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by ANTHONY DIMAGGIO
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Withdrawal Pains and Syrian Civil War: An Analysis of U.S. Media Discourse



Photograph by Mahmoud Bali (VOA) – US-backed Forces Press Deeper Into Southern Raqqa City

President Donald Trump's announced withdrawal of 2,000 U.S. combat troops from Syria is being met with strong criticism from the U.S. military establishment. [1] The attacks on withdrawal are reiterated in U.S. mass media outlets as well. Nowhere is this clearer than in the editorials of the paper of national record – the *New York Times*. The paper devoted serious attention to the Syrian civil war in 2018, echoing the sustained attention U.S. leaders have devoted toward the conflict. To better understand how this conflict has played out in elite American media discourse, I undertook a systematic analysis of all the *New York Times*' editorials that emphasized the Syria question in 2018. [2]

Few political communication scholars are interested in the issue of media propaganda and how it is disseminated in “free” and “democratic” western societies – those that do not rely on official government censorship of the press. [3] The notion that journalists are complicit in reinforcing official narratives and agendas is too radical for most scholars; most prefer limited definitions of propaganda as something that *other* nations, presses, and leaders do. But my review of the *Times*’ coverage of Syria suggests that a different type of propaganda is at work compared to the clumsier versions embraced by dictatorial governments and handed down to consumers via state-run media. With U.S. media propaganda, official motives are assumed to be pure and altruistic, but their embrace flows from journalists who legally operate independently from government censorship and control. Furthermore, substantive criticisms of U.S. policy do appear, but are so infrequent that they may as well be omitted from commentary altogether. Incorporating a sliver of dissent allows for more effective propaganda, since journalists can claim that alternative views are aired, even if they are essentially invisible, practically speaking.

The essence of U.S. media propaganda is evident not only in the frameworks that dominate the *Times*’ editorials, but in the unstated assumptions that are left out of popular discourse. By tailoring media debates to a narrow range of views expressed by the major political parties, journalists implicitly reinforce those views, setting the parameters for what perspectives are acceptable and ignored in foreign policy debates. As media critic Noam Chomsky notes, “presupposition” of a debate between limited alternatives is the essence of a media propaganda system that operates outside the formal bounds of government control. [4]

In the *Times*’ editorials on Syria, I track the emergence of six separate conceptual frames that guide media commentary. By omitting from these editorials points that challenge the foundation of U.S. foreign policy, the *Times* prohibits its readers from considering competing points of view, thereby making it difficult to form opinions differing from those embraced by American political leadership. I include a detailed run-down of these frames below.

Defeating ISIS and the Global “War on Terror”

Throughout 2018, the *Times* continually emphasized the dire importance of keeping U.S. troops in Syria to defeat ISIS, depicting them as vital to dismantling the global terror threat. The focus was on U.S. military efforts at “degrading” and “finishing off” the Islamic State. [5] The *Times* wrote approvingly of this effort, as initiated under the Obama administration in 2014, after ISIS “overran huge areas of Syria and Iraq...Military

operations under President Barack Obama and the Trump administration liberated more than 98 percent of the territory previously controlled by the Islamic State and freed over 7.5 million people from brutal rule.” [6] The paper rejected as “absurd” Trump’s claim that ISIS had been militarily defeated by late 2018, a point the president used to justify his call for withdrawal. Trump’s plan for “a precipitous withdrawal” would carry dramatic “consequences,” the *Times* warned, “including allowing ISIS forces to regroup and create another crisis that would draw the United States back into the region.” [7]

The “ISIS-War on Terror” frame was the most dominant frame I examined, appearing in every one of the *Times*’ editorials on Syria. [8] But what is perhaps most notable about the frame is what it excludes from discussion – the negative fallout that is accompanied long-standing U.S. promises of defeating global terrorism. Available evidence suggests that grandiose claims about terrorism’s demise are contradicted by the reality of proliferating terror in the decade and a half since September 11, 2001. According to the University of Maryland’s *Global Terrorism Database*, terror attacks worldwide increased dramatically since 2001, when there were less than 2,000 such incidents. [9] Terrorism experts wrote of an “Iraq Effect” by the mid-2000s, with the U.S. occupation of Iraq having “generated a stunning sevenfold increase in the yearly rate of fatal jihadist attacks, amounting to literally hundreds of additional terrorist attacks and thousands of civilian lives lost,” and with an increase in terror attacks outside of Iraq and Afghanistan by a third in the five years following 9/11. [10] The threat continued to grow in later years, as terror attacks reached their height in 2014 with the rise of ISIS, to about 17,000 a year. [11]

