

Alison Holder

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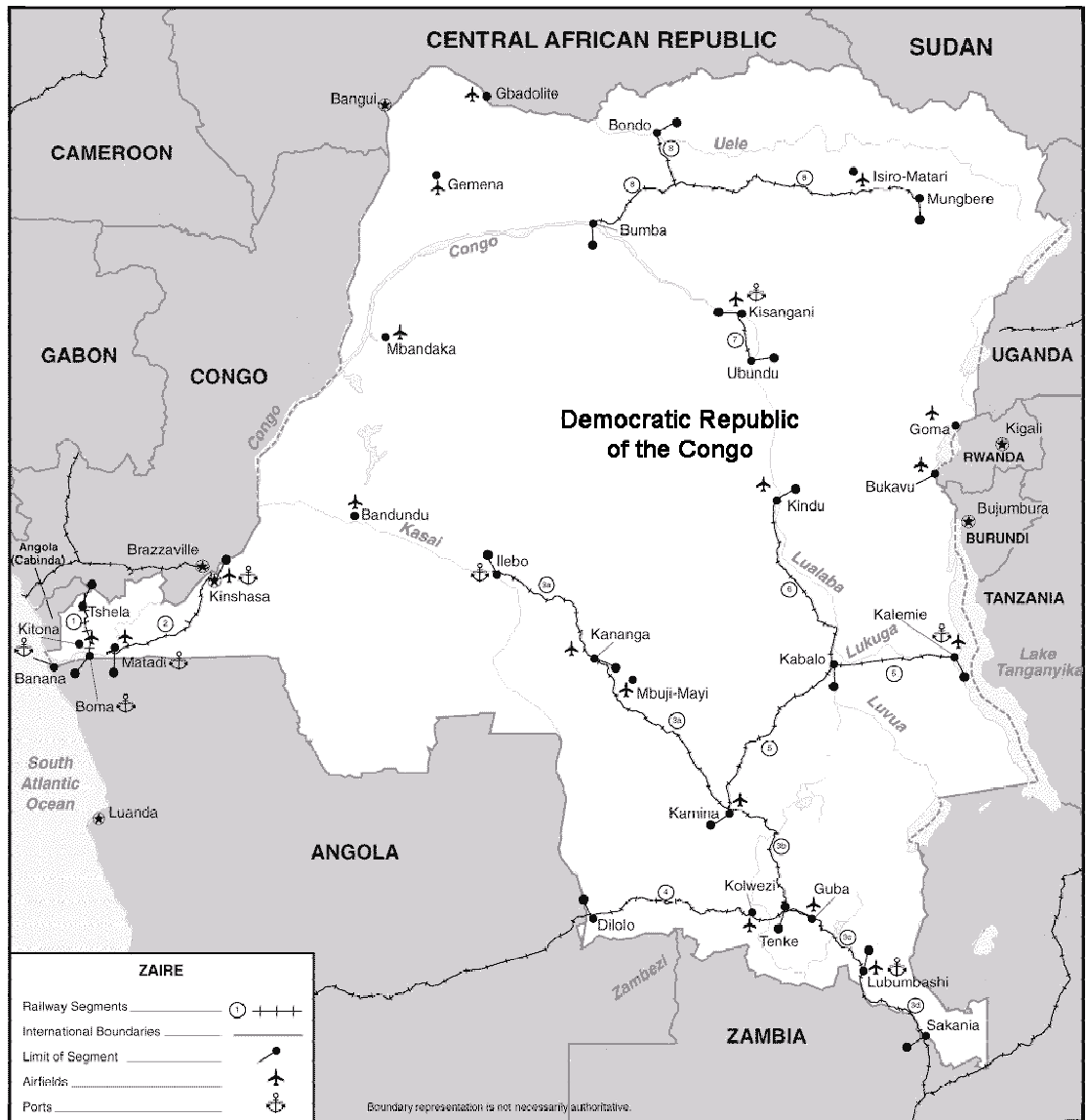
**Forgotten or Ignored? News media silence and the
conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)**

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Map of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)



Source: ReliefWeb

List of Abbreviations

ADFL	Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
IRC	International Rescue Committee
JCET	Joint Combined Exchange Training
RCD	Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie
RPA	Rwanda Patriotic Army
RPF	Rwandan Patriotic Front
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

US

United States of America

Introduction

In what is surely one of the great tragedies of our time, at least 3.3 million people in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)¹ have lost their lives in a conflict that has been described as “Africa’s first world war”². Between October 1996 and roughly December 2002 (when all parties signed a power sharing agreement, agreeing to a two-year transitional government) the DRC was “transformed into a battlefield where several African states and national armed movements [were] simultaneously fighting various wars.”³ The political consequences of this conflict have severe implications for the Great Lakes region, and for Africa as a whole: Africa, Frantz Fanon famously remarked, “Has the shape of a pistol, with Congo-Kinshasa resembling the trigger housing,”⁴ alluding to the role that [the DRC] plays in determining the political colour of much of the continent.

The political ramifications of the conflict have been matched by the severity of the humanitarian crisis suffered by the Congolese people. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) has calculated that, *in the east alone*, the war has caused, directly or indirectly, 2.5 million deaths out of a population of

¹ For consistency, this dissertation will refer to the Democratic Republic of Congo (or Congo), recognising that this country was officially called Zaire until 1997

² Comment by Susan E. Rice, US Assistant Secretary of State for Africa, in Lynne Duke, *Washington Post*, Oct. 24 1998, p. A12

³ Smis and Oyatambwe (2002), p. 411

⁴ Young (2002), p. 14

19.2 million between August 1998 and April 2001. In some regions it was estimated that 75% of children never made it to their second birthday and, across the country since the start of the war, one in every eight households has experienced a violent death.⁵

Despite the magnitude of the crisis, the conflict in the DRC is often described as a ‘forgotten conflict’, or “the world’s hidden tragedy.”⁶ At best Western countries traditionally allied to the DRC (the United States, France, and Belgium, or what is known as the ‘troika’) have maintained an “ambiguous attitude”⁷ vis-à-vis political developments in the Congo, or have been accused of being complacent, or “not taking notice”⁸. At worst, they have been accused of being complicit in the conflict and deliberately keeping it off of the political agenda.

An initial look at United States (US) news media coverage of the conflict in the DRC supports the view that it is a ‘forgotten conflict’. In the nearly three years between August 1998 and January 2001 – roughly the same period in which more than 2.5 million people are estimated to have been killed – there were only 58 mentions of the Congo on US television news, less than two mentions per month. By way of comparison, there were 29 stories about the outbreak of the Ebola virus in Congo *in one month* in 1995.

⁵ Ginifer (2002), p. 121

⁶ Pottier (2003), p. 1

One might think that there is little surprise in this lack of coverage. All available evidence points to the increasing marginalisation of ‘foreign news’ on US television, especially news from regions (such as Africa) in which the US has no perceived national interest. Edward Girardet opines that today “the general public...may be far less informed about international issues than it was a decade or two ago.”⁹

I will contend, however, that this only tells part of the story. While the DRC is often considered a ‘forgotten conflict’, nuanced analysis shows that this is only partly true. By examining the conflict in two phases it becomes apparent that the amount of US news media coverage of the conflict in the DRC differed greatly between the first and the second phase of the conflict.

In seeking to understand why there was high coverage of the ‘first Congo war’ and very little news media coverage of the ‘second Congo war’, this dissertation contends that media coverage was ‘indexed’ to government policy. In the first Congo war, and especially in November 1996, it was in the interest of the Clinton administration to have media coverage of certain aspects of the unfolding conflict in Congo – specifically, the plight of the Rwandan refugees trapped in eastern Congo – and the government was able to direct the timing and content of this coverage to serve its interests. In the

⁷ Smis (2002), p. 421

⁸ Médecins Sans Frontières (2002), p. 9

⁹ Girardet (1993), p. 41

'second Congo war', on the other hand, news media coverage of the conflict had all but disappeared. This dissertation will argue that this is in part due to the fact that, from the perspective of the US, aspects of the policy landscape had changed, rendering media coverage of the conflict 'unhelpful.'

