

4-2008

Imag(in)ing September 11: Ward Churchill, Frame Contestation, and Media Hegemony

Erika G. King

Grand Valley State University, kinge@gvsu.edu

Mary deYoung

Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/pls_articles



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

King, Erika G. and deYoung, Mary, "Imag(in)ing September 11: Ward Churchill, Frame Contestation, and Media Hegemony" (2008). *Peer Reviewed Articles*. 5.

https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/pls_articles/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Political Science and International Relations at ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Peer Reviewed Articles by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Imag(in)ing September 11

Ward Churchill, Frame Contestation, and Media Hegemony

Erika G. King
Mary deYoung
Grand Valley State University

This study analyzes the *Denver Post's* reportage on the frame contest between the dominant narrative of the September 11 terrorist attacks set out by President Bush and a challenge to that narrative in an Internet essay by Professor Ward Churchill. The authors find that by refusing to interrogate Churchill's sociopolitical argument, reducing it to the offensive rhetorical trope "little Eichmanns" he used to describe the victims of the attacks, and pillorying Churchill as a person and scholar, the *Post* assured his counterframe would not achieve parity with the dominant frame. The authors interpret this as an example of media hegemony and situate the *Post's* coverage within a crisis of hegemony that left the "sacred core" of the Bush frame—American innocence and moral exceptionalism—vulnerable to contestation. Because the Churchill counterframe flagrantly transgressed that "sacred core," it became the irresistible target of media hegemony strategies by the *Denver Post*.

Keywords: *counterframe; frame contestation; media hegemony; September 11 terrorist attacks; Ward Churchill*

On September 11, 2001, three hijacked commercial airliners slammed into the U.S. Pentagon and the twin towers of the World Trade Center; a fourth airliner, reportedly headed for the White House, crashed in a Pennsylvania field. The images of September 11—exploding airliners piloted by shadowy terrorists, dead and dying people, emergency personnel racing to the scenes, spectators running for their lives when buildings collapsed—are certainly, as the old saying goes, worth a thousand words. But just exactly *what* words are used to construct the meaning of this horrific event, and by whom they are spoken, written, and repeated, not only "frame" the event but also reveal something of interest about the working of power.

In this article, we analyze the "frame contest" (Entman, 2003, 2004) between the dominant narrative of the September 11 attacks set out by President Bush in a speech to the nation just hours after the event and a challenge to that narrative in the form of an essay titled "Some People Push Back: On the Justice of Roosting Chickens," by University of Colorado ethnic studies professor and Indian activist Ward Churchill, discovered on the Internet more than 3 years after the attacks. We are particularly interested

in how the *Denver Post*, as an exemplar of the mainstream media, represented both the counterframe and its author, why the newspaper reacted as it did, and what the consequences of that reaction to the outcome of the frame contest are.

Our analysis is informed by the media hegemony thesis. Briefly stated, *hegemony* refers to “the process by which ruling elites secure consent to the established political order through the production and diffusion of meanings and values” (Carragee & Roefs, 2004, pp. 221-222). The media are essential to that process in two ways. First, as one of an array of “cultural workers,” in Gramsci’s (1971) sense of the term, the media can reproduce, represent, and renew dominant meanings and values or, in the terms of this present article, a dominant frame to a variety of different audiences but with the single goal of securing their “consent” to that dominant frame, that is, their acceptance of it as “common sense.” Second, because hegemony can be resisted, altered, and challenged, the media serve as a site for frame contests (Artz & Murphy, 2000; Condit, 1994; Gitlin, 2003). Although not without its critics (Altheide, 1984; Carragee, 1993; Mumby, 1997), the media hegemony thesis, with its emphasis on the working of power, provides the most robust explanation for both how and why the *Denver Post* represented and reacted to the Churchill counterframe in the manner it did.

Framing September 11

The official frame of the September 11 attacks came within hours of the events themselves. In a brief address to the nation that evening, President Bush portrayed the attacks as “evil, despicable acts of terror” that resulted in the mass murder of thousands of innocent civilians. He declared that Americans were targeted for being “the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world.” And he went on to warn, “No one will keep that light from shining. . . . None of us will ever forget this day, yet we go forward to defend freedom and all that is good and just in this world.” Asking for prayers for all affected by the horrific attacks, President Bush asserted that America, its friends and allies, and all those who want peace and security in the world “will stand together to win the war against terrorism” (Bush, 2001a). In another statement the following morning, the president declared,

The deliberate and deadly attacks which were carried out yesterday against our country were more than acts of terror. They were acts of war. This will require our country to unite in steadfast determination and resolve. Freedom and democracy are under attack. . . . The United States of America will use all our resources to conquer this enemy. . . . This battle will take time and resolve. But make no mistake about it: we will win. . . . This will be a monumental struggle of good versus evil. But good will prevail. (Bush, 2001b)

The Bush frame of the September 11 attacks, according to Entman (2003), defines a problematic effect (the death of thousands of civilians in an act of war), its cause (the unprovoked and unwarranted acts of terrorists), a moral judgment (struggle of good versus evil), and a remedy (war against terrorism). Anker (2005) fleshed out the frame and argued that it presents a compelling melodramatic story line of villainy, victimization, and vengeance by reducing the event and its resolution to a Manichean battle of right versus wrong, morality versus immorality, and, in Bush's starkly polarized characterization, good versus evil. This melodramatic plot line furthermore constructs an American national identity "that establishes its own moral virtue through victimization and heroic restitution" (p. 25); in short, its "sacrificing language" (Jackson, 2005, p. 35) forges a moral community, unsullied by immorality or evil and unified by shared values and the practices of freedom and democracy. Attacked precisely because of this constructed moral exceptionalism, this powerful victim, in the Bush frame, has no choice but retribution through engaging the evil "other" in war (Coe, Domke, Graham, John, & Pickard, 2004; Domke, 2004; Hutcheson, Domke, Billeaudreaux, & Garland, 2004; Karim, 2002; Silberstein, 2002; Waisbord, 2002).

