Cheerleaders for the REVOLUTION

Network Coverage of Barack Obama's First 100 Days

MEDIA RESEARCH CENTER

A Special Report from the Media Research Center

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During his first 100 days as President, Barack Obama has pushed an audaciously liberal agenda which, if enacted, would have radical consequences for America for decades. With Democrats enjoying monopoly control of the House and Senate, the news media have a professional duty to scrutinize those policies, and give audiences both sides of the story — not just the perspective of a powerful Chief Executive.

Unfortunately, a Media Research Center analysis of ABC, CBS and NBC evening news coverage of President Obama's first 100 days in office shows network reporters have failed as watchdogs. The networks have raised few doubts about Obama's left-wing agenda and showered each of Obama's major policy initiatives with positive press.

MRC analysts looked at all 982 broadcast evening news stories about Obama and his administration from Inauguration Day (January 20) through April 29. Key findings:

- Obama's first 100 days were defined by massive spending, aggressive intervention in the private sector and proposals for a huge expansion of the federal government. Yet none of the networks aired a single story on whether Obama's policies were pushing the U.S. toward socialism, and no reporter used the term "socialist" to describe Obama.

- Not only that, network reporters never used the word "liberal" to describe either Barack Obama or his agenda during the first 100 days.

- The networks lavished good press on every major initiative of the early Obama administration, including the massive stimulus package, all of the various bailouts, health care, stem cells, the environment and foreign policy.

- In the days before the President unveiled his unprecedented $3.5 trillion budget — with a record-shattering $1.75 trillion deficit — four out of five statements on the evening newscasts parroted the White House spin that Obama was a deficit fighter.

- Reporters treated Obama's hugely expensive $787 billion stimulus bill to mainly positive coverage (58 percent positive, 42 percent negative).

■ The networks applauded Obama's decision to use taxpayer money to fund embryo-destroying stem cell research (82% positive coverage).

■ Network coverage of Obama's mortgage bailout was also positive — 59% of statements supported the bailout or wanted even more intervention, compared to 41% who opposed the bailout as unfair to responsible homeowners.

■ Reporters heavily skewed their coverage in favor of the President's actions on global warming (78% positive).

■ President Obama's decision to send thousands of additional troops to Afghanistan was greeted by nearly unanimous (91%) positive coverage — a far cry from the highly negative coverage of President Bush's successful troop surge in Iraq two years ago.

■ Like Obama and the Democrats, the networks went on a feeding frenzy against big corporate bonuses. The networks aired six times more statements forwarding the "infuriated" reaction to business (104) than criticized politicians' grandstanding (16).

■ The networks spent days decrying AIG's $165 million bonuses, but hardly mentioned the $210 million in bonuses handed out by Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac (the bailed-out mortgage giants with strong Democratic ties). ABC and NBC completely ignored the Fannie and Freddie bonuses, while the *CBS Evening News* gave it 27 seconds.

Such highly promotional coverage is not part of the normal "honeymoon" that exists between journalists and new Presidents. Rather, it seems to be a symptom of how few network reporters evidently see their professional role as operating on the public's behalf as a check on whoever is in the White House.

The longstanding liberalism of network reporters made them aggressive adversaries of the Bush White House over the past eight years. The evidence from Barack Obama's first 100 days is that that same liberal mindset has crippled reporters' ability to be effective watchdogs on behalf of the public.

The once-fierce media watchdogs have become Barack Obama's drooling, tail-wagging lapdogs.

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Network Coverage of Barack Obama's First 100 Days

BY RICH NOYES
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After last November's election, observers were split about how Barack Obama might govern as president. One camp believed that the new President was a pragmatic realist who would seek a centrist approach — disappointing his most liberal supporters, perhaps, but maximizing his personal political clout.

A second group, including many conservatives, believed Obama was, in fact, the deeply liberal ideologue that his resume as a community activist and his past associations suggested. With solid Democratic majorities in the House and Senate, conservatives feared the Obama era would be a treacherous time for the principles of limited government and free markets.

One hundred days into Obama's presidency, the debate is over. The President has now signed the most expensive spending bill ever passed by Congress; asserted government control of major banks and automobile manufacturers; diverted billions of tax dollars to individual mortgages; proposed a massive new role for government in health care; sought punishing taxes on the use of carbon-emitting fossil fuels; and submitted a budget plan that would explode the national debt to more than $20 trillion over the next ten years — even as he preposterously claimed that he did not believe in big government.[1]

So how have journalists reacted to this audacious liberal agenda which, if fulfilled, would inevitably push the United States away from our traditional free market system and towards a European social democratic system? A Media Research Center analysis of ABC, CBS and NBC evening news coverage of President Obama's first 100 days in office (January 20 through April 29) shows network reporters have failed as watchdogs, raising few doubts about Obama's

[1] In his February 24 speech to Congress, President Obama said of his stimulus package: "I asked this Congress to send me a recovery plan by Presidents' Day that would put people back to work and put money in their pockets, ***not because I believe in bigger government — I don't*** — not because I'm not mindful of the massive debt we've inherited — I am. " (Emphasis added.)

agenda and showering every major policy initiative with positive press. While the networks have covered the President's individual policy choices, reporters have failed to focus on the massive shift away from the free market that they collectively entail. Reporters never once described his actions as "socialist," nor sought experts to debate whether that correctly describes Obama's overall agenda. Indeed, TV reporters never once even used the term "liberal" to describe Obama's approach, arguably the most left-leaning in American history. Instead of presenting a debate about Obama's dramatic policy direction, network correspondents all but ignored conservative policy experts who disagreed with the President's direction.

TABLE 1

Policy Issues Discussed In Obama Administration Stories

January 20 - April 29

All Economic	**448**	**(46%)**
Stimulus Package	150	(15%)
Bank Bailout	86	(9%)
Budget	64	(7%)
Bonuses/Exec Pay	61	(6%)
Auto Bailout	48	(5%)
Housing Bailout	35	(4%)
Health Care Reform	26	(3%)
All Foreign Policy	**264**	**(27%)**
War on Terror	68	(7%)
Afghanistan War	35	(4%)
Overtures to Iran	27	(3%)
Iraq War	19	(2%)
Overtures to Cuba	18	(2%)
Mexico Drug Wars	17	(2%)
Other Topics		
Admin. Ethics	26	(3%)
Environment	22	(2%)
Stem Cells	16	(2%)

Based on content analysis of 982 stories about the Obama administration aired on the ABC, CBS and NBC evening news stories. Note: A story could have discussed more than one policy issue.

For this report, MRC analysts examined all 982 broadcast network news stories about President Obama and his administration from Inauguration Day, January 20, through his 100th day in office, April 29. ABC's *World News* ran the most stories (366), followed by the *NBC Nightly News* (315 stories) and the *CBS Evening News* (301). More than half of these stories (546, 55%) were full reports or interview segments that focused directly on the President or his administration; the rest were divided between brief, anchor-read items (182) or stories that contained a substantive mention of the administration, but did not focus on the President or his team (254).

Not surprisingly, the main policy focus was the state of the economy and the various economic-related measures proposed by the administration. Nearly half (46%) of all Obama stories featured discussion of the economy, while about one-fourth (27%) discussed an aspect of foreign policy. A few policy issues that involved neither economic nor foreign policies — mainly stem cell research, the environment and ethics of administration officials — also drew significant coverage during the first 100 days. Table 1 shows the top policy areas featured in stories about the Obama administration during this period.

While not the focus of this report, the networks also broadcast dozens of stories that treated the new President and his family as pop culture celebrities. First Lady Michelle Obama, for example, was the focus of 34 stories, all of which struck a promotional, positive tone (and more

than half of which aired on the *NBC Nightly News*). The First Family's adoption of a puppy was chronicled in 12 stories, or more than were focused on the President's education policies (9 stories). While these stories contained no substantive policy discussion, their highly positive approach certainly added to the public relations glow that surrounded both the President and his administration during the policy battles of the first 100 days and beyond.

The President's Economic Agenda: Liberal Government on Steroids

The centerpiece of President Obama's first 100 days was his economic agenda, and the broadcast networks certainly chronicled the new President's interventionist approach. During just this brief, three-month period, the White House intervened to change the way business is done in both the banking industry and the auto industry. Obama fired the CEO of General Motors; instructed Chrysler to merge with the Italian car-maker Fiat; limited the pay and bonuses of executives at the nation's top banks; instructed banks to be more lenient to credit card holders; and constructed an elaborate program to use taxpayer money to subsidize the home mortgages of several million homeowners.

As for big government, the President pushed through a huge $787 billion stimulus package, and proposed a massive $3.5 trillion budget for next year, projecting large deficits and a swelling national debt over the next ten years. The President announced he would push for universal health care coverage, adding more than $600 billion to his budget for that purpose, and suggested a "cap-and-trade" system of taxing carbon dioxide emissions that would cost each American more than $3,000 per year in higher energy costs and decreased productivity.

In spite of this (partial) menu of initiatives, the networks failed to run a single story focused on the question of whether Obama's economic policies were driving the U.S. in the direction of European socialism. In the first 100 days, not a single network news reporter used the term "socialist" to describe how the administration was shifting economic authority away from the free market and towards government.

On five occasions, the term was used in network news stories — three times in soundbites from sources and twice by reporters summarizing the views of Obama's conservative critics. In no case was the discussion of socialism more than a brief mention. The February 28 *NBC Nightly News,* for example, ran a clip of Newt Gingrich from CPAC, saying of Obama's policies: "It is the boldest effort to create a European socialist model we have seen."

