civilians during combat operations in Afghanistan. The soldiers involved were also alleged to have desecrated some of the bodies of the victims by mutilating their corpses and posing for pictures. This story was derived from an actual incident reported in the *New York Times* in September 2010, which received considerable attention in the press and among political and military officials for months after the incident was publicly revealed (Yardley & Schmitt, 2010). This incident is an ideal case to test the framing effects of minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation

on individual respondents for several reasons. First, like My Lai and Abu Ghraib, this incident was widely publicized and it involved members of the U.S. military behaving in ways inconsistent with what are perceived to be American values, potentially triggering a sense of collective shame and humiliation among Americans. Thus, it posed a profound internal threat to the image and reputation of the nation. Second, like My Lai and Abu Ghraib, this incident could potentially be linked—at least in part—to the policies put in place by the administration. Political rivals could, therefore, benefit by challenging the interpretations offered by White House and U.S. military officials regarding the character, causes and consequences of the incident. Finally, this incident possesses an important difference from My Lai and Abu Ghraib—it occurred during a Democratic presidency. As a result, it offers an opportunity to test my theoretical expectations about the power of national-identity themes across partisan differences. Because of these reasons, I modeled my experiment based on this incident.

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of nine versions of the news story. This was done to test the framing effects of each of the four frames on individual respondents when each frame was either echoed or contested by political officials in news coverage about the incident. The texts of each of these news stories can be found in Appendix A. In the first condition, the news story and its quotes from the Obama White House and U.S. military officials invoked minimization frames—downplaying the scope of the incident and attributing blame only to the low-level soldiers involved. These frames were then echoed by Republican Congressional officials, who offered similar arguments about and interpretations of the incident. In the second condition, the news story invoked the same minimization frames but these were challenged by the same Republican Congressional officials, who offered competing arguments about and

interpretations of the incident, suggesting that the incident was part of a larger, systemic problem and that responsibility extended to higher-ups.

In the third condition, the news story and its quotes from the Obama White House and U.S. military officials invoked contextualization frames—emphasizing that the incident was caused by stress, confusion, peer pressure or external provocation. These frames were then echoed by Republican Congressional officials, who offered similar arguments in response to the incident. In the fourth condition, the news story invoked the same contextualization frames, but these were challenged by the same Republican Congressional officials who emphasized that these were deliberate acts of murder and that contextual factors such as stress, confusion or peer pressure neither explain nor justify this behavior.

In the fifth condition, the news story and its quotes from the Obama White House and U.S. military officials invoked disassociation frames—emphasizing that the alleged transgressors should be punished or removed from the group. These frames were then echoed by Republican Congressional officials, who offered similar arguments about and interpretations of the incident. In the sixth condition, the news story invoked the same disassociation frames, but these were then challenged by the same Republican Congressional officials who suggested that justice would not be served.

In the seventh condition, the news story and its quotes from the Obama White House and U.S. military officials invoked reaffirmation frames in response to the incident—with emphasis on the positive values, attributes and deeds of America, which were then echoed by Republican Congressional officials. In the eighth condition, the news story invoked the same reaffirmation frames in response to the incident, but these were then contested by the same Republican Congressional officials who offered challenges to America's image and reputation.

Finally, the ninth condition served as the control news story, including only facts about the incident but none of the national-identity frames offered by political officials.

After reading the news story, respondents were asked to answer a questionnaire. It began with incident-related questions about whether they believed the scope and severity of the incident to be limited, whether the actions were caused by situational stresses, whether those involved should be punished, and their beliefs in America as a moral leader. These measures were designed to assess the cultural resonance of each of the frames and to see whether contestation of the frames impacted respondents' attitudes about the incident. Next, respondents were asked a series of questions about their policy views and political attitudes. This included questions regarding their level of support for the war in Afghanistan, their confidence in the U.S. military, the White House and Congress, whether they believed it was important to have vigorous debate among political officials, the press and the public during times of war, and whether they supported a shift towards more soft power policy measures in U.S. foreign policy. The intention of these questions was to assess whether exposure to the different messages prompted shifts among respondents in these broader policy and political attitudes.<sup>9</sup> Next, there was a battery of questions assessing the respondent's level of national identification (adapted from Sidanius, Feshbach, Levin, & Pratto, 1997), including questions about how close respondents felt to other Americans and how important being American was to them. Finally, there were questions assessing respondents' gender, race, education level, and political party and other demographic information. The full questionnaire is included in Appendix B.

### *Timeframe and Sample*

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<sup>9</sup> The measures on incident-related and broader political and policy attitudes were assessed on either a 4-point ordinal scale, where 1 meant "not at all" and 4 meant "completely" or a 4-point Likert-type scale, where 1 meant "strongly disagree" and 4 meant "strongly agree."

Data were collected in March 2012. Data collection was run through SurveyMonkey—a web-based questionnaire provider—and comprised 1698 adults, who were part of SurveyMonkey’s regular survey panel. Following completion of a different questionnaire, participants were encouraged to participate in another study. Those who agreed to do so were directed to our experiment, and randomly assigned to one of our message conditions. Because these respondents chose to be part of a panel of survey takers for SurveyMonkey, and then self-selected into our study, they are not representative of the U.S. adult population. However, the sample is considerably more representative and diverse than the typical lab sample of undergraduates. Specifically, males constituted 53.6% of the sample; 63.2% of respondents were above the age of 45 years; 61% had a two-year college degree or more while 10.6% had no more than a high school education; 83.6% of respondents were white, 3.7% were Latino/a, 3.9% were black, 3.2% were Asian, and 4.8% were other or more than one race; 41.5% of the respondents were Democrat, 24.6% were Neutral and 33.9% were Republican; 10.6% of the respondents were a current or former member of the U.S. military, 37.7% had a family member who was currently or previously in the U.S. military and 43.7% had not been a member and had no immediate family members who had served in the U.S. military; and 55.8% of respondents made less than \$75K/year. This sample diversity, combined with random assignment of respondents to the varying experimental conditions, increased the external validity of the study relative to a traditional lab sample.

### In Sum

This dissertation examines political officials, the press, and the public in the framing process when internal threats to the nation arise, what kind of contestation is advanced by political officials and journalists in these moments, and how the public responds to these

messages. In so doing, this dissertation sheds light on the importance of cultural resonance and frame contestation in the framing process. Notably, by employing two methods—content analysis and an experiment—this dissertation connects these actors together within the framing process and explains why certain frames are more likely to move through the public arena’s framing hierarchy in response to nationally dissonant incidents. Together, these components enabled me to examine the complex contours of the framing process and offer insights regarding press-state relations and the role of the public in moments when the national image has been internally threatened. Ultimately, this study reveals both the rhetorical power of frames that celebrate and reinforce the nation’s image when such moments arise as well as the considerable impact that substantive contestation of these frames—when explicitly articulated by rival officials and amplified within the press—can have on how citizens interpret and respond in these moments.

## CHAPTER 3

### The My Lai Massacre

On March 16, 1968, U.S. soldiers killed more than 500 unarmed South Vietnamese civilians, the majority of whom were women, children, and elderly men, in a village known as My Lai. Charlie Company, which consisted of roughly 105 American soldiers, entered My Lai on a “search and destroy” mission to sweep out Viet Cong thought to be hiding in the village (Bilton & Sim, 1992). The Company was ordered to burn houses, kill livestock, destroy foodstuffs, close the wells and “wipe [the enemy] out for good” (Peers, 1970). When the soldiers arrived and found no Viet Cong, they rounded up civilians into large groups and killed them. Many were gang-raped, beaten with rifle butts, stabbed with bayonets and tortured with a signature of “C Company” carved into their chests (“Murder in the Name of War – My Lai,” 1998). The incident lasted four hours. In the end, Charlie Company suffered one casualty—a soldier intentionally shot himself in the foot to avoid participating in the massacre—and just three enemy weapons were confiscated.

In the immediate aftermath, official U.S. Army reports suggested that 128 Viet Cong and 22 civilians had been killed in what was described as a “fierce fire fight” (Peers, 1970). U.S. General William Westmoreland sent a personal congratulatory note to the unit for an “outstanding job” and *Stars and Stripes* magazine ran a feature story about My Lai, applauding U.S. soldiers for courage and for having “killed 128 Communists in a bloody day-long battle” (Bilton & Sim, 1992). The incident did not receive closer analysis from officials until March 1969—roughly one year after the incident—when Vietnam veteran Ronald Ridenhour sent a letter to the White House, Pentagon, and numerous members of Congress alleging that U.S. soldiers had committed a massacre at My Lai. Ridenhour’s claims were based on second-hand

information he had received through conversations with U.S. soldiers who witnessed or participated in the incident (Anderson, 1998). For the most part, Ridenhour's letter fell on deaf ears—most officials within the White House and Pentagon ignored the allegations (Hersh, 1970). Eventually, Ridenhour's Congressional representative, Morris Udall (D-AZ), and Congressional Rep. Mendel Rivers (D-SC), chair of House Armed Services Committee, aggressively pushed for a full investigation of Ridenhour's allegations. Only then did official scrutiny occur.

The reality of My Lai was revealed to the American public on November 13, 1969—almost two years after the incident—when freelance journalist Seymour Hersh (1969) published a story through the news agency *Dispatch News Service*. Hersh drew on several sources, including Lieutenant William Calley, who was a platoon leader at My Lai and was believed to have ordered his soldiers to kill many of the victims. One day after Hersh's story was published, it was picked up by more than 30 major U.S. newspapers (Bilton & Sim, 1992). This was followed one week later by the release of grisly photographs of My Lai in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and *Life* magazine (Haeberle, 1969a; Haeberle, 1969b), as well as a prime-time television interview on CBS News of former U.S. soldier Paul Medlo (1969), who described his involvement and provided graphic details of the killings at My Lai. These stories and images seared the “My Lai Massacre” into the consciousness of the American public, and threatened to undermine the U.S. war effort in Vietnam. In response, the U.S. military launched an investigation led by Army General William Peers. At the same time, the House Armed Services Committee established a special subcommittee to conduct hearings. In the end, 26 U.S. soldiers were charged with criminal offenses for their actions in My Lai, but only Calley was convicted. He served three years of a life sentence, most of it under house arrest.

My Lai represented a profoundly dissonant moment in American history. In the words of Bilton and Sim (1992, p. 3): “Until My Lai, it had been possible (although perhaps not quite accurate) to believe that the authors of the twentieth century’s greatest atrocities were to be found in distant, primitive, or at least deluded peoples. With My Lai the heart of darkness came home to America.” Such ingroup transgressions could well have generated among Americans a deep sense of shame and humiliation, and triggered a national effort to derive lessons from the incident, explore its causes and consequences, and assess the U.S. war effort in Vietnam. How My Lai came to be explained in political and news discourses and understood by the American public is therefore critically important to examine. With this in mind, I systematically examined White House, military, Congressional, and news communications in the aftermath of My Lai to assess how serious and widespread the actions were conveyed to be, how the circumstances were portrayed, how the actors involved in the incident were characterized, and whether America’s core values were questioned. Specifically, I sought to determine the types of nation-protective frames offered by the Nixon presidential administration and U.S. military in response to My Lai, the degree to which these frames were contested among Congressional Democrats, and whether this range of elite political discourse was reflected in the press.

### Expectations

In this chapter, I examined five hypotheses. First, I expected that Nixon administration and military officials would consistently and broadly emphasize the nation-protective frames of *minimization*, *contextualization*, *disassociation*, and *reaffirmation* in their public communications throughout the period in which the My Lai incident dominated political and news discourse (H1). Minimization involves downplaying the seriousness and scope of deviant

behavior by group members; contextualization consists of characterizing deviant behavior as situational and, thus, not indicative of the values of the group members who committed the acts; disassociation involves punishing or removing the deviant actors from the group; and reaffirmation consists of shifting attention from the transgression to events or aspects of the group that portray it in a more positive manner such as emphasizing idealized group values, attributes and behavior. These frames, I argue, are likely to be particularly resonant among the public in moments when internal threats to the nation arise. I therefore expected Nixon administration and U.S. military officials to strategically employ these frames in the aftermath of My Lai because they would have perceived such messages to be of political benefit.

Second, I expected that Congressional Democrats would articulate significant challenges to the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames emphasized by the Nixon administration and U.S. military in response to My Lai (H2). Such challenges were likely to occur, I argue, because partisan and electoral pressures would have compelled Congressional opponents to contest the White House's preferred interpretation of My Lai in an attempt to benefit politically. Given that My Lai was a military scandal that could be potentially linked to the policies of the president, and anti-Vietnam War sentiment was cresting across the nation at the time that the scandal was first revealed to the American public, Congressional Democrats possessed considerable motivation to try to pin the blame on the president. I expected them to try to do exactly this.

Third, I expected that Congressional Democrats would challenge the minimization frame more vigorously than the contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames (H3). I expected this to be so because minimization is the least culturally resonant of the frames—challenges to it do not explicitly call into question the broader values and identity of the nation.

It, therefore, carries the least political risk for Congressional opponents to challenge. Put simply, it is harder for oppositional actors to argue against a contextualization frame that emphasizes the extraordinary pressures that U.S. soldiers face in war, a disassociation frame that characterizes the perpetrators as un-American and deserving of severe punishment, or a reaffirmation frame that puts the spotlight on mythic American values, ideals and behaviors. In essence, the frame of minimization is less overtly tied to American identity and thus more ripe for contestation among political rivals than the other three frames.

Fourth, I expected that U.S. news media would largely *echo* rather than *challenge* the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames offered by the Nixon administration and U.S. military (H4). As the cascading activation model suggests, even if there is considerable frame contestation among Congressional officials, this may not be matched in the press—especially if the frames introduced by the White House and military officials are culturally resonant. Such frames pick up momentum as they cascade past Congressional opponents and into the press, making it increasingly difficult for journalists to contest. Journalists are essentially compelled for both psychological and economic reasons to embrace culturally resonant frames because such messages tend to align with their own beliefs, identity and expectations as well as those of the audience they attempt to serve. In this sense, the diminishing returns of the cascade combined with cultural resonances would likely give the White House and military a considerable advantage in shaping news coverage about My Lai.

Finally, I expected that the minimization frame would receive greater scrutiny in the press than the contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames because, as argued, it possesses less cultural resonance relative to the other frames *and* it would have likely encountered more resistance from Congressional Democrats (H5). These dynamics are likely to

cascade through to the press as well because it becomes easier for the press to initiate or at least include *some* of this contestation and, therefore, maintain the goal of objectivity, without alienating its audience. Thus, the cultural and political momentum of the minimization frame was likely to be considerably less powerful relative to the other frames, and thus more likely to be contested by journalists well attuned to cultural and political norms.

For this research, I conducted three content analyses. First, I analyzed White house and military communications, which consisted of speeches, press conferences, interviews, Congressional hearing statements, and press releases about My Lai from these officials between November 13, 1969—the date the incident was first revealed to the American public—and December 31, 1971—two weeks after the final court trial pertaining to My Lai was completed. When analyzing these statements, I examined whether each speaker emphasized *minimization*, *contextualization*, *disassociation*, and *reaffirmation* frames within each communication.

Second, during the same dates I analyzed Congressional texts, which consisted of statements by Senate or House members—both Democratic and Republican—on the floor of Congress or in Congressional hearings about the scandal. For these statements, I coded whether the speaker echoed, questioned, or challenged the *minimization*, *contextualization*, *disassociation*, and *reaffirmation* frames put forth by the administration.

Finally, during the same dates I analyzed news coverage of My Lai in the *New York Times*, CBS News, and *Time* magazine. Specifically, I examined every other *New York Times* news story, *New York Times* editorial or opinion piece, CBS News broadcast, and every *Time* news story. When analyzing these texts, I identified the source for statements and whether they echoed, questioned, or challenged the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, reaffirmation frames. Source statements were identified within these texts and coded for valence.

In this chapter, I began by analyzing the employment of national identity frames by the White House and U.S. military following public disclosure of My Lai. Next, I assessed the extent to which these frames were echoed or contested by members of Congress. Finally, I examined whether U.S. news coverage about My Lai reflected this range of discourse among political officials. Together, these pieces showed how the My Lai incident came to be framed within American public discourse and, more broadly, offered insight into the importance of cultural resonance and frame contestation in explaining why certain messages are more likely to move through the public arena's framing hierarchy when internal threats to the nation arise.

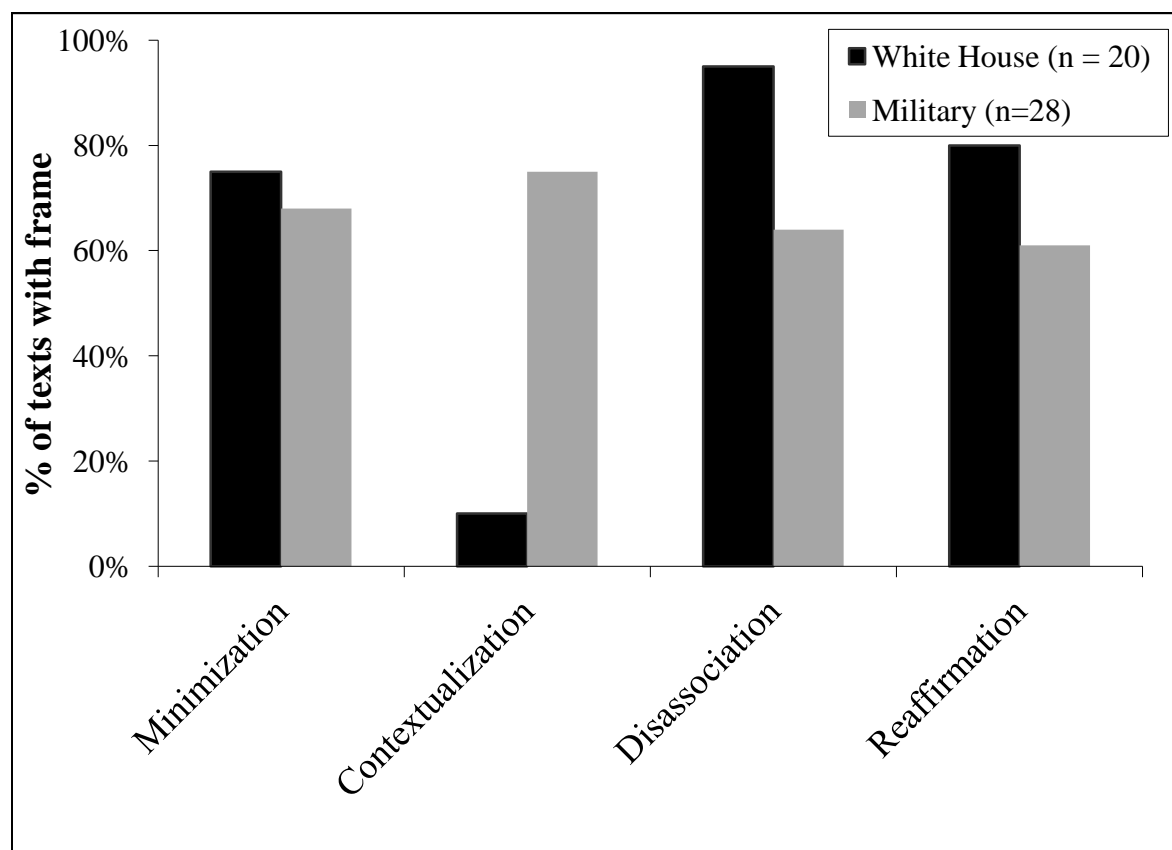
#### National Identity Frames in White House and Military Communications

Evidence in this section is presented in three stages. I begin by presenting aggregate data of White House and U.S. military emphasis on the national identity frames across their public communications. I then present several examples in which the national identity frames were employed within White House or military statements. Finally, I present some internal communications that occurred privately *within* the Nixon administration and the U.S. military—such as administration memos, meeting notes, and telephonic transcripts—to illuminate how the White House and military strategically sought to get out in front of the scandal and frame it within the press by appealing to and bolstering the national identity.

#### *White House and U.S. Military Communications*

My first hypothesis was that White House and military officials would *consistently* and *broadly* emphasize minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames in response to My Lai (H1). With this in mind, I analyzed the extent to which each frame was present in White House and U.S. military communications and the frequency with which each

frame was emphasized.<sup>10</sup> Figure 3.1 shows that in seven of eight instances, the frames were present in at least 60% of White House and U.S. military communications. Only the contextualization frame appeared less frequently in White House communications, a point I will discuss later in this section. Overall, this data provide strong support for hypothesis one.



**Figure 3.1.** Frame usage within White House and military statements

Examples of these frames in White House and U.S. military communications in response to My Lai can be highlighted. Minimization, which involves downplaying the severity and scope of ingroup transgressions, was often evident. For example, during a foreign policy speech on

<sup>10</sup> I coded for sub-frames within each of the broader frame categories of *minimization*, *contextualization*, *disassociation* and *reaffirmation*, but I do not present evidence of them here for two reasons. First, the related sub-frames were often so conceptually linked that they were, at times, indistinguishable from one another. Second, I was more interested in accounting for whether these broader nation-protective tendencies—rather than the specific sub-components of them—manifested in public discourse.

December 4, 1969, Secretary of State William Rogers (1969) stated: “The shocking allegations of atrocity in the village of Mylai in 1968 have concerned all of us. Although this was an *aberration of a few*, these events trouble us deeply.” Likewise, in what was his first public statement about My Lai, President Nixon stated during a press conference on December 8, 1969: “As far as this kind of activity is concerned...*it is an isolated incident*. Certainly within this administration we are doing everything possible to find out whether it was isolated and so far our investigation indicates that it was.” In addition, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird stated the following on March 17, 1970: “When you have a group of 3,000,000 people, there certainly are going to be problems, but *99.9% of these people are really the finest people there are in our country*.” Notably, Laird used this “99.9%” reference in three other public statements about My Lai. Furthermore, responding to questions during a Congressional hearing on May 12, 1970 about the causes of My Lai and whether government policy contributed, General Creighton Abrams (1970), commander of U.S. military operations in Vietnam, stated: “If what is alleged to have happened occurred, there is no regulation and there is no way to write a regulation to prevent it. *What you have is a people problem, not a regulation problem*.” Finally, speaking about My Lai during a Congressional hearing on June 10, 1970, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army General William Westmoreland (1970) declared that My Lai was “*so out of character for American forces in Vietnam* that I was quite skeptical.” Beyond these public statements, numerous others by White House and military officials sought to explain My Lai as “inconsistent,” “contradictory” or “in direct violation” of U.S. military policy in Vietnam, suggesting that those implicated were rogue soldiers acting on their own.

Contextualization, which involves framing the deviant behavior as situational—caused by stress, confusion, peer pressure or external provocation—and, therefore, not reflective of the

values of the group members who committed the acts, was regularly communicated by military officials, but appeared much less frequently among White House officials. This may be because contextualization in this case focuses explicitly on the military tactics and challenges that soldiers face in combat. Emphasis on this frame, for example, was present in a Congressional hearing on November 26, 1969, when Secretary of the U.S. Army Stanley Resor offered this explanation for the My Lai incident: “*My Lai 4 Hamlet is located in an area which is now and has been for several years under Viet Cong control. Intelligence reports indicate that it has been the traditional home of the 48<sup>th</sup> Local Force Battalion, considered one of the best Viet Cong battalions in the country*” (New York Times, 1969). Likewise, in response to question about whether My Lai was considered an enemy stronghold during a Congressional hearing about My Lai on June 10, 1970, General Westmoreland (1970) stated: “Well, *it had been for many, many years, sir.*” During the same hearing, Westmoreland also attempted to link My Lai with the difficulty of differentiating friend from foe in the Vietnam conflict, stating: “[T]he nature of the Vietnam War [has] created special hazards for non-combatants. The *infiltration of the non-uniformed enemy into the local populace [has] made identification difficult, and increased the likelihood of injury to innocent people.*” Similarly, in Congressional testimony about My Lai on May 8, 1970, Lieutenant Colonel William Doyle (1970) stated:

It is *difficult to label people in the vicinity either as combatants or noncombatants*. The enemy has chosen to wage a war in which he makes free use of non-uniformed personnel—both male and female. In addition, persons carrying out operational missions for the enemy may not even be armed. *They may be old men and women, or young children. Nevertheless they are a part of the enemy force.*<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> It is also important to note that in its summary report, the Peers Commission, which was charged with conducting a military investigation into My Lai, identified the following as some of the major factors that contributed: recent casualties suffered by Charlie Company due to enemy mines and boobytraps; the nature of the enemy and the military tactics it uses, such as engaging in guerilla warfare and blending in to the civilian population; previous failure by the division to militarily engage the 48<sup>th</sup> Viet Cong Battalion; a lack of emphasis on proper combat training; psychological buildup among the troops before the mission; and dysfunctional leadership at the company and division levels (Peers, 1970). These factors seem closely connected with the contextualization frame.

These statements suggest an effort to contextualize the My Lai incident by highlighting confusion, uncertainty and threat faced by U.S. soldiers on the battlefield in Vietnam.

Disassociation—emphasizing that the alleged transgressors should be punished or removed from the group—was often present. On November 26, 1969, for example, White House Press Secretary Ronald Ziegler stated during a press conference: “An incident such as that alleged in this case is...abhorrent to the conscience of all the American people...*Appropriate action is and will be taken to assure that illegal and immoral conduct as alleged be dealt with in accordance with the strict rules of military justice*” (New York Times, 1969). Similarly, during an interview with the National Education Television Network on November 26, 1969, Secretary of State Rogers (1969) emphasized: “[I]f the allegations are true, it is a shocking, shocking incident and *all we can do is to court martial any responsible persons to show the world that we don’t condone this.*” Furthermore, during a speech on December 8, 1969, President Nixon stated: “I am going to do everything I possibly can to see that all of the facts in this incident are brought to light and that *those who are charged, if they are found guilty, are punished.*” Finally, speaking about My Lai in a speech in Paris on December 4, 1969, Ambassador to South Vietnam Henry Cabot Lodge emphasized that “Responsibility will be fixed as the facts warrant, and *appropriate action is and will be taken to assure that conduct as alleged will be dealt with in accordance with the strict laws of military justice.*” These statements show an emphasis on the need for the alleged perpetrators to be harshly punished.

Finally, reaffirmation, which involves shifting attention from the transgression to more positive events or aspects of the group such as emphasizing idealized group values, attributes and behavior, was emphasized often as well. During a press briefing on November 26, 1969, White House Press Secretary Ronald Ziegler offered the following: “This incident should not be

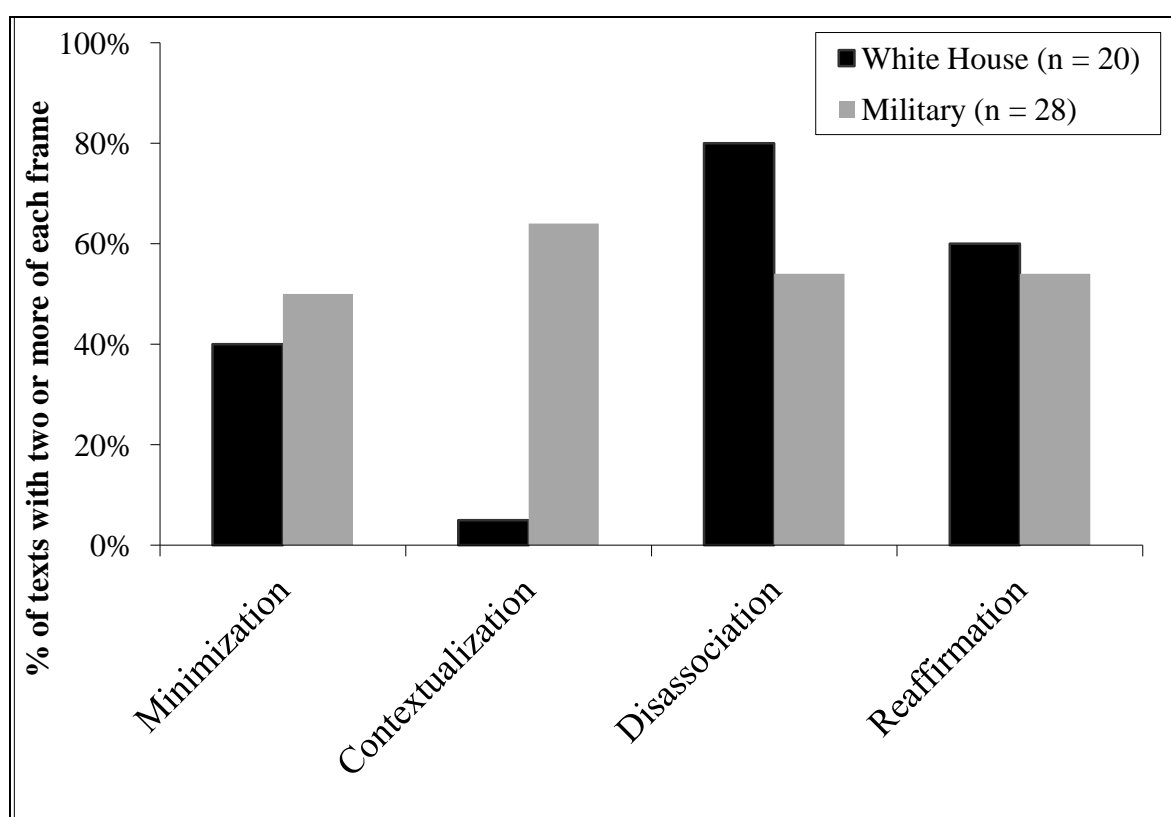
allowed to reflect on the *some million and a quarter young Americans who have now returned to the United States after having served in Viet-Nam with great courage and distinction*” (New York Times, 1969). President Nixon offered a similar statement during a press briefing on December 8, 1969: “[W]e have 1,200,000 Americans who have been in Vietnam... *Virtually all of them have helped the people of Vietnam in one way or another.* They built roads and schools. They built churches and pagodas... *Now this record of generosity, of decency, must not be allowed to be smeared and slurred because of this kind of an incident.*” In a speech on April 7, 1971, Nixon (1971) elaborated this point further, emphasizing the broader humanitarian mission of the United States in Vietnam—despite the atrocity allegations:

I feel it is my duty to speak up for the two and a half million *fine* young Americans who have served in Vietnam. The atrocity charges... should not and cannot be allowed to reflect on their *courage* and their *self-sacrifice*. War is a terrible and cruel experience for a nation, and it is particularly terrible and cruel for those who bear the burden of fighting. But *never in history have men fought for less selfish motives—not for conquest, not for glory, but only for the right of a people far away to choose the kind of government they want.*

Some officials highlighted the fact that those alleged to have committed the crimes at My Lai were being tried as further evidence of positive American values. Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird (1970), for example, stated during a press briefing on March 19, 1970: “I think we should pass judgment after the trials are completed rather than before... *This is the only country in the world that could go through this process. This wouldn't happen in any place, else, and I think it's to our credit that we have this kind of system.*” Together, these statements suggest an effort to move the spotlight away from the atrocity towards the good deeds of other U.S. military service members and, in the process, reaffirm the nation and its values.

As a next step, to further assess the frequency with which these frames were emphasized by White House and U.S. military officials, I looked at the percentage of communications that

contained two or more instances of each frame. Figure 3.2 shows that with the exception of the contextualization frame, which regularly appeared only in military texts, we see that the minimization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames were routinely employed by each of the message sources. Notably, in seven of the eight instances, two or more of each frame was present in at least 40% of White House and U.S. military texts. Ultimately, such repeated usage of these frames by these officials suggests a strategic effort on the part of these officials to shape how the public came to understand My Lai.



**Figure 3.2.** Percentage of White House and military statements with two or more of each frame

To further assess the extent to which these frames were strategically employed by the Nixon administration and U.S. military in response to My Lai, I examined some of the internal communications—including memos, meeting notes, and telephonic transcripts—that occurred privately among these officials. Specifically, I sought to determine whether the White House and

U.S. military had carefully constructed a public relations offensive to contain the scandal—privately emphasizing, for example, the need to get in front of the scandal and maintaining a consistent message among administration and military officials—and whether this involved an intentional effort to minimize, contextualize, disassociate and reaffirm. Evidence from these internal communications seems to suggest that such a strategy was indeed in place. For example, on November 21, 1969—eight days after My Lai was revealed to the American public—notes taken by Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird from his phone conversation with National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger (National Security Archive, 1969) include the following:

K[issinger] was calling about the atrocity case; the President wants to make sure L[aird] got on top of that—got a game plan...L[aird] said he's got the thing on his desk...L[aird] said about a game plan, he'd like to sweep the whole thing under the rug, but you can't do that. Kissinger said we just need some unified line...K[issinger] said he wondered if we could establish a press policy for DOD, and L[aird] should send the requests over to K[issinger]. L[aird] said yes.

