

## **Blunders, Scandals, and Strategic Communication in U.S. Foreign Policy: Benghazi vs. 9/11**

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Scholars have paid little attention to the role of media scandals in U.S. foreign policy discourse. This article suggests that journalists' treatment of foreign policy failures as scandalous bears little relationship to the nature or effects of officials' malfeasance. Scandalized news coverage is instead more fruitfully viewed through the lens of skilled strategic framing. Contrasting the news about two terrorist attacks on Americans—9/11 and Benghazi—reveals how politicians can successfully promote or deflect potential foreign policy scandals without much regard for evidence. Benghazi suggests that unsubstantiated or minor failings can spawn major scandals. Conversely, 9/11 shows how and why well-documented and massive miscues may not ignite scandal. Much depends on party elites' strategic communication choices. The ability of savvy communicators to foster or evade scandal regardless of underlying facts and severity of malfeasance has important implications for democratic accountability and prudence in U.S. foreign-policy making and democracy more broadly.

*Keywords: scandal, strategic communication, political communication, textual analysis*

Responding to a 2015 debate question about his brother George W. Bush's achievements as president, former Florida governor Jeb Bush asserted that President Bush (a Republican) had "kept us safe." Apparently forgetting that the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks occurred during his brother's first term, Jeb Bush's assertion—reiterated in a campaign tweet the following day (Bush, 2015)—suggests that, in the collective memory, George W. Bush successfully avoided accountability or blame for failing to act on warnings about planned massive attacks on the United States (see also Martinez, 2015).

The 9/11 nonscandal stands in contrast to the highly publicized scandal around the much smaller-scale terrorist incident in Benghazi, Libya, on September 11, 2012, when terrorists attacked the U.S. consulate and killed four Americans. Over the next few years, Republicans successfully kept up a

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drumbeat of accusations and allegations of misconduct against top Democratic leaders in office during the attack, holding 32 congressional hearings (versus 22 held for 9/11) and issuing 11 reports related to Benghazi (versus one for 9/11). President Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and other administration officials were repeatedly accused of doing nothing in response to warnings that U.S. installations in Libya were vulnerable to terrorism, of blocking military responses while the attack was occurring, and of purposefully using misleading rhetoric about what happened.

This article assesses media coverage and political responses to 9/11 and Benghazi. Although the contrasting scopes and locations of the attacks contributed to differences in media treatment, we show that comparing the degree to which each was framed specifically as a scandal yields insights into the following questions: To what extent did the differences in scandal framing for these two instances of potential blame result from contrasts in strategic political communication on the part of Republicans and Democrats? To what extent did major mainstream news outlets support or resist the preferred frames of the opposing political parties? And what are the implications of the stark differences in framing for understanding the role of scandals in U.S. foreign policy discourse, democratic politics, and foreign-policy making? Dissecting the differences in political communication and scandal framing for these events shows two alternative paths taken by politicians and media when assigning responsibility for failures of leadership. These in turn influence the accountability and incentives facing decision makers.

To illuminate strategic communication, we analyze media content, not leaders' behavior. We feel comfortable inferring elites' strategic communication behavior from media texts based on one of the field's most robust findings: media index elite discourse (Bennett, 1990). In foreign policy and scandal politics—as in political discourse more broadly—elites play a paramount role in shaping news frames (Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2006; Domke, Graham, Coe, Lockett, & Coopman, 2006) and have broad ability to bend the facts and journalistic will to their desires.<sup>1</sup>

### Reactions to the Two Attacks

Public revelations about neglected pre-9/11 intelligence warnings began in May 2002 with the leak of, and subsequent *CBS Evening News* story about, a presidential daily brief (PDB) from August 6, 2001, headed "Bin Laden Determined to Strike in U.S." It was in the news again during the summer of

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<sup>1</sup> Although space limitations preclude detailed discussion, additional evidence comes from our immersion in news and discourse about these two incidents. It revealed many examples of distinctive communication behavior by the two parties. Democrats generally appeared less strategically adept, or perhaps less inclined to allow strategic goals such as power maximization to determine what they said and did. Republicans' strategic savvy, evidenced in their relentless promotion of scandal over Benghazi and careful deflection of 9/11 scandal, contrasts with Democrats' inattention to controlling the frames. One token is the contrast between Congress's issuing 11 reports on Benghazi and just one on 9/11. This despite Democrats' controlling the Senate in 2001–3 and 2012–13 and both the Senate and House in 2007–11. Not that elites completely determine frames; news organizations do enjoy a degree of autonomy that varies over issues and circumstances. As shown by our findings on *The New York Times's* front-page treatment of Benghazi, in some instances journalists can and do resist lockstep indexing.

2004, after the government's 9/11 Commission issued its report. Shortly after came a book from Bush's former chief counterterrorism advisor, Richard Clarke (2004), who detailed the administration's failure to heed repeated alarms about imminent Al-Qaeda attacks. Sporadic attention in elite media continued. For example, a 10th anniversary op-ed by *Times* reporter Kurt Eichenwald (2011) titled "The Deafness Before the Storm" described numerous intelligence warnings, as did a *Politico* magazine cover story, "The Attacks Will Be Spectacular" (Whipple, 2015). None of these revelations triggered a full-blown scandal.

In contrast, the Benghazi attack took on scandal framing almost immediately after it occurred, as we detail below. This ongoing drumbeat of allegations helped spread a public perception of Clinton as dishonest, a marked change from her favorable image as secretary of state.<sup>2</sup> They also scuttled Obama's nomination of UN Ambassador Susan Rice as Clinton's successor in the State Department (see, e.g., Schwartz, 2014). Yet congressional hearings on Benghazi turned up no prior intelligence warnings to top foreign policy officials or the president about imminent terrorist attacks against the U.S. consulate in Libya. They also found no evidence that American military personnel were ordered to "stand down" during the assault—a charge that leading Republicans, including many candidates for the 2016 presidential nomination, repeatedly endorsed.<sup>3</sup>

At first glance it might seem that much of the difference in media treatment of the two events arose from a natural rally-round-the-flag response to 9/11 because of its very scale and emotional resonance. Such a rally would mute the public's desire for blame and cue elites and journalists not to investigate or question the White House aggressively. If in retrospect it seems predetermined that the politics of scandal would be unavailable for exploitation after 9/11, this itself testifies to the effectiveness of the framing. Facts pointing to Bush's culpability did garner brief publicity, but that dissipated without political effect. Dissecting the coverage alongside that of Benghazi clarifies what would otherwise be invisible: exactly how draining the scandal potential operated in media texts, making scandalized discussion of Bush's responsibility virtually unthinkable and a patriotic rally seem natural. In fact, President Obama could have orchestrated an analogous rally around four American heroes slain in Benghazi, as President Reagan did after a Benghazi-like incident in conflict-torn, majority-Muslim Beirut (Entman, 1989, Chapter 3).