By 2018, the number of terror attacks fell to 10,900, which was taken as evidence by the U.S. government of the increasing efficacy of the “war on terror.” [12] While a 36 percent decline in terror incidents in three years is significant, it is hardly cause for celebration considering the stated intentions of former U.S. presidents of eradicating terrorism from the face of the planet. [13] To the contrary, terrorist attacks were nearly five times *more* common in 2018 than they were in 2001. Of course, Americans may primarily be concerned with terrorism as a threat to *American lives*, more so than as a global danger. But even on the domestic front, there is no indication that the “War on Terror” has succeeded in eradicating terrorism committed by Islamist groups and radicals. According to *New America*’s report on domestic terror, a total of just four people were killed by Islamist radicals in the seven-year period following 9/11, from 2002 to 2008. But the number grew significantly in subsequent years by 100, from 2009 to 2018, in large part

due to a few major incidents, including the shootings in Fort Hood, Texas (2009), San Bernardino, California (2015), and Orlando, Florida (2016). [14]

There are at least two ways to critically interpret the above statistics. The first is to conclude that the “War on Terror” has *not* made Americans safer, if the goal after 9/11 was to reduce the number of people murdered by Islamist fundamentalist groups. The domestic risk from terrorism has become greater from the first to the second decade of the twenty-first century. A second conclusion is that the justification for continuing the “War on Terror” rests on shaky, even fraudulent foundations, considering the relatively tiny number of Americans who have been killed by Islamist fundamentalists since 9/11. Compare the 104 deaths from Islamist threats over the last decade and a half – an average of *six* per year – to the number of Americans who die each year from other causes. In 2016, 10,497 Americans died in alcohol-related driving accidents, which accounted for a quarter of all American traffic deaths.[15] A total of 37,133 people died in all traffic accidents in 2017.[16] Cigarette smoking causes more than 480,000 deaths a year in the U.S., with more than 41,000 deaths from second hand smoke, equivalent to one in five deaths annually, or 1,300 per day.[17] Heart disease claims 610,000 victims a year, although no one is depicting fast food suppliers or junk food manufacturers as threats to national security.[18] Most ominously in terms of threats that exist independently from one’s personal consumer choices are the nearly 40,000 Americans killed by gun violence in 2017. [19] The risk from gun shootings far outweighs any threat from Islamist groups, although there is little impetus in Washington to regulate gun ownership.

It is the sensational spectacle of terrorism that draws so many Americans to focus on this relatively minor threat to American lives. The fear invoked by terror attacks is impossible to ignore, but it also leads to Americans vastly exaggerating the extent of that threat. One recent study concludes that Americans have a one in 3.6 million chance of being killed in a terrorist attack, and there is a better chance of strangling from one’s clothing or from a toddler shooting you than from being killed by a terrorist.[20]

Furthermore, to associate terrorism primarily with Muslims reveals the Orientalist, prejudiced nature of U.S. political discourse. *New America* found that 97 Americans were killed from 2002 to 2018 by far-right domestic terrorists of various kinds – including white supremacists and “incels” – compared to the 104 Americans killed by Islamist attacks.[21] Other research suggests the right-wing threat is far greater, with two-thirds – or 37 of the 65 domestic terror incidents in 2017 committed by right-wing extremists who

hold “racist, anti-Muslim, homophobic, anti-Semitic, fascist, anti-government, or xenophobic motivations.” [22]

The *Times*’ primary defense of the war in Syria is combating terrorism. But the fixation on the terror threat is radically overblown compared to other safety risks Americans face on a daily basis. To the extent that Islamist terror groups are a threat to Americans, the global “War on Terror” has not curbed that threat. The campaign to destroy al Qaeda in the 2000s was accompanied by the proliferation of terrorism in the Middle East and elsewhere. Even as al Qaeda deteriorated as an international threat, the danger of Islamism morphed via the emergence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Rather than dismantling Islamism, the U.S. escalation of military activities in the Middle East has produced destruction, polarization, radicalization, and heightened fundamentalism. There is little reason to think this threat will not continue so long as the U.S. remains committed to dismantling state after state – Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and now Syria, being the most extreme cases – via its military adventurism in the “War on Terror.”