Central to the melodrama of the Bush frame are the casualties of the attacks and what their victimization represents. In characterizing them as ordinary people who were engaged in the routines of everyday life on that fateful day, he not only stressed their absolute moral innocence but also, in doing so, underscored the risk for all ordinary Americans. In the Bush frame, the innocent victims of the September 11 attacks represent and symbolize each and every American as well as the moral community that *is* America (Lule, 2002).

The hegemony of the Bush frame was ensured by its uncritical repetition by politicians on both sides of the aisle, military leaders, non-administrative elites, and the mass media over the months after the September 11 attacks (Domke, 2004; Entman, 2003, 2004; Jackson, 2005; Kellner, 2002; McChesney, 2002; Norris, Kern, & Just, 2002). The wave of patriotism, indeed of nationalism, that followed the attacks gives face validity to the Bush frame's success in securing public consent. Public opinion polls taken over those months showed an unprecedented level of approval for President Bush, a robust optimism that the nation would be successful in its newly declared "war on terrorism," and an emphatic expression of support of the "American values" of liberty, freedom, and equality (Huddy, Khatib, & Capelos, 2002). Over the ensuing year and a half, Bush would draw on this initial reservoir of consent to expand the war on terrorism from skirmishes in the mountains of Afghanistan in search of the diabolical mastermind of the September 11 attacks, Osama bin Laden, to an indefinite battle against an "axis of evil" in Iraq, the homeland of a more familiar nemesis, Saddam Hussein.

Bush's strategy of linking Saddam Hussein, weapons of mass destruction, and the threat of more terrorist attacks on American soil to his frame of the September 11

attacks crafted a persuasive justification for a war in Iraq that garnered much initial political and public support (Entman, 2004). Leading political and media figures who otherwise might have been expected to vociferously question the decision to go to war did so from the margins in the face of what Krebs and Lobasz (2007) refer to as “rhetorical coercion,” that is, Bush’s strategy “to rhetorically constrain political opponents and maneuver them into public assent to [his] preferred terms of debate and . . . to [his] policy stance” (p. 411).

But as that war continued to drag on long after Bush’s enthusiastic declaration that our mission had been accomplished, and as the nation wallowed in what Heller (2005) refers to as “9/11 fatigue” resulting from “the incessant binging and manipulation of evocations of national catastrophe, warnings of future threats, a drawn-out Iraqi military occupation with no visible end-point, and the continued erosion of civil rights in a fear-saturated, surveillance-obsessed political climate” (p. 23), voices of opposition began to increase in number and volume.

The Churchill September 11 Counterframe

By early 2005, meaningful counterframes had emerged (Entman, 2004). One of them came in the form of an essay titled “Some People Push Back: On the Justice of Roosting Chickens,” by University of Colorado ethnic studies professor and Indian activist Ward Churchill (2001). The 5,600-word essay, written the day after the attacks and posted on the Internet 2 weeks later, was penned as an immediate and angry rejoinder to the Bush frame.

Churchill’s self-described “stream of consciousness” invective spans centuries and continents in its savage condemnation of U.S. political leaders and their foreign policies. He begins with a reminder that half a million Iraqi children have died as a result of the 1991 U.S. bombings and the subsequent embargo of food and medicine. He goes on to cast the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks as “secular activists” and insists their intent was to jolt all Americans out of their complacency and to force them to realize that their shock, pain, and grief are equal to those currently suffered by the Iraqis and historically endured by the Vietnamese, whose country they ravaged, the Japanese citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, whose cities they obliterated, and the Native Americans whom they dislocated and massacred. He warns against Bush’s resolve to “rid the world of evil” by retaliating for the September 11 attacks with war, by writing,

They are preparing once again to sally forth for the purpose of roasting brown-skinned children by the scores of thousands. . . . To where? Afghanistan? . . . Iraq, again (or still)? . . . Any of them or all. It doesn’t matter. The desire to pummel the helpless runs rabid as ever. Only this time it’s different. This time the helpless aren’t, or at least are not so helpless as they were.

And he concludes that Americans “still don’t get” the lesson: “When you push people around, some people push back. And they should. As they must. And as they undoubtedly will. There is justice in such symmetry” (Churchill, 2001).

Churchill’s counterframe is far from unique in its assertion that the attacks of September 11 are the consequences of U.S. foreign policy, particularly the bombings of Iraq and other current and historic American actions as a global superpower. What does separate the Churchill counterframe from all others that began emerging in 2005, however, is its transgressive nature. In Churchill’s narrative, it is not just U.S. political leaders and their policies or, for that matter, the nation-state who are responsible for the September 11 attacks but all ordinary Americans who like “good Germans gleefully cheered” the devastating effects of those policies. And to the Bush frame’s depiction of the victims of the September 11 attacks as innocent civilians, Churchill replies that those in the Pentagon were “military targets, pure and simple”; of those killed in the World Trade Center, he writes,