Analyzing Benghazi alongside 9/11 offers theoretically useful insights precisely because the political responses and scales of damage differed so much. If scandals were closely calibrated to the social and economic costs of political malfeasance, the magnitude of 9/11 should have yielded far more coverage of highest officials' potential responsibility than for Benghazi. Or if, as might be inferred from Benghazi, all potentially avoidable terrorist attacks on Americans yield significant scandals, 9/11 should have done so. The 9/11 attacks were exponentially costlier, and the dead were innocent civilians on U.S. soil, not

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<sup>2</sup> For example, a February 2016 Gallup poll found that "dishonest" was the most frequent label for Clinton (Byrnes, 2016), while voters' perceptions of Clinton as "honest and straightforward" declined dramatically from June 2014 to October 2015 (Hart Research Associates, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Three government reports rejected the "stand down" myth, including from the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (2014).

Americans voluntarily deployed overseas. Thus, from the perspective of accountability for miscues in foreign-policy making, 9/11 should have yielded deeper investigation and scandal than Benghazi.

### Scandal and Asymmetrical Political Communication

Scandal is a quintessential part of political communication for parties and media, but it is often poorly calibrated to the political and social costs of malfeasance. Figure 1 relates the severity of real-world effects to the degree of political damage, showing the contingent nature of foreign policy scandal.

	Deaths & economic cost: Relatively minor	Deaths & economic cost: Major
Political damage: Minimal (no scandal or rally)	Reagan: Beirut	Bush: 9/11
Political damage: Major (scandal)	Clinton: Benghazi	Bush: Iraq War (2006–8 only)

**Figure 1. Comparing real-world effects and political damage for costly and minor foreign policy mistakes.**

This taxonomy undergirds our proposition that strategic framing and skillful political communication play a more decisive role in the political effects that U.S. policy makers face than do the costs that their poor decisions impose on the United States (and elsewhere).

One dimension of scandal coverage relevant here is whether the actor held responsible is a person or an institution. Some scholars (e.g., Just & Crigler, 2014) have argued that personalized scandal coverage tends toward empty sensationalism, whereas placing the blame on institutions makes meaningful structural reform more likely and is therefore more desirable. However, it could also be argued that when high-ranking individuals, rather than nebulous institutions, receive scandal attention, accountability and the incentives for prudent policy making are more powerful. Likewise, it is less risky for top national journalists to place blame on faceless bureaucracies than on high officials who have the power to retaliate.

Moreover, the president's standing with the public—based on trust and other forms of political capital—is a linchpin of presidential power" (Kriner & Schickler, 2014, p. 1). That heightens incentives for an administration's opponents to promote scandal, even when, as for Benghazi, there is flimsy evidence of wrongdoing. In addition, studies suggest that historically, congressional investigations, when directed at the executive branch, reduce presidential approval—and power (e.g., Kriner & Schickler, 2014).

Finally, research has revealed that even when misinformation (such as a trumped-up scandal) is debunked or corrected, many citizens' negative beliefs about the object of that misinformation persist—a phenomenon Thorson (2016) has termed "belief echoes." As we show below, this sort of damage by misleading scandal framing befell Hillary Clinton but not George W. Bush.

Regarding asymmetrical political communication, several studies suggest the general superiority of Republican messaging (e.g., Lakoff, 2014; Westen, 2007). Excepting the Trump White House, Republicans also generally tend to be more disciplined in their messaging than Democrats, repeating the same word or phrase in multiple venues and over time, promoting it as the default way to think about an issue (e.g., Phillips-Fein, 2009). In addition, Republicans have poured more resources into finding “words that work” (Luntz, 2007) than Democrats, building an extensive network of think tanks and university institutes to produce partisan research and promoting their analyses to journalists and other public commentators (e.g., Hacker & Pierson 2016; cf. Grossmann & Hopkins, 2016).

Among other results, Republicans’ superior strategic communication system has cemented their “ownership” of foreign policy—their brand as the toughest, most competent stewards of national security. This established reputation helps them control framing in this field, as illustrated by the party’s success at controlling scandalization in both cases. For instance, applying Entman’s (1993) four-part conceptualization of framing’s functions to Benghazi: If the tragic deaths of four Americans is a large-scale *problem* for U.S. foreign policy and national security, and Hillary Clinton’s incompetence and dishonesty were central *causes* of Benghazi, then *moral* condemnation of Clinton’s behavior becomes justifiable, and a *solution* would be to deny her power to commit future deadly blunders. The GOP brand made this framing more credible to media and public, as it made Republican culpability in 9/11 less thinkable.

The ability of skillful strategic communication to evade scandal over severely damaging incidents such as 9/11, or to promote major scandals in the wake of relatively minor tragedies such as Benghazi, points to important linkages among scandal politics, media practices, and foreign-policy making. These connections have received surprisingly limited attention (although see Rowling, Sheets, & Jones, 2015, on the My Lai massacre).

### Method

To explore how Benghazi, but not 9/11, became a scandal, we analyzed an extensive corpus of news stories and editorials about both events from *The New York Times* (NYT), *USA Today* (USAT), and NBC’s *Nightly News* (NBC).<sup>4</sup> Our 9/11 data set begins on May 15, 2002, when the revelation of the August 6, 2001, PDB triggered the first serious attention to Bush’s knowledge of prior warnings before 9/11, and runs through Election Day, November 2, 2004. Benghazi data were drawn from the period beginning on the day of the event itself, September 12, 2012, to October 30, 2015—a week after the last congressional testimony by Hillary Clinton on October 23.<sup>5</sup> All stories were selected using LexisNexis, applying the most

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<sup>4</sup> We focused on mainstream media because, at that time, they were still the agenda-setting media for broader political discourse in the United States.

<sup>5</sup> The 9/11 data set begins in 2002 and not on September 11 itself because the 2002 PDB marked the first time important politicians or media began publicly suggesting that scandal framing might be appropriate, whereas Republicans immediately framed Benghazi as scandalous. The data set for Benghazi ends after Clinton’s last congressional testimony in 2015, and not into Campaign 2016, because the mainstream media examined herein gave Benghazi only passing mentions after the testimony. Some in right-wing media continued promoting Benghazi into 2016, as discussed below.

inclusive search terms, then narrowing manually to include only those items directly addressing allegations of responsibility for missing preattack warnings or not acting to evade the attack.