Furthermore, in notes taken by White House Chief of Staff H. R. Haldeman (Papers of the Nixon White House, 1969) from a White House meeting on December 1, 1969, one of the pages includes the heading: “Task Force—My Lai.”<sup>12</sup> Directly underneath are the phrases “dirty tricks,” “discredit one witness,” “get out facts on Hue,” “may have to use a Senator,” and “all don't go off in different directions.” From the same meeting, the heading on another page reads: “get a My Lai group to develop a plan.” Below it are: “we should spend more time on it” and “change AM Briefing procedures.” Finally, an internal U.S. Army memo dated January 27, 1970, with the heading “My Lai Army Staff Monitor Summary” includes written communications between two officials about how to discredit freelance journalist Seymour Hersh and Army veteran Ronald Ridenhour for having broken the My Lai story (Records Relating to the My Lai Massacre, 1970). Specifically, one of the notes reads:

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<sup>12</sup> The My Lai Task Force is also referred to as the “Atrocity Group” elsewhere in Haldeman’s notes from the December 1, 1969 White House meeting.

I'm not sure just what can be done about it, but I certainly don't think the Army should be patsies for Hersh, Ridenhour, etc. There is some big money in My Lai...and it looks like this is an effort to grab some of the \$\$\$.

In addition, some of these internal communications indicate an effort on the part of the Nixon administration to emphasize minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation in their public communications about My Lai. A strategy of minimization, for example, was evident in a White House memo on December 6, 1969, in which Kissinger advised Nixon not to convene a commission to investigate My Lai because doing so might "resurrect...recollections of atrocities by other veterans," at which point, the administration would "no longer be dealing with a single phenomenon" (Nixon Presidential Materials, 1969). In Haldeman's notes from a White House meeting on April 1, 1971, the phrase "clear breach of orders" is highlighted, suggesting an effort to minimize the My Lai incident by pinning the blame on low-level soldiers (Papers of the Nixon White House, 1971).

An effort to contextualize the My Lai incident was also evident in notes taken by Secretary of Defense Laird from his conversation with National Security Advisor Kissinger on November 21, 1969 in which Laird vowed to emphasize in his public communications that "only someone who had lost his sanity could have carried out such an act" (National Security Archive, 1969). He went on to state: "those boys had been suffering terribly; one of their boys had been killed just 24 hours before....you can understand a little bit of this, but you shouldn't kill that many." Likewise, transcripts from a telephone conversation between Nixon and Kissinger on March 17, 1970 indicate that Nixon suggested contextualizing the scandal, stating: "We know why it was done. These boys being killed by women carrying that stuff in their satchels" (National Security Archive, 1970). Together, these private communications show a plan by these

officials to attribute the causes of the My Lai incident to confusion, stress and danger encountered by the troops involved in the incident.

Internal communications also indicate an emphasis on disassociation. For example, in a memo from National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger to President Nixon on December 6, 1969, Kissinger emphasized the need for punishment of the perpetrators to quell public hostility about the incident. Specifically, he stated: “the legal proceedings now underway [will] more than likely result in severe punishment that would have a conclusive character which would tend to limit public speculation. The court martial also tends to reinforce the isolated character of the incident” (Nixon Presidential Materials, 1969). This indicates an understanding that messages focused on emphasizing that the perpetrators be severely punished would likely carry considerable political value in response to the My Lai incident.

Finally, a strategy of reaffirmation was apparent in Haldeman’s notes from a White House meeting on December 2, 1969. One heading from his notes reads: “get the worst possible stories of Hue and the worst possible pictures.” Hue was the site where Viet Cong were alleged to have killed hundreds of innocent civilians during the Tet Offensive in 1968. Denigrating the “other”—in this case, the Viet Cong—would enable Americans to proclaim that My Lai was not nearly as bad as the atrocities committed by the enemy (Papers of the Nixon White House, 1969). Such advantageous comparisons, in turn, allow Americans to reestablish themselves in a pre-eminent position relative to out-groups, thus restoring positive social identity. Thus, the administration appeared to recognize the importance or perhaps necessity to emphasize reaffirmation themes in their public communications in the aftermath of My Lai to contain the political fallout.

Overall, these findings support my first hypothesis that minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames would be employed consistently by a breadth of White House and military officials over an extended period of time. Repetition of these frames is suggestive of a strategic effort on the part of the Nixon administration to make these perspectives salient and shape how the My Lai incident came to be explained in the press and understood among the public. Furthermore, consistent usage of these frames over time suggests a concerted effort by these officials to sustain this discourse and, therefore, limit whether, to what extent, and what kind of contestation might emerge within the broader public debate over My Lai.

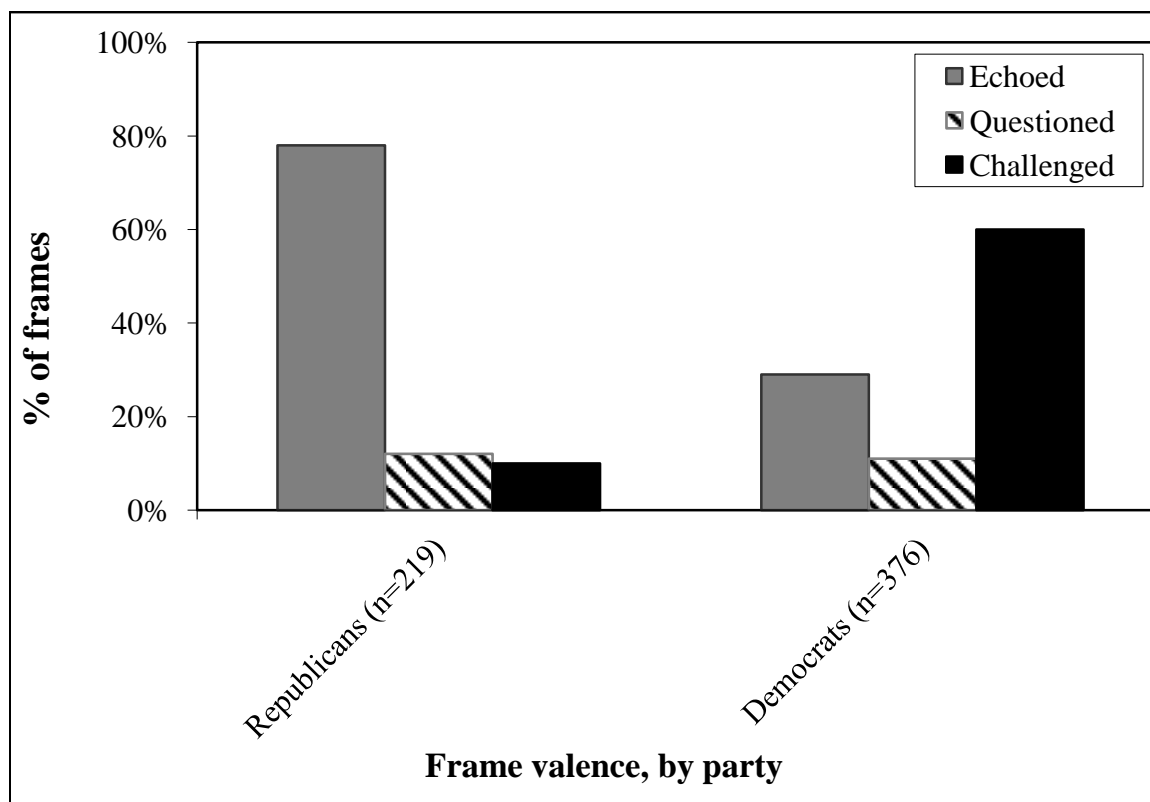
### National Identity Frames in Congressional Communications

In this section, I present data on how members of Congress—both Congressional Democrats and Republicans—publicly responded to My Lai. I begin by presenting aggregate data on the extent to which Congressional members from each party *echoed*, *questioned* or *challenged* the White House and military frames of minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation. Next, I highlight some specific statements by Congressional Democrats to further illuminate the degree of frame contestation offered by these officials.

#### *Frame Valence in Congressional Communications*

In my second hypothesis, I expected that Congressional Democrats would articulate significant challenges to the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames emphasized by the Nixon administration and U.S. military in response to My Lai (H2). With this in mind, I analyzed statements made by both Congressional Democrats and Republicans on the floor of Congress and in Congressional hearings. Figure 3.3 shows the degree to which the minimization, contextualization, disassociation and reaffirmation frames together

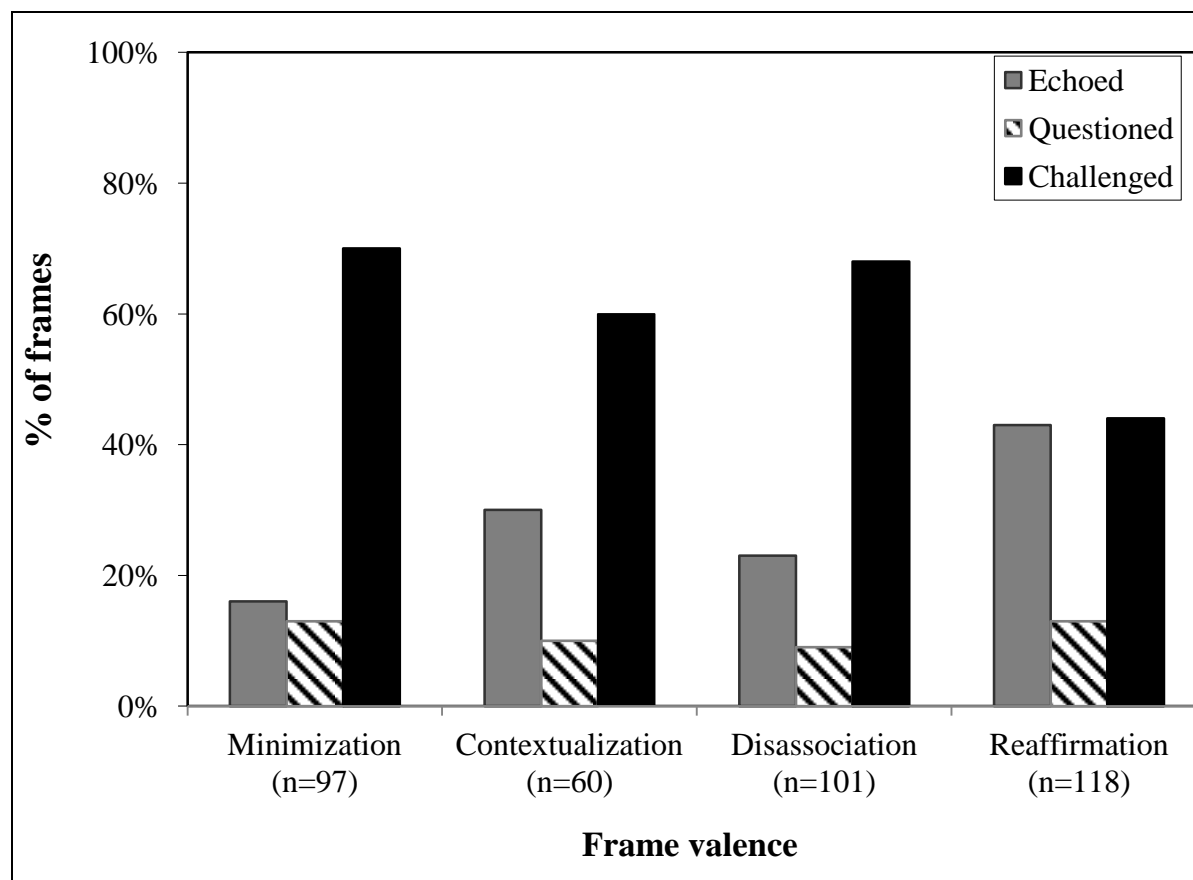
were echoed, questioned or challenged by officials from both parties. As the figure illustrates, Democrats offered significant contestation of the White House and U.S. military frames, challenging them fully 60% of the time and questioning them another 11%. Not surprisingly, Republicans only contested these frames 10% of the time and questioned them another 12%. Such differences in the discourse among Congressional Democrats and Republicans in response to My Lai suggests that partisan and electoral motivations were at work.



**Figure 3.3.** Valence of frames within Congressional statements, by party

Next, I examined each of the four frames to assess the valence in Congressional Democrats' statements: I expected that they would contest each of the four frames, but that they would challenge minimization a bit more vigorously than the others (H3). Figure 3.4 shows that across the board there was considerable contestation of each frame by Congressional Democrats. Democrats challenged the minimization frame 70% of the time, and questioned it another 13%.

Notably, this was the most contested frame among Congressional Democrats. Contextualization was challenged by Democrats 60% of the time and questioned another 10%. Disassociation was challenged 68% of the time and questioned another 9%. Finally, reaffirmation was challenged by Democrats 41% of the time, with questioning occurring in another 21%. Further, contestation of these frames was particularly pronounced among the Democratic leadership—Minority Leader, Minority Whip—and those Democratic members serving on committees charged with exercising oversight on military issues—the Armed Services and Foreign Policy Committees in both chambers. These officials (these numbers are not broken out in the figure) challenged minimization in 76% of communications and questioned it another 14%; they offered challenges to contextualization in 71% of communications and questioned it another 14%; they challenged disassociation in 71% of these communications and questioned in another 15%; and they challenged reaffirmation 51% of the time and questioned it in another 11%. Thus, each of the four frames—especially the minimization frame—was regularly contested by Congressional Democrats, and this was particularly the case in the communications by those Democrats with the strongest voice on issues involving foreign policy and national security.



**Figure 3.4.** Valence of frames in statements by Congressional Democrats

Some notable examples of contestation by Congressional Democrats of the White House and U.S. military frames merit highlighting. Minimization, for example, was challenged on November 24, 1969 when Ohio Senator Stephen Young (1969), a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, stated: “[T]he reported massacre of approximately 567 civilians—children, women, and old men—by Americans at Mylai in South Vietnam is so shocking as to be almost beyond belief. Nevertheless, *there is convincing evidence that this deliberate, methodical atrocity by GI’s under orders from their superiors did actually occur.*” Likewise, speaking about the administration’s efforts to pin the blame on Lieutenant William Calley for My Lai, Congressman Roy Taylor (1970) of North Carolina said on January 21, 1970: “[O]ne man... cannot cause such destruction. *Lieutenants do not make military policy.*” Furthermore,

Congressman Ronald Dellums (1971) of California offered the following on March 1, 1971: “the Military Establishment acts as if war crimes are minute aberrations, the deranged acts of men temporarily enraged by the horrors of combat...But *there have been far too many instances of premeditated atrocities for this excuse to be accepted anymore.*” Finally, Alabama Congressman George Andrews (1971) stated in a speech on March 30, 1971: “*Lieutenant Calley was carrying out an assigned search-and-destroy mission which was official policy of the Army at that time from the Pentagon on down. It is asinine to assess criminal responsibility on lieutenant for carrying out an order...which originated at the very top of the chain of command.*” These statements illustrate a concerted effort by Democrats to contest the minimization frame offered by the administration.

The contextualization frame was also sharply contested in the months after the My Lai story broke. For example, Senator Stephen Young (1969b) of Ohio offered this on December 12, 1969: “In the entire village *there was no resistance. Only three weapons were found* in the entire area...It remains *murder in cold blood.*” Similarly, New York Congressman Samuel Stratton (1971), a member of the House Armed Services Committee—and a member of the special House subcommittee charged with investigating My Lai—emphasized the following on April 5, 1971: “[W]hat happened at Mylai was that a substantial group of *unarmed, unresisting men, women, and children, people already under military custody, were deliberately put to death.*” A day later, Congressman Morris Udall (1971) of Arizona, stated: “Perhaps 2,000,000 Americans have served in Vietnam, *many of them under pressures and dangers...as far as we know know none of them lined up dozens of defenseless babies, women and children for slaughter.*” Finally, speaking about the Vietnamese civilians who were killed at My Lai, New York Congressman William Fitz Ryan (1971) emphasized on April 6, 1971 that “*not even a single shot was fired by them, or by*

*anyone... Yet the civilians were killed.*” Such statements challenge the line offered by the White House and U.S. military that the U.S. soldiers involved in the massacre committed these acts because they were confused, stressed or threatened in some material way.

Contestation of the disassociation frame was also evident. On November 26, 1969, speaking about the administration’s response in the aftermath of the My Lai story, Congressman Allard Lowenstein (1969) of New York stated: “[F]acts pile up, and as they pile so does the cacophony—a defensive ugly jumble of wrong noises and wrong silences, of *buck-passing and minimizing, of impugning those who are reporting the facts and finding justifications for ‘no comments’ that suggest a discreet condonation more than a wordless grief.*” Commenting on what he perceived to be the efforts of the military to “scapegoat” Lieutenant Calley for My Lai, Tennessee Congressman William Anderson (1971) stated on March 24, 1971: “I ask Secretary Resor if he is willing to shake the faith in the system of military justice for all who serve under it for the sake of *scapegoating one man for the Mylai incident?*” In a similar statement on March 30, 1971, Congressman Jack Thomas Brinkley (1971) of Georgia said the following: “Lieutenant Calley is a *scapegoat; a victim of a monumental witch hunt.*” Finally, California Congressman Ronald Dellums (1971b) offered this on March 30, 1971: “I just do not believe that Lieutenant Calley... can bear the sole responsibility for what happened in that small hamlet that day. Yet, *if we leave it to the Military Establishment to render ‘justice,’ I am sure that every time the Calleys, the Hendersons, the Medinas will be found ‘guilty’—without any mention of complicity or responsibility at higher military and civilian command leadership positions.*” Thus, Congressional Democrats strongly contested the disassociation frame.

Finally, Democrats challenged the reaffirmation frame as well, albeit less than those offered for the three other frames. Congressman Bertram Podell (1969) of New York, for example, offered this scathing critique of American values on December 1, 1969:

How, then, can we bellow about our nation fighting in Vietnam in defense of moral principles, especially the right of self-determination, when the latest case heaves national morality in our teeth? It is like a person who has murdered his parents asking for the court's mercy on the grounds that he is an orphan. If we countenance such atrocities, how can we pose as defenders of morality?

Furthermore, lamenting the loss of moral authority by the United States due to My Lai, Alaska Senator Mike Gravel (1970) stated on December 15, 1970: "We say, 'It hurts to have our men as prisoners there. Will you please release them because it is the humane thing to do?' And it is. They could then come back and say, '*How humane are you when you napalm our children? How humane were you at My Lai? How humane were you when you dropped bombs all over our country?*'" Finally, New York Congresswoman Bella Abzug (1971) offered this on April 6, 1971:

*Killing civilians is U.S. policy in Indochina. It is also policy to have saturation bombings, to designate huge areas of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia as free-fire zones in which anything that is seen moving may be shot or machinegunned or napalmed. . . We know that horrors are committed in all wars, but there is one thing that is different about this war. This time it is our own soldiers who are talking about and confessing to these crimes.*

These statements indicate that Congressional Democrats were indeed willing to challenge the reaffirmation frames offered by the White House and U.S. military.

As predicted, then, Democrats challenged the Nixon administration and U.S. military's message in the aftermath of the My Lai incident—and they did so widely. At the same time, these challenges occurred most vigorously with the minimization frame, which was most clearly connected to partisan and electoral matters and *least* clearly tied to national identity. In addition, such contestation was least vigorous with the reaffirmation frame, reflecting its cultural resonance and the fact that Democrats may have been reluctant to challenge given the potential

patriotic backlash that it might trigger. Overall, then, these results support my second and third hypotheses that Congressional Democrats would, in general, contest the minimization, contextualization, disassociation and reaffirmation frames offered by the administration, but that they would be most willing to contest the minimization frame.

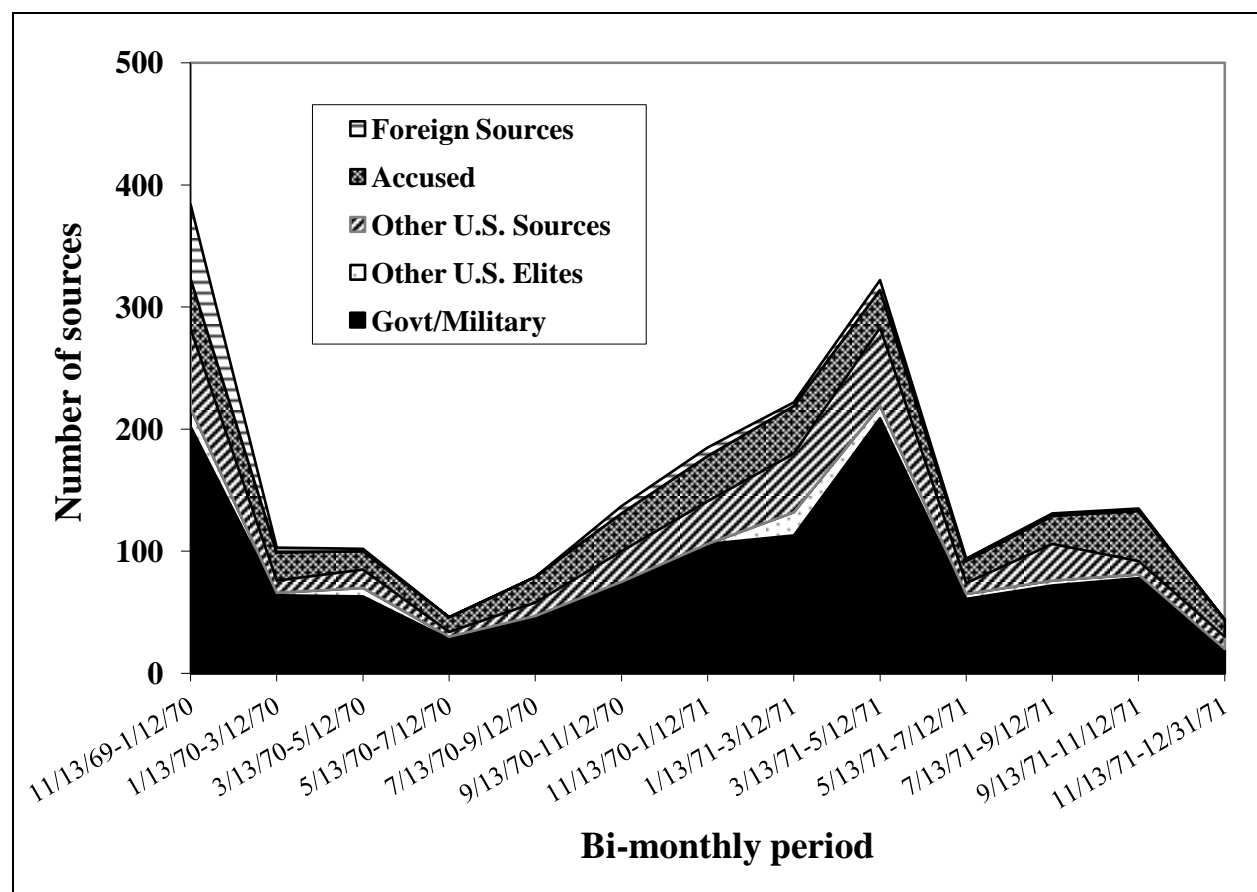
### National Identity Frames in News Coverage

In this section, I present data on whether news coverage of the My Lai incident reflected the range of discourse offered by White House, military and Congressional officials. Results in this section are presented in two stages. I begin by discussing the types of sources journalists included in news coverage of My Lai to assess which voices were most prevalent in shaping news about the incident. I then offer aggregate data on usage and valence of the minimization, contextualization, disassociation and reaffirmation frames in news coverage to determine the extent to which these frames were echoed, questioned or challenged within the press.

#### *News Sourcing*

I first assessed the sources that the *New York Times*, CBS News and *Time* most relied upon in coverage of My Lai. This was done to determine whose voices among White House, military and Congressional officials were most heard within the press in the aftermath of the scandal, and to assess the extent to which non-governmental sources made it into the news. Overall, I found that 57% of sources in these news outlets were U.S. government or military officials; 3% were other U.S. elites; 17% were other U.S. sources; 17% were members of the accused; and 5% were foreign sources. I then went a step farther, examining whether these proportions changed over time. Perhaps news media relied on government officials early on, but then shifted to include a greater diversity of sources into their coverage, so I wanted to examine

this possibility. Figure 3.5 shows the relative share of sources, bi-monthly, within news coverage. Notably, it demonstrates that, throughout the more than two years of news coverage that I examined, U.S. government and military sources consistently dominated. This occurred even as the total number sources was relatively high—such as, for example, during the first two months after the My Lai story was initially revealed to the public and in the months surrounding the Calley trial in March 1971—and when they dropped off.



**Figure 3.5.** Sources in news coverage of My Lai over time.

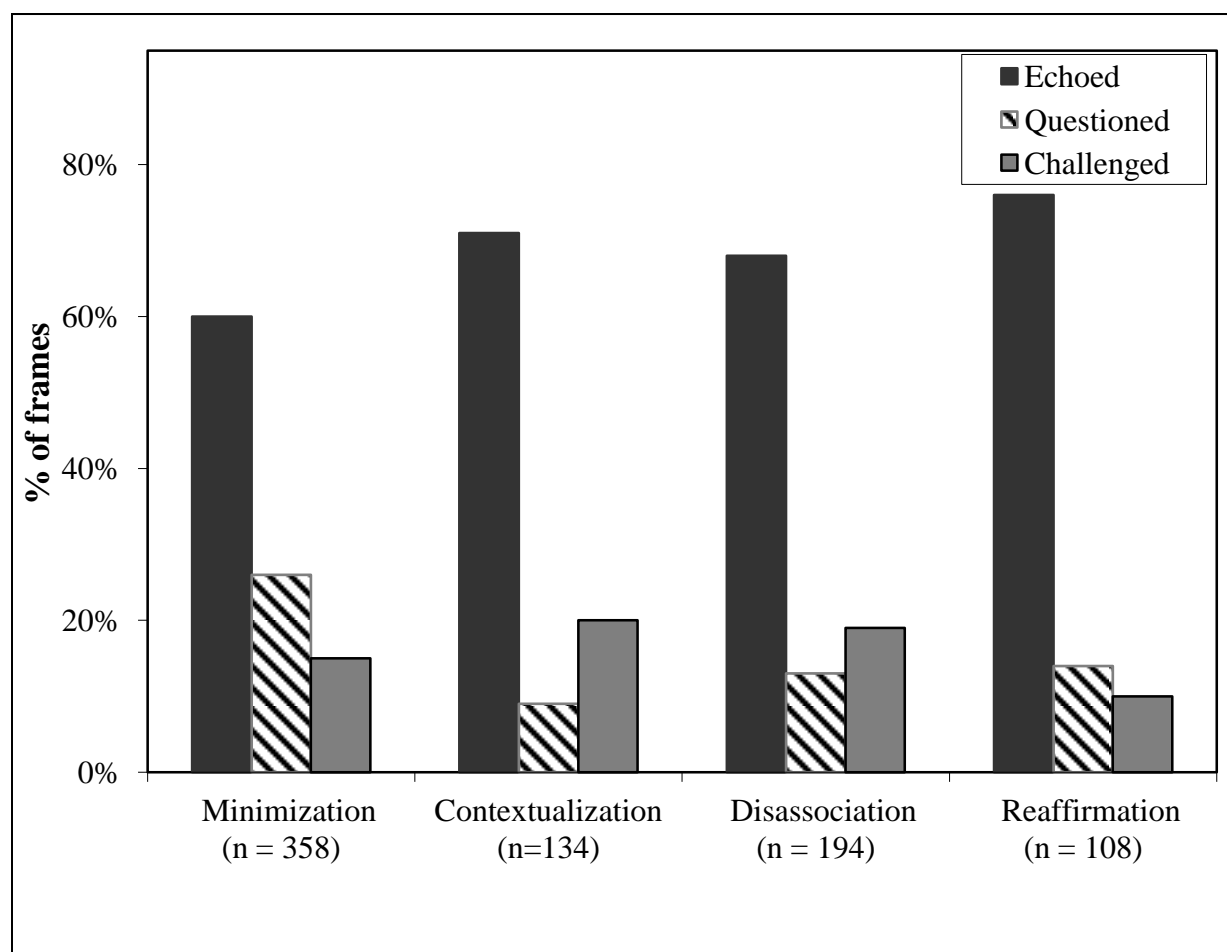
The composition of these sources also is revealing: among U.S. government and military sources, 90% were White House or military officials, whereas *only 5% were Congressional Democrats*. This is all the more remarkable given that Congressional Democrats—both on the floor of Congress and in Congressional hearings—offered explicit and sustained challenges to

the administration frames. Thus, even though political officials from both parties frequently sparred publicly over the extent and severity of the incident, who was responsible and who should be punished, and whether American values should be questioned, this debate was not reflected in the press. This indicates an initial step towards a press echo of White House and military frames. After all, the surest way to echo the administration and military is to give them the widest swath of the platform to speak.

#### *Frame Valence in News Coverage*

Next, I examined valence of the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames in news coverage to determine the extent to which these frames were echoed, questioned, or challenged within the press. My fourth hypothesis was that U.S. news media would largely *echo* rather than *challenge* these frames (H4). In addition, I expected that the minimization frame would receive greater scrutiny in the press than the contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames because it possesses less cultural resonance relative to the other frames *and* it encountered more resistance from Congressional Democrats (H5). Figure 3.7 shows that sources in news coverage about My Lai overwhelmingly echoed the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames offered by White House and military officials. Notably, minimization frames were positively echoed 60% of the time; contextualization frames were positively echoed 71%; disassociation frames were positively echoed 68% of the time; and reaffirmation frames were positively echoed 76% of the time. Thus, across all news content examined, I found a largely uncritical repetition of the national identity frames offered by the White House and military in response to the My Lai incident. Moreover, minimization received the most scrutiny, suggesting that the challenges offered by Congressional Democrats may have reduced the cascade of the minimization frame.

Likewise, the reaffirmation frame received the least amount of resistance among Congressional Democrats, and this was reflected in the valence of this frame in press coverage.



**Figure 3.6.** Valence of frames within My Lai news coverage

Together, the patterns of sourcing and the valence of coverage show that the press selectively echoed the White House and U.S. military on My Lai, largely excluding Congressional Democrats and consistently disseminating and agreeing with the identity-protective frames employed by the administration. Furthermore, minimization—the least culturally resonant of the frames—received the most scrutiny within the press, while reaffirmation—the most culturally resonant of the frames—encountered the least resistance in the press. These results are consistent with my expectations. Ultimately, through source selection

and a deferential posture on frames and valence, the U.S. press played an important role in not just transmitting, but also amplifying, a view of the world that protected the nation's self-image *and* its Republican president.

### Discussion

This chapter presented the results of my analysis of White House, military, Congressional messages following public disclosure of the My Lai Massacre. Evidence presented here shows that despite challenges from Congressional Democrats, the national identity frames employed by the Nixon administration and U.S. military in the aftermath of My Lai were largely amplified in the U.S. press. Specifically, the data demonstrate that the administration constructed and communicated four types of national identity-protective frames—minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation—to limit the political fallout caused by the incident. These frames were designed to protect and restore America's self-image in light of the potential shame, humiliation, and angst felt by many Americans in the wake of the incident. Notably, emphasis on these frames was particularly pronounced during the first two weeks after the story first broke, enabling the administration to set the initial parameters of debate regarding the character, causes, and consequences of the scandal.

In addition, data indicate that Congressional Democrats challenged the White House framing of the scandal, consistently contesting the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames throughout the months after the story was first publically revealed. In particular, Congressional contestation of the minimization frame was especially strong due to its ripeness for potential partisan and electoral gains. This occurred, I argue, because the minimization frame was the least culturally resonant of the four frames; it did not directly refer to America or Americans, and instead focused exclusively on the scope of the

incidents themselves. By challenging the minimization frame, Democrats could pin at least some of the blame for My Lai—and the broader flawed war effort—on the Nixon administration.

Contextualization, disassociation and, to a lesser extent, reaffirmation were also challenged by Congressional Democrats, but it is important to note that Democrats were reluctant to contest the “fog of war,” “un-American” and “positive American values” elements within these messages. Democrats were more likely to embrace—rather than contest—the “fog of war” sub-frame, I argue, because it provided yet another reason to end the war—a position held by many Democrats by 1970. After all, if My Lai was caused by the difficult conditions in which well-intentioned and well-trained American soldiers were operating, it would give further credence to the idea that the United States should leave Vietnam. In addition, the cultural resonance of the “Un-American” and “positive American values” sub-frames made them particularly difficult to challenge—given that contesting them well might have produced a patriotic backlash from Americans. Had Democrats chosen to challenge these frames, they would have been directly challenging American history and values—and even America itself—a politically unwise thing to do. Ultimately, then, the evidence demonstrates that there was considerable frame contestation among U.S. mainstream political leaders in response to My Lai—and that there were significant cultural currents at play in this discourse.