Assad’s Brutality, his Enablers, and Syrian “Stability”

Propaganda campaigns usually contain elements of truth, and in the case of Syria, media propaganda is aided by the brutal and heinous nature of the Assad regime. This president – with the aid of Russian air power – has indiscriminately bombed and flattened Syrian cities such as Homs and Aleppo – leading to countless deaths. Assad has used barrel bombs against his own people, which are notorious for maximum destruction, targeting militant and civilian alike when used in urban settings. [23] He has used chemical weapons against civilians in Ghouta (2013), Douma (2018), and elsewhere. [24] He has earned a reputation as a mass torturer and murderer for the systematic violence government forces have perpetrated against detainees in Syrian prisons. [25] And Assad’s attacks against civilians and non-violent government critics precede the rise of Syria’s violent rebellion. [26] All told, 400,000 Syrians have been killed as a result of this deadly civil war, with another 2.2 million becoming refugees and 6.5 million internally displaced. [27]

The *New York Times*, however, is careful to place virtually all the blame on Assad and his allies – Russia and Iran – while exempting the U.S. for destabilizing Syria via its own bombing campaign. As the *Times*’ editors warned in September 2018, Assad was “on the cusp of crushing the rebellion, at the risk of a humanitarian catastrophe” in the rebel-dominated northwestern city of Idlib, where Assad and Russian forces were preparing for a major assault. [28] “An estimated three million people, including about one million

children, live in Idlib...There is little doubt an all-out assault will cause death, destruction, and displacement rivaling the brutality seen before.”[29] Just over half of the *Times*’ 2018 editorials emphasized the brutal nature of Assad’s regime. Three-quarters of them condemned Iran and Russia – Syrian allies – for supporting Assad’s regime, and for giving comfort to counter-insurgency efforts. Stories regularly referred to Iran and Russia as Assad’s “enablers,” and wrote off their support as motivated by brazen power politics and geopolitical interests.[30]

The *Times*’ laments against Assad’s and Russia’s “scorched earth” attacks on rebel-held cities would carry more credibility had it spent more energy also condemning the United States for its role in destabilizing Syria. But this has not been the case. Only one editorial from the *Times* admitted to the fact that “American airstrikes on Islamic State targets have killed many civilians.” [31] This sliver of dissent, however, was not taken as evidence of the United States’ role in destabilizing Syria. Instead, the *Times* presents the U.S. as having “liberated” ISIS held areas, while two-thirds of the paper’s editorials depict the American military as providing for a “stabilizing” role. Nowhere in these editorials is it suggested that the U.S. and Russian military presences in Syria are increasing the risk of a direct conflict between two aggressive nuclear powers. Nor is there any discussion of the U.S role in arming Syrian rebels as itself fueling instability. Reasonable minds can debate the merits of arming rebel groups that fight against mass murdering dictators. But to assume that this action is inherently compatible with the U.S. providing for Syrian “stability” is propagandistic at best.

The routine discounting of the destruction the U.S. imposes on other countries via its military campaigns is hardly unique to Syria. This practice is longstanding, applying to conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere.[32] But the view of the U.S. as a “stabilizing” force is hardly shared by the people of Syria, less than half of which articulated support for “international coalition airstrikes.” [33] And the *Times* does not help improve the U.S. image abroad when it callously writes that “The United States has no obligation to rebuild Syria” after the role the Obama and Trump administrations played in destroying this beleaguered nation. [34]