The example of the DRC has been chosen because, contrary to the assumptions of the CNN effect – in short, the assumption that television “has the power to move governments”¹⁰ -- news media coverage of the Congo conflict provides empirical evidence that “governments also have the power to move television.”¹¹

Investigating the relationship between the news media and US government policy in the context of the Congo conflict is not only relevant from a theoretical point of view. Given the severity and complexity of the conflict, and the destabilizing effect it continues to have on the entire Great Lakes region, it is crucial, from a conflict resolution perspective, to seek insight into its dynamics. And by further broadening our understanding of the links between media, policy, and humanitarianism, this study of the Congo can prompt us to ask important questions about news coverage in any conflict situation: What dynamics may be obscured by media silence towards a particular conflict? What 'interventions' (for example arms sales, military training, or natural resource exploitation) may be taking place behind the veil

of this silence? Alternatively, what has led the news media searchlight to suddenly 'find' a conflict? Whose interests does this serve?

This study will be limited to an examination of US media coverage and US policy. As recognised by Thomas Weiss, the term 'international community' is without "policy edge,"¹² and it is therefore more illuminating to explore one country in particular. By focusing on the US, it is not my intent to "obscure" or minimise the importance of "internal regional dynamics", as cautioned by McNulty.¹³ Nor is it my intention to apply a greater importance to US media, over and above other international or local reporting; the US news media coverage of the conflict in the DRC is just one aspect of the landscape that should be explored.

The empirical data of the media coverage has been drawn from extensive analyses of US television news (archives of news reports on *ABC World News Tonight*, *CBS Evening News*, *NBC Nightly News*, and *CNN* are available through the Vanderbilt Television News Archive) and newspapers (specifically the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, both known for their coverage of international news). Insights were gleaned into US policy by analysing both primary data (such as press statements, press briefings, and

¹⁰ Mermin (1997), p. 403

¹¹ Mermin (1997), p. 403

¹² Weiss (2001), p. 424

¹³ McNulty (1999), p. 79

minutes of government hearings) as well as secondary data (such as the work of commentators, academics, and policy advocacy agencies and human rights organisations). In addition, initial conclusions were tested through personal communication with a small group of Congo commentators (see page 31). I would like to thank each of these people for their time.

Part I:

Theories of Media-Policy Interaction

There are, broadly, two highly polarized models of media-policy interaction – the ‘CNN effect’ position and the ‘manufacturing consent’ position.

The ‘interventionism’ of the 1990s – and especially the US-led interventions in Northern Iraq (1991) and Somalia (1992-93) -- spurred a debate within academic and government circles about the motivation for international intervention during humanitarian crises.¹⁴ One of the contributing factors was purported to be news media attention, dubbed the CNN effect, whereby the news media had the power to influence foreign policy decisions. The argument of the CNN effect is that “the technical capabilities of the electronic media in covering disasters around the world...have created a situation in which the emotions of the public can be easily aroused by terrible pictures. This in turn puts great pressure on their leaders to do something about the suffering on display.”¹⁵

Policymakers substantiate the theory of the CNN effect when asked to analyse their past decisions. For example, in response to questions about the

¹⁴ The debate on media power resurged in the 1990s, but the role of the media in disaster reporting (for example in Biafra in the 1960s and in Bangladesh and Ethiopia in the 1970s and 1980s) has been extensively analysed. See especially Benthall (1993) and Allen (1999).

authenticity of the CNN effect, one US policymaker commented, “the CNN effect: surely it exists, and surely we went to Somalia and Rwanda partly because of its magnetic pull.”¹⁶ To the same effect, Edward Girardet writes, “as media coverage of the Vietnam War, Ethiopia in 1984-1985, and famine and war in Somalia have demonstrated, governments, policymakers, and international organisations are often prompted, if not forced, into action by public exposure of the gruesome realities of war.”¹⁷

But while the CNN effect has been oft-quoted, many would argue that it has been little demonstrated, and exists precariously as an “untested and unsubstantiated fact in foreign policy and humanitarian circles.”¹⁸

On a theoretical level, challenges to the CNN effect come from what may be termed the ‘manufacturing consent’ school, named after Herman and Chomsky’s influential book of the same name.¹⁹ This range of theories emphasizes the power of governments to set news media agendas. Far from the idea of a powerful news media driving policymakers, ‘manufacturing consent’ literature emphasizes the “ability of governments to influence the output of journalists and the tendency of journalists to both self-censor and

¹⁵ Garrett (1999), p. 80

¹⁶ Minear (1996), p. 46

¹⁷ Girardet (1993), p. 40. See also Kennan (1993).

¹⁸ Robinson (2002), p. 12

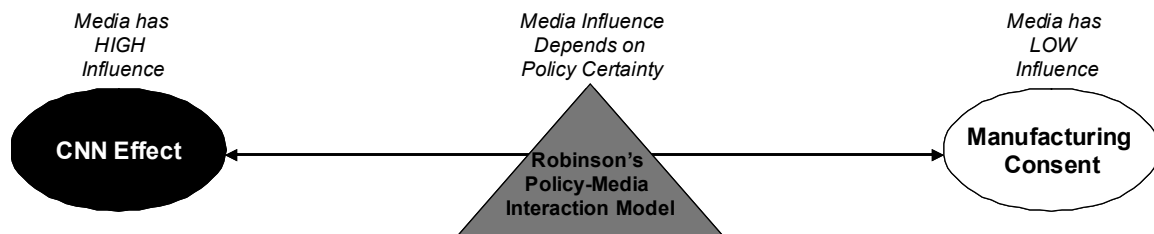
¹⁹ Following Robinson, the “manufacturing consent” label is useful because it “captures...the understanding that news media are influenced by government policy and only rarely influences government in the way the CNN effect suggests.” Robinson (2002), p. 13

perceive global events through the cultural and political prisms of their respective political and social elites.”²⁰

Between proponents of the CNN effect, who believe in the ‘power’ of the media, and proponents of the ‘manufacturing consent’ position, who see the media as ‘pawns’ in the hands of government power, there seems to be an irreconcilable gulf. Piers Robinson has attempted to bridge this divide with his ‘policy-media interaction model’ (see Figure 1). Robinson urges that, while the CNN effect overestimates the power of media to move governments, the ‘manufacturing consent’ school fails to appreciate the power of the media on government under conditions of policy uncertainty.

Figure 1

Influence of the News Media on Government Policy



²⁰ Robinson (2002), p. 12

In the context of this dissertation, however, the limitations of Robinson's model lie in its limited mandate to only consider the "*influence* of media upon decisions to intervene during humanitarian crises."²¹ Robinson's analysis, while an important contribution to the debate, by definition does not address situations in which there is media silence. Further, it does not address questions that are critical to this dissertation, such as "why [some] situations become the object of intense news scrutiny while others of an exact or similar nature remain obscure?"²² To begin to answer these questions we must consider the interaction of policy and media not in terms of whether the news media can *influence* policy-making but "rather [in terms of] who is responsible for setting the news media agenda."²³

To this end, we return to the body of 'manufacturing consent' literature. Whilst Herman and Chomsky's "totalizing" argument about the "propaganda model" of US news media is controversial,²⁴ they make less contentious and highly persuasive arguments about the structure of news sourcing: "The mass media are drawn into a symbiotic relationship with powerful sources of information by economic necessity and reciprocity of interest."²⁵ The White House, the Pentagon, and the State Department, are central nodes of news activity, generating a consistent flow of statements

²¹ Robinson (2002), p. 2

²² Livingstone (1996), p. 68

²³ Robinson (2002), p. 21

²⁴ See Robinson (2002), p. 12.