Well, really, Let’s get a grip here, shall we? True enough, they were civilians of a sort. But innocent? Gimme a break. They formed a technocratic corps at the very heart of America’s global financial empire—the “mighty engine of profit” to which the military dimension of U.S. policy has always been enslaved—and they did so willingly and knowingly. . . . To the extent that any of them were unaware of the costs and consequences to others of what they were involved in—and in many cases excelling at—it was because of their absolute refusal to see. More likely, it was because they were too busy braying, incessantly and self-importantly, into their cell phones, arranging power lunches and stock transactions, each of which translated, conveniently out of sight, mind and smelling distance, into the starved and rotting flesh of infants. If there was a better, more effective, or in fact any other way of visiting some penalty befitting their participation upon the little Eichmanns inhabiting the sterile sanctuary of the twin towers, I’d really be interested in hearing about it. (Churchill, 2001)

The rhetorical trope “little Eichmanns” makes reference, of course, to Adolph Eichmann, the high-ranking SS officer in Nazi Germany who was responsible for the logistics of the extermination of millions of people during the Holocaust, including more than 6 million Jews as part of the “Final Solution.” It was in regard to Eichmann that political philosopher Hannah Arendt (1977) coined the term *the banality of evil*, arguing that although his deeds were monstrous, he, himself, was a quite ordinary technocrat who performed his job with no thought as to its consequences.

The Churchill counterframe, then, does not so much challenge the Bush frame as transgress it: It is not “who we are” that is the reason for the attack but “what we have done.” And because what we have done is evil, to borrow the dominant frame’s binary language, and is aided and abetted by all Americans, particularly the victims of the September 11 attacks, then “we,” whether defined collectively in terms of a nation-state, an imagined community or a national identity, or more distinctively as

individuals, have no legitimate protestation of innocence or claim to moral exceptionalism. In 5,600 words, Churchill's counterframe transgresses the core of the Bush frame by exposing its most persuasive thesis that American innocence and morality exist entirely apart from the story the frame tells about it, as nothing more than what Barthes (1986) would term a "referential illusion."

Yet despite its transgressive rhetoric, the essay languished in cyberspace obscurity for 3 and a half years before it was discovered when Churchill was invited to appear at a February 2005 symposium at Hamilton College in upstate New York. An announcement of the talk in the student newspaper noted Churchill's status as a controversial author and outspoken Indian activist and cited a number of the inflammatory assertions he had made about the attacks in his online essay (Mandel, 2005). Press, public, and political reactions were swift, intense, and emotionally charged, and the ensuing uproar played out across news and advocacy outlets, the blogosphere, college campuses, and state capitols as it gathered steam over the ensuing months.

Media attention to Churchill's counterframe was extensive, as a wide variety of outlets both large and small pursued the story. The cable news networks quickly pounced on it, and it became the lead story on Fox's *The O'Reilly Factor* as well as MSNBC's *Hardball*, *MSNBC Reports*, and *Scarborough Country* within the first 24 hours. A search of the Nexis Major Papers and News Wires databases through the first full month of the frame contest from January 27 to February 28, 2005, found that the keywords *Ward Churchill* appeared in 226 separate news and op-ed items in the major national and regional newspapers published in the United States. The story was also the subject of 155 wire service stories and was featured in 112 programs on cable news networks.

The content of the media's portrayal of the Churchill story is especially revealing. Just as the dominant frame of the September 11 attacks was condensed by the news media into images and sound bites (Entman, 2003, 2004), Churchill's counterframe was reduced by media outlets across the board to his analogy of Americans as complicit Nazis, specifically his labeling of those killed in World Trade Center as "little Eichmanns." With media focus on this single offensive figure of speech, Churchill's counterframe catapulted into the center of a media firestorm. In the 226 news and op-ed pieces published during the first month of the frame contest by all outlets in the Nexis Major Papers database, specific mentions of the phrase *little Eichmanns* appear in 92 (40.7%) of the stories. References to Adolf Eichmann as a named person and Nazis in general are contained in 93 (41.1%) news and op-ed pieces. And the term *victims*, specifically in reference to those who died in the World Trade Center, is mentioned in 101 (44.7%) of the Churchill-related stories in the major national and regional dailies. In a number of news and op-ed items, the phrase *little Eichmanns* appeared multiple times in the space of a single story, as did references to Adolf Eichmann, Nazis, and the September 11 victims.

The *Denver Post* and the Churchill Counterframe

To obtain a more nuanced understanding of *how* the media reacted to Churchill's challenge of the Bush frame, we conducted an in-depth qualitative content analysis of the *Denver Post's* coverage during the first month of the frame contest. We selected the *Post* because it is the major daily in the mountain west and was, not surprisingly, highly attentive to this story.

Like the rest of the leading U.S. national and regional print media and broadcast news, but in contrast to much of the cable TV opinion-driven echo chamber, the *Post* values "objective" reportage, and its coverage is not filtered through an overt ideological lens. Yet just like other media outlets, from the Associated Press to Fox News, the *Denver Post* ignored the counterframe's exegesis on the newly declared war on terrorism, specifically the war in Iraq, and, in doing so, did not attempt to legitimize it by linking it to the arguments of other counterframes that were gaining influence in 2005. Rather, the newspaper distilled the counterframe into the rhetorical trope *little Eichmanns*. In the 65 news and op-ed pieces analyzed, this phrase was cited 40 times, with an additional 69 references to Adolf Eichmann and Nazis and 79 references to the victims of the September 11 attacks. Therefore, in all of its connotations the phrase *little Eichmanns* is central to the *Post's* coverage, appearing a total of 188 times, for an average of 2.9 cites per news and op-ed item.