Summarizing Obama's first 100 days on the April 26 *Evening News*, CBS's Jeff Greenfield acknowledged that the term was used by "the right" to describe Obama's policies, but also saw "allies" who "like" Obama for his leftist approach. "The degree to which he sees government as an active partner in so many fields....is one reason why his opponents on the right are using phrases like 'socialist' or 'fascist' to describe him. They see Obama as a big government guy, and to some extent he's confirmed that, and his allies like him for that reason."

Not only did reporters eschew the "socialist" debate about Obama, they never once labeled his big government, tax-and-spend approach as "liberal." The L-word passed the lips of ABC's John Hendren and Dan Harris as each summarized how Republicans used it to describe Obama's big spending, as when Harris announced on the February 8 *World News*: "Republicans are saying that this stimulus bill is a tired old liberal wish list."

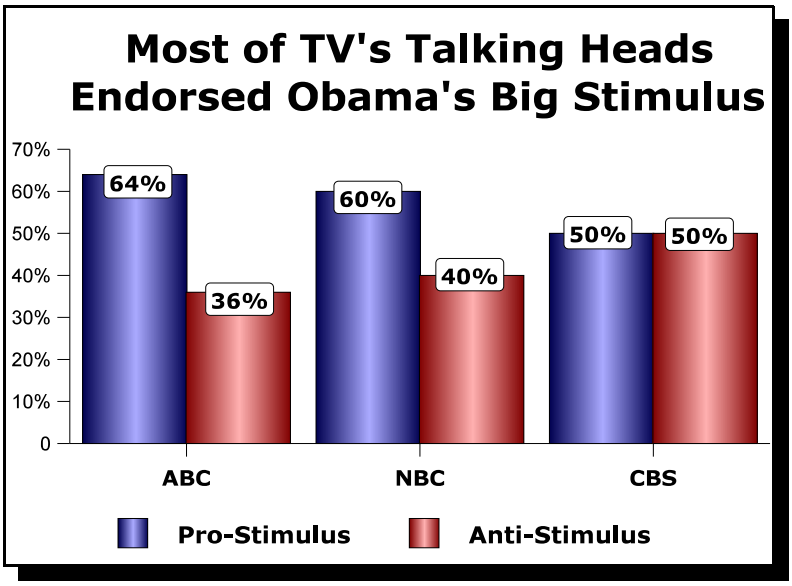
NBC's David Gregory used the label on the January 23 *Nightly News* to describe those who thought the President wasn't spending enough: "This stimulus package has to do something that Americans are not doing, and that's pump money into the economy to get it moving again. Some liberals think you need more." And CBS's Chip Reid on February 6 said congressional liberals did not like the Senate's attempt to cut back some of the stimulus spending.

Of the top seven economic policy initiatives that received major coverage during the first 100 days, all were given mainly positive coverage by the three broadcast networks — a far cry from the adversarial approach that dominated during the Bush years. Some topics, such as the big spending in the stimulus package and the budget, incorporated some Republican or conservative critics in stories in which the views of liberals, Democrats and the administration dominated. Coverage of other issues — such as health care, the banking bailout and the auto bailout — essentially excluded any conservative critics of Obama's big government approach.

A rundown of how the networks covered each of the big economic topics during the first 100 days:

■ **Stimulus Package (150 stories):** By far, the most heavily covered agenda item of the new Obama administration was the President's nearly $800 billion stimulus package. The debate over the stimulus bill consumed most of the first four weeks of the Obama administration, and network evening news coverage of this issue was skewed in favor of the big government spending plan backed by President Obama and Democrats and against Republican and conservative critics.

From the first day of the administration through the end of the congressional debate (January 20 through February 14), the three evening newscasts aired 182 statements arguing for or against the merits of the stimulus package. (These included both comments from sources in soundbites, plus any opinions expressed by the correspondent themselves.) Nearly three-fifths argued on behalf of the stimulus (58%), compared to barely two-fifths who criticized the



package (42%). ABC's *World News* offered the friendliest coverage, followed closely by the *NBC Nightly News*, while the *CBS Evening News* struck a balanced note. (See the chart on Page 4.)

While the big spending package was frequently criticized by GOP talking heads, network reporters often cast the bill as essential. CNBC economics reporter Steve Liesman appeared on the January 25 *NBC Nightly News* to argue: "I think the market wants to see this stimulus plan passed." Liesman's colleague, Melissa Lee, appeared on the January 31 *Nightly News* to make a similar plea: "The bleak economic outlook is strengthening the case for swift action on a stimulus plan."

Prescription for More Massive Spending

"Japan, a nation with half the population of the U.S., ended up spending more than $6 trillion, mostly on construction jobs like those in the U.S. stimulus plan. It stabilized the economy and slowly started a recovery, but then a mistake — seeing progress in a couple of years, Japan shifted from making jobs to paying down the deficit....So a recession that might have ended in a few years went on for more than a decade....Stop the stimulus too soon, as Japan did, and the economy could be on life support for a decade or more."

— Correspondent Barry Petersen, February 14 *CBS Evening News.*

"The Senate is going to start debating the massive economic stimulus plan tomorrow. The stakes could not be higher for millions of Americans in pain," ABC's *World News* Sunday night anchor Dan Harris empathized on February 1. Later on that broadcast, correspondent Bill Blakemore promoted the idea that spending taxpayer dollars on operas and playhouses was worthwhile stimulus: "Arts advocates say the arts support six million jobs, $167 billion worth of business, and would be putting any new money right back into the system with new jobs."

On the February 14 *CBS Evening News*, correspondent Barry Petersen asserted that the Japanese economy failed to rebound in the 1990s because the Japanese stopped their massive spending program too soon — and that the U.S. should brace for even greater government spending than the $787 billion stimulus bill. (See text box.)

After Congress sent the stimulus bill to President Obama for his signature, the coverage entered a new phase, as the networks touted it as a boon to local economies and help for citizens during hard times. Unlike stories about the congressional debate, which usually included both sides, these stories invariably excluded critics in favor of one-sided depictions of the stimulus as a force for economic good.

"The Open Cities Health Center in St. Paul, Minnesota, offers primary medical and dental care on a sliding scale to anyone who walks in the door," NBC science correspondent Robert Bazell explained on February 16 as he set up an example of how the stimulus was helping local communities. "The clinic's director, Dori Bolo, is thrilled that the stimulus package provides $87 billion nationally for Medicaid."

"The President's $787 billion plan for boosting the economy will help state and local governments struggling to pay their bills," CBS's Katie Couric chirped on the February 18 *Evening News*. "For states like California, Bill Whitaker reports, the money can't come soon enough." Reporting from Los Angeles, Whitaker touted how: "With Democrats seeking tax

increases, Republicans, spending cuts, the only relief on the horizon: the federal economic stimulus money."

Two weeks later, on the March 6 *Evening News*, Couric ran a cluster of stories all aimed at celebrating jobs created by the stimulus. (See box.) On April 29, the President's 100th day in office, CBS ran three more stories celebrating the stimulus. Reporter Mark Strassmann showed how stimulus money was funding new bridges in Tennessee. "It's a start," he argued, "this project to rebuild bridges — and hope."

ABC's Bill Weir was excited about how the stimulus helped pay for new hybrid buses in Santa Monica, California. "The city had scrimped and saved to buy ten new hybrid buses at around $700,000 apiece. But then came the stimulus money, so they ordered six more," Weir enthused on the April 13 *World News*. He detailed how several manufacturers and suppliers in different states all benefitted from Santa Monica's order for new buses: "It's a first tangible example of the money working to create jobs now, and a smooth ride later."

CBS's Infomercial for Obama's Big Spending Plan

Anchor Katie Couric: "Tonight, the President calls it 'astounding.' The recession has now cost nearly four-and-a-half million Americans their jobs. We'll show you the new jobs his stimulus plan is creating...."
Reporter Anthony Mason: "It's the government that's going to have to pull us out of this recession...."
Reporter Jeff Glor: "For blue collar workers, the checks can't come quickly enough...."
Reporter Ben Tracy: "These overwhelmed doctors have already seen 5,000 more patients in just the past year. The stimulus money will give them what they need most: more co-workers."
— Series of reports on the March 6 *CBS Evening News*.

Following passage of the stimulus in mid-February, the three evening newscasts ran 19 such one-sided stories touting its benefits — and promoting the liberal presumption that such government spending can promote a healthier U.S. economy. Instead of challenging the premise of Obama's big government approach, the networks deployed their resources in a campaign to validate it.

■ **The Banking Bailout (86 stories):** The continuing taxpayer bailout of the financial sector was the second-most discussed policy item, accounting for nearly one out of ten Obama stories. Unlike stories about the stimulus package, which contained some conservative dissenters, none of the bank bailout stories featured soundbites from any source — expert, politician or everyday citizen — criticizing either the concept of the bailout or the administration's opportunism in using the bailout as a means to pressure banks to change their business practices.

Indeed, reporters often presumed that the banks who took bailout funds should bow to the administration's wishes. On April 23, for example, the President assembled lenders at the White House to lecture them about credit card lending practices. None of the networks suggested this was an improper intervention in the financial industry; indeed, CBS's Katie Couric suggested it was not "fair" of banks to limit credit or hike interest rates on borrowers.

"It doesn't seem fair," Couric told reporter Anthony Mason, "many of these banks took taxpayer bailout dollars and now they're turning around and penalizing a lot of taxpayers, some of whom pay their credit card bills on time." ABC's Gibson summarized the "stern warning" from the President: "If you don't protect the consumers, the government will."

NBC's Brian Williams framed it this way: "Some of the same banks that got billions in taxpayer money to stay in business are now sticking it to those same taxpayers, their customers," and he applauded Obama's reaction: "The President admonished the credit card companies and came down on the side of consumers."