All stories from NYT, USAT, and NBC that met the search criteria during the specified dates were subjected to two analyses: at the paragraph level, and at the story level. The paragraph-level analysis used the software QDA Miner to identify the frequency and co-occurrence of different actors and entities (e.g., President Bush, the FBI and CIA, Condoleezza Rice) with words that indicated blame and with exculpatory language that deflected or diffused blame. The specific search terms used were gathered inductively by close reading of the actual language that journalists and political actors used (see Appendix for all search terms and related details of content analysis).

The story-level analysis shows the number of items over time that blamed specific actors or combinations of actors. A story was coded as blaming when it directly associated blame with a specific person or entity. We tallied the number of stories that blamed only one actor and the number of stories that blamed multiple actors. The four possible culpable parties in 9/11 stories were President Bush himself, the Bush Administration in general, another government institution (the FBI, CIA, a former administration), and intangible factors such as a failure to connect the dots or too much bureaucracy. For Benghazi, the culpable parties coded were Secretary of State Clinton, President Obama, the Obama administration in general, another government institution (FBI, CIA, or the State Department, which figured prominently), and external causes, including "Muslim extremism," the offensive video originally purported to have sparked the attack, and the 9/11 anniversary.

The story-level analysis reveals how blame shifted from actor to actor over time, usually reflecting skilled strategic communication by those promoting scandal (Benghazi) or evading it (9/11). The story-level analysis looks only for the presence or absence of blame for each actor in a story, making it a relatively efficient way to uncover journalists' prioritization of actors involved in a large amount of coverage over time. To supplement these analyses, we also employed simple searches and counts within much larger samples of media coverage. These yielded important supplementary insights.

## Results

### *Asymmetrical Attention to 9/11 and Benghazi*

Table 1 shows the difference in total number of stories and editorial items covering allegations that American officialdom bore some responsibility for allowing the 9/11 and Benghazi attacks to happen.

**Table 1. Number and Placement of News and Editorial Items Discussing Responsibility for Terrorist Attacks on 9/11 and at Benghazi.**

	Page A1		Op-ed/Editorial		Inside Pages		Total	
	9/11	Benghazi	9/11	Benghazi	9/11	Benghazi	9/11	Benghazi
NYT	82	23	48	60	109	127	239	210
USAT	9	13	11	35	45	67	66	115
NBC	59	81	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	59	81

*Note.* Ns represent stories or editorial items. For NBC, the entire newscast was considered equivalent to page A1.

Perhaps the most noteworthy finding is that NBC and USAT both ran more stories dealing with blame for Benghazi than for 9/11, thereby reinforcing Republicans' scandal goals. On the other hand, Table 1 also shows that in one respect, NYT resisted Republicans' strategic communication. On its influential front page, *The Times* de-emphasized Benghazi as compared with 9/11; for the other two outlets, Benghazi was the bigger story. Yet on the editorial page and inside news pages, NYT, like USAT and NBC, published more items discussing blame for Benghazi than for 9/11. In total, USAT and NBC devoted considerably greater attention to assessing blame for Benghazi than for 9/11, and even NYT provided nearly equal attention to the two.

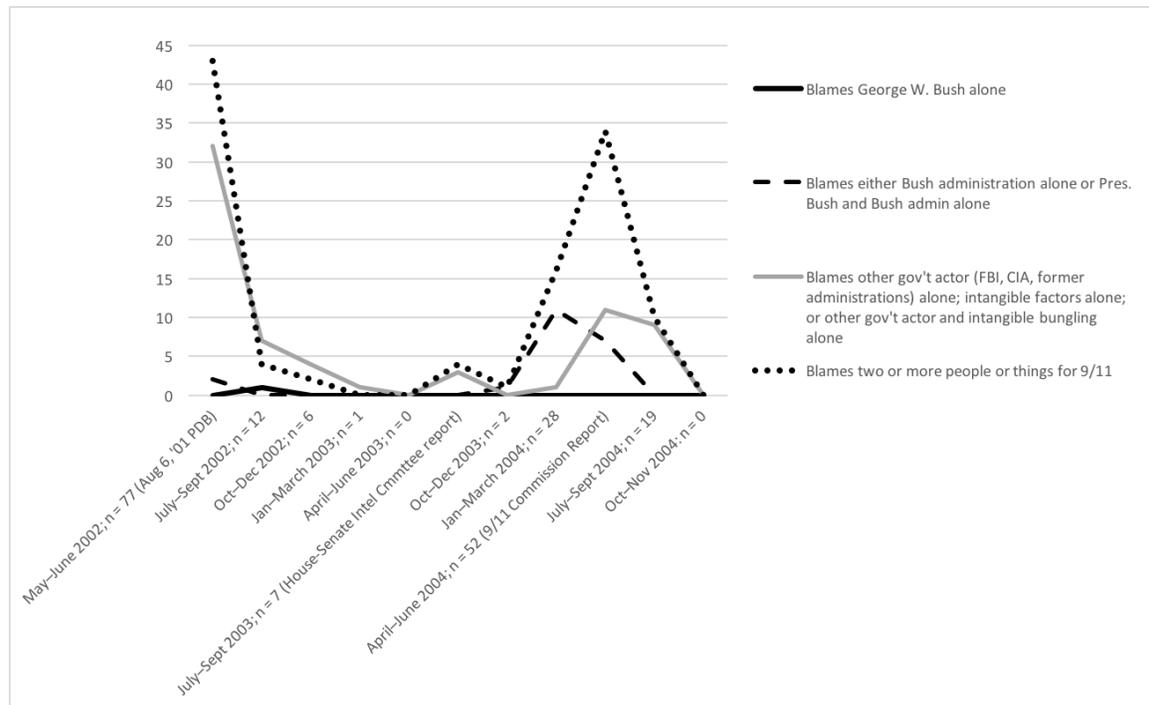
### ***9/11: A Nonscandal for George W. Bush***

We now look more closely at how the news outlets we studied allocated responsibility for 9/11. Figure 2 shows the results of the story-level analysis, charting blame for individual actors, and combinations of actors, over time. Just one story in our analysis—on NBC—blamed only President Bush for 9/11, and it focused not directly on 9/11 but on congressional races in the South. There were zero stories on page one of NYT or USAT focusing exclusively on Bush's responsibility.

A scandal delayed is often a scandal avoided, a factor the administration adroitly exploited. The administration, under substantial political pressure, finally released a copy of the PDB warning Bush of attacks, fully eight months after September 2001. At this point, the news that Bush had been personally and explicitly warned about imminent attacks was less compelling than it might have been right after 9/11, when emotions were running highest. Indeed, attention to Bush's personal responsibility was effectively tamped down until two years after news of the memo first broke. That further delaying tactic again helped contain scandal, as 9/11 culpability was even older news by then. In the same way, it was more than a year after 9/11 (November, 2002) when the 9/11 Commission was formed (again, after long administration resistance and under pressure) to investigate why the attacks were not discovered earlier and possibly prevented. With the nearly three-year gap between 9/11 and the 2004 publication of the commission's final report,<sup>6</sup> its equivocal language, and Democrats' failure to use it as a campaign cudgel, interest faded quickly.