Moral Outrage

This distillation of the counterframe to its most transgressive phrase had a significant consequence: It provided an entrée for "cultural workers," as Gramsci (1971) refers to them, to react with moral outrage to the "little Eichmanns" transgression and, by doing so, reify the referential illusion of the Bush frame that American innocence and morality really do exist entirely apart from the story the frame tells about it. Table 1 illustrates the ecumenical array of cultural workers and their responses to Churchill's transgression that were reported by the *Denver Post* during the first month of the Churchill affair.

These outpourings of moral outrage, accompanied as they were by expressions of great reverence for the victims of the September 11 attacks, became a staple of the *Denver Post's* reportage. Quotes from numerous public and private individuals and commentary from the journalists themselves extolled the victims' sacrifice, emphasized their innocence, and excoriated as evil the perpetrators of September 11 and anyone who would defend them. Colorado state political leaders were especially anxious to enshrine the victims' iconic status, as perhaps best exemplified in a unanimously passed resolution from the Colorado House of Representatives that states, in part,

Table 1
Moral Assessments of Churchill's Counterframe as
Reported by the *Denver Post*

January 27, 2005	
“Repugnant and disparaging”	Unnamed Hamilton College administrators
“Repugnant and plain looney”;	State Senator Shawn Mitchell (R-CO)
“hatemonger”	
“Morally outrageous”	Prof. Steven Goldberg, Hamilton College
“Utter irresponsibility”	Prof. Robert Paquette, Hamilton College
January 28, 2005	
“Indefensible and reprehensible”	U.S. Representative Mark Udall (D-CO)
“Outrageous”	U.S. Representative Bob Beauprez (R-CO)
“Morally repugnant”	Prof. Phil Klinkner, Hamilton College
“Offensive”	Phil Stefano, University of Colorado interim chancellor
January 31, 2005	
“Appalling”	Cindy Carlisle and Patricia Hayes, Regents, University of Colorado
“Ill thought-out and hurtful”	Todd Gleeson, Arts and Sciences Dean, University of Colorado
February 1, 2005	
“Indecent, insensitive, and inappropriate”; “at odds with simple decency”; “far outside the mainstream of civil discourse”	Governor Bill Owens (R-CO)
“Hurtful”	Kathy Trant, widow of September 11 victim
“Defamation of character of [September 11 victims]”	Richard Pecorella, fiancé of September 11 victim
“Warped sense of right and wrong and of humanity”;	
“bigoted terrorist supporter”	Governor George Pataki (D-NY)
February 2, 2005	
“Evil and inflammatory blow”;	House Joint Resolution 1011, Colorado House of Representatives
“deplorable”	
February 3, 2005	
“Disgusting”	Barbara Bintliff, chair, Boulder Faculty Assembly
February 4, 2005	
“Disgraceful comments”	Resolution, Board of Regents, University of Colorado
“Aids our enemies”; “frankly disgusting”	State Senator Peter Groff (D-CO)
February 5, 2005	
“Repugnant”	Prof. Uriel Nauenberg, University of Colorado
February 6, 2005	
“Antagonistic to the beliefs and conduct of civilized people”	Governor Bill Owens (R-CO)
February 10, 2005	
“Grossly inappropriate”	Jack Miller, Chancellor, University of Wisconsin–Whitewater
February 23, 2005	
“Supporter of terrorists”	Kimberly Craven, Hawaii College Republicans, University of Hawaii

Whereas, the victims at the World Trade Center were innocent in every sense of the word and should always be remembered as innocent victims of an unprovoked attack on America; now, therefore, be it resolved . . . that the General Assembly commemorates the lives lost. ("Text of House Resolution," 2005)

Newspaper reports were rife with statements from politicians on both sides of the aisle who rushed to add their individual voices of assent to the resolution. A letter from Governor Bill Owens (R-CO) to the University of Colorado College Republicans is also illustrative; in the space of one brief paragraph, he twice mentions that the victims were "murdered" and proclaims their innocence no fewer than three times ("Text of Owens' Letter on Churchill," 2005).

As a consequence of the moral outrage given voice in the *Denver Post*, demands that Churchill apologize and resign from his university post quickly followed. These calls received much of the newspaper's attention, as did Churchill's public and defiant refusals to comply (Pankratz, 2005c). He eventually did some moral gerrymandering of his own in a statement, published in full by the *Post*, in which he stated that his phrase *little Eichmanns* applied only to "technicians" and not to the "children, janitors, food service workers, firemen and random passers-by who were the innocent victims of the attack" ("Text of Churchill Statement," 2005). But the news story that accompanied this statement primarily focused on the appalled reactions to the continued use of the rhetorical trope, not his ex post facto attempt to secure the moral high ground (Pankratz, 2005a). Nor were critics assuaged by his resignation as chair of the Ethnic Studies Department, although not from his tenured faculty position, as the *Post* printed without comment the brief text of his resignation letter (Pankratz, 2005a). The University of Colorado Board of Regents, however, did accede to the calls for public repentance in language that reified the Bush frame's referential illusion to a moral community of Americans that the September 11 victims both symbolize and represent. It issued a widely reported apology for Churchill's "disgraceful comments," addressed to "all Americans, especially those targeted in the 9/11 attacks and those serving in our armed forces" ("Text of Regents' Resolution," 2005).

In the second week of the controversy, the *Post* published excerpts from an earlier online interview in which Churchill had again used the phrase *little Eichmanns*, this time to characterize those who abused animals or people, and then went on to claim that "more 9/11's may be necessary" to put the United States "out of existence altogether" (Kane, 2005a). Not surprisingly, this led to further expressions of moral outrage and renewed calls by Governor Owens and an array of politicians and university and community leaders for Churchill's dismissal.