It wasn't just credit cards: the Obama administration also required newly bailed-out banks to change their rules on executive compensation and bonuses and to participate in the administration's mortgage bailout. (More on both of those topics later.) None of the networks ran stories focused on whether these impositions signaled an administration that had exceeded its authority, nor did they investigate whether bailouts that were originally advertised as a temporary bridge to keep the banking system afloat last fall had actually made the biggest banks long-term appendages of the executive branch.

Indeed, virtually all of the network coverage focused on describing *how* the government was proceeding to intervene in the financial marketplace, rather than getting both sides to debate *whether* the government should intervene. Even talk of "nationalizing" major U.S. banks — a concept so breathtakingly foreign to America's free market culture that one would have expected even liberal journalists to react with skepticism — drew surprisingly little negative reaction from reporters.

According to ABC's John Hendren on the February 15 *World News*, "some prominent economists, including Nobel Prize winner Paul Krugman, say nationalization is the only way out of the current financial crisis, given that the nation's largest banks are now carrying a crushing half a trillion dollars in bad debt." He ran a soundbite of Krugman predicting that the just-announced "stress tests" for banks would give the government a rationale for taking over the banks: "They're gonna go in there and do a kind of Claude Rains in *Casablanca* — 'I'm shocked, shocked to discover that these banks are in so much trouble financially,' and then seize them."

On the February 19 *CBS Evening News*, anchor Katie Couric equated a government takeover with a big hug from Uncle Sam: "It could keep banks open and free up money so they can start lending again....In Britain, a government takeover of a bank last year helped to temporarily calm fears in the financial markets there. Nationalization may have a psychological impact as well, and Uncle Sam wrapping his arms around failing banks in this country might provide a big dose of confidence for the American consumer."

The next night, CNBC correspondent Trish Regan, on the February 20 *NBC Nightly News*, assured viewers that, for most people, nationalization would be no big deal: "As worried as shareholders in these institutions, these banks, may be, people that have accounts in them — whether that be a savings account, checking account, money market, CD — they really don't

need to be worried....The FDIC insures accounts up to $250,000 and, second, if the government were to nationalize these banks, remember, these banks would be owned not by shareholders, but by the government. So, in theory, everyone's money should be perfectly safe."

The following Monday on ABC's *World News*, anchor Charles Gibson asked reporter Betsy Stark why "nationalization is considered such a dirty word?" After explaining Wall Street's "philosophical" objections, Stark assured Gibson that opposition to a government takeover is "not entirely rational." (See box.)

In all, one-fifth of the bank bailout stories (17, or 20%) discussed nationalization. Most of the time, reporters merely pointed out that the White House had ruled out nationalization (actually, spokesman Robert Gibbs rejected nationalizing the entire banking system, not individual banks), but rarely brought on critics of the idea. An exception was a piece on the February 23 *NBC Nightly News*, which featured two critics of nationalization to one supporter. The New York Stock Exchange's Steve Grasso was one of the former. "You don't want the government controlling anything. You want the markets dictating price," he argued. "You want supply/demand dictating everything."

Only Irrational Capitalists Oppose Nationalization?

Anchor Charles Gibson: "I'm curious why nationalization is considered such a dirty word? The Obama administration has been at pains to say we're not going to nationalize the banks, but a lot of economists...say this actually could be a positive step if the banks were — if a couple of banks were taken over for a couple of years."

Reporter Betsy Stark: "A couple of things, Charlie....If banks are taken over by the government, then private investors could see the value of their shares either severely diluted or wiped out altogether. But the other thing is philosophical. Wall Street is the bastion of free market capitalism, and nationalization — even if it's meant to save the banks — is something that happens in socialist countries. It's not supposed to happen in the United States."

Gibson: "But those investors have been wiped out already, haven't they?"

Stark: "Well, it's not entirely rational. You're absolutely right about that. But there is certainly great resistance to this on Wall Street."

— ABC's *World News*, February 23.

Surprisingly, only CNBC correspondent Scott Cohn, reporting on the February 27 *NBC Nightly News*, actually used the term when the Obama administration became the largest single owner of Citigroup by reclassifying its stake in the company as common stock. "You can call this 'nationalization light,'" Cohn quipped.

While Citigroup remains an ostensibly private company, just two business days after the administration's stock grab, the bank announced it would let newly-unemployed mortgage holders temporarily drop their monthly payments to just $500, with funds going to taxes, insurance and principal — but no interest. It's exactly the kind of lenient policy the Obama administration was championing, another example, perhaps, of how government ownership is re-shaping private businesses.

■ **Budget/Spending (64 stories):** President Obama's first budget blueprint, for the fiscal year beginning October 1, proposed spending a record $3.5 trillion (up $400 billion from President Bush's final budget), about half of which ($1.75 trillion) would be financed through deficit spending, by far a record. Under Obama's budget, the national debt would soar to more than $20 trillion by 2019, the Congressional Budget Office determined, or more than 82 percent of the entire Gross Domestic Product (GDP) — levels not seen since World War II.

Obama announced his budget February 26, but the previews began nearly a week earlier, as the networks parroted the White House spin that the President would aggressively *reduce* the deficit. In the four days leading up to the Obama's speech to Congress (February 21 to 24), far more statements on evening newscasts painted the President as a deficit fighter (83%) than as a big spender (17%).

ABC's David Muir began the February 21 *World News* by pitching how the President was "slashing the deficit by at least 50 percent by raising taxes on the wealthy, people making $250,000 and above, and cutting war spending by bringing troops home from Iraq."

The next night, ABC's Yunji de Nies kept up the salesmanship: "President Obama hopes to get control by slashing the federal deficit in half over the next four years. He'll do it by cutting spending in at least two keys areas: winding down the war in Iraq, which now costs the taxpayers an estimated $400 million a day, and federal health care spending by overhauling Medicare and Medicaid."

The next evening, February 23 — in spite of the massive stimulus plan just signed and ambitious campaign promises yet to fulfill — all three network newscasts touted how the President pledged at his "fiscal responsibility" summit to cut government spending and reduce the deficit by more than half:

NBC's Brian Williams heralded "the President's plan to bring down the federal deficit during a time of record government spending." CBS's Chip Reid explained that "most of the savings would come from winding down the war in Iraq; ending the Bush tax cuts for people making over $250,000 a year; and cutting spending." According to ABC's Jake Tapper, "deficit hawks applauded the President's focus today, saying ignoring the problem could cause an even more severe crisis....The President said to the group he has no interest in making government bigger for the sake of making it bigger."

When the actual budget details were revealed three days later, most network reporters seemed to realize that Obama had proposed a very liberal, tax-and-spend budget. While none of the three networks used that term, both ABC and CBS suggested a profoundly liberal shift, incorporating phrases such as "redistribution of wealth" and "radical."

"This $3.5 trillion budget outline represents a break from the past in a dramatic, if not radical, fashion," ABC's Tapper observed February 26. "President Obama is trying to redirect vast sums of wealth from wealthy individuals and businesses to people of lower incomes and ambitious and costly programs for the environment, education and health care."

"In what would be a major redistribution of wealth, the President proposes taxes on high-income Americans totaling about $637 billion over the next ten years," CBS's Reid seconded.

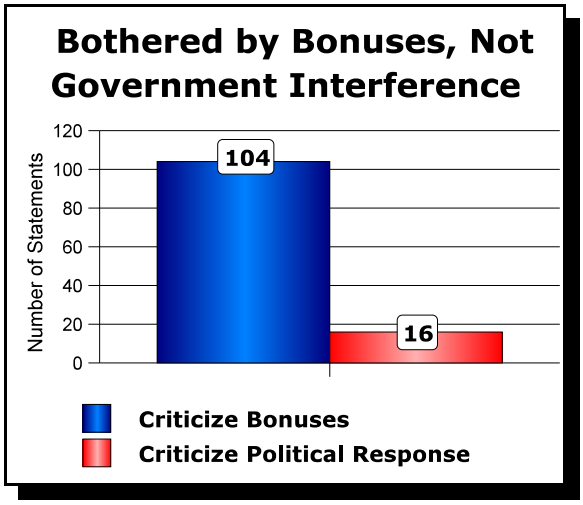
Even ABC's George Stephanopoulos described Obama's budget as "radical progressive reform."

But to NBC's Brian Williams, the massive price tag was "the cost of our new reality." White House correspondent Savannah Guthrie maintained the deficit-cutting theme as she parroted: "the President promises to cut the deficit in half by the end of his term, in part by raising taxes on the wealthiest Americans....The White House says this budget is more honest than previous ones....It assumes the economy will begin to turn around this year and grow robustly by 2011, a forecast advisers say is not too rosy." Instead of an independent expert, NBC turned to Obama's own economic adviser, Christina Romer, who unsurprisingly assured viewers that Obama's assumptions were "nothing out of the ballpark."

■ **Bonuses/Executive Pay (61 stories):** Even as the Obama administration was lobbying for its $800 billion stimulus package, and agreeing to a spending resolution with over 9,000 earmarks totaling roughly $8 billion, the President and his allies (and more than a few Republicans) engaged in high-profile scolding of supposed overspending and extravagant pay at companies that received government bailout money.

While network news coverage contained no direct criticism of the bailouts themselves, the bonuses — especially those given to executives at the AIG insurance company — were the topic of feeding frenzy coverage in mid-March. Rather than scrutinize the hyperbolic reaction of politicians from both parties, the networks essentially joined in the bashing themselves. The networks aired six times more statements (104) criticizing the corporations who paid out large bonuses to employees, compared with statements suggesting the political reaction was counterproductive or an infringement on businesses that remained in the private sector (16).