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<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.9-11commission.gov/report/>.



**Figure 2. Assignment of blame for 9/11 in NYT A1, USAT A1, and all NBC stories, over time. Note: The Ns are greater than the frequencies in Table 1 because some stories are counted more than once.**

Figure 2 shows that at both points of maximum publicity around responsibility for 9/11 (after the revelation of the PDB and after the 9/11 Commission's report), stories on the front pages of NYT and USAT or broadcast on NBC tended to blame two or more actors, often including nebulous government institutions, such as the FBI or CIA, or intangible forces such as too much bureaucracy or an inability to connect the dots.

Figure 2 therefore displays perhaps the most politically consequential choices journalists make when covering scandal: which actor or actors to blame for misdeeds. Journalists can choose to run stories that clearly blame only one actor or entity—for instance, the FBI, the Bush administration, or President Bush himself—creating a clear frame for the assignment of fault. Or, as in our results, journalists can diffuse blame by emphasizing multifaceted or inconclusive explanations. This reduces the role of human agency, diminishing the likelihood that citizens will regard any identifiable actor or actors as culpable. To put the point in terms of episodic versus thematic framing (Iyengar, 1991): Blaming institutional and structural causes rather than individuals is useful in policy discussions around issues such as poverty and street crime. But when it comes to high-level official misconduct, thematic framing that focuses on the role of institutions over individuals has the effect of letting individuals most responsible for upholding national security off the hook.

Probing in more detail *The New York Times* (NYT), the paper that ran by far the most items on 9/11 culpability,<sup>7</sup> Table 2 shows results from the paragraph-level analysis: the frequency with which blame words appeared in the same paragraph with mentions of specific actors, and the presence of exculpatory language negating that blame. The blame words that were used for 9/11 included “memo,” which captured all discussions of the August 2001 PDB (the publicity about which was inherently accusatory), “unheeded,” “ignored,” “intelligence failures,” and “dismissed” (see Appendix). A typical sentence that associated an actor with blame was the headline, “FBI Ignored Early Warning About Possible Attack on U.S.” (NBC, May 15, 2002).

**Table 2. Association of Blame and Exculpation of Blame for 9/11, at the Paragraph Level (NYT A1, USAT A1, and All NBC).**

	% of Paragraphs	
	Blaming Specific Actor(s) Alone <sup>a</sup>	Blaming Actor(s) and That Also Use Exculpatory Language
President Bush	22.8 ( <i>n</i> = 31 of 136)	46.3 ( <i>n</i> = 63 of 136)
Rice and/or Cheney	9.3 ( <i>n</i> = 17 of 88)	31.8 ( <i>n</i> = 28 of 88)
“White House” and/or “Bush administration”	31.2 ( <i>n</i> = 63 of 202)	18.3 ( <i>n</i> = 37 of 202)
FBI, CIA, Mueller, government in general, and/or vague, diffuse factors	39.2 ( <i>n</i> = 163 of 416)	12.3 ( <i>n</i> = 51 of 416)

<sup>a</sup> Shown as percentage of all paragraphs linking that actor with blame words.

Exculpatory language included words and phrases meant to belittle the intelligence warnings or otherwise deflect blame, such as “vague,” “nonspecific,” “speculative,” and “wasn’t briefed.” An example of a sentence that included blame but also exculpatory language was, “But Mr. Bush and his aides did not have all the threat information that was circulating through lower levels of the government in July and August, some of it more specific” (Johnston & Risen, 2002, para. 4).<sup>8</sup> In fact, intelligence warnings to Bush were specific.

Table 2 shows that the political communication strategy of the Bush administration—to deflect blame from the president and top administration officials and place it on the intelligence agencies and other nebulous institutions—succeeded. The second column shows the difference in frequency with which blame words were associated only with the particular actor listed (i.e., no other actors were mentioned in the same paragraph). The third column shows the frequency with which actors were blamed but also exculpated in the same paragraph (as in the example above). The data show that President Bush, Vice

<sup>7</sup> That only NYT paid any significant attention to 9/11 responsibility is itself an indicator that the attacks didn’t yield an important presidential scandal. By definition, a politically significant scandal will spread throughout the media ecosystem. Confined to one or two elite newspapers, a potential scandal frame will not influence politics much.

<sup>8</sup> Because of variability in word meaning, all of the results obtained by automated searches, either in full or every third item returned, were manually checked.

President Cheney, and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice were more likely to be exculpated than they were to be blamed. By contrast, the intelligence agencies; the FBI director at the time, Robert Mueller; and the vaguer "White House" and "Bush administration" were more likely to be blamed.

The third column also shows that Bush enjoyed the greatest amount of exculpation. Nearly half his blaming paragraphs included exculpatory language. These most often came in the form of asserting—inaccurately—that although Bush didn't do anything to prevent the attacks, he didn't get any clear warnings that they were brewing. Also frequently defended from blame were Rice and Cheney. Far less likely to be defended were the more general and vague actors "White House" and "Bush administration," and least likely to receive exculpation were the real fall guys: the FBI, CIA, their leaders, and the most nebulous actor, "government" in general. Rice gave lengthy (if long resisted [Olshansky, 2011]) public testimony before the 9/11 Commission, whereas Bush and Cheney testified jointly, privately, and for just one hour. Resisting and then insisting on highly constrained testimony was another important element of their scandal containment strategy. Politically, it was better for Rice than Bush and Cheney to receive public attention from the commission.

A final measure of the limited extent to which the 9/11 attacks were subjected to scandal framing comes from a separate search for "9/11" or "September 11" appearing within a sentence of the word "scandal"<sup>9</sup> in news items by NYT, USAT, Associated Press (AP), and National Public Radio (NPR). In 2001, these outlets were still performing an important agenda-setting function for the rest of mainstream media and for political discourse in general (e.g., Golan, 2007); the time period for our search was September 11, 2001, to Election Day, November 3, 2004. In NYT and USAT, 17 stories each featured such a sentence. AP issued 12 such stories, and NPR's two main news programs, *All Things Considered* and *Morning Edition*, broadcast 10. Within this total of 56 items, just two mentioned Bush as potentially involved in a 9/11 scandal. One NYT op-ed labeled 9/11 a pseudoscandal and strongly defended Bush against any charge of culpability (Wright, 2004). The other was an NPR discussion in which Democratic-leaning *Washington Post* columnist E. J. Dionne said Bush should have as a rhetorical move accepted some responsibility for 9/11, but then added that "blaming Bush for 9/11 is wrong"; Republican-leaning *New York Times* columnist David Brooks said it was outright "ridiculous" to claim "there was some scandal here" (Block & Siegel, 2004, paras. 23–24). (Much later, then-presidential candidate Donald Trump did state (though never made it a major theme) that Bush should be held accountable for 9/11 (Martinez, 2015).)