Reactions of moral outrage also contained expressions of anger and disgust directed toward the University of Colorado for elevating Churchill to the ranks of the faculty. The university was roundly castigated in several *Post* news and op-ed pieces for failing to follow its own procedures and standards in hiring and promoting Churchill, for repeatedly ignoring complaints about his behavior and scholarship, and for ignoring his counterframing Internet essay for 3 years (Kane, 2005b; Kane, 2005c).

The voices that rose to Churchill's defense in the pages of the *Denver Post* included some students, administrators, and faculty who cited his right to academic freedom and free speech; a number complained that Churchill was being unfairly vilified, and some even compared the controversy to a McCarthy-era witch hunt, but none spoke in support of the sociopolitical critique of U.S. foreign policy in his counterframe or of his use of the rhetorical trope *little Eichmanns* (Kane, 2005c; Tsai, 2005). Only two *Post* articles, both written by the same columnist, noted that Churchill's "core argument" about the connection between U.S. foreign policy and the September 11 attacks had some merit (Rivers, 2005a, 2005b). In the *Denver Post's* coverage of the first month of this frame contest, however, that rhetorical trope most certainly trumped any analysis of U.S. foreign policy.

Churchill's Fraudulent Identity

The *Denver Post's* focus on the transgressive rhetorical trope *little Eichmanns* and its extensive coverage of the morally outraged reactions to the term diminished the power of the Churchill counterframe to influence public consent to his alternative read on the September 11 attacks and their U.S. foreign policy implications. The *Post* further weakened the counterframe by discrediting Churchill, that is, by divesting him of the moral capital he required to promote and defend his counterframe by exposing him as a fraud. The reportage on this issue provided not only another entrée for various individuals and groups to engage in the performative discourse of reifying the Bush frame but also an opportunity to exercise a rather blunt social control over Churchill as a counterframer.

Churchill's interest in oppressed groups and their resistance to oppression presents a moral "front," that is, a public performance that may or may not be consistent with his true identity (Goffman, 1959). His books include critiques of the justice system's treatment of racial minorities (1992), the FBI's covert actions against minority activist groups (Churchill & VanderWall, 2000), and the media's racist portrayals of American Indians (1992, 1993). He has written about colonizations, genocides and ecocides in American history (1997), and Indian resistance to them (2002, a Gustavus Myer Award-winning book). As a member of the Keetoowah Band of the Cherokee Nation, he serves as co-director of AIM of Colorado, an activist group that broke away from the American Indian Movement (AIM), and coordinator of the group's annual protest of the Columbus Day celebration and parade. Over decades of activism that began after his service in the Vietnam War and that includes involvement with Students for a Democratic Society, the Weather Underground, and the Black Panthers, Churchill has been arrested several times, has been sued several times more, and has maintained a high profile as a professor, guest speaker, and critic of the U.S. government and its domestic and foreign policies (Curtin, Pankratz, & Kane, 2005).

The *Denver Post's* task of "deconstructing" Churchill, that is, of finding his true identity behind his front as a morally credible critic of the U.S. government and its

domestic and foreign policies, was made that much easier by the fact that he has never maintained a personal distance from his scholarship or activism. Any challenge to any of his identity claims, then, is a challenge to his scholarship and activism, and vice versa.

It is his claim of being an American Indian, in fact, that brought Churchill, who has a master's degree but no doctorate, to the position of chair of the Ethnic Studies Program at the University of Colorado. The university, in the interest of retaining minority faculty, then granted him tenure as a full professor without the mandatory 7-year review (Kane, 2005c; Spencer, 2005). Yet just more than a week after the frame contest began, a *Denver Post* article quoted a representative of the Keetoowah Band of the Cherokee Nation to the effect that Churchill was not, as he claimed, an Indian but had been granted associate membership in the impoverished band only because he "convinced us that he could help our people," a promise he never fulfilled (Pankratz, 2005b).

As charges that Churchill had fabricated his ethnic identity mounted and were duly reported in the *Denver Post*, additional revelations about a "clouded" Vietnam War service record, particularly his unsubstantiated claims that he had faced combat, also surfaced in newspaper stories (Curtin et al., 2005; Pankratz & Merritt, 2005). And a lengthy *Post* profile exposed what the authors called Churchill's "turbulent personal life" that has featured four marriages, allegations of marital violence, minor run-ins with the law, multiple civil suits, and clashes with city officials (Curtin et al., 2005).

With every aspect of his ethnic and personal identity called into question, Churchill's "front," that is, his academic credentials and scholarship, also was placed under the microscope. Less than a week after the controversy first appeared in the *Denver Post*, Governor Owens asserted that Churchill's views failed to pass the test of "useful academic work" ("Text of Owens' Letter on Churchill," 2005); a week later he accused Churchill of "lack of intellectual scholarship" because "he simply assumes things instead of proving things" (Harsanyi, 2005). In another story, Owens claimed that "there are a number of things that call into question his competence and his integrity" (Curtin & Pankratz, 2005) and that professional incompetence is one of the grounds spelled out by the University of Colorado for termination of a tenured faculty member.