briefings, speeches, hearings, resolutions, and other forms of information on the events of the day: "These bureaucracies turn out large volume of material that meets the demands of news organisations for reliable, scheduled flows."²⁶

As a result of the role that officials play in setting the news media agenda, it can be argued, the spectrum of debate in the news is a function of the spectrum of debate in official Washington. In 1990 W. Lance Bennett described this phenomenon as 'indexing': "The mainstream media, Bennett argues, "index" the range of voices and viewpoints in both news and editorials according to the range of views expressed in mainstream government debate about a given topic."²⁷

There is significant empirical evidence to support the thesis that news media coverage is 'indexed' to the frames of reference of foreign policy elites. Even in the so-called 'banner cases' of the CNN effect, such as Vietnam and Somalia, nuanced analyses have shown that the power of the media on policymakers may not be as strong as it first appears. For example, with regards to Vietnam, Daniel Hallin's study shows that news media coverage critical to official US policy in Vietnam only appeared *after* sections of the

²⁵ Herman and Chomsky (1988), p. 19

²⁶ Herman and Chomsky (1988), p. 19

²⁷ Bennett (1990), p. 160

Washington political elite turned against the war.²⁸ And in his analytically rigorous study of television news and the US intervention in Somalia, Jonathan Mermin shows that, contrary to popular assumptions, Somalia only made the television news after it had garnered attention among foreign policy makers in the United States.²⁹

In summary, these analyses expose the theory of the CNN effect to be largely misguided: “Decision-makers are clearly not at the mercy of an oppositional and all-powerful news media as suggested by some commentators.”³⁰ Further, as predicted by ‘manufacturing consent’ theory, “...it does appear that in establishing their agenda of potential stories, reporters tend to reflect the foreign policy concerns of their government far more than they shape those concerns themselves.”³¹ This dissertation will seek to explore the theory that media can follow policy in the context of the conflict in the Congo, focusing on the period between the October 1996 and January 2001.

Part II:

Media-Policy Interaction and Conflict in the Congo, 1996-2001

²⁸ See Hallin (1986)

²⁹ See Mermin (1997) and Mermin (1999).

³⁰ Robinson (2002), p. 130

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 83

While the conflict in the DRC is often touted as a 'forgotten conflict', in depth analysis shows that this is only partly true. By examining the conflict in two phases -- defined here as Phase I (October 1996 to May 1997) and Phase II (August 1998 to January 2001) -- it becomes apparent that the amount of US news media coverage in the DRC differed greatly between the first and the second phase of the conflict.

Contrary to the assumptions of the CNN effect, it was not 'independent journalistic initiative' that brought the Congo conflict onto the news media agenda in Phase I of the conflict, and kept it off in Phase II of the conflict. Instead, it is the contention of this dissertation that, in line with the tenets of the 'manufacturing consent' theory, in the case of the DRC, media coverage was 'indexed' to government policy. It was not a change in journalistic initiative, but a change in the policy landscape, that led to media *coverage* of the first conflict and media *silence* on the second.

This argument will start *first* with a detailed analysis of US television news and newspaper coverage to demonstrate that media coverage of Congo did, in fact, vary between the two phases of the conflict.

Second we will examine news media coverage in the context of US policy during Phase I of the conflict, finding that in the autumn of 1996 it was in the interest of the Clinton administration to have media coverage of certain

aspects of the unfolding conflict in Congo – specifically, the plight of the Rwandan refugees trapped in the eastern provinces. And further, that the US government was able to direct the timing and content of the news media coverage to serve its interests. The rise of the conflict in Congo in October 1996 gave the Clinton administration the opportunity to ‘use’ the media to celebrate the humanitarian assistance that the US had provided towards the crisis of Rwandan refugees in eastern Congo. In addition, by actively steering media attention towards the refugee crisis the US government was able to divert potential attention away from the progression of the conflict itself, allowing the rebel advance to proceed unimpeded (which, it is widely believed, was in US interests).

After understanding the reasons for the extensive media coverage of Phase I of the Congo crisis, we will, *third*, examine news media coverage in the context of US policy during Phase II of the conflict. After August 1998, news media coverage of the conflict all but disappeared. This dissertation will argue that, contrary to popular assumptions, the lack of coverage of Congo after 1998 was not only due to logistical constraints and the complexity of the crisis. It was also important that the policy landscape had changed, rendering media coverage of the conflict ‘unhelpful’ to the US government. The Rwandan government had denied its army’s participation in Phase I of the conflict, but in July 1997 Paul Kagame openly admitted (in an interview

with the *Washington Post*) to his army's involvement in Congo. Given US support for the Rwandan army (both military training and arms transfers) it would have been difficult to paint these Rwandan incursions, which continued in the second conflict, in a positive light.

Prior to exploring these arguments in detail we will explore a brief background of the conflict, in order to justify the examination of news media coverage in two phases.

1. Background and Overview of the Conflict

While this paper will focus on the period after October 1996, it is important to illustrate the context in which this conflict arose. The war in the Congo is rooted in tensions that have plagued the broader Great Lakes region (broadly, Congo, Burundi, and Rwanda) since colonial times, but especially since the early 1990s. While numerous studies have shown that there is nothing inevitable about ethnic strife, the fault lines of conflict in central Africa do take on 'tribal' dimensions³². Local battles over land and political control frequently turn into standoffs between Tutsi and Hutu, or Hema and Lendu, or 'native' Congolese and Banyamulenge (local term for Congolese Tutsis), among others.

³² Recognising the limitations of using ethnicity to understand conflict, the word 'tribal' is used here only to represent the importance of personal and group identity in determining the

This complex mix of identities and local conflicts was critically altered in the summer of 1994, when, after the genocide in Rwanda and the breakdown of order in Burundi that began in 1993, it is estimated that more than two million refugees crossed the border into Congo. Amongst this flow of refugees, though largely made up of civilians and genocide survivors, were Hutu fighters – *génocidaires* who took advantage of the ‘hospitality’ of United Nations (UN)-run refugee camps to regroup and launch attacks across the border into Rwanda.

In light of the decaying security situation in Western Rwanda in 1996 and President Mobutu’s inability (or unwillingness) to secure the borders, Rwanda took matters into its own hands. In September 1996, the Rwandan army (the Rwanda Patriotic Army (RPA)) and armed elements of the Banyamulenge attacked in eastern Congo, with the goal of emptying the refugee camps of the fighters that threatened Rwanda’s security.

Largely due to a poor showing of defence from the Congolese army, these isolated attacks quickly grew into a full-scale rebellion to overthrow Congo’s President Mobutu. On October 16 1996 this rebellion, almost entirely driven by Rwanda in the early stages but also including Uganda and Angola, was given a Congolese ‘face’ under leader Laurent Kabila and united under the banner of the Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération

fault lines of conflicts in the Great Lakes. See especially Turton (1997) on the construction and

(ADFL). By May 1997, the coalition had successfully taken Congo's capital city, Kinshasa, and installed Laurent Kabila as the President of the newly proclaimed DRC. In his early months as President, Kabila struggled to balance the concerns of his Congolese constituents, who were suspicious of the involvement of 'foreigners' in his rule, and the expectations of his Rwandan and Ugandan backers.

Barely eighteen months after Kabila came to power, and immediately after he attempted to eject from the country the Rwandan military forces that had brought him to power, the 'second Congo war' began. On 2nd August 1998, Rwandan and Ugandan backed Rassemblement Congolais pour la Democratie (RCD) rebels launched a campaign to replace their former ally, Kabila. The war reached a stalemate "fragmenting the original war into a myriad of regional and local armed conflicts"³³, including Rwandan and Ugandan forces, Zimbabwean and other forces who were called in by Kabila to protect his government, well entrenched social groups such as the Mayi-Mayi, and other opportunistic actors.