A specific example should further clarify the nature of the many stories that, although suggesting some actor, institution, or process bore some responsibility for 9/11, directed attention away from Bush. On May 17, 2002, just after the August 2001 PDB became public, USAT ran this on its front-page:

U.S. officials have said a failure of intelligence agencies to work together allowed planning of the attacks to go undetected. Disclosure of the information given to Bush in

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<sup>9</sup> Nyhan (2015) employed media use of the term "scandal" to measure the degree to which presidential acts are framed as scandalous.

August is the first evidence that he was told before Sept. 11 that bin Laden might order hijackings.

The news put the White House on the defensive. Vice President Cheney said suggestions that the attacks could have been prevented are "thoroughly irresponsible . . . in a time of war." He said congressional probes should be handled carefully because "a very real threat of another perhaps more devastating attack still exists."

Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle (D-SD) said, "There is a lot more to be learned before we can come to any final conclusion about all of the facts, but it clearly raises some very important questions" (Diamond & Kiely, 2002, paras. 5-7).

In a separate story under the same headline:

Intelligence professionals interviewed Thursday said that in fairness to Bush, the president is not expected to take material in his briefing book and put out warnings to officials and agencies below him. "No one would expect the president of the United States or members of Congress to put on their James Bond uniform and become CIA agents," said Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Bob Graham, D-Fla. (Keen, 2002, para. 13)

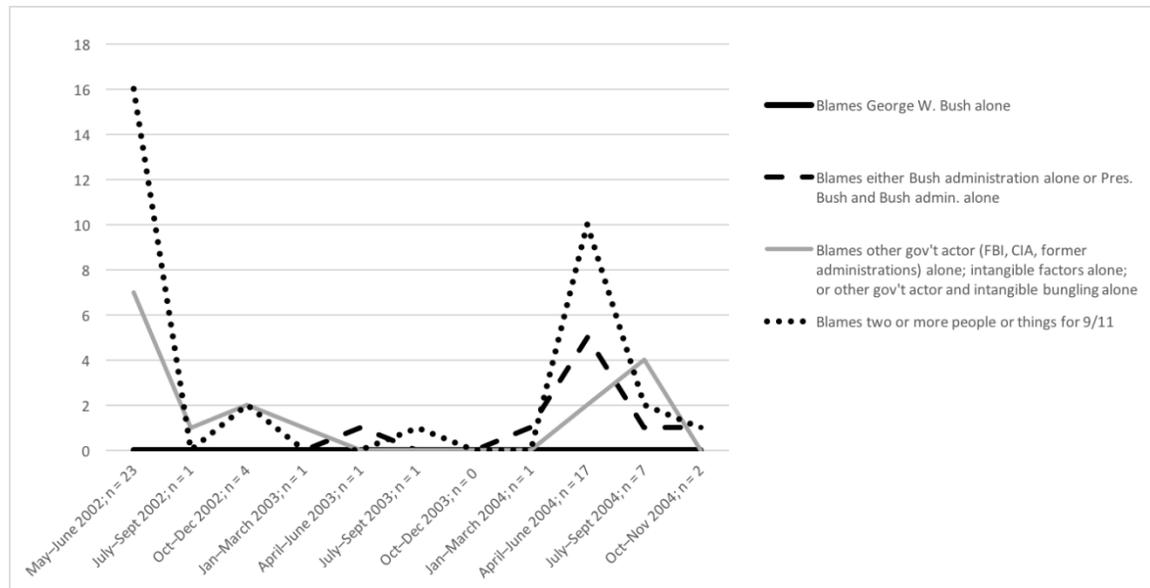
The first thing to note is conflicting (i.e., inconclusive) suggestions of blame: first of President Bush, then of the intelligence agencies and their failure to work together. We also see counterframing, first by Cheney, then by Democrat Bob Graham. USAT was not willing to state clearly who was responsible and gave prominent play to Republicans' defenses, allowing any potential responsibility to be, at the very least, put into question. This story also offers an example of how Republicans immediately went on the offensive (e.g., Cheney's fear-mongering), while Democratic leaders failed to initiate a scandal narrative. Daschle vaguely, passively suggests "some very important questions" were raised by the PDB, rather than voicing accusations that Bush was culpable for incompetence or a cover-up.

Graham, the other Democrat in the best position to initiate scandal framing, appears to support the Republicans' misleading claim that the president is not responsible for following up on intelligence warnings—misleading because the essence of the commander-in-chief's job is precisely to digest intelligence analyses and decide what subordinate agencies and officials should do in response. In short, Senators Daschle and Graham's passivity signaled to journalists that scandal framing was inappropriate, making it highly unlikely that mainstream journalists would pursue a scandal narrative on their own (Bennett, 1990; Entman, 2004, 2012).

If coverage was inconclusive and deferential on the front page, were the op-eds and editorials more resolute? Figure 3 shows that even on *NYT*'s liberal-leaning editorial pages, not one item blamed Bush alone during the entire two years of coverage, whereas dozens blamed some combination of actors.

When Bush or his administration were blamed, editorially or on page A1, it was always in the context of an inconclusive analysis that impugned several actors simultaneously, reducing culpability to a

he-said-she-said situation. The editorial pages of USAT provided little attention to any sort of culpability for 9/11; within the handful ( $n = 11$ ) of editorial items that suggested responsibility, none blamed Bush or his administration alone, and most followed Republicans' lead and blamed the impersonal intelligence apparatus, recommending reforms of government process rather than accountability for scandalous failure on the part of an identified person. (NBC doesn't run editorials.)



**Figure 3. Assignment of blame for 9/11 in NYT and USAT op-eds and editorials, over time.**  
**Note: The Ns are greater than the frequencies in Table 1 because some stories are counted more than once.**

### ***Benghazi: Major Scandal for Hillary Clinton***

The data presented above, along with Bush's ability to maintain sufficient public confidence in his ability to handle terrorism to win election in 2004, suggest that many Americans remained unaware or unconvinced that he received significant intelligence warnings before 9/11. In contrast, considerations of culpability for Benghazi persisted, resulting in serious damage to Hillary Clinton's political career. This despite several Republican-led investigations unearthing little or no evidence of culpability for Clinton (or Obama; e.g., Beauchamp, 2016; O'Toole, 2016). Perhaps more importantly, the Benghazi investigations revealed Clinton's use of a private e-mail server while serving as secretary of state and her erasure of 30,000 messages she deemed private. This led to further charges of evasiveness, dishonesty, and even criminality. Thus when scandal framing might otherwise have been exhausted, Benghazi morphed into what turned out to be the far more damaging e-mail scandal, discussed further below (Lipton, Scheiber, & Schmidt, 2015).