In early February, the *Denver Post* reported on the vote of the University of Colorado Board of Regents to review all of Churchill's publications, speeches, and interviews to determine whether they contained possible grounds for dismissal (Tsai, 2005), and allegations of substandard research from a variety of sources quickly began to surface. The *Post* highlighted separate charges from two academics that Churchill has engaged in historically inaccurate, misleading, and fraudulent scholarship throughout his career (Curtin & Pankratz, 2005). In one interview, Lamar University sociology professor Thomas Brown accused Churchill of making up data, specifically his unsubstantiated claim that U.S. officials intentionally distributed

smallpox-tainted blankets to Indians. “Churchill’s tale of genocide by means of biological warfare is shocking. . . . It is also entirely fraudulent,” quotes the *Post* (Curtin & Pankratz, 2005). The same story also details University of New Mexico law professor John LaVelle’s charge that Churchill’s (1993) widely read book *Indians ‘R’ Us: Culture and Genocide* is “grossly misleading and misinforming.” Noting LaVelle’s status as an enrolled member of the Santee Sioux, the article quotes him as saying that given “America’s entrenched ignorance of the legal and political concerns of Indian tribes . . . [the book] constitutes a regrettable setback in Indian people’s struggle for social justice” (Curtin & Pankratz, 2005).

Thus, attacks on Churchill’s suspicious personal history, problematic scholarship, and questionable academic background became thoroughly entwined with challenges to his putative ethnic identity and Vietnam War service. As a result, he was discredited on all fronts. Just as Churchill had denied membership in any putative moral community to the September 11 victims and the ordinary Americans they are said to symbolize and represent, so too was he figuratively stripped of membership in the ethnic and intellectual communities he claimed as his own.

Media Hegemony

The question remains as to *why* the *Denver Post* represented and reacted to the Churchill counterframe in the manner it did. Our response to that question is informed by the media hegemony thesis that proposes that in a democratic society political elites create political and cultural consensus through persuasion more often than coercion. Thus, traditional “cultural workers,” such as the media, are relied on to reproduce, represent, and renew dominant frames for a wide range of public audiences in order to secure their consent. The acceptance by these public audiences of the dominant frame as “common sense,” then, is a measure of the success of hegemony.

It is our opinion that the *Denver Post*’s reportage during the first month of the Churchill affair provides three distinct examples of media hegemony. First, by following the lead of national news outlets and ignoring the sociopolitical critique of the counterframe, the *Post* excluded from public discourse the substance of Churchill’s argument about the meaning of the September 11 attacks as a retaliation against present and past U.S. foreign policy initiatives. Thus, by its unwillingness to interrogate the Churchill counterframe as a “complete alternative narrative” (Entman, 2003, p. 418) to the Bush frame, the *Denver Post* effectively deprived it of the resonance and magnitude necessary to engage in a vigorous contest with the dominant frame. A frame contest, it should be noted, is not just a battle over meaning but a battle for social and political influence; thus, the newspaper ensured that the Churchill counterframe could not weigh in to any ideological battle to “transform the popular mentality” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 348) about the meaning of the September 11 attacks.

Second, by distilling Churchill's counterframe to its transgressive rhetorical trope *little Eichmanns*, the *Denver Post* provoked an array of other cultural workers—politicians, academics, and civic leaders—to engage in the performative discourse of expressing their moral outrage to the public. And in doing so, these cultural workers also reaffirmed, defended, and even reified that which the rhetorical trope so offensively transgressed in the first place—the Bush frame's interpretation of the September 11 attacks as evil assaults on pure innocence and unsullied morality. The relentless publicity of a transgression raises not only the profile of what is transgressed but also its significance and influence (Adut, 2004; Cottle, 2006). Thus, by devoting so much of its reportage to the rhetorical trope *little Eichmanns* and the moral outrage it engendered, the *Denver Post* not only attacked Churchill's integrity as a counterframer but also reminded the public of the meaning and value of the Bush frame's portrayal of the victims of the September 11 attacks as innocent and as representative and symbolic of each and every American and of the moral community that *is* America.

Third, by devoting a great deal of its reportage to the unmasking of Churchill as a fraud, the *Denver Post* divested him of the moral and intellectual capital needed to both defend and promote his counterframe. It should be noted that Churchill was far from a passive victim of a press campaign to discredit him. In fact, he cleverly eluded repeated questions about his ethnic identity and Vietnam War service and refused to defend his scholarship against criticism. And rather than elaborating on, or clarifying, the sociopolitical content of his counterframe when given the opportunity to do so, he engaged in a series of spirited and unrepentant public defenses of his rhetorical trope *little Eichmanns*, thus further raising its transgressive profile. Both the *Denver Post's* investigative reportage that exposed him as a fraud and its coverage of his responses to the reportage, however, had the combined effect of casting, or perhaps even typecasting, him as a moral and intellectual pariah and left him powerless to defend or promote his counterframe in any contest with the dominant Bush frame of the September 11 attacks.

Conclusion

We recognize the media are far from powerless receptacles and reflectors of dominant frames and that they can and do sometimes operate as what Stinrati (1995, p. 168) refers to as “tools of insurrection” by producing, reproducing, and legitimating challenges to a dominant frame and thus serving as a site for frame contests. We conclude by considering two possible reasons why the *Denver Post* acted more as a tool of hegemony than as a tool of insurrection in its first month of reportage on the Churchill counterframe.

We begin by returning to the hegemony thesis. Far from being monolithic, hegemony has to be continually “renewed, recreated, defended and modified” (Williams, 1977, p. 112) in the face of resistance, contradiction, and challenge for any group to maintain its influence and power. At some historical moments, a “crisis in hegemony” occurs, “a profound rupture in the political and economic life of a society, an accumulation of contradictions” that weakens the influence of dominant ideologies and values on daily lives and lived experiences. These are moments “when the whole basis of political leadership and cultural authority becomes exposed and contested” (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clark, & Rogers, 1978, p. 217).