Importantly, however, press coverage did not reflect this range of viewpoints between the administration and Congress. Instead, my analysis found that the *New York Times*, *Time*, and CBS News overwhelmingly relied upon administration sources in news coverage, providing the administration with a broad platform from which to shape the discourse surrounding My Lai. In essence, the White House’s position atop the framing hierarchy and the cultural resonance of the frames they constructed gave them the power to set frames that cascaded past Congressional

challenges, into the press, and, eventually, to the public. That these national identity-protective frames dominated U.S. news coverage about My Lai has important implications. What might have been a moment for critical examination and self-reflection by the American press of the nature of the U.S.'s foreign policy and its use of controversial military tactics became, instead, a moment of deference to the White House in which journalists were reluctant to aggressively explore the broader causes and consequences of the failed U.S. war effort in Vietnam.

## CHAPTER 4

### The Abu Ghraib Prison Scandal

Throughout 2003 and part of 2004, the U.S. military and CIA engaged in the inhumane treatment of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. The prisoners were threatened with dogs, subjected to mock electrocution, forced to simulate sexual acts, sodomized, raped and severely beaten by U.S. military and CIA personnel (Danner, 2004; Hersh, 2004; Mapes & Roberson, 2004). There were reports of at least two homicides at the prison, including the death of Manadel al-Jamadi who suffocated after he had his wrists bound behind his neck and he was hanged from a barred window during interrogation (Hettena, 2005; McKelvey, 2008; Shamsi & Perlstein, 2006). Because Abu Ghraib prison was known as Saddam's notorious torture chambers, these incidents carried a symbolism. Moreover, given that part of the rationale provided by the Bush administration for the Iraq war was to eliminate human rights atrocities, public exposure of these incidents had the potential both to threaten the U.S.-led war effort in Iraq and to severely damage America's image both at home and abroad. For several months, however, the U.S. public remained in the dark about these incidents.

The incidents at Abu Ghraib were first reported to officials on January 13, 2004 when Specialist Joseph Darby provided a collection of horrific images from the prison to the Army's Criminal Investigation Command (CID) (McCoy, 2006). Darby had not been involved in the interrogation of Iraqi prisoners and he had only become aware of the problem when he stumbled upon the graphic images while searching for photos to send back home from compact disks maintained at the prison (Salon, 2004). One day after Darby submitted the photos, CID launched an investigation. The scope of the investigation focused entirely on the involvement of low-level officials and the results of the probe were not presented to the press and American public. Darby

had intended to keep the photos out of the press because of his desire to see the problem handled internally by the U.S. military. Weeks after the graphic images were given to CID, however, the photos were leaked to the press.

In spring 2004, the images and stories from Abu Ghraib began to emerge in U.S. news media depicting the brutal treatment at the prison. On April 28, CBS News program “60 Minutes II” released photographs showing U.S. military beating and humiliating Iraqi prisoners (Mapes & Roberson, 2004). Notably, this story had been delayed for two weeks due to pressure from the Bush administration not to release the photos. Two days later, Seymour Hersh (2004) published an article in *The New Yorker* attributing blame to the policies of the Bush administration and higher-ups in the U.S. military. The photos and Hersh’s accusations put the White House and U.S. military in a precarious position: Americans wondered if what had taken place constituted torture, who should be blamed, and whether the actions at Abu Ghraib extended to other U.S. prisons in Iraq, Afghanistan, Cuba, and elsewhere (Danner, 2004; McKelvey, 2008). Ultimately, 11 lower-level soldiers were convicted of various charges, with three sentenced to more than one year in prison. None were convicted of murdering detainees. Moreover, no superior military officers or political officials were charged with having played a role in the scandal. In the aftermath, author Christopher Hitchens (2004) called the Abu Ghraib scandal a “moral Chernobyl,” suggesting that it would have devastating consequences for America’s image and influence in the world for many years to come. And in the words of historian Alfred McCoy (2006, p. 202): “the pervasiveness of those images from the military prisons [at Abu Ghraib], indelibly imprinted in Arab consciousness, has subtly subverted American democracy and has damaged the nation’s moral leadership.”

This scandal possesses some important similarities to My Lai. Like My Lai, Abu Ghraib served to potentially engender a sense of collective shame and humiliation among Americans because it involved revelations of U.S. soldiers—due, at least in part, to policies put in place by the U.S. government—brutalizing foreign civilians in some of the worst ways imaginable. In this sense, each of these incidents represented a profound *internal* threat to the image and reputation of the nation. Furthermore, like My Lai, Abu Ghraib occurred at the height of a major U.S.-led war effort and could potentially be linked to the policies of a president. Given these similar dynamics, I employed the same methodology here to examine the Abu Ghraib case as I did in the previous chapter on My Lai. I systematically examined White House, military, Congressional, and news messages in the aftermath of Abu Ghraib to determine how serious and widespread the actions were conveyed to be, how the circumstances in which the incident occurred were portrayed, how the actors involved in the incident were characterized, and whether America's core values were questioned. Consistent with the previous chapter, I sought to determine the types of nation-protective frames offered by the Bush administration and U.S. military in response to Abu Ghraib, the degree to which these frames were contested among Congressional Democrats, and whether this range of elite political discourse was reflected in the press.

### Expectations

In this chapter, I examined five hypotheses. These hypotheses parallel those in the previous chapter on My Lai. First, I expected that Bush administration and U.S. military officials would routinely and broadly emphasize the nation-protective frames of *minimization*, *contextualization*, *disassociation*, and *reaffirmation* in their public communications during the period in which the Abu Ghraib scandal dominated political and news discourse (H1). Because

these frames are likely to resonate with the American public in moments when internal threats to the nation arise, I expected Bush administration and U.S. military officials to consistently employ them in the aftermath of Abu Ghraib. Specifically, officials would likely have perceived it to be strategically beneficial to employ these frames in the midst of the scandal both to limit the impact on President Bush's reelection campaign—which was far along when reports about Abu Ghraib emerged—and to maintain public support for the war.

Second, I expected that Congressional Democrats would employ explicit and sustained challenges to any employment of minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames by the Bush administration and U.S. military in response to Abu Ghraib (H2). Such challenges were likely to occur, I argue, because partisan and electoral pressures would have compelled Congressional opponents to contest the White House's preferred interpretation of Abu Ghraib. Specifically, given that Abu Ghraib was a military scandal, Congressional opponents were able to offer one of the most powerful criticisms any president can face—the accusation that he is incompetent as commander-in-chief. And with the presidential election just months away, Congressional opponents likely would not have passed up the opportunity to link the administration and its policies with the Abu Ghraib scandal.

Third, I expected that Congressional Democrats would challenge the minimization frame more vigorously than the contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames (H3). I expected this because minimization is the least culturally resonant of the frames—challenges to it do not explicitly call into question the broader values and identity of the nation. Challenges to minimization, therefore, carry the least political risk for Congressional opponents. In contrast, it is harder for oppositional actors to argue against a contextualization frame that emphasizes the extraordinary pressures or threats that U.S. soldiers face in war, a disassociation frame that

characterizes the perpetrators as un-American and worthy of punishment, or a reaffirmation frame that highlights positive American values, ideals and behaviors. Such critiques could lead to negative partisan and electoral consequences for officials who dare to offer them. In essence, the frame of minimization is less overtly tied to American identity and thus more open to contestation from Congressional opponents than the other three frames.

Fourth, I expected that U.S. news media would largely *echo* rather than *challenge* the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames offered by the Bush administration and U.S. military (H4). The cascading activation framework that guides this dissertation suggests even if there is considerable frame contestation among Congressional officials, this may not be paralleled in the press if the frames introduced by the White House and military officials are culturally resonant. Such frames accrue momentum as they cascade past Congressional opponents and into the press, making it increasingly difficult for journalists to contest. Journalists are compelled for both psychological and economic reasons to embrace culturally resonant frames because such messages tend to align with their own beliefs, identity and expectations as well as those of the publics they attempt to serve. In this sense, the diminishing returns of the cascade combined with cultural resonances would likely give the White House and military the upper hand in shaping news coverage about Abu Ghraib.

Finally, I expected that the minimization frame would receive greater scrutiny in the press than the contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames because, as argued, it possesses less cultural resonance relative to the other frames *and* it would have likely encountered more resistance from Congressional Democrats (H5). Specifically, the minimization frame is more politically vulnerable than the others—as noted, it is easier for political opponents to direct their attacks at the administration without implicating the nation. These dynamics are

likely to cascade through to the press as well because it becomes easier for the press to initiate or at least include *some* of this contestation and, therefore, maintain the goal of objectivity, without alienating its audience. Thus, I expect the cultural and political momentum of the minimization frame as it cascades downward to be considerably less powerful relative to the other frames, and therefore more likely to be contested by journalists attuned to cultural and political norms.

For this research, I conducted three content analyses. First, I analyzed White House and military texts, which consisted of speeches, press conferences, interviews, Congressional hearing statements, and press releases about Abu Ghraib from these officials between April 28, 2004 and July 6, 2004. April 28 was the date that the Abu Ghraib photos were released on CBS' "60 Minutes II" and July 6 was the date after which White House communications and news coverage about Abu Ghraib dropped off precipitously (see Bennett et al., 2007; Rowling, Jones & Sheets, 2011). When analyzing these statements, I examined the frequency with which each communicator emphasized *minimization*, *contextualization*, *disassociation*, and *reaffirmation* frames in each text.

Second, during the same dates I analyzed Congressional texts, which consisted of statements by Senate or House members—both Democratic and Republican—on the floor of Congress or in Congressional hearings about the scandal. For these statements, I coded whether the speaker echoed, questioned, or challenged the *minimization*, *contextualization*, *disassociation*, and *reaffirmation* frames put forth by the administration.

Finally, during the same dates I analyzed news coverage of Abu Ghraib in the *New York Times*, CBS News, and *Time* magazine. In particular, I examined every other *New York Times* news story, *New York Times* editorial or opinion piece, CBS News broadcast, and every *Time* news story. When analyzing these texts, I identified each source for statements and coded

whether they echoed, questioned, or challenged the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, reaffirmation frames. Overall, 776 source statements were identified within these texts and subsequently coded for valence.

For my analysis, I began by analyzing promulgation of the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames by the White House and U.S. military following public disclosure of Abu Ghraib. Next, I assessed the extent to which these frames were echoed or contested by members of Congress. Finally, I examined whether U.S. news coverage about Abu Ghraib reflected this range of discourse among political officials. Together, these three elements enabled me to better understand how the Abu Ghraib prison scandal came to be framed within American public discourse and, more broadly, to gain insight into the importance of cultural resonance and frame contestation in explaining why certain messages are more likely to move through the public arena's framing hierarchy when internal threats to the nation arise. I close this chapter with a brief discussion of the My Lai and Abu Ghraib cases, specifying some of the key similarities and differences between them and elaborating on what these cases together can tell us about the framing process.

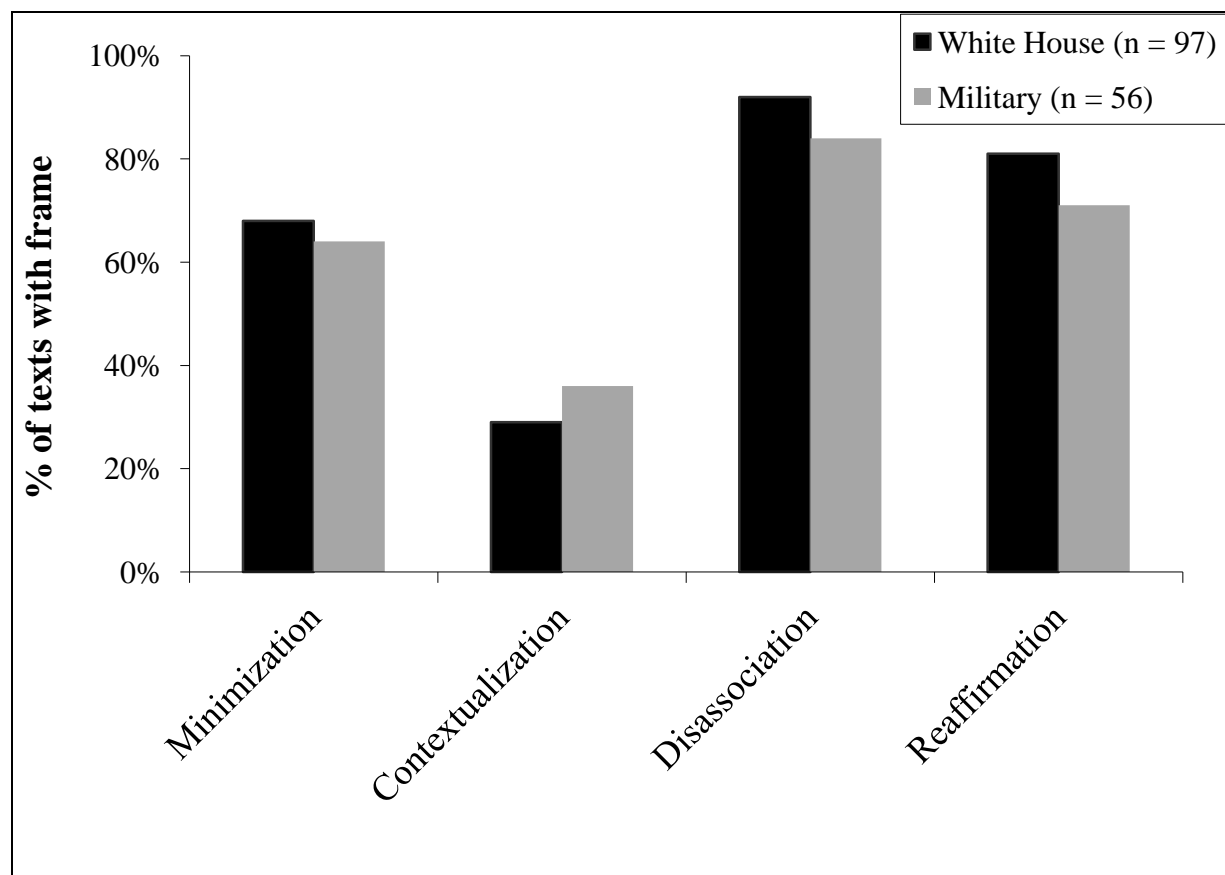
#### National Identity Frames in White House and Military Communications

In this section, I begin by presenting aggregate data of White House and U.S. military emphasis of the national identity frames across their public communications. For Abu Ghraib there were three times as many statements among these officials than for My Lai. This allowed me to more clearly identify patterns in this discourse and more confidently assess the extent to which these officials strategically employed the frames. Next, I offer several examples in which each of the national identity frames was employed within White House or military statements. I

close this section with an examination of White House and U.S. military emphasis of each of the national identity frames over time. Again, given the volume of White House and U.S. military statements in this case, I was able to assess in detail whether articulation of these frames was sustained throughout the period in which the scandal dominated political and news discourse.

#### *White House and U.S. Military Communications*

My first hypothesis was that a breadth of White House and military officials would *consistently* emphasize minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation in response to Abu Ghraib (H1). With this in mind, I analyzed the extent to which each frame was present in White House and U.S. military communications and the frequency with which each frame was communicated per text. Figure 4.1 shows that in six of eight instances, the frames were present in at least two-thirds of White House and U.S. military communications. Only the contextualization frame was emphasized less frequently; nonetheless, it still was employed with some regularity, appearing in 29% of White House and 36% of U.S. military public communications. Notably, there was virtually no difference in the articulation of the four frames across these two sets of sources. In addition, at least one of the four frames appeared in 96% of White House and military texts—and 21% of the texts contained all four of these frames—further illustrating consistency of message across these communications. Overall, then, these data provide strong support for my first hypothesis.



**Figure 4.1.** Frame usage within White House and military statements

To further illuminate the manner and extent to which each of these frames was articulated by White House and U.S. officials in the aftermath of Abu Ghraib, some notable examples can be highlighted. Minimization—downplaying the severity and scope of ingroup transgressions—was emphasized often. On April 30, 2004—the day the Abu Ghraib story was first revealed to the American public—Brigadier General Mark Kimmit (2004a) declared during a press briefing: “[T]his is a very small minority of the hundreds and hundreds of guards that we have operating in Abu Ghraib prison... Am I going to apologize for those soldiers? Hell, no... I’ve got 150,000 other American soldiers who feel as appalled and disappointed as I do at the actions of these few.” One week later, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz (2004) offered this during a television interview: “[T]his kind of behavior is *absolutely not the norm for American men and*

*women in uniform...* it's such a disservice to everyone else that *a few bad apples* can create some large problems for everybody.”

That same day, during a press briefing, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld (2004a) asserted that Abu Ghraib was an “*exceptional, isolated case.*” Likewise, on May 10, 2004, during an interview on National Public Radio, Secretary of State Colin Powell (2004a) stated: “What we saw at Abu Ghraib...looks like a *single, isolated set of events at that particular facility.*” The next day, Vice President Dick Cheney (2004) emphasized: “It’s absolutely essential that the American people understand, and our men and women in uniform understand that *these are acts of a handful of individuals.*” Likewise, during a press briefing on May 26, 2004 in which a reporter asked White House Press Secretary Scott McClellan a question about the causes of “so many abuses” committed by U.S. soldiers in Iraq and elsewhere, McClellan (2004b) responded: “*Well, I don’t know, when you say ‘so many,’ what exactly you’re referring to....there were a small number of individuals involved in those incidents we saw in these appalling photos.*” Finally, at a Pentagon press conference on May 26, 2004 a reporter asked whether allegations that nearly 40 cases of abuse had occurred across U.S. military prisons in Iraq and Afghanistan meant that the problem was systemic. In reply, Pentagon official Lawrence Da Rita (2004) said: “There’s probably 300,000 soldiers that have served in Afghanistan and Iraq over the last two years. So let’s stipulate to your premise that there’s 37 people involved. What does that come out to? I don't know, but...*it doesn’t describe something systematic.*” Together, these statements suggest a concerted effort by the administration to minimize the scandal by pinning blame on a handful of low-level soldiers and presenting the incident as isolated.

Contextualization, which involves framing the deviant behavior as situational—caused by stress, confusion, peer pressure or external provocation—and, therefore, not reflective of the values of the group members who committed the acts, was also emphasized by White House and U.S. military officials, but to a lesser degree than the other frames. This is likely due to the fact that the scandal did not occur in the heat of battle; thus, the “fog of war” explanation became more difficult to tie to the incidents. Nonetheless, contextualization still appeared somewhat regularly across these communications. On May 4, 2004, for example, Secretary of State Colin Powell (2004b) asserted during an interview on CNN’s “Larry King Live”: “[I]n war these sorts of horrible things happen every now and again.” A week later, during testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Lieutenant General Keith Alexander highlighted the chaotic circumstances and security concerns faced by U.S. soldiers operating at Abu Ghraib, emphasizing that the soldiers were “*receiving artillery or mortar fire, people [were] getting shot, the facility [was] not being policed.*” Furthermore, during Congressional testimony on May 19, 2004, Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez (2004), who was commander of coalition forces in Iraq at the time, emphasized the high level of stress, confusion and pressure to produce intelligence for those operating at the prison:

*I would like to make sure that the committee understands, we did have detention center problems. They were overcrowded. We didn't have the M.P.s in the right place. We were moving into facilities that had been destroyed or damaged by the war. We had an intelligence problem, in that the tactical units were not getting feedback from the detainees that moved into the detention centers.*

In addition, other officials highlighted the strategic value and threat posed by the detainees at Abu Ghraib. For example, on May 5, 2004 during a press briefing, Brigadier General Mark Kimmit (2004b) offered this in response to a question from an Arab journalist about Abu Ghraib:

You sort of give the impression that somehow Abu Ghraib is a place for us to just grab people off the street who are innocently walking up and down, window shopping. I think the *security situation in this country would demonstrate otherwise...The number of civilians killed by roadside bombs, by car bombs and by other targeted assassinations is significant. These are the people that we have inside Abu Ghraib...They present an imperative threat to this nation. They are an imperative threat to you, your families, your fellow citizens.*

Three weeks later, during a press briefing in Baghdad, Iraq, Kimmit (2004c) repeated—almost verbatim—these same claims:

*Persons are held at Abu Ghraib because they are determined to be security threats, imminent threats here in country. If it is determined that they are an imminent threat to the security of this nation, then we have not only the authority, but the obligation to detain them, to keep them off the streets, to ensure that they're not out killing their fellow Iraqis, to make sure they're not out there building bombs...If they were innocent, they wouldn't be at Abu Ghraib.*

Overall, then, such statements suggest an effort by the White House and U.S. military to contextualize the incidents at Abu Ghraib by emphasizing the difficult pressures faced by the U.S. soldiers operating at the prison as well as security threat posed by these prisoners.

Disassociation—emphasizing that the alleged transgressors should be punished or removed from the group—was also promulgated in a number of statements. For example, during an interview with *Al Arabiya News* on May 3, 2004, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice (2004) emphasized: “[T]he President is determined to get to the bottom of it, to know who is responsible and to *make sure that whoever is responsible is punished for it and held accountable...Americans do not do this to other people...we will get to the bottom of it. And those who are responsible will be punished.*” Similarly, White House Press Secretary Scott McClellan (2004c) stated during a press briefing on May 6, 2004: “The President’s focus is on getting to the bottom of these allegations of prisoner abuse, and *making sure that strong steps are taken to punish people and hold people accountable.*” The next day, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld (2004b) declared during testimony before the Senate Armed Services

Committee: “It’s my obligation to evaluate what happened, to *make sure that those who have committed wrong-doing are brought to justice...it was inconsistent with the values of our nation. It was inconsistent with the teachings of the military, to the men and women of the armed forces. And it was certainly fundamentally un-American.*”

At that same Congressional hearing, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army General Peter Schoomaker (2004) asserted: “These are conscious actions that are *contrary to all that we stand for. This is not a training issue, but one of character and values...Our Army has already taken corrective actions.*” Likewise, Lieutenant General Keith Alexander (2004) stated in Congressional testimony on May 11, 2004: “Those soldiers who mistreated or humiliated detainees will be *brought to justice swiftly. Again, the Army does not condone or tolerate such behavior.*” Finally, on May 13, 2004, during a highly publicized town hall meeting with U.S. troops at Abu Ghraib prison, Rumsfeld (2004c) proclaimed: “[I]t [the incidents at Abu Ghraib] *doesn’t represent America. It doesn’t represent American values. It doesn’t represent the values of you, each of you here in this room. I know that, you know that, your families know that. The people who are engaged in abuses will be brought to justice.*” Thus, these statements illustrate how the White House and military sought to disassociate the nation—and themselves—from those alleged to have committed the crimes at Abu Ghraib by characterizing the deviants as un-American and emphasizing the need to punish them.

Finally, reaffirmation, which involves shifting attention from transgressions to events or aspects of the group that portray it in a more positive manner such as emphasizing idealized group values, attributes and behavior, was articulated often. For example, during a Pentagon press briefing on May 4, 2004, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld (2004a) offered this in response to a question from a reporter about whether the United States’ image had been irreparably

tarnished by the Abu Ghraib scandal: “[O]ur country is our country, and *it is a wonderful country. And the American people are wonderful people, and our armed forces are wonderful people.* And when one drops a plumb line through the totality of that, is it perfect? No. Are there things like this that happen? Yes. But *over time, the people tend to find their way to fair, reasonable conclusions.*” One day later, during an interview with the Arab news agency, *Alhurra News*, President Bush (2004) stated:

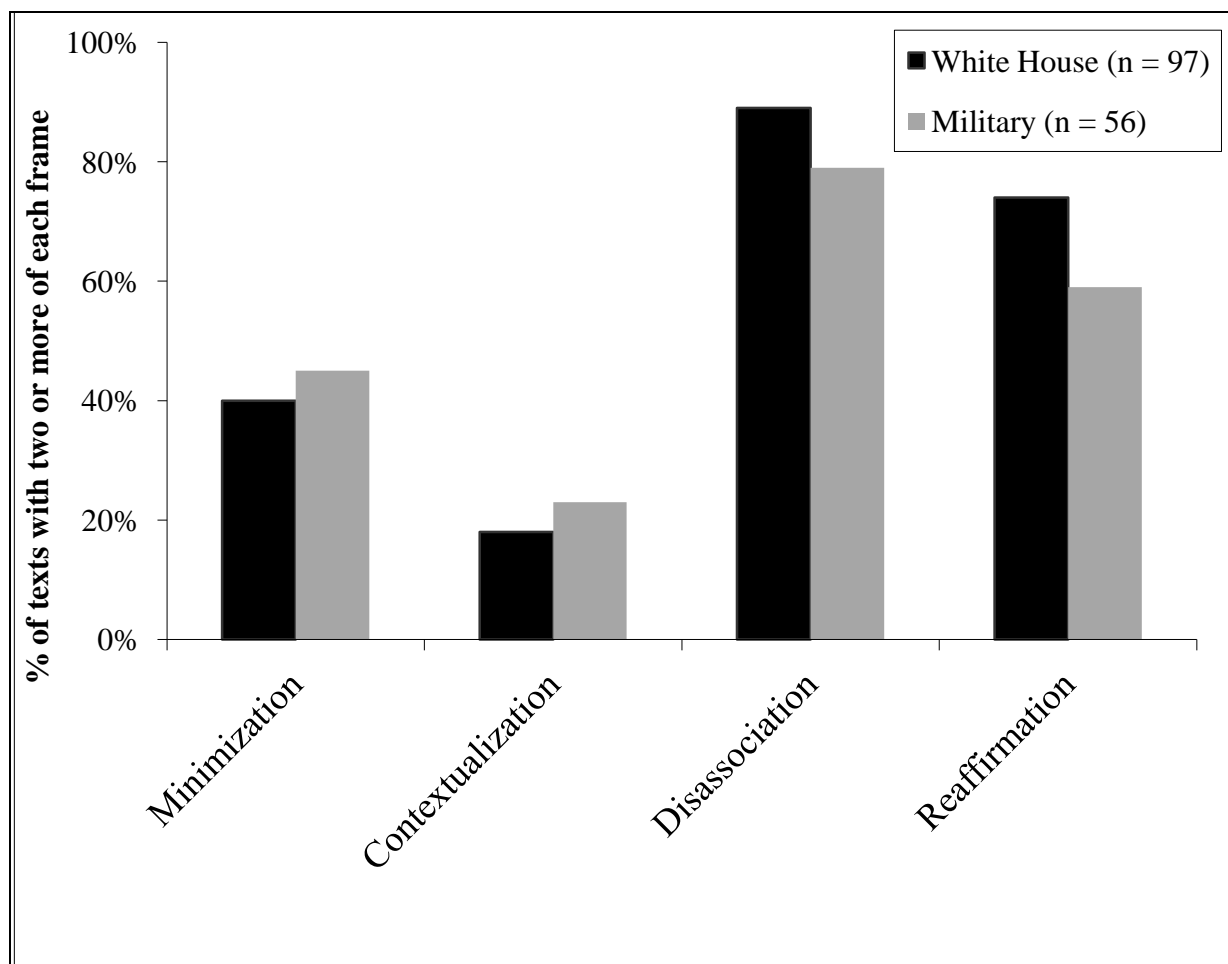
[W]hat took place in that prison does not represent [the] America that I know. *The America I know is a compassionate country that believes in freedom. The America I know cares about every individual. . .it is unpleasant for Americans to see that some citizens, some soldiers have acted this way, because it does—again, I keep repeating, but it’s true—it doesn’t reflect how we think...America is a country of justice and law and freedom and treating people with respect.*

That same day, White House Press Secretary McClellan (2004a) emphasized during a press briefing: “We do not tolerate that kind of activity in America. *America stands for freedom and democracy. America stands for rule of law and justice. America stands for treating all people with dignity and respect.*”

Furthermore, during a speech in Iraq on May 13, 2004, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld (2004c) declared: “*The world will see how a free system, a democratic system functions and operates transparently with no cover-ups with the world seeing the fact that we’re not perfect. And goodness knows, we’re not perfect. But don’t let anyone tell you that America is what’s wrong with this world, because it’s not true.*” Finally, Secretary of State Powell (2004c) stated the following during an interview with Fox News on May 16, 2004: “[K]eep in mind, *tens of thousands of wonderful young American soldiers are doing great work for the Iraqi people. They are helping to rebuild schools and hospitals, and putting in sewage facilities, and acting the way you would expect American soldiers to act, the way we have acted during the course of our history, and so our value system is intact. The United States is a moral nation.*” In essence, the

White House and U.S. military sought to shift attention away from the Abu Ghraib incidents towards positive American values and, thus, limit the scandal.

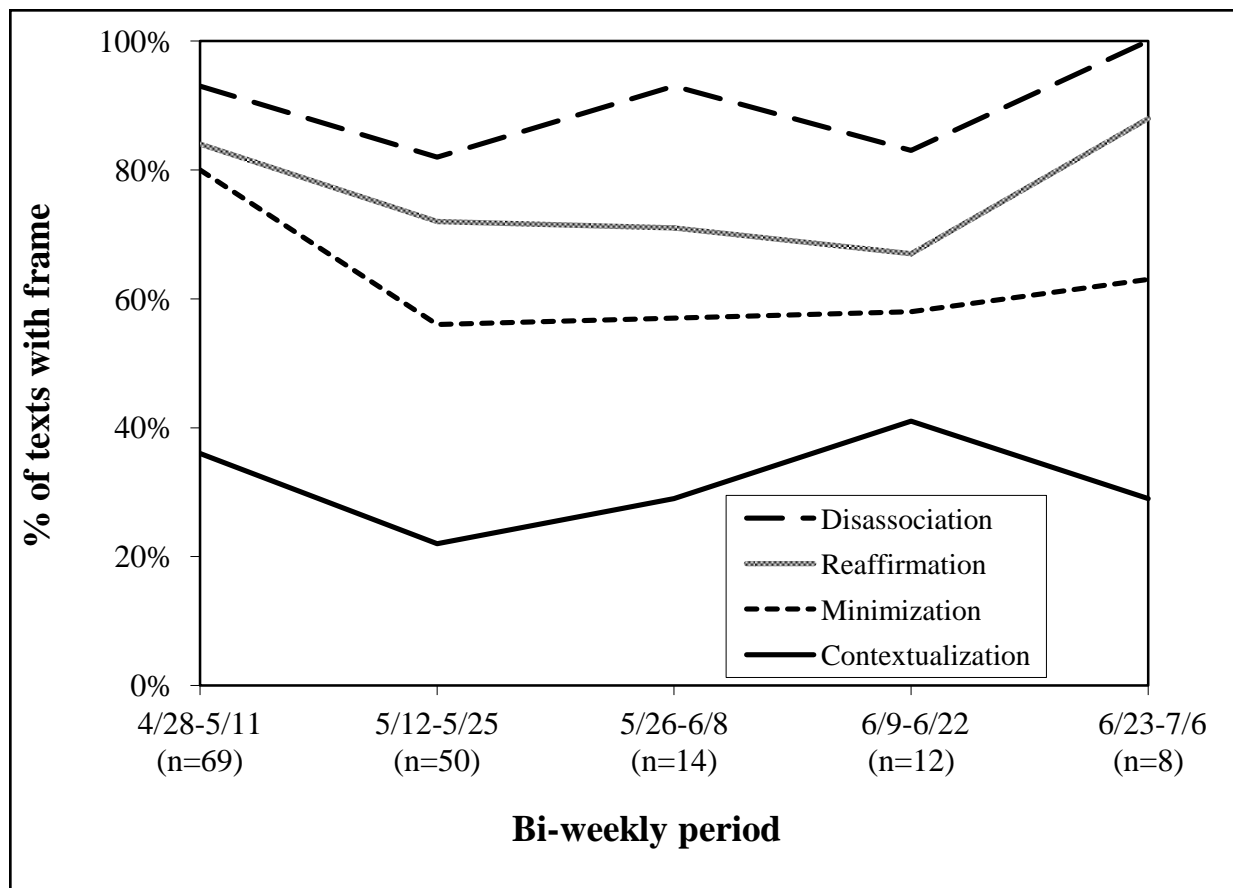
Next, to further assess the breadth and frequency with which these frames were emphasized by White House and U.S. military officials, I looked at the percentage of communications that contained two or more instances of each frame. Frequent articulation of each frame within a given communication provides further indication of the level at which these officials sought to make each frame salient in their public communications about Abu Ghraib. Figure 4.2 shows that the minimization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames were routinely employed within each text by each of the message sources. Contextualization was also frequently emphasized, but to a lesser degree. In six of the eight instances, two or more of each frame was present in at least 40% of White House and U.S. military communications. Again, there was virtually no difference in the articulation of the frames across these two sets of sources. Ultimately, such repeated emphasis on these frames serves to make them more memorable to the public and to journalists and, in turn, shapes how these actors came to understand the character, causes and broader consequences of the scandal.