Clinton and other Democrats' strategic communication choices over Benghazi contrast markedly with those of Bush and the Republicans. Both Clinton and Obama publicly and repeatedly accepted responsibility for the Benghazi attacks.<sup>10</sup> As honorable as this impulse might have been, it was a flawed political communication strategy. It gave the impression that Republicans were correct to frame Benghazi as a scandal rather than—like the Beirut barracks bombing of 1983—a tragedy. This frame of Benghazi succeeded despite the widely acknowledged political nature of the numerous inquiries (e.g., Rucker & Costa, 2015). Apologia further signaled to news media that Clinton and Obama merited at least some blame.

These differences are illustrated by the findings in Table 3, which displays data from our paragraph-level analysis for Benghazi. Coverage on the front pages of NYT and USAT and on NBC was much more likely to assign individual blame for Benghazi than it was for 9/11. Furthermore, the narrative included far less exculpatory language for Benghazi than it had for 9/11. Moreover, nearly two-thirds of paragraphs mentioning Clinton or Obama in conjunction with blame focused specifically on one of those two actors alone, in marked contrast to treatment of Bush, Rice, and Cheney, who were singled out for blame for 9/11 only one-fifth of the time. The smaller *n*'s for the Clinton-Benghazi paragraph analysis reflect the data presented in Table 1, showing less front-page attention to blame for Benghazi than 9/11 on the part of NYT, despite greater coverage on inside and editorial pages (and nearly equal front-page attention to Benghazi in USAT).

Table 3 shows that, in contrast with 9/11 news, all of the actors connected to Benghazi—Secretary Clinton, President Obama, the State Department, and intelligence agencies—were far more likely to be blamed than exculpated. The Benghazi narrative also focused more on individual than institutional culpability. In contrast to the minimal political fallout from 9/11, opinion data suggest that Benghazi and the ensuing e-mail controversy severely damaged Clinton. Her favorability declined from 66% before the Benghazi scandal to 50% after the Benghazi scandal framing began, and down to 31% after Republicans made Clinton's use of unsecured private e-mail a cornerstone of their 2016 presidential campaign (Newport, 2016; Saad & Newport, 2015).

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<sup>10</sup> Hillary Clinton first accepted personal responsibility on CNN (October 16): "Look, I take responsibility. I'm in charge of the State Department" (Labott, 2012). Shortly thereafter, Obama stated, "I am ultimately responsible for what is taking place there" (Mali, 2012).

**Table 3. Association of Blame and Exculpation of Blame for Benghazi, at the Paragraph Level (NYT A1, USAT A1, and all NBC).**

	% of Paragraphs	
	Blaming Specific Actor(s) <sup>a</sup>	Blaming Actor(s) and That Also Use Exculpatory Language
Hillary Clinton	63.6 ( <i>n</i> = 21 of 33)	12.1 ( <i>n</i> = 4 of 33)
Obama or Obama administration	69.4 ( <i>n</i> = 25 of 36)	0.0 ( <i>n</i> = 0 of 36)
State Department	55.0 ( <i>n</i> = 11 of 20)	25.0 ( <i>n</i> = 5 of 20)
FBI or CIA	100.0 ( <i>n</i> = 14 of 14)	21.4 ( <i>n</i> = 3 of 14)

<sup>a</sup> Shown as percentage of all paragraphs mentioning only that actor in association with blame words.

The morphing of Benghazi into the e-mail scandal resulted from dogged investigation by Benghazi committees and politically adroit moves by Republicans. The private e-mail server allowed Republicans finally to abandon the dry well of Benghazi, yielding a gusher of new evidence suggesting Clinton's dishonesty and evasiveness.

As shown in Figure 4, polls asking what people had recently heard about Clinton reflect this success (Saad & Newport, 2015). According to Saad and Newport, 2015:

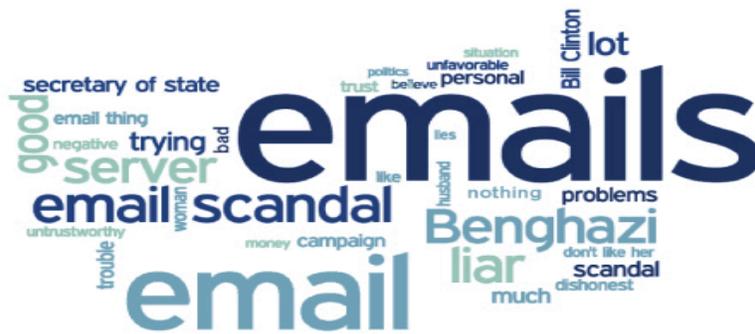
The frequent mentions of the e-mail controversy certainly suggest that Clinton's attempts to get other messages out to the public, which might either change her image or excite those who already like her, were largely drowned out by the media coverage of the e-mail matter at the time of the survey . . . Indeed, the second-, third- and fourth-most-frequently used words associated with Clinton also relate to e-mails: "FBI," "investigation" and "scandal."<sup>11</sup> (para. 8)

The e-mail scandal not only eclipsed Benghazi, but it also became a major theme of mainstream campaign coverage throughout 2016. For example, the network evening news programs devoted 100 minutes to Clinton's e-mail and only 32 minutes to all major public policy issues (Yglesias, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> Bush's management of 9/11 might have morphed into an e-mail scandal too. The 9/11 Commission never received a large volume of potentially relevant e-mails from Secretary of State Colin Powell, who had erased them (Boehlert, 2015).

### What Americans Have Heard About Hillary Clinton

Most frequently used substantive words in answer to the question: Please tell me what you may have recently heard or read about Hillary Clinton



Based on 754 U.S. adults familiar with Hillary Clinton  
Gallup Daily tracking, Aug. 24-30, 2015

GALLUP

**Figure 4. Word cloud of Gallup poll shows e-mail scandal dominance.**

We conducted a simple count of all items mentioning “Benghazi” within a paragraph of “scandal” from the day of the attack itself through Election Day 2016; unlike data in Table 1, this enumeration does not require any reference to blame but does require explicit use of the term “scandal.” It shows a high level of attention to Benghazi: 53 items in NYT alone, 42 also mentioning Clinton. Benghazi transmogrified as of March 2015 into an e-mail scandal. In NYT, editorially supportive of Clinton, “scandal” occurred within a paragraph of “e-mail” 120 times. Of these, 74 mentioned Clinton.<sup>12</sup> Compare the total of 116 (42 + 74) items in NYT referencing Clinton in the same text as an e-mail or Benghazi scandal with the 2 items suggesting (but denying) a Bush connection to a 9/11 scandal.