We suggest that just such a crisis in hegemony was occurring when the Churchill counterframe emerged in 2005. In a historical context of “9/11 fatigue” (Heller, 2005), the failed search for weapons of mass destruction, the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, the bloody pre-election violence in Iraq, the war protests around the world (“Iraq Timeline,” 2005), and Bush’s plummeting approval ratings (Ruggles, 2005), the dominant frame was being battered from all fronts.

Hegemony always has to be recreated and negotiated by political leaders, but never more so than during a crisis of hegemony. We hypothesize that although it was the war in Iraq that was the most contested part of the dominant frame, the crisis of hegemony left what was the core of the frame—innocence and moral exceptionalism—vulnerable to contestation as well. The repetition, remembrance, and even reification of that core, such as occurred during the *Denver Post*’s first month of reportage on the Churchill affair, holds it fast against threat and recreates, although perhaps only weakly, the hegemony the dominant frame of the September 11 attacks once had.

Our use of the word *core* to indicate, metaphorically, a symbolic heart of the Bush frame of the September 11 attacks brings us to a second hypothesis as to why the *Denver Post* acted as a tool of hegemony rather than insurrection. As Carragee and Roefs (2004) point out, there is no consensus definition of what a frame is, although there is agreement that it is more than simply a story topic, attribute, or issue position. We posit that the Bush frame’s narrative of innocence and its referential illusion to moral exceptionalism constitute the core of the frame in which dominant ideologies and values are the most densely codified and therefore the most likely to elicit spontaneous consent. More simply put, while the war in Iraq was open to criticism, contradiction, and negotiation, the innocence of the September 11 victims was not. Thus, the Churchill counterframe, with its heavy-footed transgression of what we are calling the inviolable *core* of the Bush frame, became the irresistible subject of the tools of media hegemony by the *Denver Post*.

In conclusion, our analysis in this present article focused on the first month of the Churchill affair, and even by that short time, the outcome of the frame contest was indisputable. By refusing to interrogate his sociopolitical argument, by reducing his counterframe to its most transgressive rhetorical trope, and by pillorying him as a person and scholar, the *Denver Post* ensured that Churchill’s counterframe did not, and indeed *could* not, achieve parity with the Bush frame of the September 11 attacks.