**Figure 4.2.** Percentage of White House and military statements with two or more of each frame

As a final step, I examined the percentage of White House and U.S. military communications that contained at least one of each of these frames *over time*. This was done to assess whether emphasis of each of these frames was sustained by these officials throughout the ten-week period in which the Abu Ghraib scandal dominated the news. If each frame was routinely emphasized during this time frame, it would lend further credence to the idea that the administration and military engaged in a strategy of minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation. Figure 4.3 indicates that emphasis on minimization, disassociation and reaffirmation by White House and U.S. military officials remained high throughout the ten-week period after the scandal broke, even as the volume of statements

diminished over time. Contextualization was consistently communicated as well, albeit with less frequency. Notably, at no point during the ten weeks did the minimization, disassociation or reaffirmation frames drop below a presence in at least one-half of White House and U.S. military communications. Moreover, these three frames appear to move in the same direction throughout this period of analysis, further suggesting that they were linked as part of a coordinated communication strategy. Together, then, these results suggest that the White House and U.S. military indeed remained on message throughout the duration of public debate about the incident, consistently emphasizing each of the frames—particularly minimization, disassociation and reaffirmation—in response to Abu Ghraib. That emphasis of these four frames was sustained by these officials throughout this time period further suggests a communication strategy on the part of the Bush administration and U.S. military to appeal to and protect the national identity as a way to limit the fallout caused by the scandal.



**Figure 4.3.** Frame usage within White House and military statements, bi-weekly

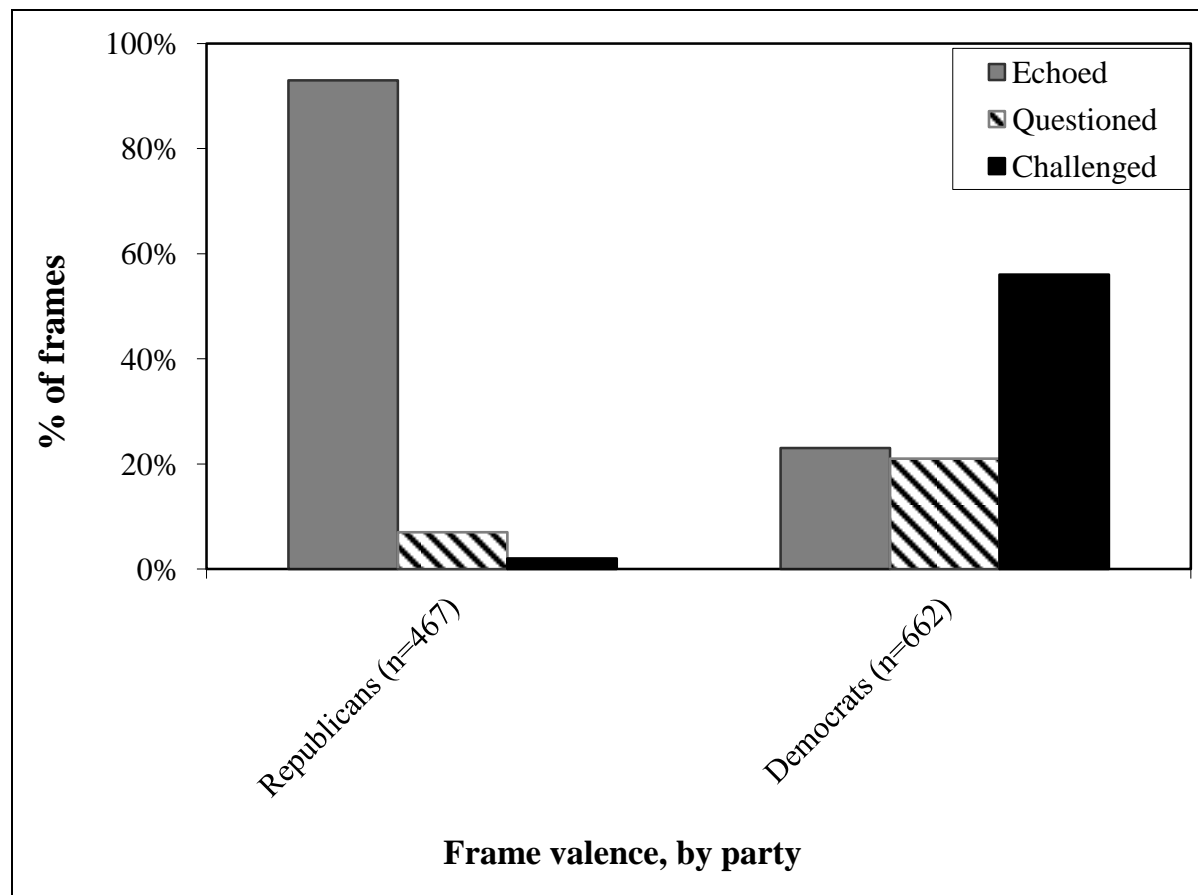
Overall, then, these findings support my first hypothesis that minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames would be employed consistently by a breadth of Bush administration and U.S. military officials over an extended period of time. Notably, these results are consistent with my findings in the previous chapter regarding White House and U.S. military discourse following the My Lai events. Ultimately, such repetition of these frames by the White House and U.S. military is suggestive of a strategic effort by these officials to make the frames highly salient in their public communications about the scandal. Furthermore, such consistent emphasis of these frames over time indicates that these officials sustained the discourse, thereby potentially limiting whether, to what extent, and what kind of contestation might emerge in the broader debate over Abu Ghraib.

## National Identity Frames in Congressional Communications

In this section, I examine how Congressional officials—both Congressional Democrats and Republicans—responded to the Abu Ghraib scandal. I begin by presenting aggregate data on the extent to which Congressional officials from each party *echoed*, *questioned* or *challenged* the White House and military frames of minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation. I then highlight some specific statements by Congressional Democrats to illuminate the degree of frame contestation offered by these officials.

### *Frame Valence in Congressional Communications*

In my second hypothesis, I expected that Congressional Democrats would offer significant challenges to the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames emphasized by the Bush administration and U.S. military in response to Abu Ghraib (H2). With this in mind, I analyzed statements made by both Congressional Democrats and Republicans on the floor of Congress and in Congressional hearings. Figure 4.4 shows the extent to which the minimization, contextualization, disassociation and reaffirmation frames were echoed, questioned or challenged by officials from both parties. Democrats offered consistent contestation of the White House and U.S. military frames, challenging them 56% of the time and questioning them another 21%. Republicans, in contrast, only contested these frames 2% of the time and questioned them another 7%. Such patterns suggest that partisan and electoral motivations were crucial in driving the Congressional discourse about Abu Ghraib.

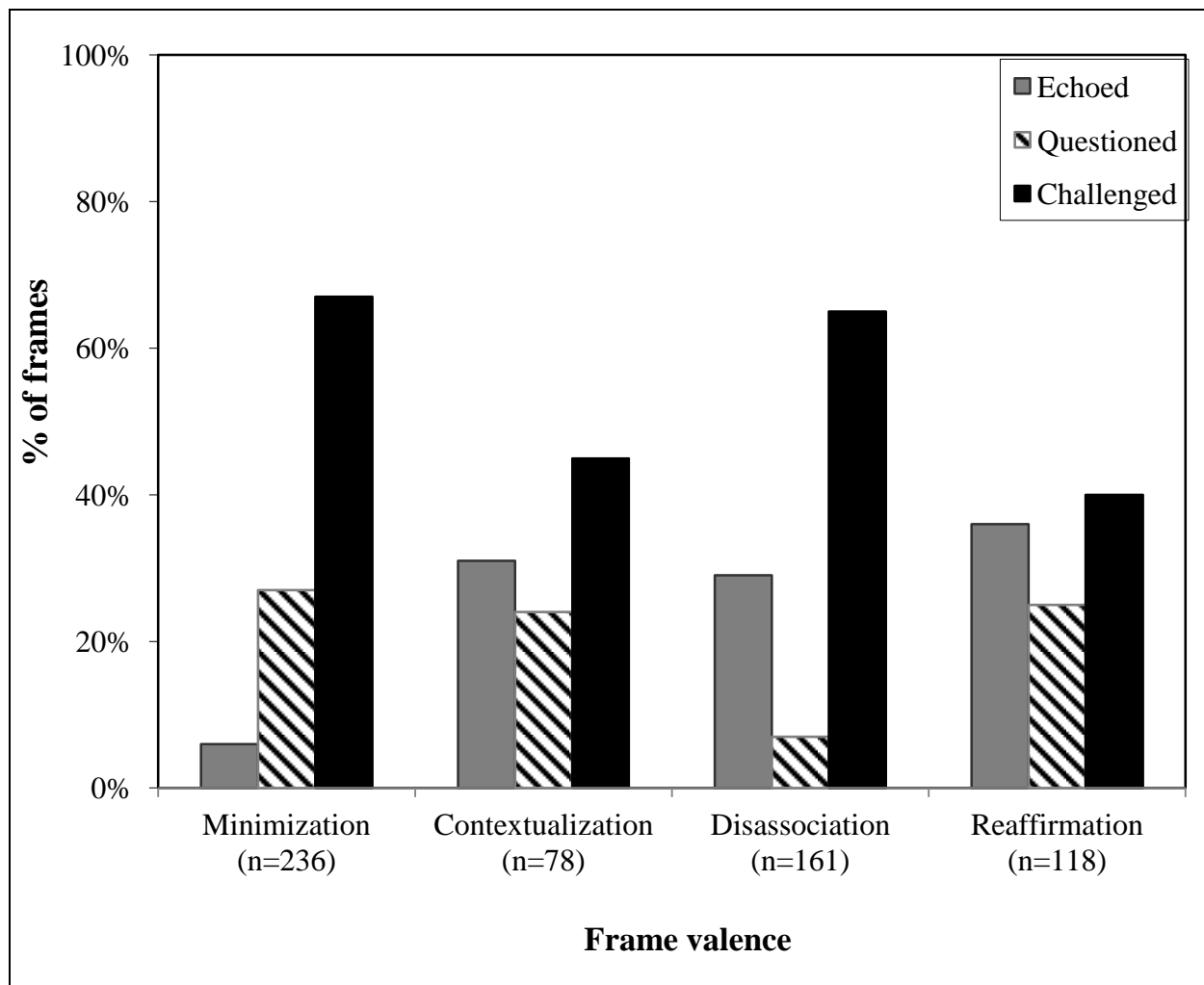


**Figure 4.4.** Valence of frames within Congressional statements, by party

Next, I examined the valence of these frames in Congressional Democrats' statements. I expected that these officials would contest each of the four frames, but that they would challenge minimization more vigorously than the others (H3). Figure 4.5 reveals that, in general, there was considerable contestation of each frame by Congressional Democrats. Democrats challenged the minimization frame 67% of the time, and questioned it another 27%. As predicted, this was the most contested frame among Congressional Democrats. Contextualization was challenged by Democrats 45% of the time and questioned another 24%. Disassociation was challenged 65% of the time and questioned another 7%. Finally, the reaffirmation frame was challenged by Democrats 40% of the time, with questioning occurring in another 25%. Thus, each frame was

either questioned or challenged at least 65% of the time, indicating substantial frame contestation among Congressional Democrats—with the greatest occurring for minimization.

Further, contestation of these frames was slightly stronger among the Democratic leadership—Minority Leader, Minority Whip—and those Democratic members serving on committees responsible for exercising oversight on military issues—the Armed Services and Foreign Policy Committees in both chambers. In particular, these officials (these numbers are not broken out in the figure) challenged minimization 71% of the time and questioned it another 27%; they challenged contextualization 49% of the time and questioned it another 25%; they challenged disassociation in 67% of the time and questioned it another 2%; and they challenged reaffirmation 43% of the time and questioned it another 14%. As predicted, then, Democrats, and especially their leadership, consistently challenged each of the four frames offered by the Bush administration and U.S. military. At the same time, these challenges occurred most vigorously with the minimization frame, which was most clearly connected to partisan and electoral matters and *least* clearly tied to national identity.



**Figure 4.5.** Valence of frames in statements by Congressional Democrats

To illustrate how Congressional Democrats contested the nation-protective frames put forth by the White House and U.S. military, some examples merit mention. Minimization, for example, was challenged in each of the following statements. On May 6, 2004, Congressman Pete Stark (2004) of California stated:

*The torture and abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison are part of a larger systemic pattern of abuse with which this administration has been complicit...prisoners captured in Afghanistan by the U.S. were transferred to other nations to be tortured for information. We are already well acquainted with the mistreatment of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay. This latest expose of torture and abuse at the Iraqi prison is just one more example of heinous treatment at the hands of our Government.*

That same day, Congressman Dennis Kucinich (2004) of Ohio explicitly challenged the “few bad apples” line often emphasized by the administration: “We should demand the resignation of the Secretary of Defense, *since we know that ‘rotten apples’ are the fruit of the poison tree. And it’s the top leadership who have grown that tree.*” Likewise, during a Congressional hearing on May 11, 2004, Senator Carl Levin (2004) of Michigan, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee, stated: “*These acts of abuse were not spontaneous actions of lower ranking enlisted personnel who lacked the proper supervision. These attempts to extract information from prisoners by abusive and degrading methods were clearly planned.*”

Furthermore, on May 20, 2004, Senator Patrick Leahy (2004a) of Vermont, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Judiciary Committee, emphasized:

*[E]vidence has continued to seep out almost daily of similar mistreatment of prisoners in other U.S. military detention centers in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Guantanamo...it becomes clearer by the day that this scandal was set in motion by the actions of senior officials...the President talks about a few bad apples. The President’s comments have become harder and harder to swallow.*

Finally, on June 16, 2004 Congressman Lynn Woolsey (2004) of California offered this:

*What more evidence does the one need to understand that this administration condoned and approved the use of torture? There is an eerie pattern at work here. First Guantanamo Bay, then Abu Ghraib. Now we are learning that prisoners in Afghanistan have been subjected to torture by American soldiers. It is becoming clear that the really “bad apples” are at the top of the barrel. They are, in fact, in the White House.*

Together, these statements illustrate a concerted effort by Congressional Democrats to pin the blame for Abu Ghraib—and similar incidents at U.S. military prisons elsewhere—squarely on the policies of the Bush administration and the U.S. military.

The contextualization frame was also frequently challenged by Congressional Democrats. Emphasizing the minimal threat posed by these detainees, Congressman Joe Hoeffel (2004) of Pennsylvania stated on May 17, 2004: “[T]he detainees were a bunch of people off the street,

*street criminals, rock throwers, hoodlums...certainly a wide number of just disaffected Iraqis who got swept up by the police.*” Likewise, during a Congressional hearing on May 11, 2004, Senator Lieberman (2004) of Connecticut, a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, expressed dismay that “*70 to 90 percent of the detainees (at Abu Ghraib), according to the Red Cross, were captured without solid evidence of their guilt.*” This was further echoed in a speech made by Senator Leahy (2004a) on May 20, 2004: “*According to the International Red Cross, 70-90 percent of the Iraq prisoners arrested (at Abu Ghraib)...were later determined to have been detained by mistake.* That is appalling, but not so appalling that the Administration did anything about it.” A month later, Leahy (2004b) declared: “[I]t turns out now that the *majority of detainees...are not the worst of the worst, as the administration asserted, but rather low-level recruits or even innocent men...* This is why, after years, not a single one has been brought before a military tribunal.” Ultimately, these statements reveal that Congressional Democrats challenged the contextualization frame, emphasizing that the detainees possessed minimal strategic value and posed no material threat to U.S. soldiers at the prison.

Contestation of the disassociation frame from Democrats was also often evident. On May 6, 2004, Congressman John Dingell (2004) of Michigan asserted: “[A]re we just going to sack a bunch of poor infantryman up to the rank of Sergeant or something like that and say you are going to jail[?]....It sounds to me like *they are going to stick it to the ordinary uniformed military service under the rank of lieutenant.*” That same day, Congressman John Lewis (2004) of Georgia stated: “Why did officials at the highest levels of government try to hide these criminal acts against humanity? *Why did they try to cover it up?*” Furthermore, on May 6, 2004, House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer (2004) of Maryland argued: “[T]he Secretary of Defense has known for months that prisoners in Iraq and Afghanistan have been humiliated, beaten, tortured, and

even murdered. Twenty-five prisoners have died in U.S. custody. And, *still, there is virtually no accountability for those deaths...The buck must stop somewhere.*” During a speech on May 19, 2004, Congressman Jim McDermott (2004) of Washington declared:

At a time when the world must see that no one in the U.S. is above the law, the *Pentagon arrogantly acts as if it answers only to itself.* The first low-ranking soldier was thrown overboard today. Other low-ranking soldiers will soon follow. This is how Secretary Rumsfeld and Lieutenant General Sanchez and all of their minions define justice. Do as I say, not as I do. The world is watching, and *the world is not buying the Pentagon justice charade.*

Finally, Congresswoman Sheila Jackson-Lee (2004) of Texas emphasized on May 21, 2004:

*“The court-martial of a few enlisted soldiers is not enough for a problem that has now proven to be endemic...Secretary Rumsfeld and Secretary Wolfowitz cannot hide behind their office, they bear the responsibility for this scandal.”* Thus, Congressional Democrats strongly contested the disassociation frame.

Finally, Congressional Democrats contested the reaffirmation frame, albeit with less vigor as compared to the other three frames. On May 5, 2004, for example, Congresswoman Barbara Watson of California stated that because of Abu Ghraib, *“Our standing in the world has been lowered to the point that the United States is isolated in the court of world opinion...we are no longer viewed as peacemakers but instead as the principal threat to world peace.”* A day later, Congressman Lewis (2004) offered this: *“What happened to those prisoners is a reflection on our soul, on our values. American citizens smiling as they humiliate citizens of Iraq? There must be a sense of righteous indignation.”* Likewise, during a Congressional hearing on May 7, 2004, Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia posed the following rhetorical questions: *“Given the catastrophic impact that this scandal has had on the world community, how can the United States ever repair its credibility? How are we supposed to convince not only the Iraqi people, but also*

*the rest of the world that America is indeed a liberator, and not a conqueror, not an arrogant power?”*

Days later, Senator Edward Kennedy (2004) of Massachusetts asserted: *“The torture and other sadistic abuses of prisoners in Iraq have done immense damage...to America’s reputation in the world...”* On March 19, 2004, President Bush asked: ‘Who would prefer that Saddam’s torture chambers still be open?’ Shamefully, we now learn that Saddam’s torture chambers reopened under new management—U.S. management.” Furthermore, on May 14, 2004, Congressman Alcee Hastings (2004) of Florida responded to the Abu Ghraib incidents by simply stating: *“America has lost its moral authority.”* Such sentiment was echoed days later by Congressman McDermott (2004) in which he emphasized: *“This has ruined our reputation in the world. It has taken away our moral authority...because not only did we do it, but we will not own up to it.”* Also, on May 17, 2004, Congressman Frank Pallone (2004) of New Jersey proclaimed: *“The photos and accounts of the treatment of Iraqi detainees at the hands of American soldiers...have shown that we are not immune from committing evil acts.”* Finally, on June 23 Senator Leahy (2004b) stated: *“This is not the mark of a great country. This is not the mark of a moral country.”* These statements reveal a willingness among Democrats to indeed challenge the reaffirmation frame despite the potential patriotic backlash such contestation might elicit among the American public.

As predicted, then, Democrats broadly and consistently challenged the frames put forth by the Bush administration and U.S. military in the aftermath of the Abu Ghraib scandal. Remarkably, these findings closely parallel the frame contestation advanced by Congressional Democrats in the aftermath of the My Lai incident. Notably, challenges occurred most vigorously with the minimization frame. In addition, such contestation was least vigorous with

the reaffirmation frame. Ultimately, these results support my second and third hypotheses that Congressional Democrats would, in general, contest the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames offered by the administration, but that they would be most willing to contest the minimization frame.

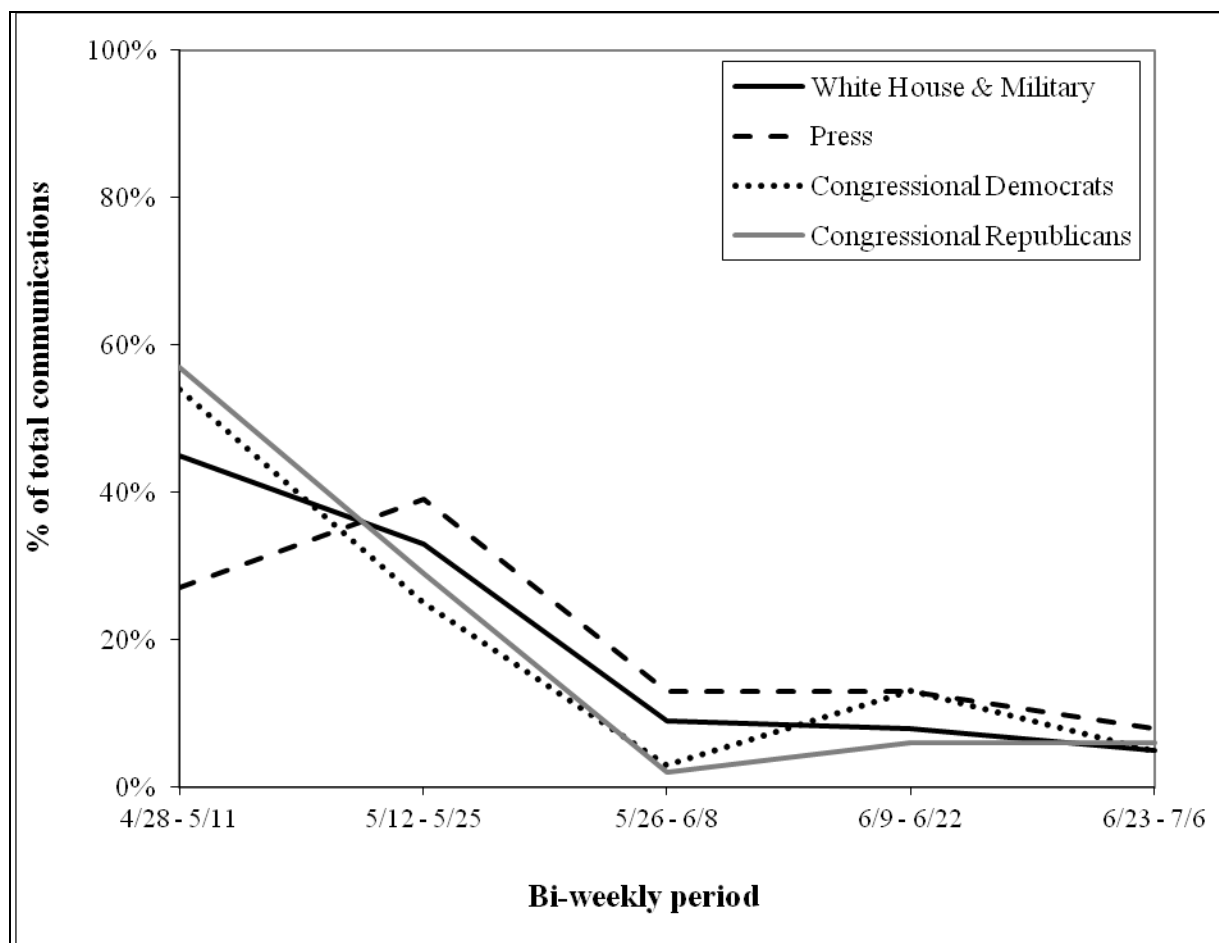
### National Identity Frames in News Coverage

In this section, I present data on whether news coverage of the Abu Ghraib scandal reflected the range of discourse offered by White House, military and Congressional officials. Results are presented in four stages. First, I examine the relative volume of White House, military, Congressional and press communications over time to determine when each of these sets of communications peaked during the 10-week period after the scandal broke and to assess the relationship among these communications. Second, I explore the types of sources journalists included in news coverage of Abu Ghraib to determine which voices were most prevalent in driving news about the incident. Third, I offer aggregate data on the presence and valence of the minimization, contextualization, disassociation and reaffirmation frames in news coverage to assess the degree to which these frames were echoed, questioned or challenged within the press. Finally, I assess the mean valence of these frames in both Congressional and news discourse over time to assess whether the range of debate advanced in Congress about the scandal was represented in the press.

#### *Political and News Communications Over Time*

As an initial step, I examined the relative volume of White House, military, Congressional and press communications over time to compare the ebb and flow of these communications and to determine when each of these sets of communications peaked in the

aftermath of Abu Ghraib. Figure 4.6 shows that the volume of communications among these actors spiked and declined at roughly the same time throughout the ten weeks after the scandal broke. Notably, communications among White House, military and Congressional officials—both Democratic and Republican—were most pronounced during the first two weeks. Specifically, 45% of all White House and military communications, 54% of all Congressional Democrats and 57% of all Republicans communications about Abu Ghraib occurred during this time. That these officials would be most vocal about the incident immediately after the scandal broke is not surprising given that each of these sets of officials would have perceived it to be strategically beneficial to get out in front of the scandal and establish the parameters of debate. Press coverage, however, did not peak until weeks three and four, suggesting that they may have been following the lead of officials in covering the story early on. In the weeks that followed, however, the relative volume of both official and news communications declined considerably—and in very much the same way—as the Abu Ghraib story began to fade from public consciousness. Overall, then, these results suggest a close association in the relative volume of discourse among officials and the news over time in the aftermath of the scandal.

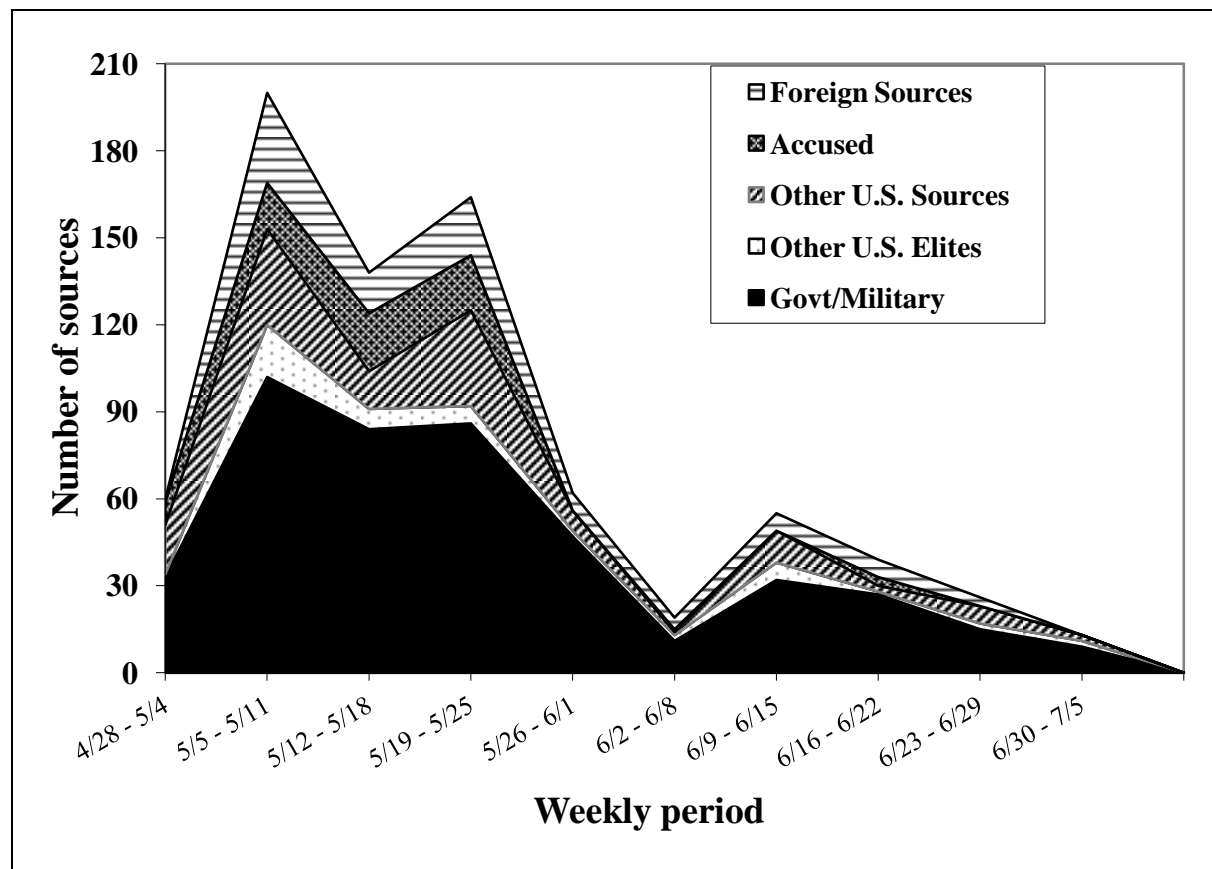


**Figure 4.6.** Percentage of total number of White House, military, Congressional and news communications, bi-weekly.

### *News Sourcing*

Next, I examined the sources that the *New York Times*, CBS News and *Time* relied upon most in coverage of Abu Ghraib. This was done to assess whose voices among government officials were most represented in the press following public disclosure of the scandal, and to determine the extent to which non-governmental sources were present in the news. Overall, I found that 56% of sources in these news outlets were U.S. government or military; 6% were other U.S. elites; 15% were other U.S. sources, 8% were members of the accused; and 12% were foreign sources. I then examined whether these proportions changed over time, given the possibility that news media relied on government officials early on, but then shifted to include a

greater diversity of sources into their coverage. Figure 4.7 illustrates the relative share of sources within news coverage during the ten weeks after the Abu Ghraib story broke. Throughout this time period, U.S. government and military sources consistently dominated news coverage. In particular, at no point did government and military sources not outnumber all other sources combined in weekly news coverage of the scandal.



**Figure 4.7.** Sources in news coverage of Abu Ghraib over time.

Notably, among U.S. government and military sources, 81% were White House or military officials, whereas *only 7% were Congressional Democrats*. These figures are consistent with the news sourcing that emerged in the aftermath of the My Lai case. Like My Lai, such a disparity in the sourcing of these officials is all the more remarkable given that Congressional Democrats—both on the floor of Congress and in Congressional hearings—

routinely contested the administration frames. That the press largely excluded Congressional Democrats from news coverage of Abu Ghraib, despite their vocal opposition to the frames offered by the White House and U.S. military, indicates that the White House and U.S. military officials were granted a disproportionately large platform from which to shape press coverage and public opinion around the scandal.