TV coverage largely matched the preening tone adopted by politicians. After a late-January report about year-end bonuses for securities industry employees, President Obama slammed the practice as "shameful" and "the height of irresponsibility." Network reporters praised the President for lashing out. "Channeling his inner populist, the President got upset about something that the public has been angry about for weeks," NBC's Chuck Todd celebrated on January 29.



Over on ABC, correspondent Dan Harris argued that the bonuses are "not only infuriating to the President, but many Americans are bewildered and angry too," and warned "Wall

Street may be playing a dangerous game here at a time when Congress is considering rewriting the basic rules of American capitalism."

But, uniquely, CBS that night also explained the "bonuses" were down 37 percent from the previous year, and are a core element of an employee's compensation, not a year-end pat on the back, undermining the premise of the President's outrage. Correspondent Anthony Mason found a compensation expert to explain that "the bonuses paid to these financial services people accounts for 50 or 75 percent of their total compensation, and it's geared to revenue that they brought in or success they brought into the firm. So it's more akin to a sales commission than what you or I would think about as a bonus."

ABC Reported Obama's Money from AIG, but CBS and NBC Skipped It

Anchor Charles Gibson: "And one of the interesting things on Capitol Hill is that AIG contributed to an awful lot of influential lawmakers an awful lot of money."
Reporter Jonathan Karl: "Oh, yeah, and they were contributing last year even as the company was crumbling, hundreds of thousands of dollars. And, Charlie, take a look at the list of top contributors [sic, recipients] from AIG: Chris Dodd, chairman of the Banking committee, right at the top. But it's a who's who of power brokers: Obama, McCain, Clinton, Max Baucus, the finance chairman, and the Vice President, Joe Biden. So they were currying favor with the very group, or some of the very group, that would go on to craft and support the plan that would send them billions of dollars as part of that bailout."
— ABC's *World News*, March 17.

The next week, Obama announced his own rules on how taxpayer-subsidized companies should compensate top officials. While all three networks offered full reports on their February 4 newscasts, only ABC's Jake Tapper included any conservative critics — a single soundbite from an unidentified man who saw the administration overstepping its boundaries. "Government should stay out of markets because they do a horrible job of it," the man argued. Besides that, the coverage was devoted entirely to explaining or justifying the President's new rules.

The "government does a horrible job" perspective was also in short supply when the networks latched on to the AIG bonus story in mid-March. All three networks framed the story as that of a righteously angry public rising up against a greedy corporation. "The controversy over the $165 million in bonuses paid to employees of AIG is consuming Washington these days, a reflection of public anger that a company bailed out with tens of billions in government funds would pay bonuses to the very people who destroyed the company," ABC anchor Charles Gibson declared on March 18.

"Anger was all the rage," NBC's Chuck Todd observed that same night. In spite of the fierce coverage, neither NBC nor CBS had time to mention that many top Democrats — including President Obama, Vice President Biden and top congressional Democrats Barney Frank and Chris Dodd were big recipients of campaign cash from AIG. (See box.)

At the exact same time the AIG bonuses were getting huge play from the three networks, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the mortgage companies Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, which essentially had been taken over by the government in September because of huge losses, gave its employees $210 million in bonuses, $45 million more than AIG. And, unlike AIG, Fannie and

Freddie were central to the exponential growth in mortgage-backed securities that created such chaos in financial markets. Further, the top echelons of these companies included many well-connected Democrats — White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel, for example, had served on Freddie Mac's board of directors after he left the Clinton White House in 2000 until he ran for Congress in 2001 — pocketing $320,000 in just over one year, according to the *Chicago Tribune*.

Given the heavy coverage that the networks devoted to bonuses handed out by the bailed-out AIG, one would have assumed even bigger bonuses from companies that were central to the financial collapse — and in which the government now owned 79.6 percent of the stock — would have generated even more attention. Yet the networks were virtually silent.

ABC's *World News* made no mention of the bonuses, although on the March 18 *Nightline* (a program not included in our study) co-anchor Terry Moran gave the matter a single sentence in a story about the AIG bonuses: "But then came news the insurance giant is not alone. Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac also plan to pay out big bonuses, despite needing giant federal bailouts."

Katie Couric gave 27 seconds to the bonuses on the April 3 *CBS Evening News*. Her entire item: "There was a huge uproar last month when AIG — bailed out by the taxpayers — paid employees $165 million in bonuses. Now, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac are getting ready to top that. The mortgage giants seized by the government last year are paying $210 million in bonuses to more than 7,600 employees. Four Fannie Mae executives will get at least $1 million apiece."

For its part, NBC skipped the Fannie/Freddie bonuses entirely.

■ **Auto Bailout (48 stories):** President Obama inherited the auto bailout from President Bush, who approved loaning just under $20 billion of Trouble Asset Relief Program (TARP) funds to General Motors and Chrysler at around the first of the year. While the Obama administration was deciding how to proceed, the networks championed the bailout as essential; a majority of statements (58%) cast the auto bailout in positive terms, compared to 42 percent who opposed pumping more taxpayer money into the two companies.

Auto analyst John Wolkonowicz argued on the February 26 *CBS Evening News* that General Motors "now knows how to do it. They know how to get it right. They need a bridge over the troubled waters, so to speak."

A month later, the President came out against new loans for the auto companies, instead ordering Chrysler to merge with Fiat and re-shuffling the top management of General Motors and demanding a new restructuring plan form each. The networks cast this as "tough" medicine from the White House.

"President Obama couched his actions as tough love for the auto industry's own good," ABC's Jake Tapper seconded. Reporting from Detroit, ABC's Chris Bury cast Obama as the Sheriff of Motor City: "Today's tough talk from the new sheriff in town was not necessarily

welcome....The automakers, under pressure before, have a gun to their heads now, and they seem to think the new sheriff in town wouldn't hesitate to pull the trigger."

"These are bold moves to quickly determine the future for two American icons," CNBC's Phil LeBeau reported for the March 30 *NBC Nightly News*: "For the first time, the government is endorsing the idea of bankruptcy to clean up GM's massive debts." NBC's Brian Williams said Obama's rejection of the automakers' restructuring plans "adds insult to injury" for Detroit's workers.

Obama's firing of General Motors' chairman and CEO was hit from the right three times as an improper intervention in the private sector, including a man-on-the-street quoted on ABC March 30: "This is a capitalistic country, and we, the stockholders, should fire somebody, not the President."

But the networks twice as often pushed the liberal gripe that Obama had fired too few CEOs, as when NBC's Brian Williams suggested to correspondent Chuck Todd that "the critics are already circling, saying 'If you're going to fire the head of a car company, what about some of these financial firms and bankers who got us in so much trouble?'" Todd told Williams that complaint was coming from "folks on the left," with conservatives saying Obama was looking like "a nationalization Democrat, a pro-government Democrat."

Two days later, Williams stuck with the criticism from "folks on the left" in an interview with Treasury Secretary Geithner: "People think the car business has been treated differently by the administration....You bounced the CEO of GM, and yet there are CEOs of finance companies still in office."

At the end of April, the White House plan for the auto companies came into sharper relief, and — contrary to the spin of late March — it was far less "tough" on the pro-Democrat auto union than it was on the creditors who would ordinarily fare best in a traditional bankruptcy. The administration's revised plan gave itself and the United Auto Workers a large equity stake in both GM and Chrysler, while bondholders would receive stock worth only a fraction of their initial investment. On the April 27 *World News* and *Nightly News*, reporters gave only a single sentence to perhaps the key headline of GM's restructuring plan. "Uncle Sam would become GM's majority stakeholder, for better or worse," ABC's Eric Horng mentioned in passing.

"Finally, the controversy," CNBC's Phil LeBeau disclosed on NBC, "the U.S. government, under the current debt exchange proposal from GM, will own up to half the shares from the automaker."

CBS's report failed to mention the proposed large government ownership of General Motors, but did manage to put a human face on the plan to shortchange bondholders. Reporter Anthony Mason found an 81-year-old retired schoolteacher who invested in General Motors bonds to pay for her retirement.

"I'm going to be hit three different ways," Marjorie Holden pointed out. "I lose the capital, I lose the interest, and I'm going to be taxed to bail them out. That doesn't seem really quite fair to me," she told CBS viewers.

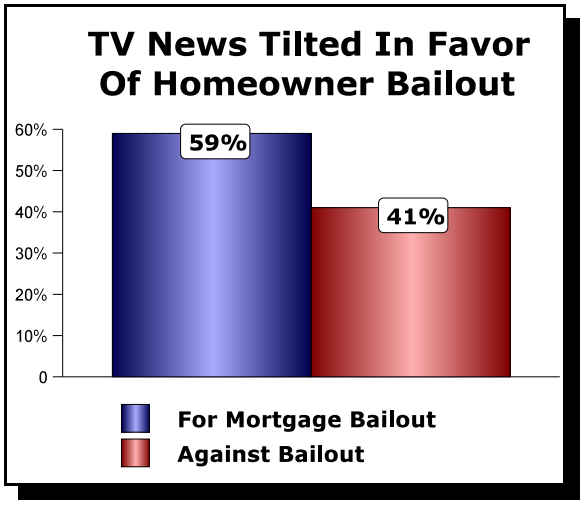
■ **Mortgage Bailout (35 stories):** President Obama's plan to use taxpayer funds to subsidize struggling homeowners drew almost exclusively positive coverage from the networks when it was announced on February 18, with the emphasis on those who would be helped, rather than the taxpayers who would be supplying the funds.