Recognising that the 'second conflict' continued until roughly December 2002 (and continues in eastern Congo today), this dissertation will focus on the period between October 1996 and January 2001. In studying US policy towards the DRC, January 2001 provides a logical break because there

political manipulation of ethnicity.

was change in government in both countries – On January 16, 2001 Laurent Kabila was assassinated, handing the presidency of the DRC to his son Joseph. And on January 20, 2001 the administration of George W. Bush was inaugurated in the US.

Part III:

Comparison of Media Coverage between Phase I and Phase II

While some would disagree with dividing the war into 2 distinct phases³⁴ – October 1996 to May 1997 and August 1998 to January 2001 – from the perspective of U.S. media coverage the separation between the two is marked (see Figure 2). By examining the differences between the two phases we gain insights into the interaction between US foreign policy and news media in the case of the Congo.

In Phase I of the Congo conflict, between October 1996, when the advance of the ADFL began against Mobutu and May 1997, when Kabila was installed as President of the newly proclaimed DRC, there were 326 stories about Congo, totaling 900 minutes, on the US television news networks

³³ Smis and Oyatambwe (2002), p. 413

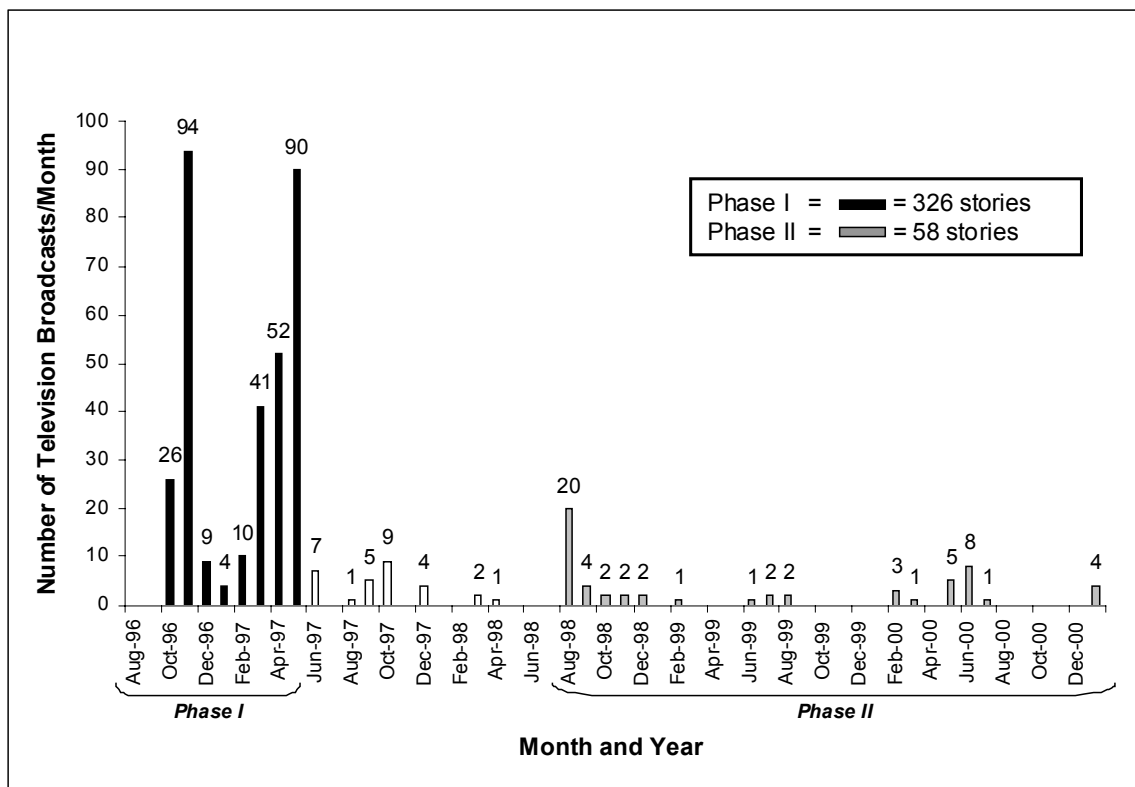
³⁴ Some would argue that there is no separation between the conflicts, as the entire post-1996 period should be characterized as a 'foreign invasion.' See Human Rights Watch (April 1997).

studied -- an average of over 40 broadcasts or 112 minutes of coverage per month (see Table 1).

In contrast, in Phase II of the Congo conflict, when the Rwandan and Ugandan backed RCD rebels launched a campaign in August 1998 to replace Kabila, there were only 58 stories about Congo, totaling 73 minutes -- an average of less than 2 broadcasts or less than 3 minutes of coverage per month (see Table 1).

Figure 2

Monthly Television Coverage* of the DRC



* *ABC World News Tonight, CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, and CNN*
 Source: *Vanderbilt Television News Archive* and own analysis

Table 1

Television Coverage of the DRC on ABC, CBS, NBC and CNN

Phase	Dates	Average Number of Television Broadcasts/Month	Average Minutes of Television Coverage/Month
I	October 1996 to May 1997	>40	>112 mins
II	August 1998 to January 2001	<2	<3 mins

Source: *Vanderbilt Television News Archive* and own analysis

Newspaper coverage followed a similar pattern, though the distinctions between the two Phases were less marked than with the television coverage. In the nine months that make up Phase I of the conflict there were 1,057 stories devoted to Congo between the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* – an average of over 117 stories per month. In contrast, during the 30 months of Phase II of the conflict, there were 1,236 stories devoted to Congo – an average of only 41 stories per month.

Having established that media coverage did, in fact, vary between Phase I and Phase II of the Congo conflict, we will now examine each phase, beginning with Phase I, to demonstrate that it was a change in the policy landscape that led to media *coverage* of the first conflict and media *silence* on the second.

Part IV:

Media Coverage of Phase I – October 1996 to May 1997

1. Overview of Phase I Media Coverage

While further analysis will prove this to be false, at first glance Phase I of the Congo conflict could be a classic case of the CNN effect. November 1996 saw a significant amount of news media coverage of the unfolding situation in Congo, both on television and in the printed press. Based on Robinson's benchmark of the amount of coverage necessary to influence government³⁵, the November 1996 news coverage of Congo could even be considered enough to create pressure on policy-makers to act. In this one month alone, the *New York Times* featured Congo on its front page 14 times and the *Washington Post* ran 11 front-page stories. There were only 13 days during the month of November that did not have a front-page story mentioning the situation in the DRC. Front page headlines such as "*Emerging From [Congo]'s Agony; On Rwandan Border, a Lucky Few Describe Suffering Thousands*"³⁶ and "*Seething Refugee Camp Could Erupt Before Foreign Forces Can Reach [Congo]*"³⁷ seemed designed to garner compassion and to call for action.

Television coverage during this period was also extensive. In November 1996 alone, there were 94 television news broadcasts mentioning Congo, 44 of which were on the major news networks *ABC*, *CBS*, and *NBC*. In

³⁵ Robinson defines this benchmark as at least one front-page newspaper story per day and a major news segment on the evening news run within the opening ten minutes of the news, sustained over three or four days. See Robinson (2002), p. 38

³⁶ Buckley, Stephen, *The Washington Post*, Nov. 9, 1996, p. A01

this month there were only two days that did not feature Congo on the nightly news (See Figure 3).