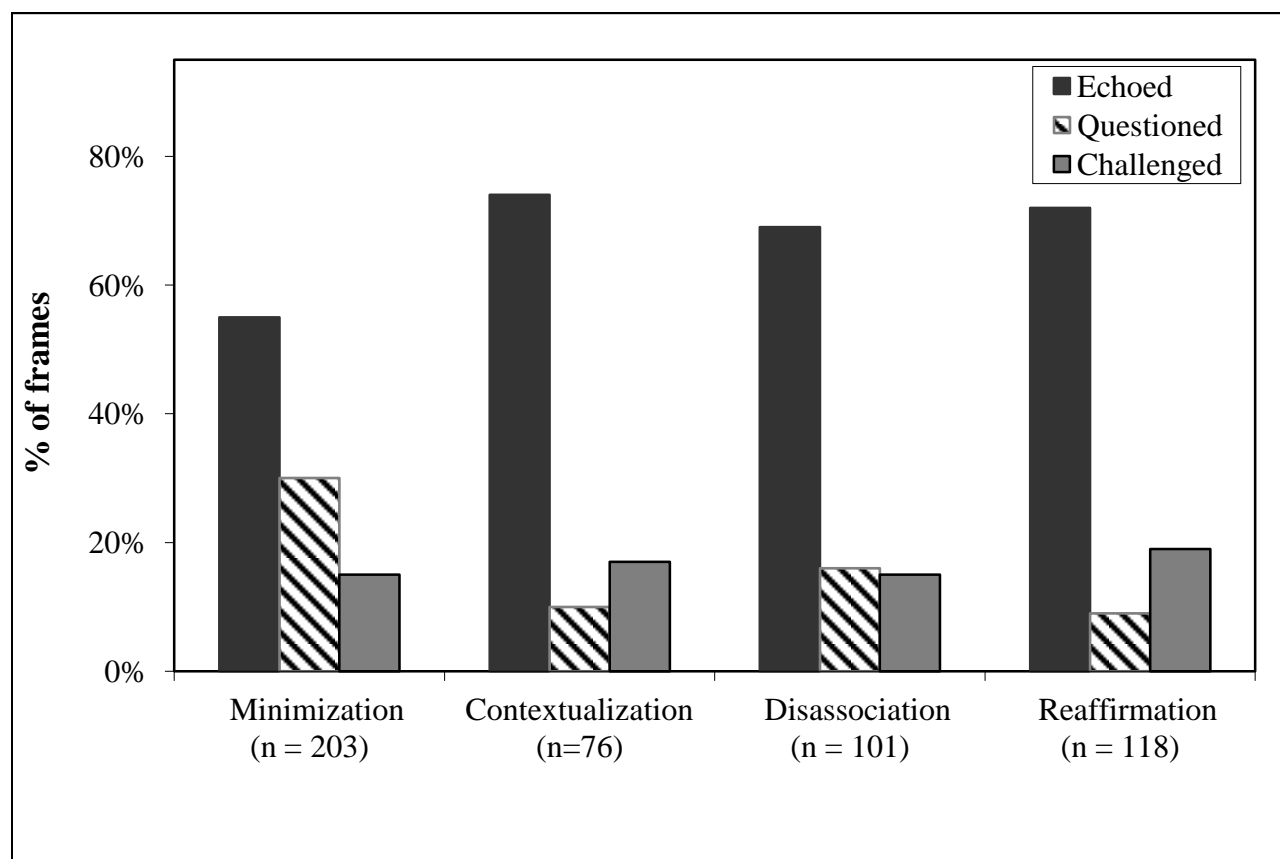
#### *Frame Valence in News Coverage*

As the next step, I examined valence of the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames in news coverage to determine the extent to which these frames were echoed, questioned, or challenged within the press. My fourth hypothesis was that U.S. news media would largely *echo* rather than *challenge* these frames (H4). In addition, I expected that the minimization frame would encounter more resistance in the press than the contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames because it possesses less cultural resonance relative to the other frames *and* it was more strongly contested among Congressional Democrats (H5). Figure 4.8 shows that sources in news coverage about Abu Ghraib overwhelmingly echoed the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames offered by White House and military officials. Notably, minimization frames were positively echoed 55% of the time; contextualization frames were positively echoed 62%; disassociation frames were positively echoed 69% of the time; and reaffirmation frames were positively echoed 65% of the time. Again, these results are constant with my findings regarding news coverage of the My Lai incident.<sup>13</sup> Thus, across all news content examined, I found a largely uncritical repetition of the national identity frames offered by the White House and military in response to Abu Ghraib. Moreover, minimization received the most scrutiny —

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<sup>13</sup> In the My Lai case, minimization frames were positively echoed 60% of the time, contextualization frames were positively echoed 71%, disassociation frames were positively echoed 68% of the time, and reaffirmation frames were positively echoed 76% of the time.

suggesting that the challenges offered by Congressional Democrats may have diminished in part the cascade of the minimization frame. Likewise, reaffirmation received the least amount of resistance among Congressional Democrats, and this was reflected in the valence of this frame in press coverage.

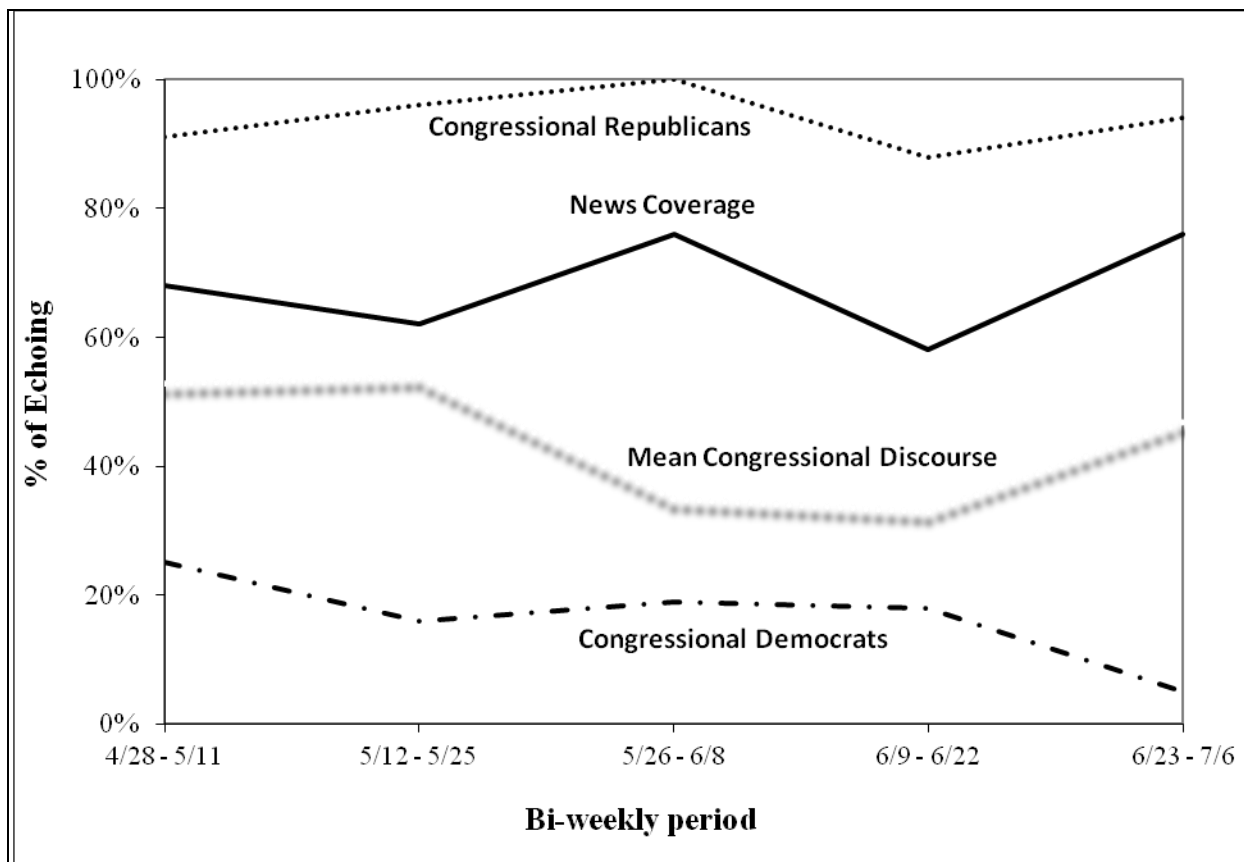


**Figure 4.8.** Valence of frames within Abu Ghraib news coverage

*Frame Valence Congressional Discourse and Press Coverage Over Time*

As a final step, I compared the mean valence of the minimization, contextualization, disassociation and reaffirmation frames in Congressional and news discourse over time. This was done to further assess whether the range of debate advanced in Congress about the scandal—from both Democrats *and* Republicans combined—was represented in the press. It is possible, for example, that the overall valence of these frames in Congress, when accounting for both

parties, mirrored the overall valence of these frames within the press. Specifically, the press may have looked to Congress in general for cues when covering the scandal. This could potentially help explain why the frame contestation so consistently advanced by Democrats in Congress remained largely absent within the press. I therefore wanted to explore this possibility. However, Figure 4.9 shows that throughout the ten weeks analyzed, the press consistently echoed the four frames—never dropping below 58%—and, most importantly, it did so at a *much higher level than the mean valence of all Congressional discourse*. This was particularly the case during weeks five and six when the press echoed the frames 76% of the time despite the fact that the frames were echoed only 35% in Congressional discourse during that time. Thus, despite the fact that Congress as a whole was largely at odds with the interpretations offered by the White House and military in response to the scandal, the press nonetheless largely suppressed these challenges and instead consistently echoed the minimization, contextualization, disassociation and reaffirmation frames.



**Figure 4.9.** Valence of frames within Congressional statements and news coverage over time.

Taken together, the patterns of sourcing and the valence of coverage reveal that the press served an echoing function, consistently disseminating the same nation-protective strategies employed by the Bush administration and U.S. military in response to the scandal. This occurred despite the considerable challenges advanced by Congressional Democrats in opposition to each of the four frames. Much like My Lai, journalists—both through source selection and the frames reported in the news—played an important role in not just transmitting, but also amplifying, the administration’s messages about Abu Ghraib.

## Discussion

This chapter presented the results of my analysis of White House, military, and Congressional messages following public disclosure of the Abu Ghraib Prison scandal. These results show that the Bush administration and U.S. military constructed and frequently communicated four nation-protective frames—minimization, contextualization, disassociation and reaffirmation—in the aftermath of Abu Ghraib. These frames were designed to protect and restore the national identity in the wake of the scandal and, in turn, limit the political fallout. Specifically, minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation were consistently emphasized by a breadth of White House and U.S. military officials over an extended period of time to both sustain the discourse and ensure that counterframes did not gain prominence in news coverage. Together, these results speak to what Manheim (1991, 1994) and others (Coe et al., 2004; Domke, Watts, Shah, & Fan, 1999; Zaller, 1992) have referred to as strategic political communication in which “political leaders craft their public language and communication with the goal to create, control, distribute, and use mediated messages as a political resource” (Hutcheson et al., 2004). In effect, the construction and ubiquitous use of these culturally resonant frames was done to manage both the political and news environments. Because Abu Ghraib posed a serious internal threat to both the image and reputation of the nation, the press and the public were likely to be receptive to messages that appealed to and bolstered the nation. The Bush administration and U.S. military sought to take advantage of these dynamics.

The data also indicate that Congressional Democrats offered consistent and sustained challenges to the minimization, contextualization, disassociation and reaffirmation frames. In particular, minimization encountered the strongest resistance. This was due, I argue, to the fact that it is the least culturally resonant among the frames and contestation over this frame offered

Democrats an opportunity to attach at least some of the blame for what happened at Abu Ghraib on the Bush administration—an accusation they no doubt hoped would call into question President Bush’s re-electability chances in the upcoming election. Contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames were also challenged by Congressional Democrats; nonetheless, there was reluctance among these officials to explicitly challenge the “enemy threat,” “un-American” and “positive American values” elements within these frames. The cultural resonance of these sub-frames likely made them particularly difficult to challenge—given that contesting them well might have produced a patriotic backlash from many Americans. Such challenges were politically risky, especially just months before the upcoming election.

Notably, despite considerable frame contestation among U.S. mainstream political leaders in response to Abu Ghraib, press coverage did not reflect this range of viewpoints. Instead, my analysis found that CBS News, *New York Times*, and *Time* primarily relied upon White House and military sources. The fact that Congressional Democrats were sourced only 7% of the time is astounding—especially given that several prominent party leaders on the floor of Congress offered challenges to the Bush administration and U.S. military’s framing of the scandal. The lack of news coverage of their critiques may have been due, in large part, to the cultural resonance of the frames constructed and communicated by the administration, which cascaded past the rival opposition and into the press.

Perhaps most revealing are the strong parallels between these results and those presented in Chapter Three on My Lai. Despite the fact that these cases occurred nearly 35 years apart and the media environments varied considerably between the two cases, we nonetheless saw strong similarities in the political and news discourses that emerged in the aftermath of each incident. In both cases, White House and military officials consistently communicated the nation-protective

frames of minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation. These frames were then strongly contested among Congressional Democrats, albeit with some variation among the frames—in both cases, minimization was the most vigorously challenged and reaffirmation was the least challenged. Moreover, despite the fact that political officials from both parties sparred publicly over these frames in both cases, the press largely amplified the White House and U.S. military's framing of the scandal.

Ultimately, then, both the My Lai and Abu Ghraib chapters illuminate the process through which the press aligns its coverage with government communications, suggesting that both the source and content of political frames deeply matters in determining which frames manifest in the press. In this sense, it is not enough to merely measure elite contestation reflected in the press to predict or understand news content; we must also know *who within the framing hierarchy offered the frames* and *whether the content was likely to resonate with the broader citizenry*. Specifically, these chapters demonstrate the cultural potency of messages which appeal to and affirm national identity, particularly when internal threats to the image and reputation of the nation arise. Because threats to the nation tend to trigger receptivity among journalists and citizens to nation-protective messages, these administrations effectively tapped into these feelings and, as a consequence, were able to shape the political discourse and fallout caused by the incidents. Thus, what could have been a moment for self-examination by American leaders, the press, and the public on the nature of its nation's foreign policy and military tactics became, overwhelmingly, a trumpeting the American vision and self-congratulatory posturing.

## CHAPTER 5

## Cultural Resonance, National Identity and Frame Contestation

Political officials have long recognized the importance of appealing to a shared sense of national identity when attempting to connect with citizens. Such an emphasis is particularly potent when the image and reputation of the nation are at risk. In these moments, citizens often come to expect—and even need—discourse from officials and within the press aimed at protecting and restoring the nation’s identity. Chapters 3 and 4 showed these dynamics in the aftermath of My Lai and Abu Ghraib—two incidents that occurred under different presidential administrations and roughly 35 years apart. Notably, I found that the same nation-protective frames of minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation were consistently emphasized by Nixon and Bush officials in response to these incidents. These frames were then largely amplified within the press despite sustained challenges advanced by Congressional opponents. These dynamics, I argue, were due in large part to the cultural resonance of the administration’s messages. Because the My Lai and Abu Ghraib incidents posed serious threats to American identity, citizens and journalists were receptive to nation-protective messages. As a result, these administrations were able to shape the political and news discourses that unfolded in the aftermath of each of these incidents.

I am assuming, then, that at least part of the reason these nation-protective frames cascaded past Congressional opponents and into the press following My Lai and Abu Ghraib was because they were *culturally resonant*. Thus far, however, I do not have evidence of such a process. Specifically, I have not examined whether or to what extent frames of minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation may have guided how the public came to understand and respond to each of these incidents. I therefore begin this chapter by presenting

public opinion survey data taken in the aftermath of My Lai and Abu Ghraib to assess how these messages may have been received among Americans. First, I looked at polling data on questions directly related to the framing of these incidents. Next, I examined data on public approval for Presidents Nixon and Bush to assess any broader impact of these scandals on their standing. Finally, I explored polling data on public support for the Vietnam and Iraq wars to determine whether attitudes about these wars shifted in the aftermath of the scandals. I will show that these data cannot tell us much. Specifically, there were several limitations in the available polling data, which provided an incomplete picture of whether the frames offered by the administrations were successful in limiting the political fallout of these scandals.

With this in mind, I designed an experiment in which I explored the effects of these nation-protective frames on U.S. adults in response to an incident in which the image and reputation of the nation was threatened. The goal here was to assess the cultural resonance of these messages when such moments arise. This approach offers several benefits. First, I created and tested the effectiveness of the kinds of messages that were explicitly employed by White House and military officials in the aftermath of My Lai and Abu Ghraib. Second, I isolated each of the nation-protective messages and, therefore, controlled for the effects that each might exert on respondents. Third, I tested how contestation of these frames—when expressed by rival political officials within the news—might undercut receptivity to the frames among respondents. Finally, I explored with significant depth the psychological processes that shape how American citizens might respond to these messages in nationally dissonant moments. Taken together, this approach offered rich insight into how messages of national identity and the public interact within the framing process.

## Public Opinion in Response to My Lai and Abu Ghraib

To assess the potential effects of the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames on public opinion in response to My Lai and Abu Ghraib, I examined three types of polling data: (a) public attitudes about these incidents; (b) public approval for Presidents Nixon and Bush; and (c) public support for the Vietnam and Iraq wars. The topline results were obtained from the *iPoll* database, an online archive of U.S. public opinion polls collected by every major U.S. survey firm since 1935. I focused my analysis on the periods immediately prior to each of these incidents—November 12, 1969 for My Lai and April 28, 2004 for Abu Ghraib—through the dates at which these incidents all but disappeared from political and news discourse—December 31, 1971 for My Lai and July 6, 2004 for Abu Ghraib. Ultimately, I wanted to identify how the public immediately responded to each of these incidents and whether there were any shifts in attitudes over time.

Public opinion data collected at the time of the My Lai incident is presented in Table 5.1.<sup>14</sup> As these results show, there is little available polling that directly relates to My Lai. In particular, virtually all of the public polling conducted on the incident did not occur until February 1971—roughly a year-and-a-half after the scandal broke.<sup>15</sup> In addition, these polls focused almost exclusively on the minimization frame—who should be blamed for this incident and whether My Lai was a common occurrence—and failed to explore the other questions of interest for this

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<sup>14</sup> Table 5.1 contains the entire universe of polling data collected on public opinion in direct relation to the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames employed by the Nixon administration in response to My Lai. Specifically, I identified any polls that examined the following: who should be blamed for the incident, whether this behavior extended elsewhere, whether situational factors such as stress, confusion or enemy threat may have led to the incident, whether those involved should be punished, and whether American values should be questioned. In addition, I included Gallup polls taken immediately prior to the incident on presidential approval, President Nixon's handling of the war and public support for the war as well as at least the next three taken on these subjects—if available—following the incident.

<sup>15</sup> These polls taken in early 1971 were likely spurred by the “Free Calley” movement at the time in response to the murder trial of Lieutenant William Calley. Public opposition to Calley's prosecution was largely derived from two camps: those who believed that he was justified in his actions and that nobody should be prosecuted, and those who believed that the war should be put on trial, not Calley.

research. Nonetheless, these polls suggest that the American public believed Lieutenant William Calley was being made the scapegoat for My Lai and that this was not an isolated incident; however, given the limited timeframe covered in these polls, we cannot tell whether such a conclusion was shaped by the political debate or news coverage.

Beyond these data, we also see that My Lai had, at most, a minimal impact at least initially on the level of support for President Nixon and the war in Vietnam. Public approval for Nixon went from 56% at the time of public knowledge of the incident to 63% in January 1970—two months after the scandal was revealed to the public—and it remained well above 50% over the course of the next year (Gallup, 2012). Likewise, public support for Nixon’s handling of the Vietnam War followed a similar trend, rising from 57% at the time of public revealing of the incident to 64% in January 1970. Finally, public support for the Vietnam War showed virtually no change in the aftermath (Carroll, 2004). Thus, it appears that Nixon—along with his policies towards Vietnam—emerged from My Lai relatively unscathed, at least in this time period. These polls are interesting, but whether any of this was due to the communications employed by the Nixon administration is impossible to determine. More analysis is therefore needed to effectively assess the potential impact of these frames on public opinion in response to My Lai.

**Table 5.1 Public opinion in response to My Lai**

|                                   | <b>Applicable Frame</b> | <b>Polling Firm</b> | <b>Date</b> | <b>Question</b>   | <b>Result</b>                                 |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|-------------|---|---|
| <b>Incident-Related Attitudes</b> | Disassociation          | Gallup              | Dec 1969    | Should the soldiers who took part in the shooting (at My Lai) be punished, or not?                            | 24% Yes<br>48% No<br>(Frame Agreement)        |
|                                   | Minimization            | Harris              | Feb 1971    | Tell me if you tend to agree: I am sure there are many other incidents like My Lai involving American troops. | 81% Yes<br>6% No<br>(Frame Agreement)         |
|                                   | Minimization            | Harris              | Feb 1971    | Tell me if you tend to agree: the soldiers at My Lai were only following orders from their higher-ups.        | 76% Yes<br>6% No<br>(Frame Agreement)         |
|                                   | Minimization            | Gallup/<br>Newsweek | April 1971  | Do you think the incident (My Lai) for which Lt. Calley was tried was an isolated incident or a common one?   | 24% Yes<br>52% No<br>(Frame Agreement)        |
|                                   | Minimization            | Gallup/<br>Newsweek | April 1971  | Do you think Lt. Calley is being made the scapegoat for the actions of others above him or not (for My Lai)?  | 70% Yes<br>12% No<br>(Frame Agreement)        |
|                                   | Minimization            | Harris              | April 1971  | Tell me if you tend to agree: The soldiers at My Lai were only following orders from their higher-ups.        | 77% Agree<br>9% Disagree<br>(Frame Agreement) |
|                                   | Minimization            | Harris              | April 1971  | Tell me if you tend to agree: it is wrong to blame the Army for what Lt. Calley and the others did at My Lai. | 38% Yes<br>49% No<br>(Frame Agreement)        |
| <b>Support for the War</b>        |                         | Gallup              | Sept 1969   | Do you think it was a mistake to send U.S. troops to Vietnam?   | 58% Yes<br>32% No                             |
|                                   |                         | Gallup              | Jan 1970    | Do you think it was a mistake to send U.S. troops to Vietnam?   | 57% Yes<br>32% No                             |
|                                   |                         | Gallup              | April 1970  | Do you think it was a mistake to send U.S. troops to Vietnam?   | 51% Yes<br>34% No                             |
| <b>Presidential Performance</b>   |                         | Gallup              | Oct 1969    | Do you approve or disapprove of the way Nixon is handling his job as president?                               | 56% Approve<br>29% Disapprove                 |
|                                   |                         | Gallup              | Oct 1969    | Do you approve or disapprove of the way Nixon is handling the War in Vietnam?                                 | 57% Approve<br>32% Disapprove                 |
|                                   |                         | Gallup              | Nov 1969    | Do you approve or disapprove of the way Nixon is handling his job as president?                               | 67% Approve<br>19% Disapprove                 |
|                                   |                         | Gallup              | Nov 1969    | Do you approve or disapprove of the way Nixon is handling the War in Vietnam?                                 | 64% Approve<br>25% Disapprove                 |
|                                   |                         | Gallup              | Dec 1969    | Do you approve or disapprove of the way Nixon is handling his job as president?                               | 59% Approve<br>23% Disapprove                 |
|                                   |                         | Gallup              | Jan 1970    | Do you approve or disapprove of the way Nixon is handling his job as president?                               | 63% Approve<br>23% Disapprove                 |
|                                   |                         | Gallup              | Jan 1970    | Do you approve or disapprove of the way Nixon is handling the War in Vietnam?                                 | 64% Approve<br>24% Disapprove                 |

Polling data about Abu Ghraib are presented in Table 5.2.<sup>16</sup> Much like My Lai, most available polls on the incident focused on the issues of blame and scope. In addition, all of these polls were conducted during the first three weeks in May 2004—which is significant given that the incident remained highly visible in political and news discourse until July 2004. Thus, it is hard to assess any effects of the White House frames on public opinion over time. We do, though, see some evidence suggestive that the public may have embraced the White House arguments that Abu Ghraib was an isolated incident, that the specific soldiers should be punished, and that the behavior was not as bad as what Iraqis had done. Still, given limitations in these data, it is difficult to draw significant conclusions about the impact of these frames.

In addition, a broader look at public opinion following the incident is mixed in suggesting whether President Bush suffered politically as a result of the scandal. His approval rating was 52% at the time of the incident and it was at 53% two months later (Gallup, 2004). Public support for Bush's handling of the Iraq War, however, saw a significant decline from 48% at the time of the incident to 41% in June 2004 (Carroll, 2004). Lastly, there was virtually no shift in public support for the war in Iraq in the wake of the scandal. Taken together, these results are interesting but inconclusive. Similar to the My Lai case, insufficient data on public opinion about Abu Ghraib combined with mixed results in polling data on public support for President Bush and the Iraq War leave an incomplete picture as to whether the nation-protective frames emphasized by the administration succeeded in containing the scandal.

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<sup>16</sup> Table 5.2 includes a subset of the polling data collected on public opinion in direct relation to the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames employed by the Bush administration. I excluded duplicate polls if they were taken at the same time as those included in this table and indicated similar results. Like Table 5.1, I included Gallup polls taken immediately prior to the incident on presidential approval, President Bush's handling of the war and public support for the war as well as at least the next three taken on these subjects—if available—following the scandal.

**Table 5.2 Public opinion in response to Abu Ghraib**

|                                   | <b>Applicable Frame</b> | <b>Polling Firm</b>  | <b>Date</b> | <b>Question</b>  | <b>Result</b>   |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|-------------|--|---|
| <b>Incident-Related Attitudes</b> | Minimization            | Gallup/CNN/USA Today | May 2004    | Were the actions (at Abu Ghraib) based on accepted military policy or were they actions that violated military policy?         | 14% Accepted<br>71% Violated (Frame Agreement)              |
|                                   | Minimization            | Gallup/CNN/USA Today | May 2004    | Do you think the soldiers who were involved (at Abu Ghraib) were following orders or acting on their own?                      | 34% Following orders<br>56% Acting on own (Frame Agreement) |
|                                   | Minimization            | Gallup/CNN/USA Today | May 2004    | Do you think the abuses of prisoners by U.S. soldiers (at Abu Ghraib) are isolated incidents or common occurrences?            | 64% Isolated<br>34% Common (Frame Agreement)                |
|                                   | Reaffirmation           | CBS                  | May 2004    | Do you believe that this behavior (at Abu Ghraib) is not worse than what Iraqis have done to Americans in this war?            | 67% Agree<br>21% Disagree (Frame Agreement)                 |
|                                   | Minimization            | Time/CNN/Harris      | May 2004    | Do you think the abuse of Iraqi prisoners reflects the behavior of just a few soldiers or do you think it was more widespread? | 63% Few<br>31% Widespread (Frame Agreement)                 |
|                                   | Minimization            | Fox/Opinion Dynamics | May, 2004   | Do you believe the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by U.S. soldiers was widespread or was it limited to a few soldiers?               | 58% Limited<br>25% Widespread (Frame Agreement)             |
|                                   | Disassociation          | Time/CNN/Harris      | May 2004    | If found guilty of abusing Iraqi prisoners (at Abu Ghraib), do you think these soldiers should serve time in prison?           | 53% Yes<br>37% No (Frame Agreement)                         |
|                                   | Disassociation          | Harris               | May, 2004   | Do you think the soldiers involved (at Abu Ghraib) should or should not be charged with a crime?                               | 64% Yes<br>27% No (Frame Agreement)                         |
| <b>Support for the War</b>        |                         | Gallup               | April 2004  | Do you think it was a mistake to send U.S. troops to Iraq?   | 42% Yes<br>57% No   |
|                                   |                         | Gallup               | May 2004    | Do you think it was a mistake to send U.S. troops to Iraq?   | 44% Yes<br>54% No   |
|                                   |                         | Gallup               | June 2004   | Do you think it was a mistake to send U.S. troops to Iraq?   | 41% Yes<br>58% No   |
| <b>Presidential Performance</b>   |                         | Gallup               | April 2004  | Do you approve or disapprove of the way Bush is handling the situation in Iraq?  | 48% Approve<br>49% Disapprove                               |
|                                   |                         | Gallup               | April 2004  | Do you approve or disapprove of the way Bush is handling his job as president?   | 52% Approve<br>45% Disapprove                               |
|                                   |                         | Gallup               | May 2004    | Do you approve or disapprove of the way Bush is handling his job as president?   | 49% Approve<br>48% Disapprove                               |
|                                   |                         | Gallup               | May 2004    | Do you approve or disapprove of the way Bush is handling the situation in Iraq?  | 42% Approve<br>55% Disapprove                               |
|                                   |                         | Gallup               | June 2004   | Do you approve or disapprove of the way Bush is handling his job as president?   | 49% Approve<br>45% Disapprove                               |
|                                   |                         | Gallup               | June 2004   | Do you approve or disapprove of the way Bush is handling the situation in Iraq?  | 42% Approve<br>56% Disapprove                               |

Overall, then, existing public opinion data on My Lai and Abu Ghraib do not allow for systematic analysis of the effects of the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames on public opinion in the aftermath of these incidents. In particular, without more polling data collected over a more extended period of time—and more questions directly and systematically focused on the contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames—it is difficult to determine how these frames may have been received among the American public. Moreover, presidential approval data on the Nixon and Bush administrations and polls regarding public support for the Vietnam and Iraq wars offer limited insight regarding the potential effects of these nation-protective frames. Thus, these polling data present us with limited understanding of the process by which the character, causes, and consequences of the My Lai and Abu Ghraib incidents came to be understood within the American public. With this in mind, I now turn to my experiment.

### Experiment Expectations

This experiment explored the differential effects of the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames on respondents' attitudes when echoed, contested or absent in news coverage about an incident in which America's image and reputation was threatened by internal actions. The primary motivation was to test the cultural resonance of these messages. Four hypotheses were examined. First, I expected that respondents exposed to news coverage in which the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames were *present*—offered by White House and U.S. military officials and then either echoed or challenged by Congressional officials—would be more likely to perceive the incident less negatively than those exposed to news coverage in which these frames were entirely absent (H6).

Specifically, I expected that respondents exposed to the minimization frame would be more likely to downplay the severity of this incident; respondents exposed to the contextualization frame would be more likely to attribute the causes of this incident to situational stress; respondents exposed to the disassociation frame would be more likely to believe that those involved will be appropriately punished; and respondents exposed to the reaffirmation frame would be more likely to perceive America as a moral leader in the world. This hypothesis is based on the belief that minimizing and contextualizing the transgressions, disassociating with the transgressors, and reaffirming the nation's identity are messages likely to resonate among citizens because these lines of argument allow them to limit collective shame and humiliation encouraged by such an incident and, in turn, to protect and restore the national identity.

Second, I expected that respondents exposed to news coverage in which the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames were *present* would identify more strongly with the nation than those exposed to news coverage in which these frames were entirely absent (H7). This is due to the fact that citizens tend to engage in nation-protective behavior in moments when the nation is perceived to be seriously threatened. Because these frames explicitly appeal to these tendencies, even if they are challenged by some political actors, I expected them to activate among respondents a stronger attachment with the nation. To be clear, this is an important test of the core argument in this dissertation—that an emphasis on national identity-protecting and -affirming ideas by political leaders and in news coverage will move citizens to become more attached to the nation.

Third, I expected that respondents exposed to news coverage in which the White House and military frames of minimization, contextualization, disassociation and reaffirmation were *contested* by Congressional officials would be more likely to perceive the incident more

negatively than those exposed to news coverage in which these frames were *echoed* by members of Congress (H8). Specifically, I expected that respondents exposed to news coverage in which the minimization frame was challenged would be less likely to downplay the severity of this incident; respondents exposed to news coverage in which the contextualization frame was challenged would be less likely to attribute the causes of this incident to situational stress; respondents exposed to news coverage in which the disassociation frame was challenged would be less likely to believe that those involved will be appropriately punished; and respondents exposed to news coverage in which the reaffirmation frame was challenged would be less likely to perceive America as a moral leader in the world. This hypothesis is derived from the view that these counterframes were likely to invite skepticism among respondents about the initial frames, thereby potentially diminishing the cascade. Because counterframes compel respondents to critically evaluate—or at least subconsciously rationalize—why one frame is more credible than another, they are likely to undercut receptivity to the initial frames regarding the incident.

Finally, I expected that respondents exposed to news coverage in which the national identity frames were *contested* by Congressional officials would identify less strongly with the nation than those exposed to news coverage in which these frames were *echoed* by members of Congress (H9). So, I expected that the simple presence of the frames would impact national attachment, and that this impact would be moderated by whether they were echoed or contested in news coverage.

Beyond these hypotheses, I also explored whether these frames had broader effects on respondents' attitudes about the Afghanistan War and the U.S. military. I did not, however, hypothesize about these potential relationships because I anticipated that these attitudes among

respondents were likely to be fairly entrenched. Nonetheless, I sought to examine whether there were indeed any framing effects on these broader policy attitudes.

### Experiment Procedures and Measurements

A collection of U.S. adults were randomly assigned to one of nine versions of a news story about an incident in which U.S. soldiers were accused of having killed several innocent civilians during combat operations in Afghanistan. The soldiers involved in this incident were also alleged to have desecrated some of the bodies of the victims by mutilating their corpses and posing for pictures afterward. This story was derived from an actual incident reported in the *New York Times* in September 2010, which received considerable attention in the press and among political and military officials for several months (Yardley & Schmitt, 2010). I chose to examine this incident in particular because, like My Lai and Abu Ghraib, it involved members of the U.S. military behaving in ways that are inconsistent with what are perceived to be American values. Thus, it represented a significant internal threat to American identity.