The networks' theme was government riding to the rescue: "President Obama warned today that a cornerstone of the American Dream is crumbling," fill-in anchor George Stephanopoulos announced on ABC's *World News*. "President Obama is throwing a lifeline to millions of homeowners struggling to pay their mortgages or at risk of outright foreclosure," CBS's Katie Couric heralded at the top of the *Evening News*.

Over on NBC, reporter Matt Taibbi profiled a widowed woman with a young daughter who was relying on a dwindling savings to stay current on her interest-only mortgage, soon to re-set at a much higher rate. Taibbi suggested Obama's plan was their only hope: "The hope now is that the home they were sure they would lose and go broke in the process might have at least a chance to be saved."

The next night, however, the networks discovered a backlash against the President's plan among homeowners with realistic mortgages who paid on time. That morning on cable, CNBC's Rick Santelli spotlighted the other side of the story when he wondered on-air, "How many of you people want to pay for your neighbor's mortgage that has an extra bathroom and can't pay their bills?...President Obama, are you listening?"

ABC and NBC's February 19 newscasts both offered reports on angry homeowners, with NBC using Santelli as their prime example. ABC's John Berman showcased everyday citizens. "It's not fair to those of us who make our house payments every month," one man declared. "They shouldn't have bought them [houses they could not afford] in the first place so, no, I'm furious about it," a woman similarly argued.



But while both of those reports featured upset citizens, they concluded with assurances from economists that, no matter how unfair it might seem, Obama's plan would really help everyone: "Nobody wins when someone's kicked out of their house when there's a viable solution to keep them in their house," economist Chris Mayer argued on ABC.

"It is a bitter pill to swallow, but it's one we need to swallow so that the financial system, the economy, don't slide away," economist Mark Zandi echoed on NBC. In other words, everyday people might be angry, but experts say Obama is right.

"The solution might not be 100 percent fair to everyone," ABC's Berman argued, "but then again, who said recessions are always fair?"

CBS failed to catch up to the public backlash until the next night, February 20, even as White House spokesman Robert Gibbs attacked critics such as Santelli. "I feel assured that Mr. Santelli doesn't know what he's talking about," Gibbs smugly asserted, although CBS's Chip Reid pointed at that, even "Gibbs conceded that some people who made bad decisions will be helped by the plan." Like Reid, ABC's Tapper also told viewers of Gibbs' admission that Obama's plan would help some undeserving individuals, but NBC's Chuck Todd omitted that from his report on Gibbs' smackdown of Santelli.

President Obama Subsidizing Bad Mortgage Behavior?

"President Obama's massive mortgage-bailout plan is nothing more than a thinly disguised entitlement program that re-distributes income from the responsible 92 percent of home-owning mortgage holders who pay their bills on time to the irresponsible defaulters who bought more than they could ever afford. This is Obama's spread-the-wealth program in action. "Team Obama is rewarding bad behavior. It is enlarging moral hazard. It is expanding its welfarist approach to economic policy. And with a huge expansion of government-owned zombie lenders Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, Team Obama is taking a giant step toward nationalizing the mortgage market.... "If the government really wants to help, instead of bailing out irresponsible mortgage holders, it should support new and younger families who want to buy starter homes and begin to climb the ladder of prosperity."

— Conservative economist and CNBC host Larry Kudlow, "Obama Subsidizes Bad-Mortgage Behavior," February 20 column.

Overall, the backlash sparked in part by CNBC's Santelli meant that network coverage of Obama's mortgage bailout was more balanced than his other big government proposals. Four out of ten statements (41%) rejected Obama's plan as unfair to responsible homeowners, compared to nearly six in ten (59%) who favored government intervention on behalf of homeowners, split between those who supported Obama's bailout plan (46%) and those who suggested the bailout should be even more generous (13%). (See chart on Page 14.)

The March 4 *CBS Evening News*, for example, profiled a homeowner who owes 54 percent more than his home is currently worth. "The part of the Obama plan written for these homeowners doesn't help those who owe more than five percent of what their house is now worth," reporter Ben Tracy fretted.

Three days later, CBS profiled homeowners upset that Obama's bailout would not help them, either. "Without a government mandate, there's often little incentive for banks to re-work mortgages with hard-hit homeowners, or help people who have second mortgages," Reporter Daniel Sieberg mourned. "Although President Obama claims his mortgage plan will help seven million homeowners, some analysts say it will be more like one and a half million."

■ **Health Care Reform (26 stories):** Much as they did with the White House's gimmicky "fiscal responsibility" summit, the networks gravitated to President Obama's March 5 health care forum, making it the peg for in-depth coverage of the prospects for health care "reform." All of the coverage was framed from the liberal perspective of the need for government to further intervene in the health care system to enforce "universal" health coverage.

"At a summit of health care providers and consumers and insurers at the White House, the President vowed to solve a problem that has bedeviled presidents since Theodore Roosevelt," ABC anchor Charles Gibson intoned. "There was an air of possibility at the White House," reporter Jake Tapper suggested at the end of his report.

The March 5 *CBS Evening News* and the March 1 *World News* on ABC asserted that the problem was, as ABC's David Muir put it, that "46 million Americans are without health insurance." Yet, as a July 18, 2007 report from the MRC's Business and Media Institute explains, that commonly-cited statistic is drawn from a Census Bureau report and includes roughly 10 million non-citizens, eight million young adults, and another nine million who make in excess of $75,000 per year — groups accounting for more than half of the uninsured.

The network coverage included no conservative experts, and no statements suggesting that the increased government involvement would worsen the state of health care in America. Instead, the networks were excited by the prospect of government taking over an even larger share of the nation's health care system. ABC Medical Editor Dr. Tim Johnson was perhaps the biggest cheerleader, celebrating news that Obama wanted $634 billion for a new health care fund. "Health care experts that I've talked to today are thrilled with this budget proposal. They see it as a very strong signal from the President that he is indeed very serious about health care reform and willing to put a lot of money behind his rhetoric," Johnson exulted on February 26.

Three days later, on the March 1 *World News*, Johnson made his perspective clear: "We spend more than twice as much per person on health care in this country as the average of all other industrialized countries, yet we're the only one that doesn't have universal coverage. That's a national shame."

On March 5, Johnson participated in Obama's health care forum, then went on *World News* to tell anchor Charles Gibson about the experience: "I have to tell you, Charlie, I was blown away by President Obama's grasp of the subject, how he connected the dots, how he answered the questions without any script."

None of the network stories about Obama's health care plans included any conservative or free market experts to balance the views of those, like ABC's Johnson, who championed a greater role for government. While the details of the administration's health care proposals have yet to be disclosed, the network coverage of the first 100 days certainly favored the sort of big government plan favored by liberals, and completely ignored the possibility of a free market solution empowering individuals instead of bureaucrats.

Foreign Policy: The Whole World As Barack Obama's Stage

As Barack Obama took office, network news reporters were smitten with the notion that our new President possessed near-magical powers to heal the wounds of the world and would, by retreating from the despised policies of the Bush years, make America one of the most loved nations on the planet.

All three networks showcased an enthusiastic global reaction to Obama's inauguration, as if the peoples of the world were more unanimous than the American electorate that split 53 to 46 percent in Obama's favor in November. "America's euphoria is spreading across the globe," NBC's Dawna Friesen celebrated on January 20. "Many people tuning in to see this moment of history unfold — and, they hope, the beginning of a new era....He is the man of the moment...and, many hope, the man who can navigate the world through the new century."

Over on CBS that night, the mood was nearly as ecstatic. "From Europe, to Asia, to Africa, his inauguration is seen as a new beginning," *Evening News* anchor Katie Couric celebrated. Reporter Mark Phillips surveyed the globe and found only admirers: "Never have so many felt so close from so far....The world seemed to stop to watch the man many see as their new leader, too....He will inherit the world's problems, but Obama, perhaps more than any before him, is being carried along on a river of good will."

As the new administration settled into day-to-day business, reporters like NBC's Andrea Mitchell kept up the kudos. When Obama showed up at the State Department to meet his new Secretary, Hillary Clinton, Mitchell could barely contain her glee, declaring on the January 22 *Nightly News*: "The State Department got a boost of adrenaline today: marching orders from the President and a new Secretary of State....Diplomacy is back!"

For the networks, Obama's first 100 days were a rolling celebration of the end of the Bush administration's foreign policy. Two of Obama's key initiatives — surging troops into Afghanistan and reaching out to America's enemies, like Iran — earned uniformly favorable press coverage from the networks. When it came to Obama's steps to re-shape the "War on Terror" into a kinder, gentler set of "Overseas Contingency Operations," the networks permitted criticism of the new President, but spent much more airtime lambasting the departed former President. (More on each of these issues below.)

President Obama's trip to Europe in early April was another chance for network reporters to tout his popularity. NBC's correspondents were the most sycophantic. On the April 1 *Nightly News*, correspondent Chuck Todd celebrated how Obama had finished "a diplomatic decathlon, packing in a week's worth of international diplomacy into 12 hours." He also declared the Obamas to be "America's unofficial royalty," and slobbered over how President Obama was "the new star of the world stage."

Chief Foreign Affairs correspondent Andrea Mitchell could barely contain herself on the April 2 *Nightly News*: "The reviews are already in, rave reviews" for Barack Obama. "He is

blessed by the comparison with his predecessor, because George W. Bush was very unpopular here in Europe. It was more like Ronald Reagan coming with the charm." NBC reporters also gushed over First Lady Michelle Obama. (See box.)

Visiting France on April 3, President Obama told Europeans that the U.S. has been an arrogant power. "There have been times where America has shown arrogance and been dismissive, even derisive. But in Europe, there is an anti-Americanism that is at once casual, but can also be insidious."