This points to a second noteworthy dimension of Benghazi in contrast to 9/11: the major role of conservative partisan news media. Not only is the liberal partisan media sector anemic compared with the well-developed conservative complex (e.g., Faris et al., 2017; Medvetz, 2012; Rich & Weaver, 2000), but cable television news and online news—both of which thrive on partisan content—were more integral parts of the news and information landscape in the 2010s than they were when 9/11 occurred.

For example, a LexisNexis search reveals that between the dates of the Benghazi attack—September 11, 2012—and a week after Clinton’s last congressional testimony, October 30, 2015, the three mainstream outlets we analyzed ran 1,285 stories or segments mentioning Benghazi, whereas Fox News ran 2,970. Although this is an imperfect measure, these numbers do indicate that conservative

<sup>12</sup> The time period for this search was March 2, 2015, when NYT first broke the story, through November 9, 2016.

outlets paid close attention to the Republicans' Benghazi narrative, giving oxygen to the charges of Clinton malfeasance and supplementing the Republicans' efforts when there was little new to report.

An example from Fox on Benghazi is from a Sean Hannity show on Benghazi. It offered statements from many guests dissecting blame for Benghazi, including Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC), who pointedly stated that Clinton "was not clear eyed. She was deaf and blind and before the attack . . . a clear example of a failed foreign policy, a detached president and a deaf and blind secretary of state." (Hannity, 2013, p. 6). Note the contrast of Lindsay Graham's strong language twice accusing Clinton of being deaf and blind with that quoted earlier, by Democrats Bob Graham and Tom Daschle about Bush. Democrats could have condemned Bush and Powell for deafness, blindness, and detachment before 9/11—but didn't.

As Alter (2013) observed, "Roger Ailes [i.e., Fox News] covered the Benghazi story as if it were Watergate just before Nixon's resignation, with almost wall-to-wall coverage" (p. 347). Just and Crigler (2014) compared Benghazi coverage on Fox to coverage on the AP, CBS *Evening News*, and the BBC, finding Fox significantly more likely to cover the scandal-framing events engineered by congressional Republicans and more likely to slant negatively against Clinton. To people who get most of their news from right-wing cable news, radio, websites, and social media, Benghazi was indelibly coupled with Obama and Clinton in a persistent way that it was not for audiences of USAT, NYT, or NBC (see also DellaVigna & Kaplan, 2007; Martin & Yurukoglu, 2017).

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Contrasting the political communication of the two political parties in the aftermath of terrorist events suggests that strategic communication can be a far greater determinant of media framing of culpability than the facts. For example, to ensure scandal framing of Benghazi, Republicans held numerous hearings targeting Clinton's personal responsibility; enjoyed support of Republican-aligned media that repeatedly attacked Clinton for scandalous misconduct; and orchestrated tearful, angry, telegenic attacks on Clinton from Benghazi victims' families. Democrats held no hearings targeting Bush's personal responsibility for 9/11 and failed to obtain help from Democratic-aligned media such as NYT, which did not focus on Bush's responsibility from the start or return to the matter repeatedly over several years. Democrats also did not manage events with grieving survivors unloading on Bush for failing to forestall the attacks.

Some might argue that Benghazi actually represents the accountability system at work. Despite the small scale of the tragedy, and the minimal involvement of Secretary Clinton and President Obama, the Benghazi scandal did force Clinton to answer for whatever culpability she had in failing to ensure adequate protection of the U.S. citizens in Benghazi. However, what we have attempted to show is the different, and disproportionate, treatment that these two political events received—and make the theoretical point that strategic political communication can and often does outweigh facts in determining who, if anyone, is held accountable. Of course, facts aren't irrelevant. The 9/11 attacks' locations and size mattered, and perhaps made successful scandal framing more difficult. But the national trauma did not render impossible at least a more balanced debate over Bush's culpability, if not a full-blown 9/11 scandal.

Consider this thought experiment: Assume Al Gore won the presidency in 2000, then ignored repeated warnings of massive terrorist attacks. Would Republicans, who so tenaciously and successfully promoted Benghazi as a scandal, have been incapable of exploiting 9/11 to weaken Gore? Perhaps, but the question makes clear the wide spectrum of possibilities for scandal framing, from making mountains of molehills to framing molehills as mountains.

This suggests that scandal processes are inconsistently applied to enforce accountability for incompetent stewardship of foreign policy and sometimes (if not often) fail to incentivize U.S. policy makers to learn from mistakes. For example, the lack of accountability after 9/11 helps us understand subsequent policy mistakes, including launching and incompetently managing the Iraq war. Not being held accountable for ignoring the pre-9/11 intelligence meant that Bush perceived no incentives to scrutinize later intelligence offering only flimsy evidence that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction (WMD).<sup>13</sup> Disregarding evidentiary weaknesses led to a massive failure throughout the U.S. foreign-policy-making apparatus as the media and congressional elites of both parties permitted a war that likely undermined U.S. security interests.

With a major 9/11 scandal as prelude, the Democrats and media might have more aggressively promoted scandal framing of Bush's personal responsibility for the failure to find WMD in Iraq and for incompetent oversight of the occupation, which in turn might have altered the 2004 election outcome. Instead, Bush won, 18 full months after it was clear there were no WMD and the war was not being won. In fact, had Bush's standing been damaged from a 9/11 scandal, he might have failed to gather political support for an Iraq war in the first place.

These cases also suggest partisan asymmetry in competent strategic communication. Democrats fail to take advantage of openings such as those provided by 9/11 and Iraq to weaken the Republicans' brand as the party that owns national security and foreign policy competence. And, as illustrated by Benghazi, Democrats' communicative weaknesses seem to make them more vulnerable to scandals. Although it might seem better that one party be held accountable for foreign policy miscues than none, this lopsidedness has a downside: reinforcing Republicans' unaccountable ownership of national security and defense issues. Among other things, that puts pressure on Democrats to prove their toughness by supporting risky military solutions that prudent policy makers might otherwise find problematic.

This brings us back to our normative point: Inconsistencies and asymmetries in the politics of scandal weaken leaders' incentives to learn from mistakes, to manage national security competently, and to act with prudence and reasonable transparency. Ironically, given Republicans' excoriation of Clinton for using unsecured e-mail, during the campaign and early in his presidency, President Trump used an easily hacked cell phone (Waddell, 2017) and conveyed classified information to the Russian foreign minister (Unger, 2017), among many diplomatic fumbles. This suggests that he and his administration did not feel compelled to engage in prudent foreign-policy making. Americans of all political leanings, and citizens of

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<sup>13</sup> U.S. intelligence agencies only agreed to support the idea that Iraq still had WMD under enormous pressure from the president and vice president (see, e.g., Leopold, 2015).

the many countries affected by U.S. policies, would benefit from a better calibrated foreign policy scandal process that yields stronger incentives for officials to make careful, informed decisions.