The nine conditions included in this study were created to test the potential effects of each of the four frames on individual respondents when each frame was either *echoed* or *contested* by political officials in news coverage about the incident. Specifically, there was an echo and a contested condition for each of the four frames of minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation. In the echo condition, the individual frame was invoked by a Democratic White House and U.S. officials and subsequently echoed within the article by Republican Congressional officials; in the contested condition, the individual frame was invoked by Democratic White House and U.S. officials and subsequently contested within the article by Republican Congressional officials. These conditions were reversed ideologically but mirrored the possible news coverage dynamics for My Lai and Abu Ghraib—when news coverage

primarily echoed a Republican presidential administration. The control condition included an article that contained only facts about the incident with none of these frames offered by political officials of any partisan stripe.

Prior to my analysis, I assessed the reliability of the data on several measures. I began with the four sets of incident-related attitudes: limited severity of the incident, whether these actions were caused by situational stress, whether those responsible for the incident would be appropriately punished, and belief in America as a moral leader. Limited severity contained six items, measured via 4-point scales, ranging from 1 (“not at all/never”) to 4 (“completely/all the time”). The items were: (a) To what extent do you think “the brigade commanders in charge” were responsible for this incident? (reverse-coded,  $M=2.31$ ,  $SD=.81$ ); (b) To what extent do you think “top U.S. military leaders in Afghanistan” were responsible for this incident? (reverse-coded,  $M=2.57$ ,  $SD=.89$ ); (c) To what extent do you think “the Defense Department/Pentagon” were responsible for this incident? (reverse-coded,  $M=2.68$ ,  $SD=.93$ ); (d) To what extent do you think “the White House” was responsible for this incident? (reverse-coded,  $M=2.81$ ,  $SD=1.00$ ); (e) “How often do you think U.S. military incidents like this happen in Afghanistan?” (reverse-coded,  $M=2.73$ ,  $SD=.64$ ); and (f) “To what extent do you think that the soldiers involved in this incident were just following orders?” (reverse-coded,  $M=3.23$ ,  $SD=.81$ ). These items when combined received a Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .80$ .

The situational stress measure contained five items, which were assessed on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (“not at all”) to 4 (“completely”). These included: (a) “To what extent do you think that the stresses of combat in Afghanistan led these soldiers to do this?” ( $M=2.87$ ,  $SD=.80$ ); (b) “To what extent do you think that this incident was caused by the difficulties faced by U.S. soldiers in identifying the enemy during combat in Afghanistan?” ( $M=2.29$ ,  $SD=.92$ ); (c)

“To what extent do you think that the military tactics used by the Taliban make incidents like this more likely?” ( $M=2.80$ ,  $SD=.84$ ); (d) “To what extent do you think that the chaotic environment in which these soldiers were operating in Afghanistan caused this incident?” ( $M=2.58$ ,  $SD=.78$ ); and (e) “To what extent do you think that the constant threat that these soldiers face in combat in Afghanistan led to this incident?” ( $M=2.68$ ,  $SD=.81$ ). These items when combined received a Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .83$ .

The punishment measure was examined via four items, on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (“not at all”) to 4 (“completely”). These items were: (a) “How likely do you think that those responsible for this incident will be appropriately punished?” ( $M=2.36$ ,  $SD=.86$ ); (b) “How confident are you that the U.S. military will take the necessary steps to help prevent incidents like this from happening again?” ( $M=2.12$ ,  $SD=.86$ ); (c) “To what extent do you think that justice will be appropriately carried out in this case?” ( $M=2.38$ ,  $SD=.82$ ); and (d) “To what extent do you think the U.S. military overlooks this type of behavior?” (reverse-coded,  $M=2.79$ ,  $SD=.78$ ). These items when combined received a Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .78$ .

The final incident-related measure was a perception of America as moral leader, which was comprised of four items that were assessed on 4-point scales ranging from 1 (“not at all”) to 4 (“completely”). These items included: (a) “To what extent do you think that America is a champion of human rights around the world?” ( $M=2.53$ ,  $SD=.83$ ); (b) “To what extent do you think that this incident is consistent with the way in which America conducts itself in war?” (reverse-coded,  $M=3.23$ ,  $SD=.79$ ); (c) “To what extent do you think that America has done more good than bad for the people of Afghanistan?” ( $M=2.64$ ,  $SD=.90$ ); and (d) “To what extent do you think that America’s military is a force for good in the world?” ( $M=2.71$ ,  $SD=.85$ ). These items when combined received a Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .78$ . Overall, there was strong reliability in each of the

scales for these incident-related measures (Reinard, 2006), meaning that each item behaved consistently with the other items in its grouping for these variables.

For each of these incident-related measures I averaged the measures to create single-item standardized indices of each scale, which were then scored in the direction of *frame acceptance*—in which higher scores meant respondents were more likely to regard the severity of the incident as limited, attribute the causes to situational stress, believe that those involved would be appropriately punished, and perceive America as a moral leader in the world.

Next, I assessed reliability for my measurement of national attachment, which consisted of five items (adapted from Sidanius, Feshbach, Levin, & Pratto, 1997) examined via 4-point scales, ranging from 1 (“never/not at all”) to 4 (“all the time/completely”). These items were: (a) “To what extent do you identify with other Americans?” ( $M=2.80$ ,  $SD=.78$ ); (b) “To what extent is being American important to you?” ( $M=3.43$ ,  $SD=.73$ ); (c) “To what extent do you feel close to other Americans?” ( $M=2.93$ ,  $SD=.78$ ); (d) “To what extent does the term ‘American’ describe you?” ( $M=3.33$ ,  $SD=.77$ ); and (e) “How often do you say ‘we’ instead of ‘they’ when talking about Americans?” ( $M=3.33$ ,  $SD=.83$ ). These items had a Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .84$ , so I averaged them to create a single-item index of national attachment where higher scores meant stronger identification with the nation.

Respondents were also asked about their attitudes towards the Afghanistan War. This was assessed with three items: (a) “To what extent do you think U.S. involvement in the war in Afghanistan has improved the long-term security of the United States” ( $M=1.90$ ,  $SD=.80$ ); (b) “To what extent do you think the United States is making progress in the war in Afghanistan?” ( $M=1.85$ ,  $SD=.71$ ); and (c) “To what extent do you think that the U.S. war effort in Afghanistan has been worth the costs” ( $M=1.68$ ,  $SD=.77$ ). These items had a Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .86$ , so I

averaged them to create a single, standardized measure. Finally, I asked respondents about their confidence in the U.S. military. This was examined via one item: “In general, how much confidence do you have in the U.S. military” ( $M=3.29$ ,  $SD=.74$ ).

In the following sections evidence is presented in two stages. I begin by providing results regarding the impact of the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames on respondents’ perceptions of the incident, their level of attachment to the nation and their broader attitudes about the Afghanistan War and the U.S. military. This was done to systematically measure the cultural resonance of these frames. In particular, I was interested in assessing how respondents psychologically processed these frames in response to the national transgression exposed in the news story. As the next step, I conducted this same three-step approach to identify differential impacts of echoed versus contested frames within the conditions on respondents’ attitudes. Together, these steps allowed me to test the cultural resonance of these frames as well as explore whether contestation of these frames diminished their impact on the public.

### Frame Resonance

In this section, I assessed the cultural resonance of the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames. First, I expected that exposure to these frames—whether echoed or contested—would serve to limit the extent to which respondents negatively reacted to the incident. Second, I expected that these frames would facilitate among respondents a stronger attachment with the nation. Lastly, I thought that these frames may well have had broader effects by generating among respondents increased support for the war and greater confidence in the U.S. military. In sum, if respondents who received the national-identity frames

perceived the incident more positively, identified more strongly with the nation and expressed greater support for the war and military than those who received the control condition, it would provide evidence of the cultural resonance of these frames.

### *Perceptions of the Incident*

To test my first hypothesis (H6)— that respondents who were exposed to news coverage in which these frames were present would be more likely to regard the severity of the incident as limited, see these actions as caused by situational stress, believe that those involved would be appropriately punished, and perceive America as a moral leader in the world—I initially ran *t*-tests comparing mean scores on these incident-related measures between those who received any of the frames and those who received no frames. This was done to assess whether, in general, the presence of any of the frames, regardless of whether Congressional opponents were presented as echoing or challenging them, was likely to elicit nation-protective tendencies among citizens. These results are shown in Table 5.3. These data indicate that respondents who were exposed to any of the frames were more likely to downplay the severity of the incident ( $M=.014$  vs.  $M=-.112$ ;  $p<.05$ ), attribute the causes of the incident to situational stress ( $M=.013$  vs.  $M=-.109$ ;  $p<.05$ ), believe that punishment would be appropriately served ( $M=.012$  vs.  $M=-.097$ ;  $p<.05$ ), and perceive America as a moral leader ( $M=.026$  vs.  $M=-.204$ ;  $p<.01$ ). This lends preliminary support for H6.

**Table 5.3** Mean scores on incident-related attitudes, comparing presence versus absence of any of the frames across all conditions.

|  | Presence         | Absence          |
|--|------------------|------------------|
| Limited Severity                             | .014<br>(n=1857) | -.112<br>(n=234) |
| <i>t</i> =1.93, <i>df</i> 304, <i>p</i> <.05 |                  |                  |
| Situational Stress                           | .013<br>(n=1837) | -.109<br>(n=232) |
| <i>t</i> =1.82, <i>df</i> 299, <i>p</i> <.05 |                  |                  |
| Punishment                                   | .012<br>(n=1856) | -.097<br>(n=236) |
| <i>t</i> =1.63, <i>df</i> 303, <i>p</i> =.05 |                  |                  |
| America as Moral Leader                      | .026<br>(n=1838) | -.204<br>(n=233) |
| <i>t</i> =3.44, <i>df</i> 300, <i>p</i> <.01 |                  |                  |

*Note.* The potential range of means is from -1 (lowest level of agreement) to 1 (highest level of agreement).

Next, I compared mean scores for these incident-related attitudes within conditions. Because each of these incident-related measures is conceptually linked with one of the frames—limited severity (minimization), situational stress (contextualization), punishment (disassociation), and belief in America (reaffirmation)—I wanted to assess the effects of the presence versus absence of each of the frames on these related attitude measures. These results are in Table 5.4.

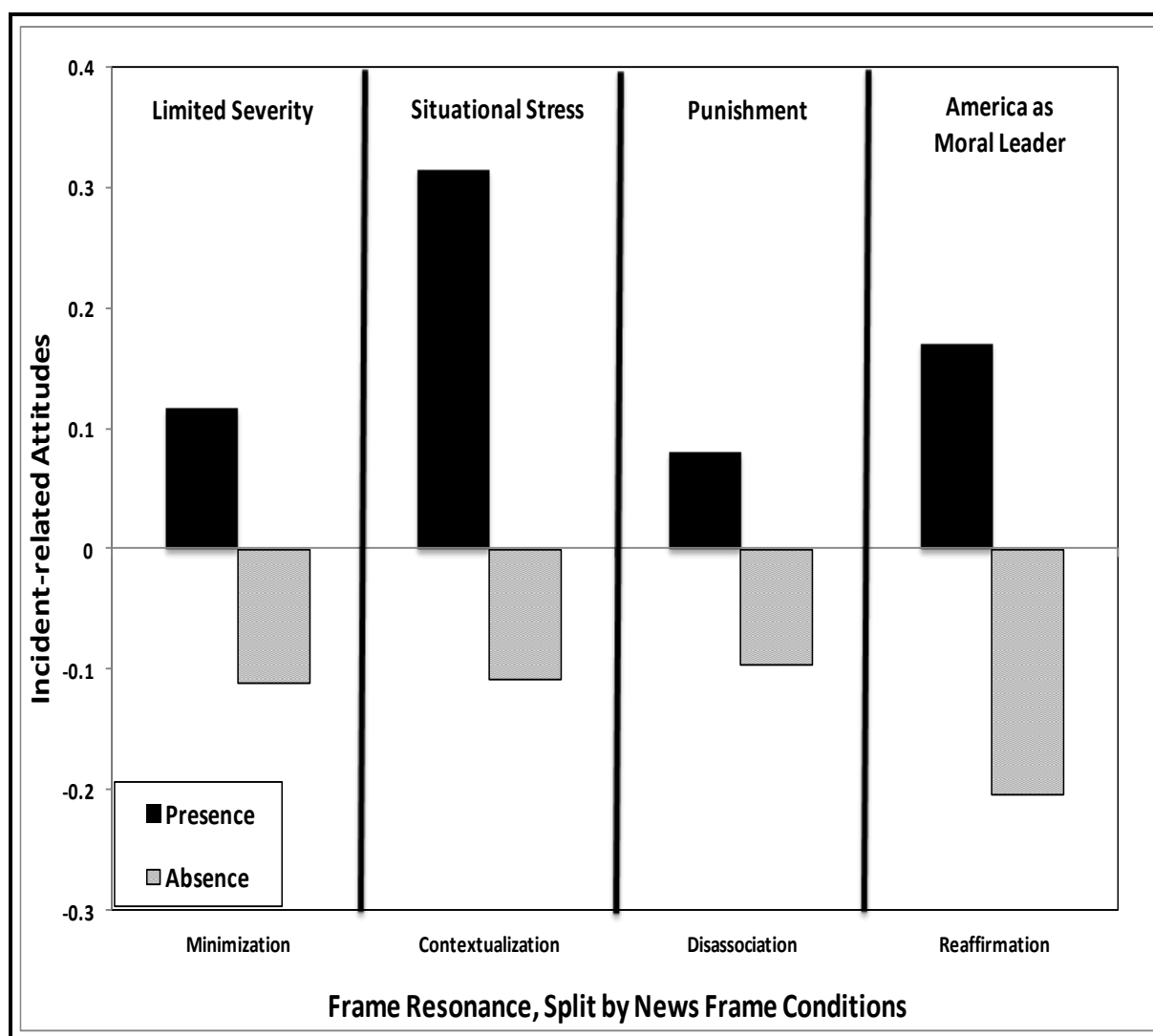
**Table 5.4** Mean scores on incident-related attitudes, comparing presence versus absence of these frames within conditions.

|                  | <b>Minimization</b>              |                    | <b>Contextualization</b>   |                                  |       |
|------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------|-------|
|                  | Presence<br>(n=455)              | Absence<br>(n=234) | Presence<br>(n=455)        | Absence<br>(n=232)               |       |
| Limited Severity | .177                             | -.112              | Situational Stress         | .315                             | -.109 |
|                  | <i>t=3.65, df 687, p&lt;.001</i> |                    |                            | <i>t=5.49, df 685, p&lt;.001</i> |       |
|                  | <b>Disassociation</b>            |                    | <b>Reaffirmation</b>       |                                  |       |
|                  | Presence<br>(n=460)              | Absence<br>(n=236) | Presence<br>(n=474)        | Absence<br>(n=233)               |       |
| Punishment       | .081                             | -.097              | America as<br>Moral Leader | .171                             | -.204 |
|                  | <i>t=2.24, df 694, p&lt;.05</i>  |                    |                            | <i>t=4.81, df 705, p&lt;.001</i> |       |

*Note.* The potential range of means is from -1 (lowest level of agreement) to 1 (highest level of agreement).

Overall, the data offer strong support for H6. Those who received the minimization frame were significantly more likely to downplay the severity of the incident ( $M=.177$  vs.  $M=-.112$ ;  $p<.001$ ); those who received the contextualization frame were significantly more likely to say the behavior of those involved in this incident was caused by situational stress ( $M=.315$  vs.  $M=-.109$ ;  $p<.001$ ); those who received the disassociation frame were significantly more likely to believe that those involved would be appropriately punished ( $M=.081$  vs.  $M=-.097$ ;  $p<.05$ ); and those who received the reaffirmation frame were significantly more likely to perceive America as a moral leader ( $M=.171$  vs.  $M=-.204$ ;  $p<.001$ ). Together, these results suggest that each of these frames—whether echoed or challenged by Congressional officials—strongly resonated among respondents. In contrast, when respondents received none of these frames, they were much more likely to perceive the incident more critically. Specifically, they were more likely to magnify the incident’s severity, dismiss claims that situational stress caused this behavior,

express doubt that punishment would be appropriately carried out, and question America's position as moral leader in the world. These patterns are presented visually in Figure 5.1.



*Note.* The potential range of means is from -1 (lowest level of agreement) to 1 (highest level of agreement).

**Figure 5.1** Means on incident-related attitudes, within frame conditions, when frame was present versus absent.

Overall, then, I found that exposure to the minimization, contextualization, disassociation and reaffirmation frames led respondents to evaluate the causes and consequences of this incident much less critically. Notably, these frames served to contain the potential damage caused by this scandal by encouraging respondents to downplay the incident, attribute the

incident to situational factors, believe that those responsible would be brought to justice, and reaffirm their perceptions that America is a moral leader. Such direct effects on respondents' perceptions of the incident are strongly suggestive of the cultural resonance of these frames.

#### *National Attachment*

Given the significant effects of the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames on respondents' incident-related attitudes, I next wanted to explore whether exposure to these frames influenced respondents' attachment to the nation. I expected that respondents exposed to news coverage in which the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames were *present* would feel a stronger personal tie with the nation and other Americans than those exposed to news coverage in which these frames were *absent* (H7). With this in mind, I began this analysis by running t-tests comparing mean scores on national attachment between those who received any of the frames and those who received none of them. These results are shown in Table 5.5.

**Table 5.5** Mean scores on national attachment, comparing presence versus absence of the frames across all conditions.

|   | Presence         | Absence          |
|---|------------------|------------------|
| All Frames Combined                           | .023<br>(n=1818) | -.179<br>(n=232) |
| <i>t</i> =2.89, <i>df</i> 2048, <i>p</i> <.01 |                  |                  |
| Minimization                                  | .030<br>(n=457)  | -.179<br>(n=232) |
| <i>t</i> =2.54, <i>df</i> 687, <i>p</i> <.01  |                  |                  |
| Contextualization                             | .059<br>(n=447)  | -.179<br>(n=232) |
| <i>t</i> =2.88, <i>df</i> 677, <i>p</i> <.01  |                  |                  |
| Disassociation                                | -.039<br>(n=452) | -.179<br>(n=232) |
| <i>t</i> =1.68, <i>df</i> 682, <i>p</i> <.05  |                  |                  |
| Reaffirmation                                 | .040<br>(n=462)  | -.179<br>(n=232) |
| <i>t</i> =2.73, <i>df</i> 692, <i>p</i> <.01  |                  |                  |

*Note.* The potential range of means is from -1 (lowest national attachment) to 1 (highest national attachment).

These results indicate that exposure to the national-identity frames in the aggregate spurred a significantly higher level of national attachment among respondents ( $M=.023$  vs.  $M=-.179$ ;  $p<.01$ ). I also found significant effects within each condition. Specifically, respondents exhibited higher attachment to the nation when exposed to the minimization frame ( $M=.030$  vs.  $M=-.179$ ;  $p<.01$ ), contextualization frame ( $M=.059$  vs.  $M=-.179$ ;  $p<.01$ ), disassociation frame ( $M=-.039$  vs.  $M=-.179$ ;  $p<.05$ ) and reaffirmation frame ( $M=.040$  vs.  $M=-.179$ ;  $p<.01$ ). These results offer strong support for H7. Ultimately, the fact that these frames—both collectively and individually—would have such a dramatic impact on these deeply held beliefs among

respondents, moving them to identify more strongly with the nation, further demonstrates the cultural resonance of these messages.

### *Policy Attitudes*

Next, I examined whether the frames of minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation had broader effects on respondents' attitudes about the Afghanistan War as well as their confidence in the U.S. military. Respondents' attitudes about the war and the military may well have been negatively affected given that this incident involved members of the U.S. military committing acts of violence against non-combatants during the Afghanistan War. Exposure to these nation-protective frames, however, may have also served to limit the potentially negative reaction among respondents towards the war and the military. I therefore wanted to assess this possibility. I began by conducting t-tests comparing the means for each of these measures between those who received any of the national-identity frames and those who received the control condition. These results are presented in Table 5.6.

**Table 5.6** Mean scores on support for the Afghanistan War and confidence in the U.S. military, comparing presence versus absence of the frames across all conditions.

|                             | <b>Presence</b>                               | <b>Absence</b>   |
|-----------------------------|---|------------------|
| Confidence in U.S. military | .021<br>(n=1868)                              | -.162<br>(n=237) |
|                             | <i>t</i> =2.66, <i>df</i> 2103, <i>p</i> <.01 |                  |
| Support for Afghanistan War | .024<br>(n=1862)                              | -.194<br>(n=232) |
|                             | <i>t</i> =3.16, <i>df</i> 2094, <i>p</i> <.01 |                  |

*Note.* The potential range of means is from -1 (lowest national attachment) to 1 (highest national attachment).

As we can see, respondents' attitudes towards the Afghanistan War ( $M=.021$  vs.  $M=-.162$ ;  $p<.01$ ) and the U.S. military ( $M=.024$  vs.  $M=-.194$ ;  $p<.01$ ) were significantly more positive when presented with the national-identity frames. Thus, respondents who received these frames

were less likely to negatively link this national transgression to the merits of the war or the performance of the military than those who received just straight factual information. That these frames would have such direct effects on these broader policy attitudes speaks to both the cultural resonance of these messages as well as the potential benefits that officials might gain from emphasizing them when nationally dissonant moments arise.

Because of the complexity of each of these attitudes, I wanted to delve deeper into whether the impact of the nation-protective frames on respondents' attitudes about both the war and the U.S. military might have been moderated by other factors. Specifically, I wanted to assess whether this relationship was moderated by respondents' attitudes about the incident. Given that this incident implicated the image of the nation and each of the four incident-related attitudes served as measures of whether respondents engaged in nation-protective tendencies in response to the incident, I thought that these attitudes might have moderated respondents' attitudes about the war and the military. I therefore explored these dynamics across the treatment conditions, using support for the Afghanistan War and confidence in the U.S. military each as criterion measures.

I began by examining whether respondents' incident-related attitudes moderated the effect of the nation-protective frames on respondents' support for the Afghanistan War. To do so, I constructed a hierarchical regression model with three blocks. The first block included respondent demographics. The second block included the five moderators—the four incident-related attitudes and the national attachment measure—along with dummy variable indicating presence (versus absence) of the frames. Finally, the third block included four interaction terms—each of the incident-related variables multiplied by the presence dummy variable. For the incident-related interaction terms, a significant coefficient would mean that exposure to the

frames affected respondents' support for the war depending on whether they regarded the incident as limited in severity, attributed the causes of the incident to situational stress, believed that those involved would be punished, and perceived America as a moral leader. These results are shown in Table 5.7. The data indicate that the model explained a considerable amount of variance of respondents' attitudes towards the Afghanistan War at 38%. Nonetheless, there were no significant interaction effects found between the incident-related attitudes and the presence of the nation-protective frames. Thus, the relationship between respondents' incident-related attitudes and their attitudes about the war did not depend on their exposure to the frames.

**Table 5.7** Predicting support for the Afghanistan War, comparing presence versus absence of the frames across all conditions.

|                                   | Model 1                            | Model 2           | Model 3           |     |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-----|
|                                   | $\beta$                            | $\beta$           | $\beta$           |     |
| Gender (Female)                   | -.06**                             | -.03 <sup>^</sup> | -.03 <sup>^</sup> |     |
| Age                               | -.08***                            | -.15***           | -.15***           |     |
| Education                         | -.05*                              | -.04 <sup>^</sup> | -.04 <sup>^</sup> |     |
| Party (Democrat)                  | -.28***                            | -.10***           | -.10***           |     |
| National Attachment               |                                    | -.01              | .00               |     |
| Limited Severity                  |                                    | -.08***           | -.09**            |     |
| Situational Stress                |                                    | -.03              | -.08*             |     |
| Punishment                        |                                    | .19***            | .21***            |     |
| America as Moral Leader           |                                    | .47***            | .47***            |     |
| Presence of Frames                |                                    | .03               | -.03              |     |
| xPresence*Limited Severity        |                                    |                   | .02               |     |
| xPresence*Situational Stress      |                                    |                   | .06               |     |
| xPresence*Punishment              |                                    |                   | -.02              |     |
| xPresence*America as Moral Leader |                                    |                   | -.01              |     |
|                                   | $R^2_{Adjusted}$                   | .10               | .38               | .38 |
|                                   | Change in $R^2_{Adjusted}$         |                   | .28               | .00 |
|                                   | $F$ for change in $R^2_{Adjusted}$ |                   | 142.66***         | .68 |

**Note.** Values in the table represent standardized beta coefficients upon entry. \*\*\* indicates beta is significant at  $p < .001$ ; \*\* indicates beta is significant at  $p < .01$ ; \* indicates beta is significant at  $p < .05$ ; and <sup>^</sup> indicates beta is marginally significant at  $p < .10$ .

As the next step, using the same regression model, I analyzed whether the relationship between the messages and respondents' confidence in the U.S. military was moderated by their

incident-related attitudes. These results are reported in Table 5.8. These data indicate that 43% of the variance was explained by this model. Most notably, I found significant interaction effects between the presence of the frames and whether respondents (a) perceived the incident as limited in severity and (b) attributed the causes of the incident to situational stress in predicting respondents' confidence in the military. Thus, those presented with one of the nation-protective frames who came to downplay the incident or believe it was caused by situational stress became more confident in the military. Beyond these two findings, there was also a marginally significant interaction effect between the presence of the frames and whether respondents believed those involved would be punished in predicting respondents' confidence in the military. The coefficient for this interaction, however, was negative; thus, those presented with one of the frames who came to believe the alleged perpetrators would be brought to justice became less confident in the U.S. military. This could potentially be explained by a perception that punishment alone would not eradicate causes and consequences of this incident.

**Table 5.8** Predicting confidence in U.S. military, comparing presence versus absence of the frames across all conditions.

|                                   | Model 1                                   | Model 2 | Model 3   |       |
|-----------------------------------|---|---------|-----------|-------|
|                                   | $\beta$                                   | $\beta$ | $\beta$   |       |
| Gender (Female)                   | -.10***                                   | -.07*** | -.07***   |       |
| Age                               | .11***                                    | .00     | .00       |       |
| Education                         | -.09***                                   | -.07*** | -.07***   |       |
| Party (Democrat)                  | -.23***                                   | -.02    | -.02      |       |
| National Attachment               |   | .21***  | .21***    |       |
| Limited Severity                  |   | .04^    | -.01      |       |
| Situational Stress                |   | .08***  | .02       |       |
| Punishment                        |   | .13***  | .18***    |       |
| America as Moral Leader           |   | .39***  | .41***    |       |
| Presence of Frames                |   | .02     | .02       |       |
| xPresence*Limited Severity        |   |         | .07*      |       |
| xPresence*Situational Stress      |   |         | .07*      |       |
| xPresence*Punishment              |   |         | -.07^     |       |
| xPresence*America as Moral Leader |   |         | -.03      |       |
|                                   | $R^2_{\text{Adjusted}}$                   | .09     | .42       | .43   |
|                                   | Change in $R^2_{\text{Adjusted}}$         |         | .33       | .01   |
|                                   | $F$ for change in $R^2_{\text{Adjusted}}$ |         | 184.69*** | 2.50* |

**Note.** Values in the table represent standardized beta coefficients upon entry. \*\*\* indicates beta is significant at  $p < .001$ ; \*\* indicates beta is significant at  $p < .01$ ; \* indicates beta is significant at  $p < .05$ ; and ^ indicates beta is marginally significant at  $p < .10$ .

To further explore the interaction effects between the presence of these frames and incident-related attitudes in predicting respondents' confidence in U.S. military, I examined these

dynamics broken out by frame. Table 5.9 presents these effects within the minimization condition. Consistent with the findings in the aggregate, I found significant interaction effects between the presence of minimization frame and whether respondents perceived the incident as limited in severity in predicting respondents' confidence in the U.S. military. Put another way, those presented with the minimization frame who came to downplay the incident became more confident in the military. Within the contextualization, disassociation and reaffirmation conditions, however, I did not find any such interaction effects.

**Table 5.9** Predicting confidence in U.S. military, comparing presence versus absence of the frames within the minimization condition.

|                            | $\beta$                                   |
|----------------------------|---|
| Gender (Female)            | -.11***                                   |
| Age                        | .01                                       |
| Education                  | -.08*                                     |
| Party (Democrat)           | -.16***                                   |
| National Attachment        | .39***                                    |
| Limited Severity           | .10**                                     |
| Presence of Frames         | .03                                       |
| xPresence*Limited Severity | .08*                                      |
|                            | $R^2_{\text{Adjusted}}$                   |
|                            | .26                                       |
|                            | $F$ for change in $R^2_{\text{Adjusted}}$ |
|                            | 29.10***                                  |

**Note.** Values in the table represent standardized beta coefficients upon entry. \*\*\* indicates beta is significant at  $p < .001$ ; \*\* indicates beta is significant at  $p < .01$ ; \* indicates beta is significant at  $p < .05$ ; and ^ indicates beta is marginally significant at  $p < .10$ .

In sum, my analysis of whether the frames of minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation had broader effects on respondents' attitudes about War and the

military revealed some significant findings. Most notably, I found that respondents were significantly more supportive of the war and more confident in the military when presented with any of the nation-protective frames. In addition, I found significant interaction effects between the presence of these frames and whether respondents regarded the incident as limited in severity and attributed the causes of the incident to situational stress in predicting respondents' confidence in the military. Together, these findings suggest that these national-identity emphases had powerful effects not just on respondents' perceptions of the incident or their attachment to the nation, but also on their broader attitudes about the war and the military.

### Frame Contestation

In this section, I explored whether contestation of the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames—offered by Congressional officials and expressed through the news—served to undercut the public's receptivity to these frames. First, I expected that challenges to the frames would cause respondents to adopt more negative attitudes towards the incident. Second, I expected that respondents would attach less strongly with the nation when presented with these counterframes. Finally, I thought that frame contestation might undermine respondents' support for the Afghanistan War and decrease their confidence in the military. Thus, if respondents who received the contested frames perceived the incident more negatively, identified less strongly with the nation, and expressed less support for the war and military than those who received the echoed frames, it would indicate the considerable impact of frame contestation on public opinion in moments when national transgressions arise.

### *Perceptions of the Incident*

For my third hypothesis, I expected that respondents exposed to contestation among Congressional officials in the news stories would be less likely to downplay the severity of the

incident (minimization), attribute the causes of the incident to situational stress (contextualization), emphasize punishment for those involved (disassociation) and express belief in America (reaffirmation) (H8). I therefore conducted t-tests to compare the means for these incident-related attitudes between those respondents who received either the echoed frame or contested frame. These results are presented in Table 5.10.