Michelle's Magic

"From the moment the Obamas landed in Britain, hand in hand, many here were already star-struck....Here, they're calling it 'Michelle's magic.' There's the media fascination with her clothes...but awareness, too, that with her Ivy League education and relaxed, easy charm, she's impressive....She's been hailed by the fashion press as a modern-day Jacqueline Kennedy, who dazzled Brits when she met the Queen."

— NBC correspondent Dawna Friesen on *Nightly News*, April 1.

To many American ears, this was unprecedented: an American President talking down his own country while overseas. To their credit, all three network newscasts that night allowed viewers see Obama's remark. But none of the three portrayed it as controversial, presenting it as a benign statement on the need for mutual cooperation. Here's how the three White House correspondents set up the quote:

ABC's Jake Tapper: "Before the young, enthusiastic crowd, Mr. Obama said both the U.S. and Europe need to change to move forward together...."

CBS's Chip Reid: "On rocky relations between the U.S. and Europe, the President blamed both sides...."

NBC's Chuck Todd: "The President addressed the elephant in the room when it comes to trans-Atlantic diplomacy...."

None of the networks spent any more time on the remark, which became a hot topic on talk radio over the following days. Assessing the President's trip on ABC's *World News* on April 4, George Stephanopoulos said while Obama did not get everything he wanted in terms of policy: "The President's stagecraft on this trip and his star power have really held up all through his trip to Europe."

The networks were similarly thrilled during Obama's Latin American summit two weeks later, although the key issue was his unilateral decision to relax the trade ban with communist Cuba. "President Obama made it clear he's interested in forging a new spirit of cooperation between the U.S. and its neighbors in the Western hemisphere," CBS's Jeff Glor touted on the April 18 *Evening News*.

That night, CBS's Michelle Miller found only fans of Obama's actions when she visited Cuban-Americans in Union City, New Jersey. "President Obama's overtures to Cuba raised possibilities and hopes," she asserted, while back in Cuba, "the signs of a thaw in the relationship were welcome news."

These themes of "possibility" and "hope" were also in evidence in coverage of the main foreign policy stories of the Obama 100 days: the War on Terror, the war in Afghanistan, and Obama's overture to Iran:

Even Darfur Victims Are Inspired by Obama

"Walking through one [refugee] camp, we discovered Obama's message of hope has reached even here. This mud-brick building is the newly renamed 'Obama Schoolhouse.' The children say Obama inspires them to reach their dreams."

— NBC's Ann Curry reporting on the Darfur crisis on the February 20 *Nightly News*.

■ **War on Terror (68 stories):** When it came to the War on Terror, President Obama's main policy initiatives during his first 100 days seemed aimed less at al Qaeda and more at his predecessor in the Oval Office. Of the Obama terror-fighting policies that drew network TV attention, the only one that involved actual aggression against the enemy was the continued use of drone aircraft to attack terrorist targets along the Afghan-Pakistan border.

The networks focused most of their coverage on Obama's decision to end the "torture" of detainees; to close the prison for suspected terrorists Guantanamo Bay, Cuba; and to publicly release Bush-era Justice Department memos on permissible interrogation methods. Coverage of President Obama's activities in these areas was split, with a bare majority of statements from reporters and quoted news sources (51%) supporting his actions, vs. 49 percent who disapproved. NBC and CBS were mostly positive of Obama's softer line, but ABC's *World News* actually offered mainly critical coverage. (See chart on Page 20.)

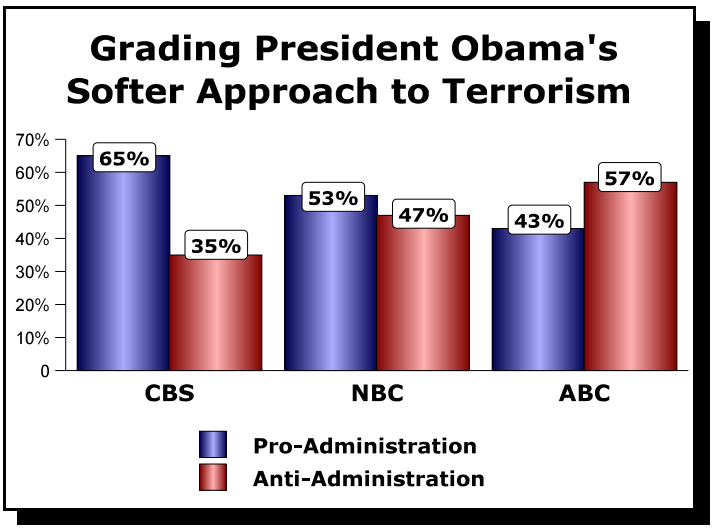
The networks generally framed the issue exactly as Obama and other liberals have. "The new President says America is taking the moral high ground in making the country safer," ABC's Charles Gibson announced on the January 22 *World News*, talking about the closing of Guantanamo and ending of harsh interrogation methods. "He has told the world that we will practice what we preach," Bob Schieffer applauded on the next night's *CBS Evening News*.

"The White House insists it was the number one recruiting tool for al Qaeda worldwide: tactics like waterboarding, which they say was clearly torture, tactics they say have now stopped," NBC anchor Brian Williams intoned in an April 20 piece about the Bush-era memos.

"Acknowledging the CIA's job is more difficult because America's enemies do not adhere to the same values, the President said the agency must live up to a higher standard," reporter Savannah Guthrie echoed.

But the networks gave nearly equal time for Obama's critics. "Can Obama's radically new direction actually defeat al Qaeda and keep America safe? Or is it, as some say, a terrorist's dream come true?" ABC *World News* Saturday anchor Dan Harris pondered on January 25. The following piece, by reporter Rachel Martin, ended on an equally-skeptical note: "Closing Guantanamo and releasing the detainees may improve Obama's image around the world, but it won't dilute al Qaeda's anti-American propaganda, and it may end up giving it a boost."

While these stories presented a nearly balanced debate about President Obama, the networks cast former President George W. Bush and his administration in a far harsher light. Four out of five statements (80%) on the network newscasts during President Obama's 100 days cast the Bush administration as corrupt or criminal in their handling of terrorist detainees. Only a handful included a response from any former administration official such as Vice President Dick Cheney, who was quoted in network stories after granting interviews to FNC's *Hannity* and *The Politico*.



The supposed guilt of the previous Republican administration was often just assumed. "How much pressure do you think the Obama administration is getting to hold Bush officials accountable?" CBS's Katie Couric asked analyst Jeff Greenfield on April 21.

The Bush administration was rarely defended. ABC's *World News* on April 18, for example, presented a one-sided attack without any rebuttal, citing liberal journalist Jane Mayer and the like-minded former CIA officer Larry Johnson. ABC reporter John Hendren allowed Mayer to claim higher-ups pushed CIA interrogators to abuse prisoners. "We've got people inside the CIA saying, 'We don't want to do this. This is criminal. This is not what America is about,' and they were ordered to do it anyway," Mayer alleged on ABC.

For all of their early claims of bipartisanship, Obama officials, including the President, also openly attacked the previous administration. "President Obama called it a dark and painful chapter in our history," ABC's Charles Gibson relayed on April 16, a phrase that was repeated on NBC that night. "The President said today that the Bush policies reflected a loss of what he called 'our moral bearings,'" NBC's Andrea Mitchell noted in an April 21 report.

Network reporters never suggested that President Obama or his aides should justify their criticisms of President Bush's record on fighting terrorism. While the networks offered a balanced debate over the wisdom of Obama's lenient approach to terrorism, their one-sided coverage of the former Bush administration's "harsh" approach is evidence of another issue in which the media are in sync with the Obama administration's liberal mindset.

■ **Afghanistan War (35 stories):** President Obama's decision to implement a surge of new U.S. troops to Afghanistan and negotiate with some elements of the Taliban was given roundly

positive coverage by the broadcast networks, in sharp contrast to their reaction to President Bush's decision two years ago to send additional troops to salvage the U.S. mission in Iraq.

Back then, the networks cast the Iraq troop surge as wildly risky and profoundly unpopular. Previewing Bush's plan on the January 8, 2007 *Nightly News*, NBC's Jim Miklaszewski was pessimistic: "Military officials warn the plan would take three months to assemble the forces, while many experts warn it's too little, too late." The day after Bush's announcement, on the January 11, 2007 *Evening News*, CBS anchor Katie Couric argued it was a non-starter: "If the early reaction to President Bush's new Iraq strategy is any indication, selling the American public on it could be a mission impossible....The reviews of the speech last night were largely negative, from the American public and Congress."

The network reaction to President Obama's surge in Afghanistan was vastly different. When word came on February 17 that Obama was dispatching 17,000 troops to Afghanistan, none of the networks cast it as controversial or even worthy of more than perfunctory coverage. ABC and CBS held themselves to brief reports, while NBC's Miklaszewski argued that with violence in Afghanistan rising, "these additional forces are urgently needed." He also deemed it a plus that the troops were being diverted from scheduled duty in Iraq: "That could meet two of President Obama's campaign promises — to reduce the number of forces in Iraq, while increasing the number in Afghanistan."

Overall, 91 percent of the statements made on a network evening news broadcast about Obama's Afghanistan strategy were favorable, a sharp contrast to the reaction to Bush's Iraq surge. Most of the favorable comments came from President Obama and his aides; the positive tone was the result of a near-absence of critics from the airwaves. Two years ago, congressional Democrats — including Obama himself — loudly decried Bush's troop surge as a mistake, but none of the networks' 100 day coverage noted the irony that President Obama was adopting a similar strategy.