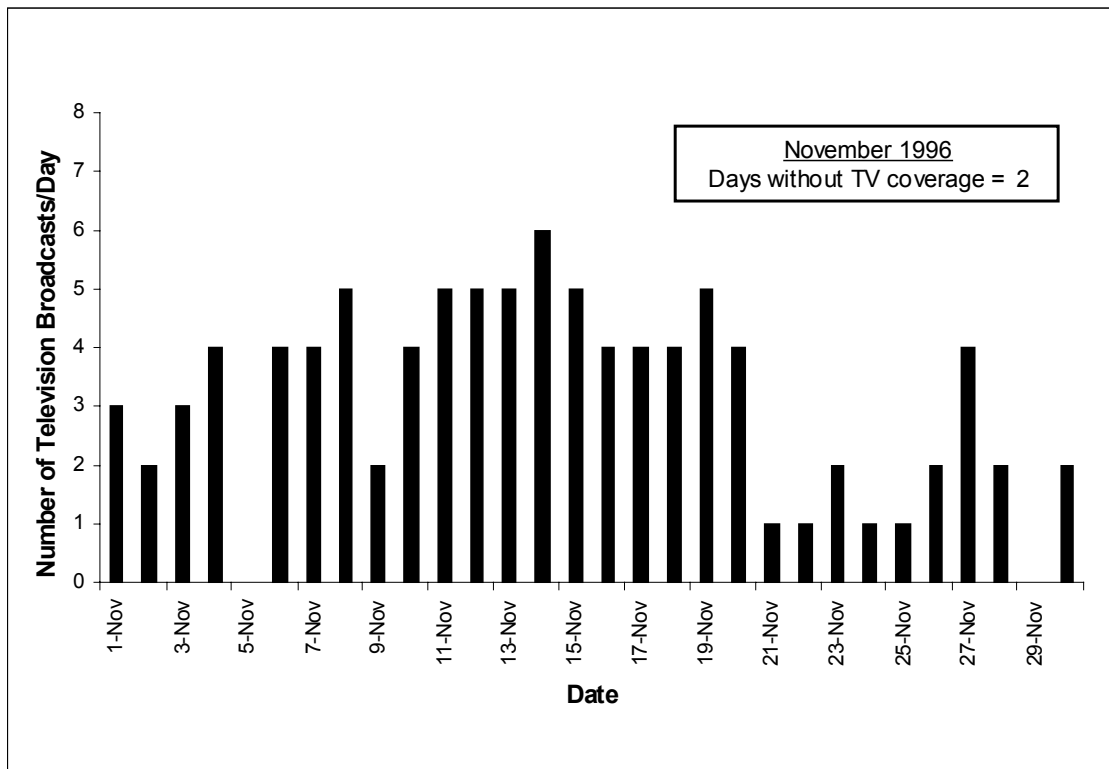
Not surprisingly, November 1996 also saw virtually the highest government attention to the conflict in Congo (save for April 1997), as measured by the number of State Department press briefings mentioning Congo (see Figure 4). The content of these press briefings focused heavily on bringing attention to American assistance to the refugee crisis. During the briefings the government spokesperson continually referred to the humanitarian assistance provided by the United States to Central Africa: "I'd just like to remind you that the United States has put available \$30 million to the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) to fund relief organizations. That is in addition to the \$875 million that we put forward in the last two years for humanitarian programmes in Central Africa."³⁸

Figure 3

Television Coverage of the DRC in November 1996

³⁷ Buckley, Stephen, *The Washington Post*, Nov. 14, 1996, p. A01

³⁸ United States State Department press briefing, Nov. 4, 1996



* *ABC World News Tonight, CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, and CNN*

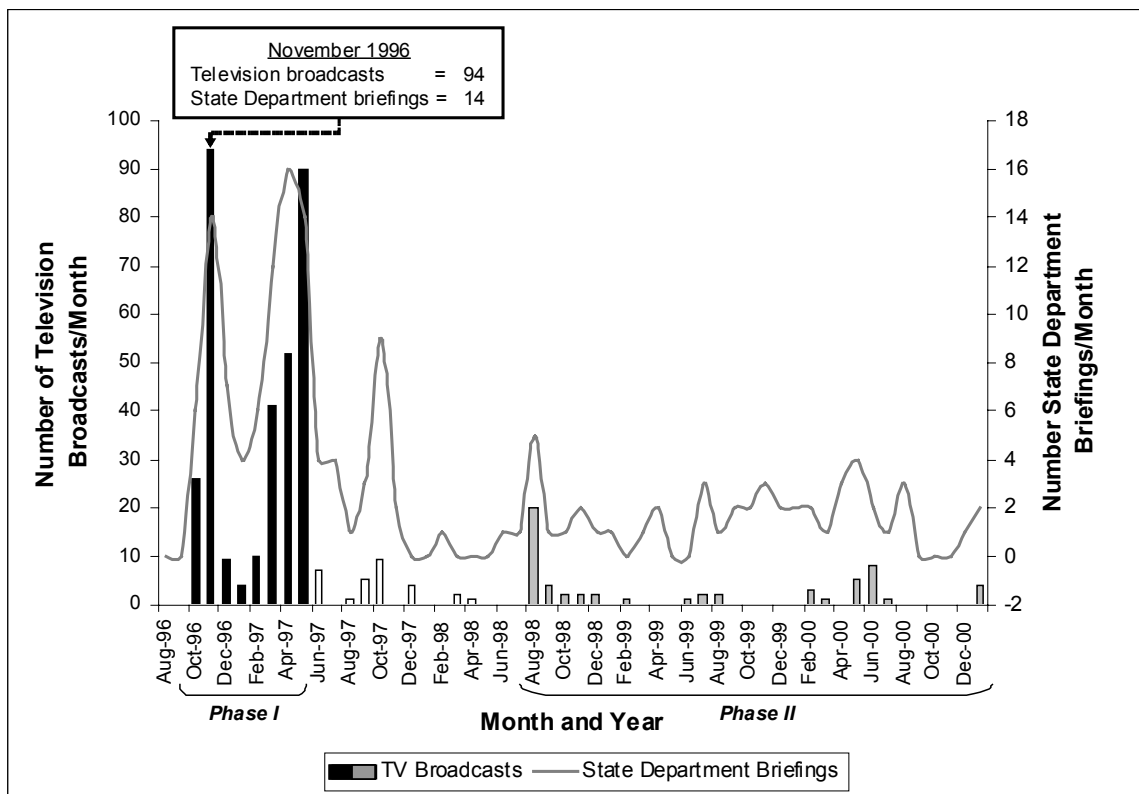
Source: *Vanderbilt Television News Archive* and own analysis

And in fact on November 14 1996, only nine days after being elected to a second-term in the White House, President Clinton announced that the US would contribute military troops to the Congo, as part of a Canadian-led multinational intervention.³⁹ At first glance, Clinton's November 14th announcement would seem to lend unequivocal validity to the CNN effect theory – the early weeks of November featured extensive and harrowing news media coverage in both the printed press and television, sustained over a number of days and culminating in a decision to participate in a military intervention.

Figure 4

Television Coverage* and State Department Briefings Mentioning the DRC

³⁹ The international intervention never took place. After a series of 'miraculous' reports that large numbers of the refugees had voluntarily returned to Rwanda, the United Nations ordered the preparations for the operation to cease on 15th December 1996.



* ABC World News Tonight, CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, and CNN

Source: Vanderbilt Television News Archive and own analysis

Deeper analysis, however, reveals that news media coverage in November 1996 did not follow the CNN effect pattern. By closely examining a chronology of events in late October and early November 1996, it becomes clear that the crisis in the Congo did not appear on the news until 'cues' from the Clinton's Administration indicated that Congo was on the government agenda. Both when the conflict appeared in the news (after it had 'sparked interest' in Washington and efforts were made by government sources to draw attention to it) and the type of coverage (focused solely on the plight of the refugees) lend validity to the predictions of the 'manufacturing consent' theories explored above.

2. The 1996 Election Imperative

While the ADFL rebellion did not officially form until October 16 1996, reports of violence in the refugee camps in eastern Congo began trickling out of the country as early as August and September 1996.

On October 7 1996, US Secretary of State Warren Christopher embarked on a five-nation Africa tour: "Three and a half years after pledging to give Africa 'the attention it deserves', Secretary of State Warren

Christopher tonight began his first...tour of this troubled continent."⁴⁰ This tour was seen as a necessary step for an administration that had repeatedly asserted at least the rhetoric of a strong interest in Africa.⁴¹

In the autumn of 1996 the Clinton Administration was coming up to an election, and there is evidence that demonstrating a reengagement in Africa formed a part of Clinton's election strategy. After being slated for inaction during the Rwandan genocide in 1994⁴², and criticised generally for "reactive" foreign policy during its first term⁴³, the unfolding crisis in the Congo provided an opportunity for Clinton's administration to 'take action' in Africa.