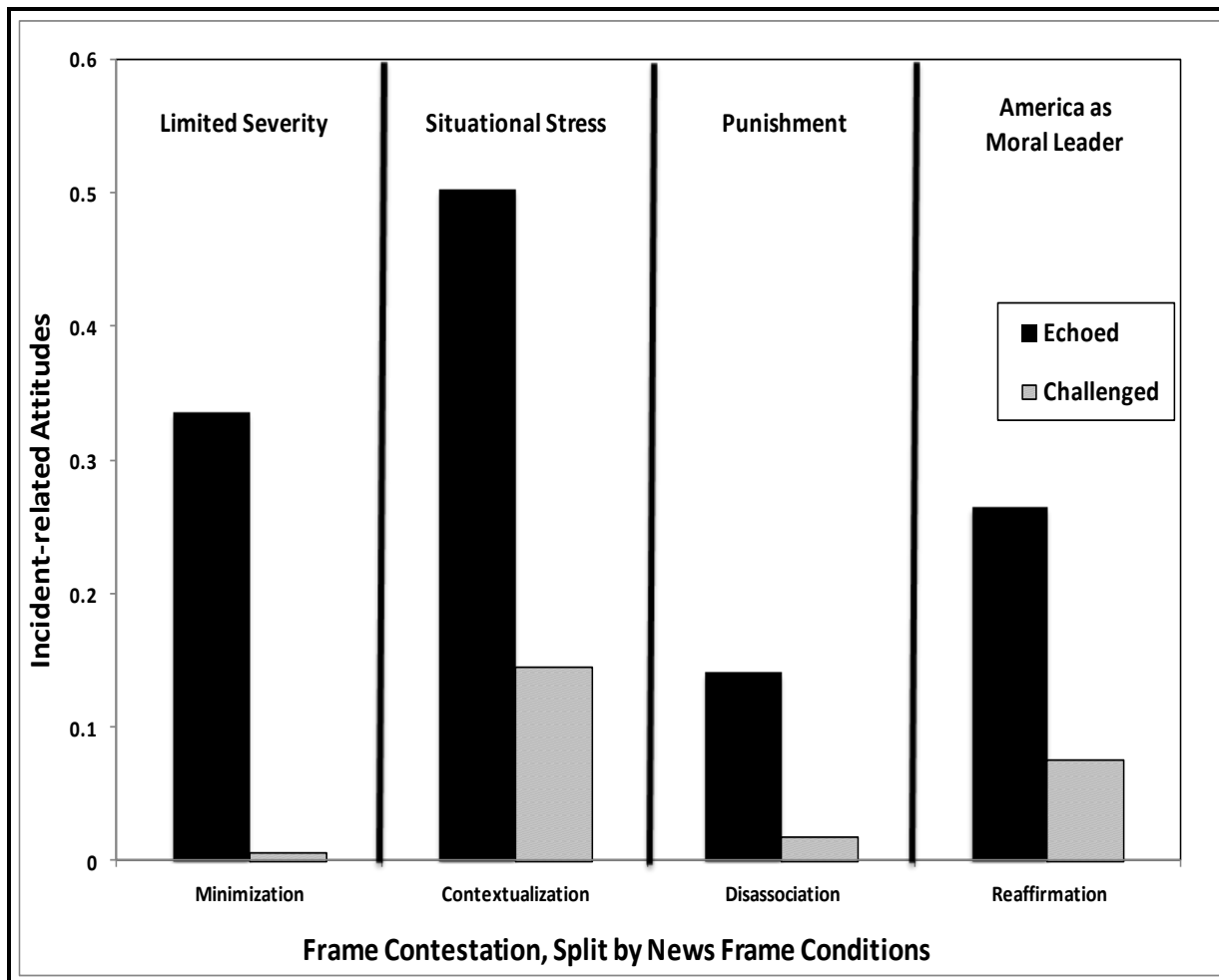
**Table 5.10** Mean scores on incident-related attitudes, comparing echo versus contestation of these frames within conditions.

|                  | <b>Minimization</b>              |                       |                            | <b>Contextualization</b>        |                       |
|------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------|
|                  | Echoed<br>(n=234)                | Challenged<br>(n=221) |                            | Echoed<br>(n=216)               | Challenged<br>(n=239) |
| Limited Severity | .336                             | .006                  | Situational Stress         | .503                            | .145                  |
|                  | <i>t=3.54, df 453, p&lt;.001</i> |                       |                            | <i>t=4.05, df 453, p&lt;.01</i> |                       |
|                  | <b>Disassociation</b>            |                       |                            | <b>Reaffirmation</b>            |                       |
|                  | Echoed<br>(n=236)                | Challenged<br>(n=224) |                            | Echoed<br>(n=241)               | Challenged<br>(n=233) |
| Punishment       | .141                             | .017                  | America as<br>Moral Leader | .265                            | .075                  |
|                  | <i>t=1.31, df 458, p&lt;.10</i>  |                       |                            | <i>t=2.11, df 472, p&lt;.05</i> |                       |

*Note.* The potential range of means is from -1 (lowest level of agreement) to 1 (highest level of agreement).

These data indicate that respondents who received the contested news frames were significantly more critical of the incident than those who received the echoed news frames in all four comparisons. Specifically, those who received the contested version of the minimization frame were significantly less likely to regard the severity of the incident as limited ( $M=.336$  vs.  $M=.006$ ;  $p<.001$ ); those who received the contested version of the contextualization frame were significantly less likely to attribute the causes of the incident to situational stress ( $M=.503$  vs.  $M=.145$ ;  $p<.01$ ); those who received the contested version of the disassociation frame were

marginally less likely to believe that those involved would be punished appropriately ( $M=.141$  vs.  $M=.017$ ;  $p<.10$ ); and those who received the contested version of the reaffirmation frame were significantly less likely to perceive America as a moral leader ( $M=.265$  vs.  $M=.075$ ;  $p<.05$ ). Taken together, these results offer strong support for H8—contestation significantly diminished the impact of the frames. These results are presented visually in Figure 5.2.



Note. The potential range of means is from -1 (lowest level of agreement) to 1 (highest level of agreement).

**Figure 5.2** Means on incident-related attitudes, within frame conditions, when frame was echoed or challenged.

Overall, then, I found that contestation of the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames significantly diminished the cascade of these initial frames. Specifically, respondents' perceptions of the incident within each condition became

significantly more negative when presented with these counterframes. Thus, such challenges served to invite skepticism among respondents about the nation-protective frames, thereby limiting the extent to which respondents' accepted them.

#### *National Attachment*

Next, I examined whether challenges to these frames undercut respondents' attachment to the nation (H9). I expected that respondents would identify less strongly with the nation when the nation-protective frames were contested by Congressional officials in news coverage versus when they were echoed by these officials. These results are reported in Table 5.11.

**Table 5.11** Mean scores on national attachment, comparing echoed versus contested frames across all conditions.

|                     | Echoed                     | Challenged       |
|---------------------|----------------------------|------------------|
| All Frames Combined | .064<br>(n=910)            | -.019<br>(n=908) |
|                     | $t=1.80, df 1816, p<.05$   |                  |
| Minimization        | .016<br>(n=234)            | .045<br>(n=223)  |
|                     | $t= -.313, df 455, p=n.s.$ |                  |
| Contextualization   | .107<br>(n=211)            | .016<br>(n=236)  |
|                     | $t=.965, df 445, p=n.s.$   |                  |
| Disassociation      | .046<br>(n=230)            | -.126<br>(n=222) |
|                     | $t=1.81, df 450, p<.05$    |                  |
| Reaffirmation       | .093<br>(n=235)            | -.013<br>(n=227) |
|                     | $t=1.19, df 460, p=n.s.$   |                  |

*Note.* The potential range of means is from -1 (lowest national attachment) to 1 (highest national attachment).

These data indicate partial support for H9. Notably, challenges to these frames, in general, significantly reduced respondents' attachment to the nation ( $M=.064$  vs.  $M=-.019$ ;  $p<.05$ ). Within conditions, however, only contestation of the disassociation frame ( $M=.046$  vs.  $M=-.126$ ;  $p<.05$ ) significantly weakened the level of national attachment among respondents. Thus, the effects of these frames on national attachment were moderated—in the aggregate and within the disassociation condition—by whether they were echoed or contested in news coverage. Put another way, challenges to these frames served to diminish respondents'

attachment to the nation, further indicating the impact of frame contestation among officials when manifest within the press.

### *Policy Attitudes*

As the final step in this analysis, I explored whether contestation of the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames shifted respondents' attitudes about the Afghanistan War and their confidence in U.S. military. Results are in Table 5.12.

**Table 5.12** Mean scores on support for the Afghanistan War and confidence in the U.S. military, comparing echoed versus contested frames across all conditions.

|                             | <b>Echoed</b>                                 | <b>Challenged</b> |
|-----------------------------|---|-------------------|
| Confidence in U.S. military | .037<br>(n=933)                               | .004<br>(n=935)   |
|                             | <i>t</i> =.74, <i>df</i> 1866, <i>p</i> =n.s. |                   |
| Support for Afghanistan War | .054<br>(n=937)                               | -.006<br>(n=925)  |
|                             | <i>t</i> =1.30, <i>df</i> 1860, <i>p</i> <.10 |                   |

*Note.* The potential range of means is from -1 (lowest national attachment) to 1 (highest national attachment).

Those respondents who received the contested news frames were marginally more critical of the Afghanistan War than those who received the echoed news frames ( $M=.054$  vs.  $M=-.006$ ;  $p<.10$ ), whereas there was no significant difference in confidence in the U.S. military among respondents between the echoed and contested news frames, though the pattern in the data was consistent with the support for the war measure. Overall, then, contestation of the frames did undermine support for the war, albeit marginally. This indicates the potential impact that challenges to these frames can have on public opinion when advanced in the press.

Next, I probed deeper to assess whether respondents' incident-related attitudes may have moderated the effect of the frame contestation on respondents' support for the war. I therefore employed the same hierarchical regression model used above, which consisted of three blocks.

Specifically, the first block included respondent demographics; the second block included the five moderators—the four incident-related attitudes and the national attachment measure—along with dummy variable indicating echo (versus contestation) of the frames. Finally, the third block included four interaction terms—each of the incident-related variables multiplied by the contestation dummy variable. These results are presented in Table 5.13. Here again we see a significant amount of variance explained at 37%; however, no interaction effects were found between incident-related attitudes and the contested frame conditions.

**Table 5.13** Predicting support for the Afghanistan War, comparing echoed versus contested frames across all conditions.

|                                 | Model 1                                   | Model 2 | Model 3   |      |
|---------------------------------|---|---------|-----------|------|
|                                 | $\beta$                                   | $\beta$ | $\beta$   |      |
| Gender (Female)                 | -.06*                                     | -.03    | -.03      |      |
| Age                             | -.08**                                    | -.15*** | -.15***   |      |
| Education                       | -.04                                      | -.02    | -.02      |      |
| Party (Democrat)                | -.28***                                   | -.10*** | -.09***   |      |
| National Attachment             |   | .01     | .01       |      |
| Limited Severity                |   | -.08**  | -.08**    |      |
| Situational Stress              |   | -.02    | -.02      |      |
| Punishment                      |   | .19***  | .19***    |      |
| America as Moral Leader         |   | .47***  | .47***    |      |
| Echoed Frames                   |   | .00     | .00       |      |
| xEchoed*Limited Severity        |   |         | .03       |      |
| xEchoed*Situational Stress      |   |         | -.01      |      |
| xEchoed*Punishment              |   |         | .03       |      |
| xEchoed*America as Moral Leader |   |         | -.02      |      |
|                                 | $R^2_{\text{Adjusted}}$                   | .09     | .37       | .37  |
|                                 | Change in $R^2_{\text{Adjusted}}$         |         | .28       | .00  |
|                                 | $F$ for change in $R^2_{\text{Adjusted}}$ |         | 125.77*** | 1.18 |

**Note.** Values in the table represent standardized beta coefficients upon entry. \*\*\* indicates beta is significant at  $p < .001$ ; \*\* indicates beta is significant at  $p < .01$ ; \* indicates beta is significant at  $p < .05$ ; and ^ indicates beta is marginally significant at  $p < .10$ .

Finally, I employed the same regression model to assess whether respondents' incident-related attitudes may have moderated the effect of the frame contestation on respondents' confidence in the military. These results are reported in Table 5.14. Overall, 42% of the variance was explained by this model. Again, no interaction effects were found in this model.

**Table 5.14** Predicting confidence in U.S. military, comparing echoed versus contested frames across all conditions.

|                                 | Model 1                                   | Model 2 | Model 3   |     |
|---------------------------------|---|---------|-----------|-----|
|                                 | $\beta$                                   | $\beta$ | $\beta$   |     |
| Gender (Female)                 | -.10***                                   | -.07*** | -.07***   |     |
| Age                             | .11***                                    | -.01    | -.01      |     |
| Education                       | -.08**                                    | -.06**  | -.06**    |     |
| Party (Democrat)                | -.23***                                   | -.03    | -.03      |     |
| National Attachment             |   | .21***  | .21***    |     |
| Limited Severity                |   | .05*    | .05**     |     |
| Situational Stress              |   | .09***  | .09***    |     |
| Punishment                      |   | .11***  | .11***    |     |
| America as Moral Leader         |   | .38***  | .38***    |     |
| Echoed Frames                   |   | .01     | .00       |     |
| xEchoed*Limited Severity        |   |         | .00       |     |
| xEchoed*Situational Stress      |   |         | -.01      |     |
| xEchoed*Punishment              |   |         | -.01      |     |
| xEchoed*America as Moral Leader |   |         | .00       |     |
|                                 | $R^2_{\text{Adjusted}}$                   | .09     | .42       | .42 |
|                                 | Change in $R^2_{\text{Adjusted}}$         |         | .33       | .00 |
|                                 | $F$ for change in $R^2_{\text{Adjusted}}$ |         | 158.15*** | .26 |

**Note.** Values in the table represent standardized beta coefficients upon entry. \*\*\* indicates beta is significant at  $p < .001$ ; \*\* indicates beta is significant at  $p < .01$ ; \* indicates beta is significant at  $p < .05$ ; and ^ indicates beta is marginally significant at  $p < .10$ .

In sum, these results indicate that frame contestation had, at best, marginal effects on support for the war among respondents. No impact was found on confidence in the military and I

found no interaction effects in each of the regression models. Thus, the effects of such challenges to the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames were primarily limited to respondents' incident-related attitudes and their level of national attachment.

### Discussion

In this chapter I explored how citizens respond to messages that appeal to and serve to bolster the nation in response to incidents in which the image of the nation has been threatened. Chapters 3 and 4 showed that four types of nation-protective frames—minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation—were emphasized by presidential administration leaders and in news coverage when such national transgressions occur—even though there was substantial contestation among opposing partisans. The reason for these dynamics, I argued, was that these frames are culturally resonant—that is, Americans widely embrace them in such moments. This stems from the fact that citizens tend to derive comfort and security from the nation and, therefore, seek to protect it whenever it is perceived to be threatened. Prior to this chapter, however, I had not systematically examined whether these frames do indeed resonate in moments of national dissonance. Furthermore, I had not assessed what impact, if any, challenges to these frames—when offered by Congressional opponents and expressed through the press—might have on the public's receptivity to them. These were the goals of this chapter.

Overall, the experimental data presented in this chapter point to both the cultural resonance of the minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation frames and a sizeable impact of contestation by U.S. political officials in the news. Notably, the results suggest that when these perspectives are offered at the top of the framing hierarchy by White House and military officials, the frames cascade forcefully into the public. Conversely, when

these messages are emphasized by White House and military officials, but are then strongly contested among Congressional officials in the press, it significantly diminishes the cascade of these initial frames as they move toward the public. These dynamics were evident in how respondents perceived the causes and broader consequences of the incident, the extent to which they identified with the nation, and to a much lesser degree their broader attitudes about the war and the military. Notably, there are several key findings I wish to emphasize.

First, I found that exposure to the frames—whether echoed or contested—served to significantly contain the extent to which respondents negatively reacted to the incident. Specifically, those respondents who received any of the frames were more likely to downplay the incident, attribute the causes of the incident to situational stress, believe that punishment would be appropriately carried out, and perceive America as a moral leader in the world. These direct effects on respondents' incident-related attitudes were even more significant within conditions. Notably, those who received the minimization frame were significantly more likely to downplay the severity of the incident; those who received the contextualization frame were significantly more likely to say the behavior of those involved in this incident was caused by situational stress; those who received the disassociation frame were significantly more likely to believe that those involved would be appropriately punished; and those who received the reaffirmation frame were significantly more likely to perceive America as a moral leader. These results are illuminating: they reveal that emphasis on these national-identity frames by political officials in the news can deeply affect how the public interprets the character, causes and consequences of national transgressions. This illustrates the cultural resonance of these messages.

Second, the results showed that these frames did more than shape how respondents perceived the incident; they also spurred a significantly higher level of national attachment

among respondents. This was evident both in the aggregate—when any national-identity frame was present—and within each specific frame conditions. In particular, minimization, contextualization, disassociation, and reaffirmation each served to activate among respondents a stronger identification with the nation in the aftermath of the incident. That these frames would have significant direct effects on such deeply held beliefs is revealing. It suggests each of these emphases taps into the tendency among citizens to identify with and protect the nation when internal threats to its image arise. This further demonstrates the cultural resonance of these messages.

Third, the data indicate that exposure to these frames directly impacted respondents' attitudes about the Afghanistan war and the U.S. military. In particular, respondents who received the frames were significantly less likely to link the incident with the broader merits of the war or the performance of the military. Beyond these direct effects on respondents' policy attitudes, I also found that those presented with one of the nation-protective frames who subsequently downplayed the severity of the incident or believed it to be caused by situational stress became more confident in the military. In this sense, the frames worked in tandem with these nation-protective attitudes to limit the extent to which people negatively reacted to the military in response to the incident. These findings indicate the power of these frames and the potential benefits that political officials might gain from emphasizing them in moments of national dissonance.

Finally, I found considerable evidence to suggest that contestation of these frames influenced respondents' attitudes in response to the incident. Notably, contestation of the four frames by Congressional officials in news coverage generated significantly more negative attitudes towards the incident among respondents. In particular, those who received the contested

version of minimization were significantly less likely to regard the severity of the incident as limited; those who received the contested version of contextualization were significantly less likely to attribute the causes of the incident to situational stress; those who received the contested version of disassociation were marginally less likely to believe that those involved would be punished appropriately; and those who received the contested version of reaffirmation were significantly less likely to perceive America as a moral leader. Further, challenges to these frames also led respondents to identify less strongly with the nation.

Taken together, these results show that challenges to frames—even culturally resonant ones—in news can substantially affect how the public responds to national transgressions. This is all the more important given that the press rarely gives voice to counterframes in news stories in response to such incidents—or at least this was the case with My Lai and Abu Ghraib—even when such views are manifestly present from political leaders. Thus, were the press to reliably “index” the contestation offered among political elites in such moments, the public would be more likely to critically assess the underlying circumstances that led to the incident and substantively examine its broader implications. In this sense, the presence of counterframes in news discourse encourages increased public scrutiny of the nation’s policies and greater accountability of the nation’s policymakers. These results, then, highlight the importance that the press actually does index such views.

In sum, the research in this chapter demonstrates the underlying importance of cultural resonance within the broader relationship among political officials, the press, and the public. Frames that effectively tap into the broader cultural values of the citizenry by appealing to and bolstering the national identity, particularly in moments of national dissonance, tend to gain wide acceptance among the public. In such moments, citizens often seek out messages that will allow

them to reconcile their beliefs in the principles and virtues of the nation with the potential shame and humiliation caused by the national transgressions. The national identity frames of minimization, contextualization, disassociation and reaffirmation, therefore, broadly resonate because they allow citizens to rationalize the transgressions in nation-protective ways. These dynamics, in turn, serve to limit whether, to what extent and what kind of contestation is likely to emerge in political and news discourses as well because of the potential patriotic backlash that might ensue. Specifically, the sources of these counterframes must walk a fine line between implicating the administration and its policies for the transgressions and directly challenging the values and identity of the nation. Still, as the data in this study indicate, such challenges do gain some traction among the public, moderating—at least in part—whether the public will be receptive to a the initial frames. In this sense, at a minimum, it is incumbent upon the press to give legitimate representation of frames and counterframes within news stories, especially in response to national transgression. Doing so has important implications for how individuals come to understand and respond to such scandals.

## CHAPTER 6

## Insights and Implications

On March 11, 2012, an American soldier entered a small village in Kandahar, Afghanistan in the middle of the night and opened fire on a number of unsuspecting villagers, killing a total of 16 civilians. Among the dead were 3 women and 9 children (Shah & Bowley, 2011). In the aftermath of the incident, President Obama (2012) declared: this is “*not who we are as a country and it does not represent our military...we will make sure that anybody who was involved is held fully accountable with the full force of the law.*” Furthermore, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta (2012a) emphasized in his first public statement on the matter: “[T]hese kinds of events are *isolated and don’t represent what’s really happening in Afghanistan.*” Two days later, Panetta (2012b) added: “[N]one of this is reflective of the overwhelming majority of troops...who day to day are doing the job of trying to protect this country, and *doing it in outstanding fashion with courage and with dedication.*” This was followed a few days later by this statement from a Pentagon spokesman about why the suspect may have committed these acts (2012): “When it all comes out, it will be a combination of *stress, alcohol and domestic issues—he just snapped.*” Within two weeks of this incident, the story faded from the news headlines and any potential for a wider investigation into what broader factors may have led to this incident or what lessons should be derived from it seemed to all but disappear from public discourse.

These responses from the Obama administration in the aftermath of this incident are revealing. Like the responses from the Nixon and Bush administrations following My Lai and Abu Ghraib, these statements suggest an effort by the White House and military to minimize and contextualize the transgressions, disassociate the transgressors from the nation and reaffirm the nation’s identity. Such parallels across these communications speak to the importance of national

identity in shaping how officials construct and disseminate messages in these moments. By tapping into the broader nation-protective tendencies of the citizenry, the Obama administration sought to limit challenges from other political actors and the press and, in turn, contain the political fallout caused by this incident. And this is exactly what happened.

My goal in this dissertation was to explore the role of national identity in shaping how political actors, journalists and the general citizenry interact and respond to moments in which America's image has been seriously threatened. Specifically, I focused on what types of nation-protective messages tend to emerge in public discourse in these moments, what kind of contestation is advanced by political opponents and journalists, and how the public responds to these dynamics. By examining political communication in these three key areas—political messages, news content and public opinion—I sought to illuminate the complex process through which the press aligns its coverage with government communications and how national identity plays a crucial role in this process.

In essence, this research can be organized into five key ideas, which I proposed and tested in the three studies presented in this dissertation. First, frames that explicitly appeal to and attempt to bolster the image of the nation in moments of national dissonance receive wide recognition and acceptance among the citizenry because these messages align with their nation-protective tendencies. Second, political officials—particularly those who could be implicated—routinely invoke these frames in response to such incidents. Third, political officials from the opposing party are likely to contest these nation-protective frames in an effort to link the incident to these high-level officials. Fourth, the U.S. press tends to amplify messages that most resonate with the broader citizenry, regardless of whether frame contestation manifest among political officials. Fifth, when competing frames do indeed manifest in the press, citizens

are more likely to scrutinize and critically evaluate the causes and broader consequences of the national transgression and the policies associated with it.

To explore these five ideas, I employed two methodological approaches. I began by analyzing the communication environment surrounding two nationally dissonant moments in U.S. history—the My Lai Massacre and the Abu Ghraib Prison Scandal. The studies were presented in Chapters 3 and 4. For both, I conducted three content analyses. First, I analyzed White House and U.S. military communications to determine whether and what extent these officials articulated nation-protective frames. Second, I analyzed Congressional communications from members of both parties to measure the degree to which these officials echoed or challenged the frames. Third, I analyzed news coverage to assess whether frame contestation in official discourse was matched by parallel disagreements in news content. As the final step in this dissertation, I conducted an experiment in which I manipulated news coverage of an incident in which the nation’s image had been threatened. This was presented in Chapter 5. The focus of this study was to test the effects of the nation-protective frames—when echoed or contested by officials in the press—on individual respondents in response to moments of national dissonance. Taken together, these four methodological components clarify and elaborate the complex relations among officials, the press, and the public in the framing process and serve to illuminate the crucial role that cultural resonance and frame contestation plays within it.

In this chapter, I begin by discussing the conceptual linkages among the three studies and discuss their limitations. I then identify directions for future work and explore the broader implications of my findings.

### Conceptual Linkages, Limitations and Future Research

Throughout this dissertation, I relied primarily on scholarship on press-state relations and social psychology to explain how officials, journalists and citizens respond to moments when the nation's image has been internally threatened. I began with Entman's (2004) cascading activation model. This model suggests a framing hierarchy in public discourse, with White House and military officials at the highest level, Congress at the middle level, and the press at the lowest level. Within this model, the communication environment is likened to that of a waterfall: some ideas introduced at the top—usually by White House officials—cascade smoothly downward past Congressional opponents or the news media and into public consciousness. Other ideas encounter fierce resistance from these actors along the way. What largely determines the trajectory of a particular idea is the extent to which it is *culturally resonant*—that is, whether it triggers or activates certain receptive thoughts and emotions for other actors (Gamson, 1992). This serves to limit whether, to what extent, and what kind of frame contestation is likely emerge in political and news discourses.

To assess what messages might be most culturally resonant in response to the incidents examined in this dissertation, I relied on social identity theory. Social identity theory suggests that an individual's self-identity is heavily shaped by the social groups that he or she belongs to and the value that he or she attaches to them (Tajfel, 1982). Simply put, people derive comfort, security, and self-esteem from the groups with which they identify (Mercer, 1995)—so much so that they seek to protect or enhance those groups when they are perceived to be threatened physically or psychologically (Wohl & Branscombe, 2008). These group dynamics are particularly potent at the national level (Huddy & Khatib, 2007). Cultural myths, shared stories, and embedded social narratives are emphasized daily by citizens and national leaders to appeal

to, affirm and maintain citizens' sense of connection with the nation (Billig, 1995; Bloom, 1990). As a result, the nation commands profound emotional legitimacy for citizens. I was therefore interested in how national identity influences how citizens rationalize and come to understand national transgressions.

There were four types of messages, derived from social identity theory, that I thought would be particularly culturally resonant in these moments—minimization and contextualization of the transgressions, disassociation of the transgressors and reaffirmation of the nation's identity. I expected these lines of argument to resonate because they allow group members to limit the collective shame and humiliation encouraged by national transgressions and, in turn, to protect and restore the national identity. As I showed in Chapter 5, these frames tend to broadly resonate among citizens in moments of national dissonance. Specifically, I found that respondents evaluate national transgressions much less critically after having received the nation-protective frames. This was particularly evident when these messages were echoed by rival Congressional officials, but also when they were contested by these officials, indicating that the mere presence of these frames in news discourse had significant effects on how citizens responded to the incident. Most notably, these same patterns were found in respondents' level of attachment to the nation—those who received the frames more strongly identified with the nation than those who did not. This demonstrates that emphasis of these frames effectively appeals to the tendency among citizens to identify with and protect the nation when internal threats to its image arise. In essence, Chapter 5 functioned as a measure of just how culturally resonant these messages can be.

There were some important limitations of note regarding my study in Chapter 5. Like any experiment in which one seeks to test message effects, it is impossible to adequately account for

the volume and valence of these messages that citizens are likely to encounter in reality. In addition, potential shifts in attitudes from such an experiment, though significant, may not be as significant from a practical standpoint. The sample used in this experiment was also not completely representative of the national population, though it was significantly more representative than most experiments given that it consisted of a national adult sample and the distribution across age, gender and political party was fairly representative of the nation as a whole. Thus, these results should be taken with these caveats. That said, the fact that I did see significant framing effects on respondents' attitudes about the incident, their level of national attachment, and their broader policy attitudes about the war and the military is suggestive of the power of these messages. Future research on these dynamics might explore the power of these frames across a broader range of political and policy attitudes in response to national dissonant incidents. In addition, valuable research might build on these findings by exploring how citizens' nation-protective tendencies might manifest in other contexts such as how Americans perceive the causes of anti-Americanism or what types of frames most resonate when the threat to the nation is external rather than internal.

Given the cultural resonance of the minimization, contextualization, disassociation and reaffirmation frames, I sought to understand whether and to what extent these nation-protective messages were emphasized—and contested—among political officials in response to My Lai and Abu Ghraib. A considerable amount of scholarship has shown that political officials tend to invoke the nation in their communications both to highlight a shared identity between themselves and the citizenry and for its potential to restore balance when the national group's image is threatened in some way (Domke, 2004; Hutcheson et al., 2004; Sheets, *in press*; Stuckey, 2005). In addition, repetition and placement of these messages is just as important in ensuring that the

messages are more noticeable, understandable, meaningful, and memorable to the intended audience (Entman, 1993). I explored these dynamics by analyzing the communications of White House and military officials in response to My Lai and Abu Ghraib. Because White House and military officials are typically the sources of political frames, as the cascading activation model suggests, and these officials had the most to lose or gain in the aftermath of these incidents, it made sense for me to start my analysis here for both My Lai and Abu Ghraib.

In particular, I expected that White House and U.S. military officials would consistently and broadly infuse the national identity frames of minimization, contextualization, disassociation and reaffirmation in their communications following My Lai and Abu Ghraib. In Chapter 3, I found strong evidence of these patterns in White House and military discourse following My Lai. Though I was not able to collect the entire universe of public statements from White House and military officials following the incident because some of these statements were unattainable through archival research, I examined important and representative internal communications among these officials—memos, meeting notes and telephone conversations. These communications support the conclusion that the Nixon administration sought to contain the scandal through the use of these nation-protective frames. Future research might further examine these communications, particularly the public communications, to develop a more complete picture of the communication strategy employed by the Nixon administration.

In Chapter 4, I also found strong support for my expectation that White House and military officials would employ these nation-protective frames following the Abu Ghraib scandal. The strength of this data is that it contained the entire universe of White House and military statements about the scandal. One shortcoming, however, was that I was not able to obtain any internal communications within the administration. This would have provided further

evidence that such a communication strategy was indeed in place within the Bush administration to control the damage caused by the scandal. Future work might explore these communications when it becomes available. Perhaps a request through the Freedom of Information Act would yield access to some of this information. Still, given the volume of administration statements and the strong patterns within these data, there is reason to be confident in these findings.

As the next step in my examination of the communication dynamics following My Lai and Abu Ghraib, I looked at the discourse among Congressional officials. Conventional wisdom suggests that those within the party of the White House would likely echo the nation-protective frames offered by these officials and those within the rival party would likely challenge these frames—even if they are culturally resonant. This stems from the fact that rival officials would likely seek to benefit politically from the scandal by linking it with the current administration. These dynamics are consistent with the cascading activation model, which suggests that challenges to White House frames are likely to be more common among actors higher up in the frame hierarchy than among actors lower in the frame hierarchy, such as the press or the public. This occurs because as one moves down the hierarchy, each set of actors possesses (a) a diminished platform in the public arena, (b) less access to accurate and reliable information, and (c) a decreased ability to formulate a policy response. Thus, I expected the White House frames to be echoed among Republican Congressional officials in response to both My Lai and Abu Ghraib and I expected that Democratic Congressional officials would challenge them. In addition, I expected that the minimization frame would be the most challenged frame among Democrats. This was because it was the most ripe for partisan-driven challenges and it posed the least risk for a patriotic backlash.

Overall, I found strong support for these expectations in both Chapters 3 and 4. In each case, Republicans reliably echoed the frames and Democrats consistently challenged them. In particular, the minimization frames was the most fiercely contested among Democrats. These findings suggest then that the level of contestation over these frames among political officials in response to these incidents was indeed significant. Still, an important limitation in this data was that I was that I only looked at Congressional floor and hearing statements; no public statements given in the press, for example, were included in the analysis. I did this because this was best available venue to systematically and reliably analyze Congressional discourse. Further, if the floor of Congress is the most common venue in which Congressional rivals are likely to challenge White House frames, and these statements are unlikely to elicit equal attention from the press, this suggests a power dynamic consistent with the framing hierarchy represented in the cascading activation model.

Moving down the framing hierarchy, I also expected in Chapters 3 and 4 that journalists would be reluctant to challenge the nation-affirming frames emphasized by the White House in the aftermath of My Lai and Abu Ghraib, even if such frames were contested by other officials. This is to be expected, I argue, because the national identity frames disseminated by the White House were likely to be more culturally resonant than those emphasized by Congressional opponents. I expected this because psychological tendencies and business imperatives would have driven journalists to be reluctant to challenge these nation-protective messages. As Entman (1991), Rivenburgh (2000) and Wolfsfeld, Frosh and Awabdy (2008) have demonstrated, journalists to respond to stories that internally threaten the image of the nation by minimizing the emotional impact and rationalizing what occurred. Further, as Hutcheson et al. (2004) point out,

national unity is good business for journalists; stories that challenge the national image run the risk of a patriotic backlash from the citizenry.

Overall, I found considerable support for these expectations in both Chapter 3 and 4. Notably, press coverage did not reflect this range of viewpoints among White House and military officials and Congress. Instead, I found that journalists overwhelmingly relied upon administration sources and consistently amplified their nation-protective discourse in news coverage about My Lai and Abu Ghraib. One important limitation in these data was that I limited my coding to the first five sources in news coverage. This was done because of the press' reliance on the inverted pyramid style, in which the information deemed most important is presented first in a story (see Bennett et al., 2007), and because citizens have a tendency to scan the news environment for the most prominent information rather than read articles to the end (Schudson, 1998). Nonetheless, the overall valence in news coverage might look different if I had coded the entirety of each article. It is also possible that a different coding scheme such as, for example, analyzing the overall slant in news pieces might have yielded different results as well. Still, given the volume of news coverage and the range of news sources examined, I can speak confidently that the results indicate an amplification of the White House and military frames.

Given these findings, future research might explore differences in news coverage when contestation of White House messages occurs from Congressional members *within the same party* versus the opposing party when national transgressions arise. These signal a more pronounced division among political officials, which might motivate the press to expand the range of sources and debate within its coverage. Another potential avenue for future research would be to compare U.S. news coverage of national dissonant incidents or controversial

military policies with international news coverage. Such comparative work might explore, for example, how news coverage of U.S. drone policy has differed in international news. This would provide insight into the extent to which ethnocentric tendencies tend to shape news coverage.