■ **Obama's Overture to Iran (27 stories):** As noted earlier, President Obama attempted to reach out to a number of America's international adversaries during the first 100 days — including Russia, Cuba and Venezuela — but his overture to Iran drew the most attention. Reporters were especially thrilled when Obama sent a video greeting on March 20 for the Iranian New Year — NBC fill-in anchor Natalie Morales called it "dramatic," while correspondent Andrea Mitchell applauded it as "conciliatory, respectful." CBS's Lara Logan called it "a bold move." ABC's Jim Sciutto said that "President Obama promised a new day in U.S.-Iranian relations."

But the next day, Iran's "Supreme Leader" Ayatollah Khaminei rejected Obama's plea in an anti-American rant delivered in front of what ABC termed "a huge rally." That night, only ABC offered a full report on the Iranian rejection. While reporter Hilary Brown noted Khamenei's slam that "America is hated around the world and that nothing would happen until the U.S. administration changes its foreign policy," she optimistically argued: "It wasn't a flat rejection of the President's overture."

For its part, NBC ran only a brief, three-sentence item on the Iranian rebuff to Obama, while the *CBS Evening News* was pre-empted by basketball.

Network reporters seemed little bothered by the Iranian regime's continued recalcitrance in the face of Obama's charm offensive. On the April 9 *Evening News*, CBS's Elizabeth Palmer reported from Iran how that government was claiming more advances in its nuclear program, as if Obama's "conciliatory" messages might be a real deterrent: "The Iranian government has demonstrated today that its nuclear program is up and running quite smoothly and nothing, not even conciliatory messages from the White House, can take that away."

The sentencing of a freelance journalist with American citizenship, Roxana Saberi, to eight years in prison for alleged "spying" was cast as another setback for Obama. NBC's Tom Aspell warned on the April 18 *Nightly News* that if the Obama administration tried to "pressure" Iran to release the woman, it could "complicate" his effort to establish better relations with Iran — sidestepping whether the imprisonment of an American might also endanger good relations.

ABC's Rachel Martin, on the April 18 *World News*, however, uniquely ran a soundbite from an expert on Iran, Karim Sadjadpour, who suggested Iran's bad behavior was the regime's response to Obama's overture: "Whenever there is an effort by the United States to try to reach out to Tehran and build confidence, the Iranians often respond in kind with these efforts to try to sabotage this rapprochement."

Four days later, ABC's George Stephanopoulos interviewed Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and asked if he accepted Obama's "personal word that she is not a spy." In an excerpt shown on the April 22 *World News*, Ahmadinejad basically told the President of the United States to mind his own business: "I think Mr. Obama, as a sign of change and also to encourage friendship, should allow laws to be processed fairly and allow the judiciary to carry out its duties."

Other Topics: Ethics, the Environment and Embryos

The Obama administration also received substantial coverage on three topics that don't fit neatly under either the economic or foreign policy categories: the ethics of his administration officials; expanding environment regulations; and the President's decision to lift the ban on federal funding for embryonic stem cell research. A run-down of how the Big Three networks covered these issues:

■ **Administration Ethics (26 stories):** On President Obama's first full day in office, January 21, all three evening newscasts noted how he signed executive orders imposing stricter ethics rules on his staff, although each folded it into larger stories about Obama's day. "With five strokes of the pen, Mr. Obama then ordered some tough ethics and transparency rules," ABC's Jake Tapper narrated.

CBS's Chip Reid offered a similar summary, followed by a soundbite from the President: "He signed orders today tightening ethics rules for government employees and gave his new staff instructions on what it means to do government service."

"It's not about advantaging yourself," the President told his staff. "It's not about advancing your friends or your corporate clients. The American people are really counting on us now."

But moments later on each newscast, the topic was how Obama's nominee for Treasury Secretary, Timothy Geithner, had failed to pay tens of thousands of dollars in taxes. Yet none of the networks suggested a discrepancy between Obama's plea for higher standards and his continued backing of Geithner. NBC, in fact, promoted the notion that Geithner's supposedly incredible talent outweighed his ethical lapses:

"During what's been described as our economic emergency in this country, there is no Treasury Secretary," anchor Brian Williams fretted. Correspondent Kelly O'Donnell added how Geithner received a "warm reception" and that "there's plenty of praise for Geithner's qualifications to run Treasury, but his tax problem is another matter."

O'Donnell showed no critics of Geithner's policies, but CBS's Sharyl Attkisson that same night pointed out that not everyone shared a high opinion of the nominee: "Some of Geithner's opponents also consider him a chief architect of the failed policies that led to the bailout. But he has many supporters, Katie, and is expected to be confirmed."

A little more than a week later, Obama's choice for Health and Human Services, former Senator Tom Daschle, was exposed as failing to pay some of his taxes, too. As they had with Geithner, the networks largely painted the President as an uninvolved casualty. On the February 1 *World News*, anchor Dan Harris empathized: "Right smack in the middle of this stimulus debate comes an unwanted distraction for the Obama administration."

The next day, all three evening newscasts outlined Daschle's "tax problem." ABC anchor Charles Gibson asked George Stephanopoulos if Daschle's bid to join the Cabinet was "in peril? Any thought he might take himself out of the running?" Stephanopulos dismissed the concern: "Not on today's facts, Charlie, I don't think so....Democrats are going to hold firm."

Less than 24 hours later, of course, Daschle was gone, with the announcement coming shortly before all three evening news anchors met the President for previously scheduled interviews. NBC's Brian Williams and CBS's Katie Couric gave Obama a sympathetic ear, casting the President as a victim of circumstance.

"You lost two nominees, two appointments, today," Williams noted. "Did that make you angry, I imagine?" He later wondered "How do you prevent the lesson from being that, no matter how lofty the goals of the new guy coming in, Washington wins, in the end?"

Couric struck a similar note: "You campaigned to change the culture in Washington, to change the politics as usual culture here. Are you frustrated? Do you think it is much, much harder to do that than you ever anticipated?"

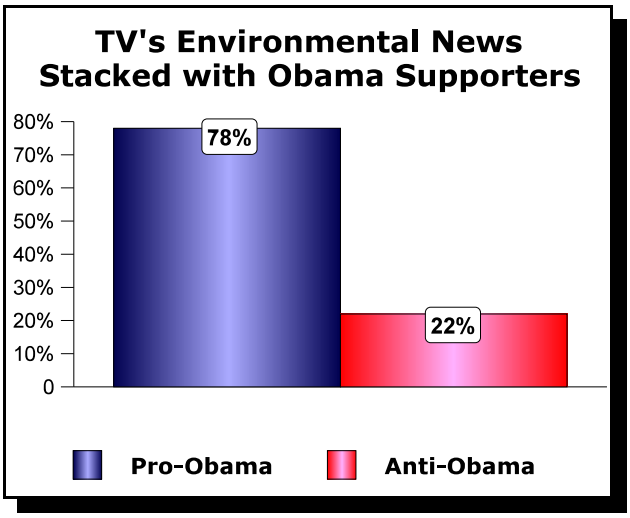
After Daschle's demise, the networks stopped making a big deal out of the ethical problems of Obama's Cabinet nominees. Only CBS mentioned (briefly, on the February 5 *Evening News*) that Labor nominee Hilda Solis had to pay back taxes; ABC and NBC skipped it. Only the *CBS Evening News* mentioned (again, very briefly, on March 2) that Obama's nominee for U.S. Trade Representative, Ron Kirk, also had to pay back taxes — ABC's *World News* and the *NBC Nightly News* skipped that, too, although NBC's *Today* carried a brief mention on March 3.

But the *CBS Evening News* completely skipped over the failure of Kansas Governor Kathleen Sebelius — Daschle's replacement — to pay all of her taxes, even as both ABC's *World News* and the *NBC Nightly News* ran short items on March 31. NBC's Chuck Todd squeezed it in at the end of a piece about Obama's trip to Europe, and played down its importance: "This wasn't a lot of tax money, about $7,000. Senate Democrats say she'll be confirmed easily."

■ **The Environment (22 stories):** All three evening newscasts provided overwhelmingly positive coverage of Obama's January 26 decision to allow more state regulation of so-called greenhouse gas emissions and to demand higher fuel efficiency standards for cars and truck, both reversals of Bush administration policy. The networks saw these actions, probably correctly, as indicators that Obama would aggressively use federal regulations to promote a liberal environmental agenda.

"Today, this country's environmental policy changed dramatically," NBC's Brian Williams enthused. "The change in course delighted the President's audience of long-suffering environmental activists," CBS's Chip Reid agreed. "With the President calling for decisive action on cleaning up the air, environmentalists in California are starting to breathe easier," CBS's Ben Tracy cheered.

That night, CBS and NBC's coverage only permitted fans of Obama's new regulations to supply comments. Only ABC's Jake Tapper — whose *World News* story featured mainly Obama supporters — managed to include soundbites from anyone criticizing Obama's new policies. Talking about the stricter fuel standards, Tapper showed industry analyst Rebecca Lindland make the obvious point that "manufacturers will be forced to pass on the cost of meeting these regulations on to the consumer." He also found an auto worker in Detroit who mocked the new President: "It was a chicken in a pot for Roosevelt, but it's like a moped in every garage for Obama."



Coverage of Obama's environmental policies during the first 100 days matched the tone of these early stories. Overall, 78 percent of statements applauded Obama's more

aggressive approach, compared to 22 percent that offered criticism of the need for such measures or the costs of doing so during a severe recession. ABC also found a way to suggest Obama was really a tool of dirty corporations, in an April 21 report (right before Earth Day) criticizing the President for supporting clean coal technology (where carbon emissions are sequestered underground instead of pumped into the atmosphere).