Prior to October 14 1996, when CNN presented a two and half minute piece on the unfolding 'ethnic unrest' in Uvira, Congo had not been mentioned on the evening news since the 22nd of May – nearly five months prior. On the day before the October CNN story, Secretary of State Christopher sent strong signals that Congo was on his government's agenda. In addition to making general pronouncements about the 'importance of

⁴⁰ Lippman, Thomas W., *Washington Post*, Oct. 8 1996, p. A12

⁴¹ The French were quick to link Christopher's Africa tour to the upcoming election: "Jacques Godfrain, the French cabinet official responsible for relations with former colonies, said the trip was politically motivated, with an eye to the black vote in the U.S. presidential election." See Lippman, Thomas W., *Washington Post*, Oct. 13 1996, p. A43

⁴² John F. Clark describes how "Western guilt about its inaction at the time of the 1994 [Rwandan] genocide exerts a decisive – and somewhat perverse – influence over the policies of the Western powers in the region." See Clark (2002), p. 6

Africa’, on October 13th Secretary Christopher evoked a strong reaction when he called for “new leadership” in the Congo (see Table 2). Christopher’s aides later added that of all of the challenges facing the US in Africa, Congo was the “most troublesome.”⁴⁴ Where the CNN effect would have us believe that independent journalistic initiative led to the CNN story on October 14th, it seems highly plausible that ‘cues’ from Christopher indicating that Congo was on the government agenda played a role in bringing the story ‘out of the abyss’.

Table 2

Chronology of Events and Television Stories in October 1996⁴⁵

October 8	Secretary of State Warren Christopher begins Africa tour
October 13	Christopher urges greater US Role in Africa and “new leadership” in Congo
October 14	Congo on CNN Evening News (2 min. 30 sec.)
October 23	State Department Press Briefing, “humanitarian disaster in Congo”
October 23	Congo on CNN Evening News (8 min. 10 sec.)
October 24	State Department issues official statement on situation in eastern Congo
October 24	Congo on CNN Evening News (2 min. 50 sec.)
October 25	Congo on CNN Evening News (2 min. 50 sec.)
	Congo on CNN Evening News (1 min. 10 sec.)
October 27	Congo on NBC Evening News (2 min. 20 sec.)
	Congo on ABC Evening News (1 min. 40 sec.)

⁴³ For example, Jim Hoagland of the *Washington Post* described Clinton in his first term as “a largely reactive, spasmodically engaged leader instinctively distrustful of plans offered to him by his foreign policy aides.” See Jim Hoagland, *Washington Post*, Nov. 13 1996, p. A23

⁴⁴ Lippman, Thomas W., *The Washington Post*, Oct.16 1996, p. A15

⁴⁵ This methodology is drawn from Mermin’s study of Somalia. See Mermin (1997) and Mermin (1999).

A similar pattern is observed throughout October 1996. At midday on October 23rd, during the daily State Department press briefing the government spokesperson drew attention to the “major humanitarian disaster” facing 1.1 million Rwandan refugees in Congo (see Table 2). And later that day, CNN ran an 8 minute report on Congo on the evening news, including an interview with Ambassador Richard Bogosian, US Special Coordinator for Rwanda and Burundi (see Table 2).

On October 24th, the State Department issued an official statement (the most emphatic way of showing that an issue is receiving government attention) stating that the US government “deplores the recent fighting in eastern [Congo].”⁴⁶ Only three days after this official statement was released, *ABC* and *NBC* (as well as *CNN*) ran stories about the conflict in Congo on their evening news programmes. *CBS* followed suit the following day (see Table 2).

In line with the tenets of ‘manufacturing consent’ theory, the series of events in late October 1996 lend credence to the theory that “officials [attempt] to persuade the media to focus on a particular crisis in order to arouse public concern and support for governmental action.”⁴⁷ From the

⁴⁶ United States State Department press briefing, Oct. 24 1996

⁴⁷ Garrett (1999), p. 83

Secretary of State's official visit to Africa, to his statement about a need for "new leadership" in Congo, to the official statement from the State Department 'deploring' the fighting, it appears that Congo was not picked up by the mainstream news media (and television in particular) until these 'cues' from the government indicated that it was of importance.

3. Beyond the 1996 Election Imperative

While the 1996 Presidential election goes some way to explaining the timing of the media coverage of Congo in October and November 1996, it does not reveal the full set of factors contributing to the difference in media coverage between Phase I and Phase II of the conflict. By focusing on the *content* of the news media coverage during this period, it will also become apparent that news media coverage of the unfolding conflict in the Congo, and in particular coverage focusing on the plight of the refugees in eastern Congo, served US government interests beyond the election imperative.

It can be argued that news media coverage was in US government interests for two reasons. *First*, there is overwhelming evidence -- particularly that which shows the US directly supporting the rebels -- that it was in US interests to see the ADFL advance succeed. By focusing media attention away from the 'front-lines' of the conflict itself, there would be less chance that the

US would be pressured to ‘curb’ the fighting. And *second*, given the US friendship with Rwanda, it seems plausible that by focusing on the plight of the Rwandan refugees in eastern Congo, the US government could ensure that its ally Rwanda was portrayed as ‘worthy’ of continued US aid and support.

3.1 Phase I Media Content - Focus on Rwandan Refugees

News media coverage of the Congo in October and November 1996, while extensive, described only one aspect of the conflict – the impact of the fighting on the plight of the Rwandan refugees in eastern Congo. By studying State Department press briefings from October and November 1996, it becomes clear where the media picked up this angle on the Congo story. During the 20 State Department press briefings in October and November 1996 that dealt with Congo, there were 260 mentions of the Rwandan refugees in eastern Congo – an average of 13 references to the refugees in each press briefing. In comparison, during the same press briefings, there were only 17 mentions of the word “rebel(s)” (not even one per briefing) and 15 mentions of the word “conflict” (again, not even one per briefing). Even the word “fighting” was only mentioned 77 times during these 20 press briefings -- an average of less than four times per briefing (see Table 3).

Table 3

Words used to describe Congo during State Department Press Briefings

October and November 1996

	Number of Mentions	Average Mentions Per Briefing
“Conflict”	15	<1
“Rebels”	17	<1
“Fighting”	77	<4
“Refugees”	260	13

Notes: Number of press briefings dealing with Congo = 20

3.2 The Relationship between the US and Rwanda

The framing of the news media coverage in Phase I of the conflict, with its focus on the Rwandan refugees, can be attributed to the close patron-client relationship between the US and Rwanda’s post-1994 government. Whether it was because of guilt over inaction during the Rwandan genocide, or because of other shared interests, the United States had become Paul Kagame’s (President of Rwanda since 2003, and widely regarded as the country’s most powerful figure since the RPF government took over after the genocide) “primary supporter in the international community...The United States had provided counterinsurgency training to the Rwandan army.”⁴⁸ The World Policy Institute reported that Rwandan troops had received training from U.S. Special Forces under the “Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) programme.”⁴⁹ Lynne Duke of the Washington Post reported that, as part of this JCET programme, Rwandan units were receiving U.S. combat

⁴⁸ Dunn (2002), p. 58

training including “camouflage techniques, small-unit movement, troop-leading procedures, soldier-team development, rappelling, mountaineering, marksmanship, weapon maintenance and day and night navigation.”⁵⁰

Collette Braeckman, renowned for her analysis of the Great Lakes Region, asserts that the friendship between the US and Rwanda went as far as collaboration over the 1996 ADFL rebellion: “[T]he war that exploded in October 1996...was a military operation carefully prepared by Rwanda and Uganda, supported by opponents of Mobutu, and *encouraged by the United States* [emphasis added].”⁵¹