Multilateralism, International Law, and World Order

American leaders have long claimed a commitment to valiant principles such as the rule of law and global peacekeeping. Consistent with these themes, the *Times* routinely cited the importance of United Nations involvement in stabilizing Syria. Such references appeared alongside discussions of Assad’s violations of international law via his targeting of

civilians with chemical weapons in Douma (2018) – which the paper deemed an “outrage” – and regarding the need for the Security Council to act to protect Syrian civilians.[35] In an April editorial, the paper wrote: “The United Nations Security Council needs to recommit to the Chemical Weapons Convention’s ban on such weapons, authorize experts to verify who was responsible in Douma and create an independent investigation that could lead to prosecution in a tribunal like the International Criminal Court.” [36] The “use of poison gas” was “a war crime under international law,” despite being “integral to Mr. Assad’s scorched-earth drive to regain control of the last-rebel held areas.” [37] In total, two-thirds of the *Times*’ editorials invoked international law and the United Nations in seeking to sell the U.S. intervention as reinforcing the rule of law and global order. As with other propaganda themes, it is worth pointing out what does *not* appear in this commentary. Almost entirely ignored by the *Times*—with the exception of a brief reference in one April editorial – is the admission that the U.S. military presence itself is illegal under international law, since it was not authorized by the U.N. Security Council, and was not undertaken in self-defense against an ongoing attack.[38] These are the *only* two conditions under which the U.N. Charter allows for the legal use of force. By including a fleeting discussion of U.S. actions under international law, the *Times* allows for a sliver of dissent in its coverage of Syria amidst a sea of self-congratulatory rhetoric. Also omitted from the *Times*’ coverage is the fact that the United States’ own bombings of civilians are criminal under international law. Nowhere in any of the paper’s editorials were the words “war crimes” used in reference to U.S. actions in Syria, although those words appeared in reference to Assad’s attacks on civilians.

Trump, Rogue Doofus

The *Times* spent most of 2018 lashing out at Trump for his supposed lack of vision in articulating support for a liberal interventionist position on Syria. There was no shortage of name-calling, which depicted the president as an unreliable and erratic clown, with little knowledge of how to formulate a competent foreign policy. *Times* editorials derided Trump as “impulsive” and lacking “sure footing” in his dealings with Syria, while lamenting a foreign policy run on the “whims” and “rants” of a madman in chief.[39] In early 2018, the paper dismissed Trump’s “tough talk” on Assad’s use of chemical weapons, pursued “without a coherent strategy or follow-through.”[40] It claimed that Trump lacked “a coherent diplomatic strategy for stabilizing Syria and putting a political settlement [presumably between rebel groups, the Kurds, and Assad] in place.”[41] Trump’s “one-off military operation” in response to the use of chemical weapons in

Douma suggested he was “lacking [in] a plan to keep up the pressure” on Assad and to deter him from using such weapons in the future.[42]

The paper of record depicted former Secretary of Defense James Mattis as the only senior-level official with the “willingness and ability to stand up to” Trump, at least prior to the president’s announced troop withdrawal, which was “the final straw” for Mattis in enduring Trump’s nonsensical foreign policy agenda.[43] Trump’s troop withdrawal was greeted as “abrupt” and “dangerous” – “detached from any broader strategic context or any public rationale” and as sowing “new uncertainty about America’s commitment to the Middle East, its willingness to be a global leader, and Mr. Trump’s role as commander in chief.”[44] All told, criticisms of Trump as lacking vision and as supporting a dangerous troop withdrawal appeared in three-quarters of all the *Time*’s editorials.

These attacks, however, reveal a fundamental misunderstanding of Trump’s political beliefs when it comes to foreign policy making. It is hardly the case that Trump lacks a political ideology, so much as his ideology conflicts with that of the liberal internationalists at the *Times*. Trump may have claimed concern for the victims of the chemical attacks in Douma, but his focus was largely symbolic, considering the limited nature of the bombing campaign against Syrian government targets.[45] Trump subscribes to a rabidly xenophobic, reactionary foreign policy agenda, with little concern for the victims of U.S. wars in the Middle East, or for people of color more generally. If he was concerned with the victims of war, he would not have instituted multiple blanket bans against those – including refugees – immigrating to the U.S. from Muslim-majority countries, which were rationalized by his claim that Muslims are extremists who are predisposed to supporting terrorism. Trump’s withdrawal from Syria overlaps with his “America first” agenda, which elevates the interests of white affluent males in the first world over refugees, victims of war, and people of color. His announced withdrawal from Syria, regardless of the potential negative effect on Syria’s Kurds (who face escalating attacks from Turkey), are of little consequence to the commander in chief.