ABC's Brian Ross juxtaposed Obama's campaign statements supporting such technology — "Clean coal technology is something that can make America energy independent" — with the condemnations of far-left environmentalist Robert F. Kennedy. "Clean coal is a dirty lie," Kennedy complained to Ross, slamming Obama as an "indentured servant to the coal industry."

But attacks on Obama from the right were rare. When Obama's EPA took a step towards regulating carbon dioxide — an atmospheric gas required for life on Earth — as a threat to "public health and welfare," the networks all stuck to the spin of cheering environmentalists. "You can't see them, but the greenhouse gases that come from your car or the coal burned to make electricity to warm the planet, that, the government says, is a danger to your health and welfare," NBC's Anne Thompson obligingly argued.

The Conservative Perspective the Networks Ignored

"The Obama administration's embrace of the global warming theory continues despite growing evidence from first-rate, blue chip scientists who are increasingly concluding that humans have little effect on global temperatures, and that natural causes and temperature patterns continue to dominate....Satellite measured temperatures show that the global atmosphere has cooled over the last 10 years, with the decline in temperatures accelerating over the last two years. They argue that temperature variations throughout the 20th century can be explained by natural causes. U.S. temperatures rose from 1977 to 1998, but they fell from 1940 to 1977. The hottest decade was the 1930s. Yet carbon dioxide increased continuously throughout the century, which should have produced a trend of consistent temperature increases if it was causing global warming."

— Peter Ferrara of the Institute for Policy Innovation, writing at the Fox Forum, April 20.

Rather than seek out experts who would offer a contrary view (see text box), the networks swarmed to the professional environmentalists who lobbied for the new regulations. "The EPA's action signals to the world that we're changing, it's a game changer. We're, for the first time, serious about tackling the global warming crisis," the National Wildlife Federation's Joe Mendelson enthused on NBC. The only note of skepticism came from the Chamber of Commerce, whose spokesman suggested intrusive EPA regulation could seriously damage the U.S. economy.

But if the networks had any desire to provide skeptical coverage, they might have questioned the Obama administration's premise that global warming is a) for real, and b) the result of human beings burning carbon-based fuels. But the networks long ago dropped a balanced approach to the climate change debate, becoming unapologetic advocates for the liberal environmentalist charge that humans will destroy the Earth without radical cutbacks in industrial activity. On this topic, the networks' bias translated into little skepticism of the Obama administration's liberal environmental agenda.

■ **Embryonic Stem Cell Research (16 stories):** For social conservatives, two of the most significant measures of Obama's first 100 days concerned his executive orders removing restrictions on federal funding for abortion established by President George W. Bush, and ending the ban on federal funding for research using stem cells taken from human embryos.

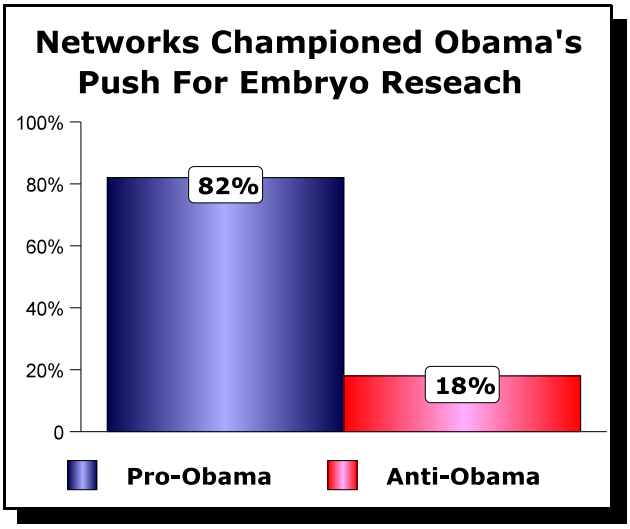
The pro-abortion orders, signed January 23, were almost completely ignored by the network evening newscasts, with NBC and CBS offering a single sentence in reports from their White House correspondents. ABC ran nothing that night, but two days later on its Sunday night newscast, the network ran a longer piece portraying Obama as conciliator looking for "common ground" compared to the "fast and brutal" reaction of religious conservatives.

In contrast, those same networks all provided heavy same day coverage of President Bush's anti-abortion executive orders in 2001, casting them as deeply ideological and highly controversial. Then-CBS correspondent John Roberts claimed Bush "waded into controversy on his first day," and channeled how "abortion rights activists fear there's more to come."

Obama's overturning of Bush's policy on funding embryonic stem cell research drew much more attention, nearly all of it positive. "These wondrous, all-purpose embryonic stem cells, the cells which look so promising in the laboratory, will now, finally, be used to treat people," ABC's John McKenzie enthused on January 23 as he reported both on Obama's anticipated action and the start of a clinical trial.

Obama's announcement came on March 9, but the network evening newscasts began trumpeting the news three days earlier. "Scientists tonight tell us they are overjoyed by the news, saying Monday will be a great day for science and for patients," ABC's Lisa Stark cheered on the March 6 *World News*. After the announcement, Stark's report included this soundbite from paralyzed researcher Roman Reed: "Under President John F. Kennedy, we were the first to walk on the moon. Under President Obama, the paralyzed will be the first to walk on earth."

The evening newscasts ran a total of 38 statements offering an opinion of Obama's shift in favor of federal funding and the vast majority (82%) saluted his decision, compared with 18 percent who were opposed. Network reporters flocked to patients who believe they might benefit, with far less time for religious conservatives who objected to the ethics of spending tax dollars to destroy human embryos. "For many Americans dealing with chronic illness, the change in government policy could not come soon enough," CBS's Katie Couric declared on the March 9 *Evening News*.



With one exception, the only scientists and researchers interviewed were supporters of

using human embryos for research, creating the impression of near-unanimous support from the medical community. "President Obama said exactly what this room full of scientists has long waited to hear," CBS's Chip Reid noted on March 9. "The new Obama decision is really putting patients first. It's putting patients over ideology. It's going to allow the science to move forward as quickly as possible," researcher George Daley enthused March 8 on ABC.

The only exception to this trend was CBS's Kimberly Dozier, who included researcher Dr. David Prentice in her March 7 piece previewing Obama's decision. Prentice suggested Obama was behind the curve: "Using embryos? Old science, bad health care. It's the adult stem cells that actually help patients now."

Writing at *U.S. News and World Report*, physician (and onetime CBS consultant) Bernadine Healy further explained that recent trials have shown a difficulty in controlling the growth of embryonic stem cells once implanted, leading to "disabling if not deadly tumors" in some patients. "To date, most of the stem cell triumphs that the public hears about involve the infusion of adult stem cells," Healy added.

Neither ABC nor NBC gave this point of view any airtime as they were praising Obama's action. As with the other policies of the new President's first 100 days, the networks seemed incapable of providing even-handed coverage of policies that match the liberal predilections of most of their reporters.

Conclusion: Media Watchdogs Now Obama's Lapdogs

At the end of President Obama's first 100 days, all three evening newscasts celebrated the occasion. NBC's Savannah Guthrie suggested the 100-day milestone "is the kind of thing his aides say is one of those fake holidays that journalists make up," although she added how Obama "graded his own performance" at a town hall meeting — "[He] said he was pleased, but not satisfied with the progress of his administration."

The *CBS Evening News* devoted most of their newscast to touting Obama's achievements. "One of the chief accomplishments of President Obama's first 100 days is getting that economic stimulus bill through Congress," anchor Katie Couric cheered. "President Obama's been on a global charm offensive in his first 100 days," echoed foreign correspondent Lara Logan.

"I'll tell you this," Bob Schieffer told Couric, "if the President's popularity stays as high as it is right now, you're going to see him continue to push big."

Over on ABC, George Stephanopoulos touted Obama's first 100 days as "shock and awe on the domestic front." He suggested that Obama's "number one accomplishment has been to inspire a sense of direction in the country," parroting the spin of White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel, who was at that moment being interviewed by Couric over on CBS.

"What's your greatest accomplishment?" Couric wondered. "We've helped give America that sense of confidence again, that we can meet these challenges and this country is headed, finally, in the right direction," Emanuel replied.

When the White House and the media are saying exactly the same thing, that's a clue that journalists are failing to act as a real check on those in power. A little over two years ago, during the debate about the Bush administration's Iraq surge, *Newsweek* reporter Evan Thomas was asked if the media were "bashing the President unfairly?"

"Well, our job is to bash the President," Thomas replied. "That's what we do."

Not anymore, apparently. In his first 100 days in office, President Obama has pushed an audaciously liberal policy agenda. If enacted, his policies would have radical consequences for America for years, perhaps decades. With Democrats enjoying monopoly control of the House and Senate, the networks and the rest of the media have the responsibility to scrutinize those policies, and give audiences both sides of the story — not just the perspective of a powerful Chief Executive.

Yet in the first 100 days, network coverage endorsed every one of Obama's major policies: the stimulus, the budget, the bank bailout, the auto bailout, the mortgage bailout, foreign policy, the "War on Terror," the environment, embryonic stem cell research, and on and on. Such promotional coverage of major policies is not part of the normal "honeymoon" that exists between journalists and new Presidents. Rather, it is a symptom of how few network reporters evidently see their professional role as that of adversary to whoever is in the White House.

The longstanding liberalism of network reporters made them aggressive adversaries of the Bush White House and other Republican administrations. The evidence from President Obama's first 100 days is that that liberal mindset has crippled reporters' ability to be effective watchdogs on behalf of the public. Instead, the once-fierce media watchdogs have become Barack Obama's drooling, tail-wagging lapdogs.

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