The belief that the US was directly backing the ADFL rebels was widely held in the Great Lakes region: “The US provided political, logistical, surveillance, and it is rumored, on the ground military support to the [ADFL] movement, and used its influence in the [Congo] to limit the capacity of the national army.”⁵² James Fairhead argues that there is evidence of collaboration between the US and the parties that eventually formed the ADFL as early as 1993.⁵³

While the extent to which the US actively supported the rebellion has not been conclusively proven, there *is* evidence that the ADFL uprising was at

⁴⁹ Hartung and Moix (2000), p. 4

⁵⁰ Duke, Lynne, *Washington Post*, Jul. 14 1998, p. A01

⁵¹ Braeckman (1999), p. 25

⁵² Fairhead (2000), p. 154

least 'in harmony' with US policy interests in the region: "...[T]he 1996-1997 ADFL uprising...was in harmony with US policies. It dispensed with the problem of the Hutu refugee camps. It also appeared to solve the more intractable problem of Mobutu's refusal to move from dictatorship to an elected government. Once Kabila had taken Kinshasa, the US felt it had secured a swathe of allies stretching across the continent, from Eritrea in the north to Congo in the south-west."⁵⁴

Given the evidence of American support (whether active or implicit) for the rebel movement it is likely that the US would have wanted the rebellion to succeed in its goal of overthrowing President Mobutu. Diverting attention away from the onward march of the conflict may have helped the US avoid calls to help 'halt the fighting'. Further, given the close relationship between the US and Rwanda, and the ongoing 'aid' (both military and humanitarian) flowing from the US to Kagame's government, it would also seem plausible that focusing media attention on the Rwandan refugees in eastern Congo would help maintain the image of Rwanda as a 'victim' worthy of US support.

Part V:

Media Coverage of Phase II – August 1998 to January 2001

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 154

On the 2nd August 1998, barely eighteen months after the ADFL alliance ousted Mobutu and installed Laurent Kabila as President of the DRC, a 'second' war began in Congo (see pages 13-14 for further background of the conflict). In contrast with US news media coverage of Phase I of the conflict, as described above, Phase II of the Congo war was treated with virtual news media silence.

At the outbreak of the second conflict in August 1998, only 20 television news broadcasts mentioned the resumption of fighting in the Congo. When compared with the television coverage of the DRC in November 1996 (94 broadcasts) or May 1997 (90 broadcasts), the August 1998 television coverage is noticeably smaller (see Figure 2, page 17).

Newspaper coverage of the Congo in August 1998 was equally paltry. Between both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* there were only three front-page stories in the entire of month mentioning the resumption of violence in the Congo. Again, compared with the 25 front-page stories in November 1996, the difference in newspaper coverage between the two phases of the conflict is significant.

After August 1998, news media coverage of conflict in the Congo lessened even further. In the 28 months between October 1998 and January 2001, Congo was only mentioned 35 times on US television news (see Figure

⁵⁴ Shearer (1999), p. 99

2, page 17) -- only 21 of these stories lasted longer than 60 seconds. What, one might ask, went wrong with news media coverage in Phase II of the Congo conflict?

It is commonly assumed that the DRC did not receive media attention for two reasons – one, logistical difficulties and two, the complexity of the conflict itself. Both explanations do have validity. An article in *The Economist* in July 2002 laid bare the logistical constraints of reporting from a country like the DRC: “Western powers seem barely to have noticed the catastrophe [in Congo]. This is partly because...it is two-thirds the size of Western Europe, thickly-forested, incredibly dangerous and has hardly any paved roads or working telephones.”⁵⁵ Jeremy Ginifer adds “the Kinshasa government does not even control the majority of its territory. ‘War lords’ or powerful chiefs control large tracts.”⁵⁶

Further, there is also no doubt that the complexity of the situation in the Congo, and especially Phase II of the conflict, is staggering. The post-1998 conflict has been described as “perhaps one of the most complex and perplexing events the post-cold war world has ever seen.”⁵⁷ Reporting the complexity of Congo’s conflict, with its shifting alliances and mélange of

⁵⁵ “Africa’s Great War”, *The Economist*, Jul. 4 2002

⁵⁶ Ginifer (2002), p. 125

⁵⁷ Smis and Oyatambwe (2002), p. 414

warring factions, would be challenging for any news media outlet, and particularly for television.⁵⁸

The obstacles to reporting resulting from logistical challenges and the complexity of the conflict are important, however they do not wholly explain the media silence in Phase II of the conflict in the DRC. By way of illustration, a small group of DRC commentators was asked by the author to explain the lack of news media coverage of the conflict. Each of these experts described **lack of 'political will' in the United States** as more important in understanding the news media silence than other constraints such as lack of infrastructure, complications with travel authorisation, and security concerns.⁵⁹

As will be demonstrated below, the events leading up to August 1998 lend credence to the importance of 'political will' in explaining the difference in media coverage between Phase I and Phase II of the conflict in two primary ways. *First*, by August 1998, the domestic considerations of the election in November 1996 had disappeared. Where at the start of Phase I of the conflict, the Clinton Administration was able to use the media to focus on their humanitarian assistance to Rwandan refugees in eastern Congo as part of

⁵⁸ The limitations of television in elucidating complex events have been widely noted. See especially Ignatieff (1998), Cohen (2001), Benthall (1993), and Girardet (1993)

⁵⁹ Personal communication with Filip Reyntjens (University of Antwerp), David Chuter (United Kingdom Government), and an anonymous contact at Christian Aid DRC

their election strategy, this motivation was no longer relevant in August 1998 with the government two years into their four-year term.

Second, as was argued above, during Phase I of the conflict it is plausible that the US wanted to divert attention away from the Kabila-led rebel advance due to US interest in seeing it succeed. However, by August 1998, when Kabila himself was challenged by the rebel uprising that marked the start of Phase II of the conflict, the relationship between Washington and Kinshasa had been ruined to the point that it was unlikely the US would take any steps to support its former ally.

Kabila's relations with the United States began to sour at the end of 1997. In May 1998, the *New York Times* reported "patience with Mr. Kabila began to fray openly late last year...as Washington and other Western capitals grew increasingly embarrassed by [Kabila's] deepening streak of authoritarianism and a lack of any clear approach to the country's immense problems."⁶⁰ Many analysts have argued, and it seems highly plausible, that US objections to Kinshasa's "economic policy orientations and its friendship with Cuba, China, North Korea, Sudan and Libya"⁶¹ contributed to the breakdown in relations. It is also interesting to note the disturbing fact that Phase II of the conflict started soon after Kabila told a number of international

⁶⁰ French, Howard W., *The New York Times*, May 21 1998, p. 1

⁶¹ Smis and Oyatambwe (2002), p. 422

mining companies that he would no longer honour the contracts he had signed with them on his march to Kinshasa in early 1997.⁶²

Third, the US position going into the 'second Congo conflict' was further complicated when it was made public that not only had Rwanda, a key US 'client' in Africa, orchestrated Phase I of the conflict, but that they had committed horrendous human rights abuses in the process. During Phase I of the conflict Rwandan officials had largely denied the involvement of their army, and, publicly, the US government had supported this line. In July 1997, however, Paul Kagame (at the time, Rwanda's Defence Minister, but widely regarded as the country's most powerful leader) gave an interview to the *Washington Post*, acknowledging for the first time his country's key role in the overthrow of president Mobutu Sese Seko in 1997. During this interview Kagame commended the United States for "taking the right decisions to let [the rebellion] proceed" once it was underway.⁶³

Kagame's public admission of Rwanda's complicity in Phase I of the conflict, combined with the release of a UN report in June 1998⁶⁴ which found that "elements of the Rwandan army were involved in abuses during [Phase I of] the war that 'constitute crimes against humanity,' including the massacre of

⁶² Moore (2001), p. 556. For analyses of the links between Congo's natural resources and the perpetuation of the conflict see also Samset (2002), United Nations Security Council (2001), and Collinson (2003)

⁶³ Pomfret, John, *Washington Post*, Jul. 9 1997, p. A01

⁶⁴ See United Nations (1998)

unarmed civilians and refugees,"⁶⁵ made it difficult for the US to paint its 'friend' in a positive light. As reported by the *Washington Post*, "the story of the US relationship with the Rwandan military illustrates the complications that have occurred when military ties -- and, in particular, hard-to-track training operations by the Pentagon's special operations forces -- have become a prime instrument of American policy."⁶⁶

In August 1998, as Phase II of the conflict began, both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* reported that intelligence reports confirmed Rwanda was again behind the growing rebellion in the Congo.⁶⁷ And over subsequent weeks in August 1998, the story of the fighting in the DRC virtually disappeared off American television screens and was relegated to the back pages of the newspapers.