Had the *Times*’ editors provided a more coherent portrait of the president, they would have stressed Trump’s reactionary ideology as motivating his politics. The Trump administration embraces a militant foreign policy that includes a creeping fascist element, on display in the government shutdown and beyond. Fascist politics are embraced via his efforts to militarize the border, ban immigrants from the Middle East, his threats to impose emergency rule and ignore immigration law by reversing birthright citizenship and diverting tax dollars to the border wall without congressional authorization, and in relation

to his demonization of people of color, which he and his family compare to animals.[46] But this creeping fascism is scarcely acknowledged in the news media, presumably for fear of what it suggests about the deterioration of American democracy. As recent research demonstrates, the term “fascism” is rarely applied to the Trump administration, compared to less incendiary, more popular terms such as “populist” and “authoritarian.” [47]

Congress as a Check on the Doofus in Chief

Following from the ‘Doofus in Chief’ frame is the claim that Congress must intervene to provide firm guidance in articulating a coherent vision for U.S. foreign policy. This frame includes: attacks on Trump for lacking Congressional authorization for his April 2018 bombing of Syrian government targets following the Douma chemical attack; support for Congressional hearings on Trump’s Syria withdrawal plan; and the claim that Congress must be more active in general in determining how Trump uses military force.[48] Appeals for Congress to take an active role in reeling in Trump’s foreign policy appeared in two-thirds of the *Times*’ editorials on Syria.

As the *Times* opined in an April editorial, “a new [Congressional] authorization to deal with military operations against non-state actors like ISIS” was needed to mitigate the decisions of “the volatile and thoughtless Mr. Trump.”[49] Legislation, they wrote, “should also set limits on a president’s ability to wage war...Without that, Congress would be once again abdicating its responsibility and ceding broad powers to an impulsive president with dubious judgment.”[50] Of particular note here is the reason given for Congressional action – a “volatile and thoughtless” Trump regime. At issue is not the illegal U.S. use of force throughout the world, which has consistently been a problem with presidents prior to Trump, but with this president’s brash demeanor and lack of a liberal multilateralist vision for Syria. This very pragmatic attack on the president reveals the artificially constrictive nature of foreign policy commentary in the paper of record. One may embrace Trump’s reactionary and abrasive foreign policy agenda, *or* the liberal militarist and interventionist stance of the *Times*. But the discussion that is not allowed is one that stresses the choice of principled anti-imperialism, and that frames U.S. wars – unilateral or multilateral – as morally questionable.

U.S. “Humanitarianism” and the Kurdish Question

Central to the *Times*’ defense of war is the claim that U.S. withdrawal will enable Turkey to invade the autonomous Kurdish region in northeastern Syria. Turkey has long been set on suppressing Kurdish independence movements in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey itself, as it designates these separatists to be “terrorists.” The Turkish government developed a

notoriously draconian record of “mystery killings” against thousands of Kurdish civilians in Turkey via government-sponsored death squads.[51] The government has napalmed Kurdish towns, wiping off the map thousands of villages, and displacing hundreds of thousands of people.[52] It has attacked Kurdish communities in Iraq and Syria, most recently in the Syrian town of Afrin (January 2018), and threatening further action in Manbij, where U.S. special forces are based.[53] Following Trump’s announced withdrawal, Turkey’s President, Tayyip Erdogan, again threatened to invade Manbij, intended to throw Syria’s Kurds out of the region and resettle Syrian refugees who migrated to Turkey.[54] Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu reinforced his country’s commitment to assaulting Kurdish Syria when he announced (January 2019) that Turkey would intervene militarily in Northeastern Syria regardless of whether the U.S. stays in the country or not.[55]

The *Times* devoted sustained attention to the Kurdish question in the last year. It pointed to the centrality of the “30,000 member border force” of Kurdish fighters in Northeastern Syria who are “tasked with protecting the emerging semiautonomous Kurdish enclave.”[56] Trump’s withdrawal, the *Times* warned, “undermines” a “crucial American partner in fighting ISIS,” thereby endangering “American success against the Islamic State.”[57] In all, references to the struggles of Syria’s Kurds appeared in a third of the *Times*’ editorials.

There is much that is wrong with the *Times*’ ‘save the Kurds’ narrative. Most importantly, it contradicts the history of U.S.-Kurdish relations, which is marked by numerous betrayals. These include: sustained U.S. military and economic support for Turkey in the 1990s and onward despite its ethnic cleansing of Turkish Kurds; support for Saddam Hussein during his atrocities against the Kurds in Halabja in 1988, when the Butcher of Baghdad used chemical weapons against thousands of civilians; and George H. W. Bush’s refusal to support rebelling Kurdish forces in northern Iraq during the 1991 Gulf War, in favor of re-establishing Hussein’s iron fist over a nation facing rising domestic unrest.