A final piece in this analysis was whether contestation among political officials—expressed through the news—might lead the public to more critically evaluate the nation and its policies. As the cascading activation model suggests, whether and to what extent an individual frame successfully cascades into the public is contingent upon the degree to which it is contested—or not contested—by actors high up within the framing hierarchy. So the assumption would be that the cascade of these nation-protective frames would be diminished once it reaches the public if it has been contested among officials and within the press. I, therefore, explored this dynamic in Chapter 5. Notably, I found that contestation of the nation-protective frames in news coverage generated significantly more negative attitudes towards the incident among respondents. Even more revealing was the fact that these challenges led respondents to identify less strongly with the nation. Thus, these challenges served to trigger resistance to the frames within the minds of respondents. One shortcoming in this study, however, was that challenges to these frames did not elicit strong effects on respondents' broader policy attitudes. One explanation for this might be that the phrasing of these challenges in the news stories was not sufficiently explicit. Another explanation might be the placement of these challenges—in each of the treatments, the contestation was included at the end of the article. Nonetheless, given that the language and placement of these challenges in the news articles was largely consistent with what I found in political and news discourse from the content analyses I conducted on My Lai and Abu Ghraib, this was probably the best approach here.

Regarding the effects of frame contestation in the news, future research should explore the potential impact on public opinion when the challenges come from within the same party versus opposing parties. In addition, it would be interesting to more systematically examine what broader effects contested discourse might have on respondents' attitudes about the importance of robust public debate during a time of war and whether that is likely to generate more willingness to become civically engaged. In sum, I think there are several potential avenues to explore here about the potential effects of frame contestation on public opinion.

### Implications

This project offers several important implications about press-state relations, the role of national identity and cultural resonance in public debate and the extent to which frame contestation matters in shaping the public's perceptions and evaluations of the nation, its leaders and their policies. There are three broader implications I wish to emphasize from this study.

First, this study suggests that both the source and content of political frames deeply matters in determining which frames manifest in the press. In this sense, it is not enough to merely measure elite contestation reflected in the press to predict or understand news content; we must also know who among political officials is offering the frames and whether or not the content of these frames are likely to resonate with the broader citizenry. Messages offered by those atop the framing hierarchy—White House and military officials—possess the most power to cascade past other political actors and into the press. Moreover, political messages that appeal to and serve to bolster the nation's image, especially in moments of national dissonance, tend to gain traction within the press, even when substantive challenges to these messages are advanced by political opponents. This is particularly evident in response to issues involving national security and the behavior of the military. Notably, in both the My Lai and Abu Ghraib cases, the

press offered the White House and military a broad platform from which to shape the public's understanding of the issues and, in doing so, it consistently amplified their messages to the public. This, in turn, led to a largely white-washing of these scandals and a lack of accountability up the chain-of-command for the policies that led to these incidents.

On the surface, one might have assumed that the Abu Ghraib and My Lai incidents would have elicited deeply critical coverage within the press. After all, these cases involved U.S. soldiers brutalizing foreign civilians in some of the worst ways imaginable and there were plenty of pictures to prove it. These incidents could have been, for example, explicitly linked to the policies of the Nixon and Bush administrations. Instead, what largely unfolded was a press that was all-too-willing to allow these administrations to provide the meaning behind the photos and accusations. The consequences of a press that functions in this way are stark: the public is largely deprived of information that might otherwise allow it to exercise greater scrutiny and public accountability over political officials and their policies, particularly in American foreign policy.

Second, this dissertation demonstrates the potency of national-affirming messages in shaping the broader relationship among political officials, the press, and the public when internal threats to the nation's image arise. In such moments, White House and military officials perceive such messages to be politically beneficial while at the same time political opponents and journalists alike must walk a fine line in challenging these messages out of fear of a potential patriotic backlash. This is particularly the case when the nation's image is perceived to be at risk; it is in these moments that citizens come expect or even demand messages designed to restore the national identity. These dynamics have important consequences. Because nation-protective frames attain such powerful resonance among citizens in response to national transgressions—and challenges to these frames rarely make it into the press—the likelihood for substantive,

thorough examination of the causes and broader consequences of these incidents is limited. Instead, paradoxically, we tend to see a trumpeting of America's virtues and ideals at the precise time one might think they should be questioned—moments of national dissonance. Perhaps this helps explain why 80% of the American public expressed the belief that America is the greatest country on earth in a recent Gallup Poll (2010) while anti-Americanism has continued to climb around the world.

A final implication is that frame contestation—when present in the news—is deeply important in shaping how the public perceives and evaluates national transgressions and the policies that may have led to them. Notably, even challenges to frames that explicitly invoke and celebrate the nation undermine the effects of these frames on the public. What this suggests is that critiques of the nation can gain traction within the public, though I would suggest that there are some limitations to these critiques. As we saw in the My Lai and Abu Ghraib cases, challenges to who was responsible and whether the problem extended elsewhere gain substantially more coverage in the press than those that explicitly questioned American values. Overall, then, this demonstrates how crucial it is that the press give voice to counterframes when such views are emphasized by political leaders. Such coverage is likely to elicit among the public more willingness to critically assess the nation, its leaders, and its policies.

In sum, this dissertation illuminates the complex process through which the U.S. press aligns its coverage with government communications and how national identity plays a crucial role in this process. Specifically, this study sheds light on the importance of cultural resonance and contestation within the framing process and the extent to which national identity considerations guide how political officials, the press and the public interact and respond when nationally dissonant moments arise. More broadly, this study offers insight into the obstacles and

constraints within U.S. public discourse that limit the extent to which vigorous debate and critical self-examination of the nation, its leaders and their policies—particularly on issues involving national security and the U.S. military—is likely to manifest and the impact that these dynamics are likely to have on America’s image both at home and abroad.

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## Appendix A

## Message Manipulations used in Experiment

*Message Manipulations*

Each respondent was randomly assigned to receive one of the following nine news stories:

**Condition #1: Control****U.S. Soldiers Accused of Killing Civilians in Afghanistan**

Associated Press, January 13, 2012

Multiple news reports claimed Wednesday that American soldiers from the U.S. Army's 5th Stryker Brigade killed several unarmed Afghan civilians in Kandahar Province in late 2011. The reports detailed at least one combat mission in which U.S. soldiers conducted an ambush in a small village, killing several of the local villagers. Among the dead were children and elderly men.

Soldiers from the same unit are also accused of having desecrated the bodies of the victims. According to the reports, the soldiers posed for photographs in front of several of the corpses. These allegations come at a time when relations between the United States and Afghanistan governments are increasingly strained.

These allegations reveal the extraordinary sensitivity surrounding civilian casualties in Afghanistan. On Wednesday, Afghan President Hamid Karzai strongly condemned the killings and on Thursday, anti-American protests swept across many parts of Afghanistan.

**Condition #2: Minimization (Echoed)****U.S. Soldiers Accused of Killing Civilians in Afghanistan**

U.S. officials call killings isolated and blame low-ranking soldiers

Associated Press, January 13, 2012

Multiple news reports claimed Wednesday that American soldiers from the U.S. Army's 5th Stryker Brigade killed several unarmed Afghan civilians in Kandahar Province in late 2011. The reports detailed at least one combat mission in which U.S. soldiers conducted an ambush in a small village, killing several of the local villagers. Among the dead were children and elderly men.

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An Army official responded this week by suggesting that the scope of these incidents was limited. "These were isolated incidents, committed by a handful of soldiers," said General John R. Allen, commander of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, in a press briefing Wednesday. "This despicable behavior does not extend beyond these individuals in that remote village in Kandahar. I can promise you that."

On Thursday, White House Press Secretary Jay Carney refused to confirm any details of the allegations, but he strongly rejected claims that the soldiers may have been following orders. "These actions were the work of a few bad apples," Carney said. "They defied the orders and training given to them. It is as simple as that." Carney added, "Let's not forget that 99.99% of our service members in Afghanistan have not behaved this way. You know this, I know this, and the Afghan people know this. These actions are terrible, but they are the actions of a few and nothing more."

In Congress, Senate Republicans on Thursday also blamed the low-ranking soldiers involved. "This was obviously not a failure of policy or military leadership; it was a failure of character among those few deranged individuals who committed these heinous acts," said Senator Richard Lugar, the ranking Republican on the Foreign Relations Committee. Senator John McCain added, "Any suggestion that these soldiers may have been following orders is ridiculous. Just look at what they did. Now the rest of our troops are going to face increased hostility over here just because of the behavior of a few sick individuals during a single combat mission. These individuals should be ashamed of themselves."

House Republicans emphasized the need to place this incident in the proper context. Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, chairwoman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, stated on Friday, "There is no need to reassess military policy or our involvement over there because of these actions. Blame rests squarely on the shoulders of the handful of soldiers who committed these atrocities." Congressman Buck McKeon, Chairman of the Armed Services Committee, added, "It is inexplicable why these individuals would have disobeyed their orders and engaged in such disgusting behavior. Still, we cannot let this isolated incident overshadow or derail what we are trying to accomplish in Afghanistan."

These allegations reveal the extraordinary sensitivity surrounding civilian casualties in Afghanistan. On Wednesday, Afghan President Hamid Karzai strongly condemned the killings and on Thursday, anti-American protests swept across many parts of Afghanistan.

### Condition #3: Minimization (Contested)

## U.S. Soldiers Accused of Killing Civilians in Afghanistan

Some U.S. officials call killings widespread and place blame on higher-ups

Associated Press, January 13, 2012

Multiple news reports claimed Wednesday that American soldiers from the U.S. Army's 5th Stryker Brigade killed several unarmed Afghan civilians in Kandahar Province in late 2011. The reports detailed at least one combat mission in which U.S. soldiers conducted an ambush in a small village, killing several of the local villagers. Among the dead were children and elderly men.

Soldiers from the same unit are also accused of having desecrated the bodies of the victims. According to the reports, the soldiers posed for photographs in front of several of the corpses. These allegations come at a time when relations between the United States and Afghanistan governments are increasingly strained.

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Republicans in Congress, however, strongly challenged these claims Thursday. "This incident is anything but isolated," said Senator Richard Lugar, the ranking Republican on the Foreign Relations Committee. "I would bet that dozens of other similar incidents have occurred over there in the last year or so due to our policies. This one just happened to get attention because of the photos," said Lugar. Senator John McCain added, "The soldiers involved here were doing what they were ordered to do. That's a fact. It's reprehensible that this administration would suggest otherwise. Our policies in Afghanistan are allowing, if not encouraging, this kind of conduct and these soldiers are being blamed just because they're easy targets."

House Republicans also placed blame for the incidents on the White House. Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, chairwoman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, stated on Friday, "Responsibility for these actions goes beyond a 'few bad apples'; it extends to the very top—the White House. This is a systemic problem and it sickens me to think about how many other incidents like this have probably occurred over there due to the policies of this administration." Congressman Buck McKeon, Chairman of the Armed Services Committee, added, "We demand answers from this administration. Innocent civilians are dying because of our 'shoot first, explain later' policies. It has to stop."

These allegations reveal the extraordinary sensitivity surrounding civilian casualties in Afghanistan. On Wednesday, Afghan President Hamid Karzai strongly condemned the killings and on Thursday, anti-American protests swept across many parts of Afghanistan.

**Condition #4: Contextualization (Echoed)****U.S. Soldiers Accused of Killing Civilians in Afghanistan**

U.S. officials say stress and confusion within the unit led to the killings

Associated Press, January 13, 2012

Multiple news reports claimed Wednesday that American soldiers from the U.S. Army's 5th Stryker Brigade killed several unarmed Afghan civilians in Kandahar Province in late 2011. The reports detailed at least one combat mission in which U.S. soldiers conducted an ambush in a small village, killing several of the local villagers. Among the dead were children and elderly men.

Soldiers from the same unit are also accused of having desecrated the bodies of the victims. According to the reports, the soldiers posed for photographs in front of several of the corpses. These allegations come at a time when relations between the United States and Afghanistan governments are increasingly strained.

An Army official responded this week by emphasizing the difficulty of differentiating friend from foe in Afghanistan. "The infiltration of the Taliban into the local population has made identification of the enemy extremely difficult for our soldiers and it has increased the likelihood of injury to innocent civilians," said General John R. Allen, commander of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, in a press briefing Wednesday. "Often, those carrying out operational missions for the Taliban may not even be armed. They may be old men and women, or even young children who possess the means and know-how to detonate IED's (Improvised Explosive Devices) at a safe distance," said Allen. "Thus, our troops face immense challenges and risk on a daily basis over there."

On Thursday, White House Press Secretary Jay Carney refused to confirm any details of the allegations, but he did indicate that those involved had been under enormous stress in the days leading up to the incident. "The unit involved here had been engaged in fierce combat prior to this incident," said Carney. "They had also recently lost one of their men due to an IED attack so they were very upset about that." Carney added, "These conditions do not justify what was done, but they do help us understand the psychological state of these men as they entered that village."

In Congress, Senate Republicans on Thursday agreed that U.S. soldiers face extraordinary pressures in Afghanistan. "Our soldiers over there are constantly threatened by IED attacks and enemy sniper fire," said Senator Richard Lugar, the ranking Republican on the Foreign Relations Committee. "The Taliban operates in the shadows, blending into the civilian population by day and launching attacks by night. Under these circumstances, one can understand why our soldiers might be quick to the trigger," said Lugar. Senator John McCain added, "Speaking from experience, war is hell. The uncertainty and confusion that soldiers face in combat is often overwhelming and can sometimes cause them to do terrible things. That's important to remember here."

House Republicans also said the incident needed to be placed in the proper context. Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, chairwoman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, stated on Friday, "These soldiers were expecting to encounter a fierce firefight when they entered the village. This might explain why those involved in this incident did what they did." Congressman Buck McKeon, Chairman of the Armed Services Committee, added, "In the fog of war, bad things can happen. The chaotic environment in which these soldiers were operating and the threats that they encounter on a daily basis could very well have caused them to act out. So it is very important to consider the context within which these acts occurred."

These allegations reveal the extraordinary sensitivity surrounding civilian casualties in Afghanistan. On Wednesday, Afghan President Hamid Karzai strongly condemned the killings and on Thursday, anti-American protests swept across many parts of Afghanistan.

### Condition #5: Contextualization (Contested)

## U.S. Soldiers Accused of Killing Civilians in Afghanistan

Some U.S. officials reject claims that confusion and stress may have led to the killings

Associated Press, January 13, 2012

Multiple news reports claimed Wednesday that American soldiers from the U.S. Army's 5th Stryker Brigade killed several unarmed Afghan civilians in Kandahar Province in late 2011. The reports detailed at least one combat mission in which U.S. soldiers conducted an ambush in a small village, killing several of the local villagers. Among the dead were children and elderly men.

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On Thursday, White House Press Secretary Jay Carney refused to confirm any details of the allegations, but he did indicate that those involved had been under enormous stress in the days leading up to the incident. "The unit involved here had been engaged in fierce combat prior to this incident," said Carney. "They had also recently lost one of their men due to an IED attack so they were very upset about that." Carney added, "These conditions do not justify what was done, but they do help us understand the psychological state of these men as they entered that village."

Republicans in Congress, however, strongly challenged these claims Thursday. "This was murder in cold blood," said Senator Richard Lugar, the ranking Republican on the Foreign Relations Committee. "Innocent civilians, including at least one child, were deliberately targeted and killed. Yet, this administration is focused on legitimizing this behavior by highlighting situational factors that might explain why they did it. It makes me sick." Senator John McCain added, "I've witnessed first-hand the horrors of war. I know combat can be confusing and stressful. But there is no excuse for deliberately killing unarmed, unresisting elderly men and children under any circumstances. We cannot allow the 'fog of war' idea to distort our understanding of this atrocity."

House Republicans also rejected the suggestion that the killings were a result of the chaotic environment in which those involved were operating. Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, chairwoman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, stated on Friday, "This administration would have us believe that these killings were caused by confusion and stress among those involved. That's outrageous. Using that logic, virtually any action could be justified in war. These were deliberate acts of murder, nothing more." Congressman Buck McKeon, Chairman of the Armed Services Committee, added, "Spare me the war is hell argument. There is no excuse or justification for what took place in that village. It was murder in cold blood."

These allegations reveal the extraordinary sensitivity surrounding civilian casualties in Afghanistan. On Wednesday, Afghan President Hamid Karzai strongly condemned the killings and on Thursday, anti-American protests swept across many parts of Afghanistan.

### Condition #6: Disassociation (Echoed)

## U.S. Soldiers Accused of Killing Civilians in Afghanistan

U.S. officials vow to punish those involved

Associated Press, January 13, 2012

Multiple news reports claimed Wednesday that American soldiers from the U.S. Army's 5th Stryker Brigade killed several unarmed Afghan civilians in Kandahar Province in late 2011. The reports detailed at least one combat mission in which U.S. soldiers conducted an ambush in a small village, killing several of the local villagers. Among the dead were children and elderly men.

Soldiers from the same unit are also accused of having desecrated the bodies of the victims. According to the reports, the soldiers posed for photographs in front of several of the corpses. These allegations come at a time when relations between the United States and Afghanistan governments are increasingly strained.

An Army official responded this week by emphasizing that the military justice system has worked in this case and that those involved will be severely punished. "As soon as we discovered these incidents, we immediately launched an investigation," said General John R. Allen, commander of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, in a press briefing Wednesday. "The U.S. military takes these allegations very seriously and we are getting to the bottom of this. Those un-American individuals who committed these heinous acts are going to be brought to justice." Allen added, "The problem is being fixed and the world will see that we do not tolerate this kind of sick behavior."

On Thursday, White House Press Secretary Jay Carney refused to confirm any details of the allegations, but he did draw a clear distinction between the soldiers involved in the incident and the U.S. military as a whole. "The despicable behavior of these soldiers goes against the values and principles of the United States military," said Carney. "American soldiers just do not behave this way. This is a shock to you, me and every other American. We are thoroughly investigating what happened and those involved will be punished swiftly and to the fullest extent of the law. I can promise you that. We will make sure that this never happens again."

In Congress, Senate Republicans on Thursday supported the plan to investigate the incidents and punish those soldiers involved. "These soldiers have done a great dishonor to the men and women who wear the U.S. military uniform," said Senator Richard Lugar, the ranking Republican on the Foreign Relations Committee. "Their behavior is inconsistent with American values and it violates everything that our military stands for. Americans just don't do this to other people. We will thoroughly investigate and prosecute those involved," said Lugar. Senator John McCain added, "Stiff punishment for those soldiers involved is coming. We must send the message that this behavior is never tolerated and that it will never happen again."

House Republicans offered similar statements on Friday. Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, chairwoman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, stated, "This behavior is so out of character for our men and women in uniform. It's fundamentally un-American. Whoever is responsible for it must be and will be held accountable." Congressman Buck McKeon, Chairman of the Armed Services Committee, added, "These acts are abhorrent to the conscience of all the American people. Appropriate action will be taken to ensure that this immoral behavior is dealt with in accordance with the strict rules of military justice."

These allegations reveal the extraordinary sensitivity surrounding civilian casualties in Afghanistan. On Wednesday, Afghan President Hamid Karzai strongly condemned the killings and on Thursday, anti-American protests swept across many parts of Afghanistan.

**Condition #7: Disassociation (Contested)****U.S. Soldiers Accused of Killing Civilians in Afghanistan**

Some U.S. officials express doubt that those involved will be brought to justice

Associated Press, January 13, 2012

Multiple news reports claimed Wednesday that American soldiers from the U.S. Army's 5th Stryker Brigade killed several unarmed Afghan civilians in Kandahar Province in late 2011. The reports detailed at least one combat mission in which U.S. soldiers conducted an ambush in a small village, killing several of the local villagers. Among the dead were children and elderly men.

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Republicans in Congress, however, strongly challenged these claims Thursday. "This administration should be ashamed of itself," said Senator Richard Lugar, the ranking Republican on the Foreign Relations Committee. "It wasn't until the photos were released in the media that this administration began doing anything about it. And the current investigation has been nothing but buck-passing and damage control. This White House is more focused on doing public relations than addressing the cause of the problem or punishing those involved," said Lugar. Senator John McCain added, "At a time when the world must see that no one in the U.S. is above the law, this administration has arrogantly acted as if it answers only to itself. There is no justice in that."

House Republicans also claimed that a miscarriage of justice has occurred. Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, chairwoman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, stated on Friday, "The White House appears only interested in sacking some poor infantrymen, then calling it justice. I'm not buying this charade." Congressman Buck McKeon, Chairman of the Armed Services Committee, added, "While the administration has publicly stated that it will fully investigate these incidents and punish those involved, this is nothing but empty rhetoric. Such statements are designed to dupe Americans into thinking that the problem has been fixed when clearly it has not."

These allegations reveal the extraordinary sensitivity surrounding civilian casualties in Afghanistan. On Wednesday, Afghan President Hamid Karzai strongly condemned the killings and on Thursday, anti-American protests swept across many parts of Afghanistan.

### Condition #8: Reaffirmation (Echoed)

## U.S. Soldiers Accused of Killing Civilians in Afghanistan

U.S. officials say America's moral standing in the world remains strong

Associated Press, January 13, 2012

Multiple news reports claimed Wednesday that American soldiers from the U.S. Army's 5th Stryker Brigade killed several unarmed Afghan civilians in Kandahar Province in late 2011. The reports detailed at least one combat mission in which U.S. soldiers conducted an ambush in a small village, killing several of the local villagers. Among the dead were children and elderly men.

Soldiers from the same unit are also accused of having desecrated the bodies of the victims. According to the reports, the soldiers posed for photographs in front of several of the corpses. These allegations come at a time when relations between the United States and Afghanistan governments are increasingly strained.

An Army official responded this week by emphasizing the need to place this incident in the proper context. "This incident is deeply regrettable, but what the United States has done in Afghanistan is nothing short of remarkable," said General John R. Allen, commander of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, in a press briefing Wednesday. "Today, the Afghan people are no longer living in a society where public executions are the norm and women are forbidden from going outside their homes. They are on the path to peace and stability and none of this would have been possible without the courage, dedication and sacrifice of our men and women in uniform. This is a testament to the generosity and determination of our nation," said Allen.

On Thursday, White House Press Secretary Jay Carney refused to confirm any details of the allegations, but he strongly rejected claims that the United States' image has suffered because of these acts. "America has always been a champion of human rights and source for good in the world," said Carney. "Our military strictly adheres to international law and we do everything in our power to avoid harming innocent civilians. The world knows this. This stands in stark contrast to the Taliban or Al Qaeda who never hesitate to kill civilians whenever it suits their needs."

In Congress, Senate Republicans on Thursday highlighted the good deeds being performed by Americans in Afghanistan. "Let's not forget that we are doing many good things in Afghanistan," said Senator Richard Lugar, the ranking Republican on the Foreign Relations Committee. "We are building schools, roads and hospitals, and, most importantly, we are improving the lives of millions who have been subjected to so many years of misery and despair under a tyrannical regime," said Lugar. Senator John McCain added, "The United States remains the international leader on human rights. This incident must not deter us from continuing our efforts to bring peace, stability and democracy to the people of Afghanistan."

House Republicans also responded to the incidents by focusing on what is at stake in Afghanistan. Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, chairwoman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, stated on Friday, "These actions are terrible, but we remain a beacon of hope for the millions of people living in Afghanistan who desire freedom and democracy. We have done so much for the Afghan people. We must not lose sight of this." Congressman Buck McKeon, Chairman of the Armed Services Committee, added, "We cannot let these horrible acts overshadow the tireless, selfless work being done by our troops in Afghanistan. They are fighting to ensure that the Afghan people may have a better future. It doesn't get more selfless than that."

These allegations reveal the extraordinary sensitivity surrounding civilian casualties in Afghanistan. On Wednesday, Afghan President Hamid Karzai strongly condemned the killings and on Thursday, anti-American protests swept across many parts of Afghanistan.

**Condition #9: Reaffirmation (Contested)****U.S. Soldiers Accused of Killing Civilians in Afghanistan**

Some U.S. officials say America has lost its moral standing in the world

Associated Press, January 13, 2012

Multiple news reports claimed Wednesday that American soldiers from the U.S. Army's 5th Stryker Brigade killed several unarmed Afghan civilians in Kandahar Province in late 2011. The reports detailed at least one combat mission in which U.S. soldiers conducted an ambush in a small village, killing several of the local villagers. Among the dead were children and elderly men.

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Republicans in Congress, however, strongly challenged these claims Thursday. "What does this incident say about the United States and our values as a nation?" said Senator Richard Lugar, the ranking Republican on the Foreign Relations Committee. "Can you imagine how Americans would respond if some foreign nation were to come into our communities and kill defenseless civilians? We'd be outraged. We've lost our moral standing in the world," said Lugar. Senator John McCain added "This incident has given ammunition to those around the world who claim that America is hypocritical and flawed, and it has cast a long shadow over our persistent claims of only wanting to bring peace and stability to the Afghan people."

House Republicans also said there will be a negative impact on the United States' image. Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, chairwoman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, stated on Friday, "It is imperative that we achieve the moral high ground when attempting to defeat the Taliban. Unfortunately, this has not been the case. We are now no better in the eyes of the Afghan people than the insurgents we seek to eliminate." Congressman Buck McKeon, Chairman of the Armed Services Committee, added, "Sadly, this incident conjures up memories of My Lai and Abu Ghraib. How can we as a nation proclaim to be defenders of moral principles when we commit such heinous acts? This behavior tarnishes our reputation and destroys America's moral authority in the world."

These allegations reveal the extraordinary sensitivity surrounding civilian casualties in Afghanistan. On Wednesday, Afghan President Hamid Karzai strongly condemned the killings and on Thursday, anti-American protests swept across many parts of Afghanistan.

## Appendix B

## Message Measurements used in Experiment

*Measurement*

After reading the assigned news story, respondents were then asked to answer the following questions:

**Incident-Related Attitude Questions****(1) To what extent do you think that the following groups are responsible for this incident?**

The low-ranking soldiers directly involved in this incident.

Not at all Responsible      Somewhat Responsible      Very Responsible      Completely Responsible

The brigade commanders in charge of these low-ranking soldiers.

Not at all Responsible      Somewhat Responsible      Very Responsible      Completely Responsible

Top U.S. military leaders in Afghanistan.

Not at all Responsible      Somewhat Responsible      Very Responsible      Completely Responsible

The Defense Department/Pentagon

Not at all Responsible      Somewhat Responsible      Very Responsible      Completely Responsible

The White House.

Not at all Responsible      Somewhat Responsible      Very Responsible      Completely Responsible

**(2) Other than this particular case, how often do you think U.S. military incidents like this happen in Afghanistan?**

Never      Occasionally      Often      All the time

**(3) How likely do you think that those responsible for this incident will be appropriately punished?**

Not at all likely      Somewhat likely      Very likely      Extremely likely

**(4) How confident are you that the U.S. military will take the necessary steps to help prevent incidents like this from happening again?**

Not at all confident      Somewhat confident      Very confident      Extremely confident

**(5) To what extent do you think that America is a champion of human rights around the world?**

Not at all      Somewhat      Very much      Completely

**(6) To what extent do you think that the stresses of combat in Afghanistan led these soldiers to do this?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(7) To what extent do you think that the U.S. military overlooks this type of behavior?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(8) To what extent do you think that this incident was an isolated event?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(9) To what extent do you think that this incident was caused by the difficulties faced by U.S. soldiers in identifying the enemy during combat in Afghanistan?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(10) To what extent do you think that this incident is consistent with the way in which America conducts itself in war?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(11) To what extent do you think that the soldiers involved in this incident were just following orders?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(12) To what extent do you think that America has done more good than bad for the people of Afghanistan?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(13) To what extent do you think that the military tactics used by the Taliban make incidents like this more likely?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(14) To what extent do you think that the chaotic environment in which these soldiers were operating in Afghanistan caused this incident?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(15) To what extent do you think that America's military is a force for good in the world?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(16) To what extent do you think that this incident was caused by the actions of only a few soldiers?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(17) To what extent do you think that justice will be appropriately carried out in this case?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(18) To what extent do you think that the constant threat that these soldiers face in combat in Afghanistan led to this incident?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

### **Policy and Political Attitude Questions**

**(19) To what extent do you think U.S. involvement in the war in Afghanistan has improved the long-term security of the United States?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(20) To what extent do you think the United States is making progress in the war in Afghanistan?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(21) To what extent do you think that the U.S. war effort in Afghanistan has been worth the costs?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(22) To what extent do you approve/disapprove of the way that the Obama administration is managing the war in Afghanistan?**

Strongly disapprove              Somewhat disapprove              Somewhat approve              Strongly approve

**(23) To what extent do you approve/disapprove of President Obama's performance as Commander-in-Chief?**

Strongly disapprove              Somewhat disapprove              Somewhat approve              Strongly approve

**(24) To what extent do you approve/disapprove of the way President Obama is handling American foreign policy in general?**

Strongly disapprove              Somewhat disapprove              Somewhat approve              Strongly approve

**(25) In general, how much confidence do you have in the U.S. military?**

None                      Not much                      A fair amount                      A lot

**(26) In general, how much confidence do you have in the White House?**

None                      Not much                      A fair amount                      A lot

**(27) In general, how much confidence do you have in the U.S. Congress?**

None                      Not much                      A fair amount                      A lot

**(28) In general, how much confidence do you have in the U.S. national news media?**

None                      Not much                      A fair amount                      A lot

**(29) To what extent do you think that political leaders should engage in vigorous public debate about a war after it begins?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(30) To what extent do you think that political leaders should scrutinize the behavior of U.S. soldiers during a time of war?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(31) To what extent do you think that political leaders should scrutinize U.S. military policies during a time of war?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(32) To what extent do you think that political leaders should voice disagreement with the president during a time of war?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(32) To what extent do you think that the U.S. national news media should engage in vigorous public debate about a war after it begins?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(33) To what extent do you think that U.S. national news media should scrutinize the behavior of U.S. soldiers during a time of war?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(34) To what extent do you think that U.S. national news media should scrutinize U.S. military policies during a time of war?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(35) To what extent do you think that U.S. national news media should voice disagreement with the president during a time of war?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(36) To what extent do you think that U.S. citizens should follow American foreign policy more closely during a time of war?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(37) To what extent do you think that U.S. citizens should make their views known to political leaders during a time of war?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(38) To what extent do you think that U.S. citizens should discuss their views about the war with other citizens while it is taking place?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(39) To what extent do you think that it is appropriate for U.S. citizens to scrutinize the behavior of U.S. soldiers during a time of war?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(40) To what extent do you think that the U.S. should rely more on diplomacy to achieve its interests in the world?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(41) To what extent do you think that the U.S. should increase the amount of foreign aid it provides to other countries?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(42) To what extent do you think that the U.S. should work more through international institutions such as the United Nations to achieve its interests in the world?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(43) To what extent do you think that the U.S. should increase the amount of money it spends on the military?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

### **National Attachment Questions**

**(44) To what extent do you identify with other Americans?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(45) To what extent is being American important to you?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(46) To what extent do you feel close to other Americans?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(47) To what extent does the term “American” describes you?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

**(48) How often do you say “we” instead of “they” when talking about Americans?**

Not at all                      Somewhat                      Very much                      Completely

### **Demographic Questions**

**(49) Generally speaking, which of the following do you consider yourself?**

Strong Republican  
Moderate Republican  
Slight Republican  
Neutral  
Slight Democrat  
Moderate Democrat  
Strong Democrat

**(50) What is your gender?**

Male              Female

**(51) What racial or ethnic group best describes you?**

Hispanic/Latino/a  
White  
Asian  
Native American  
More than one race  
Other  
If “More than one race” or “Other” (please specify)

**(52) What was the last grade or class that you completed in school?**

Did not complete high school  
Completed high school or equivalent  
Some college  
Associates degree  
Completed bachelors degree  
Some graduate school  
Completed graduate school

**(53) Last year (2011), what was your total family income from all sources before taxes?**

Less than \$10,000  
\$10,000-\$24,999  
\$25,000-\$49,999  
\$50,000-\$74,999  
\$75,000-\$99,999  
\$100,000-\$249,000  
Over \$250,000

**(54) What is your current age?**

18-24  
25-34  
35-44  
45-54  
55-64  
65 and above

**(55) Are you a U.S. citizen by birth or by naturalization?**

U.S. citizen by birth  
Naturalized citizen  
Not a U.S. citizen

**(56) Are you, or is anyone in your immediate family, a current or former member of the U.S. Armed Forces?**

I am current member  
I am a former member  
Someone in my immediate family is a member  
Someone in my immediate family is a former member  
More than one of these options  
None

## VITA

Charles Michael Rowling was born and raised in Kearney, Nebraska. He earned his Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Nebraska-Kearney in 2003 with a double major in Political Science and History. At the University of Washington, Charles earned a Masters of Arts degree in Political Science in 2007 and a Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science in 2012.