References

- Adut, A. (2004). Scandal as norm entrepreneurship strategy. *Theory and Society*, 33, 529-578.
- Altheide, D. L. (1984). Media hegemony: A failure of perspective. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 48, 476-490.
- Anker, E. (2005). Villains, victims and heroes: Melodrama, media, and September 11. *Journal of Communication*, 55, 22-37.
- Arendt, H. (1977). *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the banality of evil*. New York: Penguin.
- Artz, L., & Murphy, B. (2000). *Hegemony in the United States*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Barthes, R. (1986). *The rustle of language*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Bush, G. W. (2001a, September 11). *Statement by the president in his address to the nation*. Retrieved March 10, 2005, from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010911-16.html>
- Bush, G. W. (2001b, September 12). *Statement by the president in photo opportunity with the National Security Team*. Retrieved March 10, 2005, from <http://whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010912-4.html>
- Carragee, K. M. (1993). A critical evaluation of debates examining the media hegemony thesis. *Western Journal of Communication*, 57, 330-349.
- Carragee, K. M., & Roefs, W. (2004). The neglect of power in recent frame research. *Journal of Communication*, 54, 214-233.
- Churchill, W. (1992). *Fantasies of the master race*. San Francisco: City Lights Books.
- Churchill, W. (1993). *Indians 'R' us: Culture and genocide*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Between the Lines.
- Churchill, W. (1997). *A little matter of genocide: Holocaust and denial in the Americas, 1492 to the present*. San Francisco: City Lights Books.
- Churchill, W. (2001). *Some people push back: On the justice of roosting chickens*. Retrieved February 28, 2005, from <http://www.darknightpress.org/index>
- Churchill, W. (2002). *Struggle for the land*. Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada: Arbeiter.
- Churchill, W., & VanderWall, J. (2000). *Draconian measures: The history of FBI political repression*. Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press.
- Coe, K., Domke, D., Graham, E. S., John, S. L., & Pickard, V. W. (2004). No shades of gray: The binary discourse of George W. Bush and the echoing press. *Journal of Communication*, 54, 234-252.
- Condit, C. M. (1994). Hegemony in a mass media society. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 11, 205-230.
- Cottle, S. (2006). Mediatized rituals: Beyond manufacturing consent. *Media, Culture & Society*, 28, 411-432.
- Curtin, D., & Pankratz, H. (2005, February 10). CU prof's writings doubted. *Denver Post*. Retrieved February 28, 2005, from <http://www.denverpost.com>
- Curtin, D., Pankratz, H., & Kane, A. (2005, February 13). Questions stoke Ward Churchill's firebrand past. *Denver Post*. Retrieved February 28, 2005, from <http://www.denverpost.com>
- Domke, D. (2004). *God willing: Political fundamentalism in the White House, the "war on terror," and the echoing press*. London: Pluto.
- Entman, R. (2003). Cascading activation: Contesting the White House's frame after 9/11. *Political Communication*, 20, 415-432.
- Entman, R. (2004). *Projections of power: Framing news, public opinion and U.S. foreign policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gitlin, T. (2003). *The whole world is watching*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City, NJ: Doubleday.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections for the prison notebooks* (Q. Hoare & G. N. Smith, Eds. & Trans.). London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Hall, S., Critcher, C., Jefferson, T., Clark, J., & Rogers, B. (1978). *Policing the crisis*. London: Macmillan.
- Harsanyi, D. (2005, February 10). Cheers don't drown out toxic ideas. *Denver Post*. Retrieved February 28, 2005, from <http://www.denverpost.com>
- Heller, D. (2005). Introduction: Consuming 9/11. In D. Heller (Ed.), *The selling of 9/11* (pp. 1-26). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Huddy, L., Khatib, N., & Capelos, T. (2002). The polls—Reactions to the terrorist attacks of September 11. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 66, 418-455.
- Hutcheson, J., Domke, D., Billeaudreaux, A., & Garland, P. (2004). U.S. national identity, political elites, and patriotic press following September 11. *Political Communication*, 21, 27-50.
- Iraq timeline. (2005). *Guardian Unlimited*. Retrieved March 5, 2005, from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Iraq>
- Jackson, R. (2005). *Winning the war on terrorism: Language, politics and counterterrorism*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.
- Kane, A. (2005a, February 5). More radical comments by prof weighed. *Denver Post*. Retrieved February 28, 2005, from <http://www.denverpost.com>
- Kane, A. (2005b, February 17). Clashes with Churchill found. *Denver Post*. Retrieved February 28, 2005, from <http://www.denverpost.com>
- Kane, A. (2005c, February 19). CU inquisitors praised prof. *Denver Post*. Retrieved February 28, 2005, from <http://www.denverpost.com>
- Karim, K. H. (2002). Making sense of the “Islamic peril.” In B. Zelizer & S. Allan (Eds.), *Journalism after September 11* (pp. 101-116). New York: Routledge.
- Kellner, D. (2002). September 11, the media, and war fever. *Television & New Media*, 3, 143-151.
- Krebs, R. R., & Lobasz, J. (2007). Fixing the meaning of 9/11: Hegemony, coercion and the road to war in Iraq. *Security Studies*, 16, 409-451.
- Lule, J. (2002). Myth and terror on the editorial page: The *New York Times* responds to September 11, 2001. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 79, 275-293.
- Mandel, I. (2005, January 21). Controversial speaker to visit the hill. *The Spectator*. Retrieved February 20, 2005, from <http://spec.hamilton.edu>
- McChesney, M. (2002). September 11 and the structural limitations of US journalism. In B. Zelizer & S. Allen (Eds.), *Journalism after September 11* (pp. 91-100). New York: Routledge.
- Mumby, D. K. (1997). The problem of hegemony. *Western Journal of Communication*, 61, 343-375.
- Norris, P., Kern, M., & Just, M. (2002). Framing terrorism. In P. Norris, M. Kern, & M. Just (Eds.), *Framing terrorism* (pp. 3-23). New York: Routledge.
- Pankratz, H. (2005a, February 1). Prof quits chair over 9/11. *Denver Post*. Retrieved February 28, 2005, from <http://www.denverpost.com>
- Pankratz, H. (2005b, February 3). CU prof affirms Indian heritage. *Denver Post*. Retrieved February 28, 2005, from <http://www.denverpost.com>
- Pankratz, H. (2005c, January 28). CU prof won't take back 9/11 comments. *Denver Post*. Retrieved February 28, 2005, from <http://www.denverpost.com>
- Pankratz, H., & Merritt, G. (2005, February 9). Prof: Never back down. *Denver Post*. Retrieved February 28, 2005, from <http://www.denverpost.com>
- Rivers, R. (2005a, February 4). Churchill rant has some truth. *Denver Post*. Retrieved February 28, 2005, from <http://www.denverpost.com>
- Rivers, R. (2005b, February 11). Can't governor be offensive, too? *Denver Post*. Retrieved February 28, 2005, from <http://www.denverpost.com>
- Ruggles, S. (2005). *Bush approval ratings*. Retrieved March 5, 2005, from <http://www.hist.umn.edu/~ruggles/Approval.htm>
- Silberstein, S. (2002). *War of words: Language, politics and 9/11*. New York: Routledge.
- Spencer, J. (2005, February 11). Whom does Churchill work for? *Denver Post*. Retrieved February 28, 2005, from <http://www.denverpost.com>
- Strinati, D. (1995). *An introduction to theories of popular culture*. London: Routledge.
- Text of Churchill statement. (2005, February 1). *Denver Post*. Retrieved February 28, 2005, from <http://www.denverpost.com>
- Text of house resolution on Churchill. (2005, February 2). *Denver Post*. Retrieved February 28, 2005, from <http://www.denverpost.com>
- Text of Owens' letter on Churchill. (2005, February 1). *Denver Post*. Retrieved February 28, 2005, from <http://www.denverpost.com>

- Text of regents' resolution. (2005, February 4). *Denver Post*. Retrieved February 28, 2005, from <http://www.denverpost.com>
- Tsai, C. (2005, February 3). Review may lead to Churchill firing. *Denver Post*. Retrieved February 28, 2005, from <http://www.denverpost.com>
- Waisbord, S. (2002). Journalism, risk, and patriotism. In B. Zelizer & S. Allan (Eds.), *Journalism after September 11* (pp. 201-219). New York: Routledge.
- Williams, R. (1977). *Marxism and literature*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Erika G. King is professor of political science at Grand Valley State University. Her research fields, scholarly presentations, and publications in political communication include media depictions of war, American election campaigns, and the president.

Mary deYoung is professor of sociology at Grand Valley State University and a board-certified expert in traumatic stress. Her research focuses on the nexus of trauma, culture, and memory.