Foreign policy aside, American journalists have a poor record of valuing Kurdish lives. Hussein’s gassing of the Kurds received little to no attention in the two-and-a-half years following Hussein’s 1988 attack on Halabja. It was not until President Bush invoked Hussein’s atrocities against the Kurds, following Iraq’s August 1990 invasion of Kuwait, that the U.S. media took serious notice of this atrocity – years too late to matter for Hussein’s victims.[58] Subdued human rights considerations continued in 2007, when Turkey bombed areas in northern Iraq that were controlled by the Kurdistan Workers Party

(PKK), which Turkish leaders deem a “terrorist” force. Despite reports of civilian deaths accompanying the bombing campaign, U.S. media depicted the country’s “anger” with the PKK as “understandable,” and called on the Kurds of northern Iraq to somehow find a way to live in “peace” with a military power that was bombing them out of existence.[59] As with other propaganda frames, there were elements of truth to the *Times*’ invocation of Kurdish human rights concerns. Turkey is an existential threat to Kurdish civilians throughout the region. And the United States’ withdrawal is likely to further empower Turkey to assault the Kurds in northeastern Syria. This assault represents a serious threat to the leftist civil society that has developed in the region, via the “Rojava revolution,” which represents a significant front in the battle against ISIS. The Rojava revolution has been heralded by members of the American and international left for its embrace of women’s rights, communalism, anti-capitalism, and self-determination.[60] But there is little indication that this leftist uprising is valued by U.S. political leadership or the U.S. media. There were no references to the Kurdish civil society movement in the *Times*’ editorials, and to the extent that the Kurds were referenced at all, it was mainly in relation to their short-term strategic value to fighting ISIS. Trump’s own lack of concern for Syria’s Kurds, via his support for withdrawal, is further evidence that humanitarian concerns are not driving U.S. foreign policy.

Rather than being based on a sincere interest in protecting Kurdish lives, the *Times*’ references to the Kurds are a deeply cynical propaganda effort to put a human face on an increasingly devastating war. They correspond with the longstanding governmental and journalistic practice of politicizing Kurdish lives in pursuit of U.S. geopolitical objectives in the Middle East, independent of human rights concerns. If the concern in the region is human rights, then U.S. media should be devoting at least as much attention to the human rights crisis and famine in Yemen, in which 85,000 children have died of starvation and 13 million more are at risk of starving.[61] But Yemen’s troubles stem in large part from the actions of a U.S. ally, Saudi Arabia, which has militarily intervened in Yemen’s civil war between the Houthi rebels and the government of Mansur Hadi, and blockaded rebel-controlled ports, thereby intensifying the humanitarian crisis. Revealingly, the human suffering imposed by a major U.S. ally are of significantly less interest to U.S. media than the strategic interests and faux human rights concerns that are invoked by officialdom in U.S. war zones. According to my analysis of the *Nexis Uni* news archive, references to Syria in the *New York Times* appeared in 3,159 articles in 2018, while Yemen references appeared in just 1,204 articles, translating into 162 percent greater coverage for the former

over the latter. Human rights coverage has also been significantly politicized based on Saudi Arabia's strategic value to the U.S. My review of *Nexis Uni* finds that throughout 2018, references to "war crimes" were twice as likely to appear in articles in the *New York Times* in relation to Assad's actions in Syria, compared to Saudi Arabia's actions in Yemen.[62] These results speak poorly to the claim that the U.S. has a genuine humanitarian interest in Syria.

Broader Lessons from the Syrian Civil War

Manufacturing Consent, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's seminal work on media propaganda, argued that American journalists serve as willing tools of political officialdom.[63] There is little in the Syrian case study to contradict this conclusion, considering the *New York Times*' role in politicizing human rights concerns, privileging official war narratives, and ignoring competing and critical viewpoints. One might argue that it is not the job of "objective" news reporters to offer militant challenges to the narratives offered by U.S. officialdom. But even if one accepts that point, there is little justification for defending a media system that systematically ignores non-establishment viewpoints, thereby preventing American news readers from engaging in a critical assessment of U.S. foreign policy. By echoing the interests of those holding political power, the editors at the *Times* reveal their propaganda role in seeking to indoctrinate Americans in favor of a pro-war agenda. There is little for journalists to be proud of concerning the infantilizing nature of such content. Without access to rigorous criticisms of U.S. wars, it is difficult to imagine news audiences forming political views that are independent of official agendas and propaganda.