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## Appendix

Paragraph-level analysis search terms

### 9/11

President Bush: ("President Bush" OR "Bush" OR "George W. Bush" OR "George W Bush" OR "Mr. Bush" OR "the president") AND NOT administration AND NOT "Bush campaign"

White House: "White House" OR "Bush officials" OR "oval office"

Bush administration: "Bush administration" OR "the administration" OR "Bush team"

**FBI or CIA:** FBI or CIA OR F.B.I. OR C.I.A. or "intelligence agencies" or "intelligence agency" or "intelligence community" OR "intelligence communities" OR "intelligence officials" OR "intelligence official" OR "Central Intelligence Agency" OR "Federal Bureau of Investigation"

**Mueller:** Mueller OR "F.B.I. Director" OR "Director of the F.B.I." OR "FBI Director" OR "Director of the FBI"

**Tenet:** Tenet OR "C.I.A. Director" OR "Director of the C.I.A." OR "CIA Director" OR "Director of the CIA"

**Rice:** Rice OR "National Security Advisor"

**Cheney:** Cheney OR "vice president"

**Ashcroft:** Ashcroft

**The gov't in general:** "the government" OR "the government's"

**Blame language:**

(warning OR memo OR threat OR briefing OR unheeded OR dismissed OR ignored OR blame OR "intelligence failure" OR "intelligence failures" OR "intelligence lapses" OR "failed to" OR "failing to" OR "failure to") AND NOT Iraq

**Exculpatory language:**

("not a warning" OR vague OR "no time" OR "no place" OR historical OR history OR "did not say" OR non-specific OR "too general" OR "too generalized" OR specifics OR "no specificity" OR "no specifics" OR "not specific" OR "no serious evidence" OR unforeseen OR "no specific threat" OR "not shared" OR "no one individual" OR "did not have all the threat information" OR "had not been told" OR "did not mention" OR "nothing that indicates" OR "nothing that indicated" OR speculative OR "not enough resources" OR defending OR overseas OR abroad OR insisted OR "denied accusations" OR "not a threat report" OR "no indication" OR "does not recall" OR "wasn't briefed" OR accuse OR accuses)

***Benghazi***

**Clinton:** Clinton AND NOT "Bill Clinton" AND NOT "Chelsea Clinton" AND NOT "President Clinton"

**Obama:** Obama OR "the president" OR "oval office" OR "White House" OR "Obama officials"

**Susan Rice:** Rice OR "United Nations Ambassador" OR "UN Ambassador" OR "U.N. Ambassador" OR "ambassador to the United Nations"

**FBI or CIA:** FBI or CIA OR F.B.I. OR C.I.A. or "intelligence agencies" or "intelligence agency" or "intelligence community" OR "intelligence communities" OR "intelligence officials" OR "intelligence official" OR "Central Intelligence Agency" OR "Federal Bureau of Investigation"

**State Department:** "State Department" OR "Department of State" OR "State Dept"

**Benghazi association:**

Separate code for simple association of the actor and the word "Benghazi"

**Blame language:**

"what went wrong" OR inadequate OR blame OR blaming OR blamed OR ("lack of" AND security) OR "ignoring requests" OR "ignored requests" OR "warnings were ignored" OR "relied too much" OR failure OR failures OR "failed to" OR faulted OR "could have intervened" OR "caught napping" OR "missed signs" OR "whether Mr. Obama called" OR "when Mr. Obama spoke" OR incompetence OR "person next to Secretary" OR "was told not to" OR Watergate OR "underestimated how dangerous" OR "underestimated the danger" OR subpoena OR "inadequate protection" OR "grossly inadequate" OR "security issues" OR "dereliction of duty" OR "could have been prevented" OR "stopped them from interceding" OR "ordered them to wait" OR

"stand down" OR "held back the rescue" OR criticism OR "turned down repeated pleas" OR "turned down" OR "rejected pleas" OR "decision not to increase security" OR "lax security" OR testify

**Exculpatory language:**

"no unanswered questions" OR "told the truth" OR "evidence-based" OR "no specific intelligence" OR "no prior intelligence" OR "department policy" OR "reached Benghazi in time" OR "no regrets" OR "imperfect information" OR "not pressured" OR "pushing back" OR "pushed back" OR "no wrongdoing" OR "we weren't told" OR "variety of information" OR "fiercely defended" OR "no evidence of misconduct" OR defended

**Accusation of "shifting explanation":**

"shifting explanation" OR "shifting explanations" OR "shifting story" OR "shifting public positions" OR mislead OR misleading OR "talking points" OR "inability to answer" OR "intended to mislead" OR "what they knew" OR "what she knew" OR "what he knew" OR "initial accounts" OR "initial account" OR "initial version of events" OR "improperly claimed" OR "what took place" OR "what really happened" OR "questions about the account" OR (criticism AND handling) OR "no mention of a demonstration" OR "the administration knew" OR "misled the public" OR mishandling OR mishandled OR misrepresented OR "deliberately withheld information" OR "improper reporting" OR "portrayed the attack" OR "initially blamed" OR "video shown" OR "the White House has admitted" OR "told her to say" OR "not been forthcoming" OR misinformation OR cover-up OR coverup OR "get to the truth" OR "get to the bottom" OR "obscure a possible connection" OR "story straight"

**Accusing Republicans of politicizing words:**

fantasy OR "political score-settling" OR obsessed OR partisan OR politicize OR "Democrats dismissed" OR "old news" OR "conspiracy-mongering" OR conspiracies OR "hysterical allegations" OR circus OR spectacle OR sideshow OR "so-called whistle-blowers" OR hyperpartisan OR "hearings of outrage" OR "brazen politics" OR "play politics" OR "kangaroo court" OR "political slugfest" OR "politically motivated" OR "political ploy" OR "fishing expedition" OR "hurt Hillary Clinton politically" OR "showed their hand" OR "witch hunt" OR "gotcha politics" OR "GOP rhetoric" OR "finger-pointing" OR "blame game" OR "political tool" OR "wasted noise"

**Accepting responsibility words:**

"take full responsibility" OR "takes responsibility" OR "take responsibility" OR "taking responsibility" OR "her responsibility" OR "conceded errors" OR "explain herself" OR "assumed general responsibility" OR "biggest regret" OR "ultimately responsible" OR "is her job" OR "they should go after me" OR "a measure of the responsibility"