Notes

[1] Barbara Starr, "U.S. General Disagrees with Trump over Syria Troop Pullout," *CNN.com*, February 17, 2019,

<https://www.cnn.com/2019/02/15/politics/joseph-votel-troops-syria-intl/index.html>

[2]In analyzing all of the *New York Times*' editorials from 2018 that featured Syria, I relied on the *Nexis Uninews* archive. The criteria for search was straightforward. I looked at all editorials that mentioned the word "Syria" in 2018. Within that population of stories, an editorial had to reference Syria at least two times, and one of the references had to be within the first two paragraphs, to be included in my analysis. I found and analyzed 11 editorials in total.

[3]Exceptions to the rule when it comes to studying politics, media, and propaganda include: Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political*

Economy of the News Media (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988); Anthony R. DiMaggio, *Mass Media, Mass Propaganda: Examining American News in the “War on Terror”* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Publishers, 2008); and Scott Bonn, *Mass Deception: Moral Panic and the U.S. War in Iraq* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010). For documentation of the marginalization of propaganda studies in political communication, see: Eric Herring and Piers Robinson, “Too Polemical or Too Critical? Chomsky on the Study of the News Media and U.S. Foreign Policy,” *Review of International Studies* 29, no. 4 (2003): 553-568.

[4]Anthony R. DiMaggio, *When Media Goes to War: Hegemonic Discourse, Public Opinion, and the Limits of Dissent*(New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010).

[5]Editorial, “No Way to Run a War Policy,” April 6, 2018, *New York Times*, 22A; Editorial, “Trump’s Decision to Withdraw From Syria is Alarming. Just Ask His Advisers,” *New York Times*, December 21, 2018, 26A.

[6]Editorial, “Syria is Now Mr. Trump’s War,” *New York Times*, January 20, 2018, 22A.

[7]Editorial, “Trump’s Decision to Withdraw From Syria is Alarming,” 2018.

[8]An editorial was included in the “ISIS-War on Terror” frame if it referenced ISIS, al Qaeda, or the Islamic State.

[9]Haley Britzky and Zachary Basu, “Global Terror Attacks Have Skyrocketed Since 9/11,” *Axios.com*, September 16, 2018,<https://www.axios.com/global-terror-attacks-have-skyrocketed-since-911-34eec00f-ac8a-496f-8a30-3f3f6d054110.html>

[10]Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank, “The Iraq Effect: War has Increased Terrorism Sevenfold Worldwide,” *Mother Jones*, March 1, 2007, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2007/03/iraq-effect-war-iraq-and-its-impact-war-terrorism-pg-2/>

[11]Jessica Stark Rivinius, “Terrorist Violence Decreases Worldwide in 2017, But Remains Historically High,” *Start/National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism*, August 1, 2018, <https://www.start.umd.edu/news/terrorist-violence-decreases-worldwide-2017-remains-historically-high>

[12]Deirdre Shesgreen, “State Department Says Global Terror Attacks Declined Last Year, but Threats Deemed More Complex,” *USA Today*, September 19, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2018/09/19/terror-attacks-worldwide-declined-2017-says-state-department/1355823002/u7>

[13]The foundation for the global “war on terror” as an attempt to eradicate terror was established by President George W. Bush, following the September 11, 2001 attacks, in his September 20, 2001 address to the nation. Bush promised that: “Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated.” President Barack Obama reiterated this point, promising to “focus relentlessly on dismantling terrorist networks like al Qaeda and ISIL.”

[14]New America, “Terrorism in America After 9/11,” *New America*, 2018, <https://www.newamerica.org/in-depth/terrorism-in-america/what-threat-united-states-today/>

[15]Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Impaired Driving: Get the Facts,” *CDC.com*, June 16, 2017, https://www.cdc.gov/motorvehiclesafety/impaired_driving/impaired-driv_factsheet.html

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