Where in Phase I of the conflict media coverage of the Congo was used by the government to highlight the plight of Rwandan refugees, in Phase II of the conflict, Rwanda's admission of involvement combined with the damning UN report plausibly made the prospect of media coverage 'discomforting' to the US government as Rwanda's friend, arms dealer and military trainer.

Press briefings and official statements from the State Department and the White House referring to Congo were abundant in Phase I of the conflict,

⁶⁵ Duke, Lynne, *Washington Post*, Jul. 14 1998, p. A01

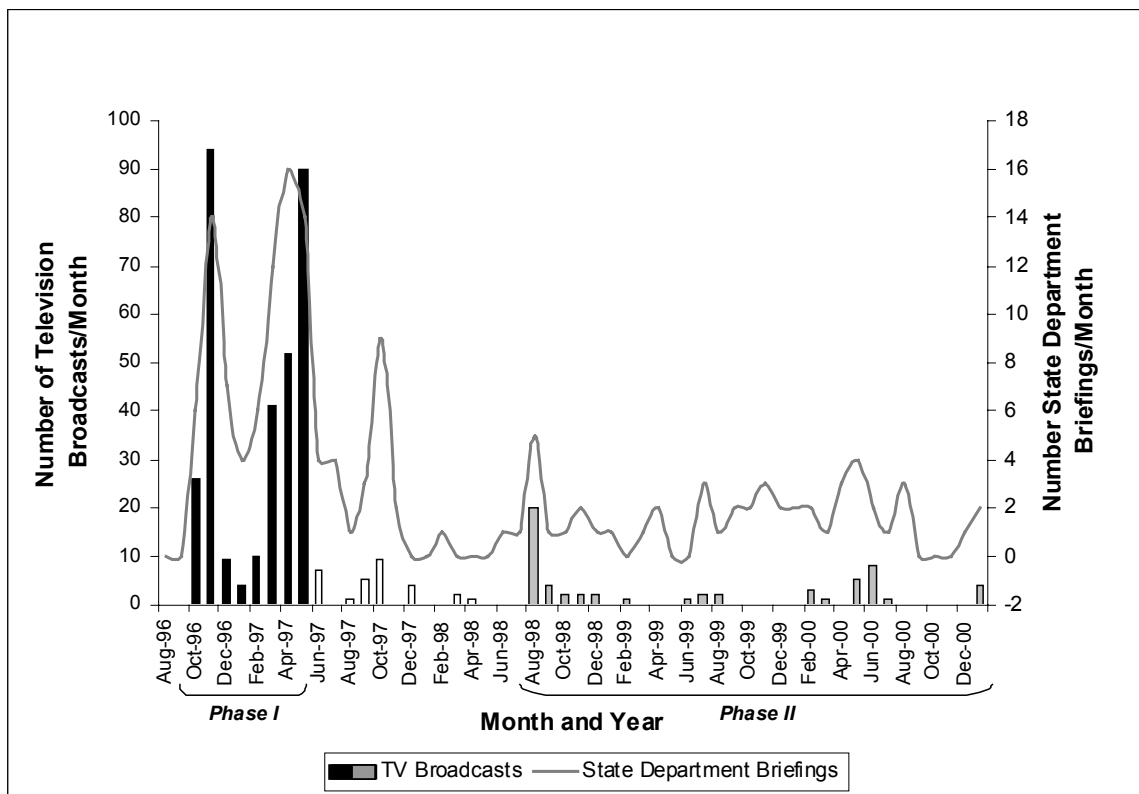
⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. A01

but in Phase II these had all but dried up (see Figure 5). In Phase I of the conflict, Congo was discussed in press briefings on average more than 9 times per month. In Phase II of the conflict, however, press briefings mentioning Congo dropped to an average of just under 2 mentions per month (See Table 4).

Figure 5

Television Coverage* and State Department Briefings Mentioning the DRC

⁶⁷ See, for example, Erlanger, Steven, *New York Times*, Aug. 5 1998, p. 8



* *ABC World News Tonight, CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, and CNN*

Source: *Vanderbilt Television News Archive* and own analysis

Table 4

Comparison of State Department Briefings in Phase I and Phase II

Phase	Dates	Average Number of Briefings Mentioning Congo/Month
I	October 1996 to May 1997	>9
II	August 1998 to January 2001	<2

In comparison with Phase I of the conflict, where the spokesperson often made comments such as “I do want to return to this in the course of the question and answer period because I do have a lot of information to give you on that,”⁶⁸ during Phase II of the conflict, the response of the spokesperson to questions about Congo indicated that it was not something about which he wanted to speak. For example, in response to a question in October 1998 about whether US officials would be meeting with those rebelling against President Kabila, the spokesperson’s response was curt: “I don't know about that -- Unlikely. Other subjects?”⁶⁹ After August 1998, the spokesperson’s responses to questions about Congo seemed designed to deflect the subject and frequently included phrases such as, “I will have to check on that; I don't know.”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ United States State Department press briefing, Oct. 24 1998

⁶⁹ United States State Department press briefing, Oct. 28 1998

⁷⁰ United States State Department press briefing, Nov. 4 1998

Part VI:

Forgotten or Ignored? Implications of Media Silence in the DRC

Despite the evidence pointing to deliberate media silence during Phase II of the Congo conflict, one may still not be able to get past the impression that Congo's conflict was simply a victim of timing. Some might argue that, after 1998, Congo was simply 'forgotten', not deliberately 'ignored'. Studies of other 'forgotten' conflicts belie this conclusion, however, and raise disturbing questions about patterns of media silence. Herman and Chomsky made the following conclusion about US news media coverage of the 'forgotten' atrocities in East Timor after Indonesia's invasion in 1976:

Atrocities in East Timor...have no [utilitarian] function; quite the opposite. These atrocities were carried out by [the United State's] Indonesian client, so that the US could readily have acted to reduce or terminate them. But attention to the Indonesian invasion would have embarrassed a loyal ally and quickly disclosed the crucial role of the United States in providing military aid and diplomatic support for aggression and slaughter. Plainly, news about East Timor would not have been useful, and would, in fact, have discomfited important domestic power groups.⁷¹

Viewed in this light, the dangers of media silence are clear. The importance of a free press in enabling democracy, and the development of

⁷¹ Herman and Chomsky (1988), p. 302

human capabilities and freedoms more generally, has been widely noted.⁷² In this context, the apparent ability of a government to 'guide' the news media away from 'discomfiting' issues is especially worrying: "A cantankerous press, an obstinate press, a ubiquitous press must be suffered by those in authority in order to preserve the even greater values of freedom of expression and the right of the people to know."⁷³

With regards to the Congo, surely the voting public has a right to know, for example, that "decades of US weapons transfers and continued military training to both sides of the conflict have helped fuel the fighting. The US has helped build the arsenals of eight of the nine governments directly involved in the war that has ravaged the DRC...U.S. military transfers in the form of direct government-to-government weapons deliveries, commercial sales, and International Military Education and Training (IMET) to the states directly involved have totaled more than \$125 million since the end of the Cold War."⁷⁴

Some, however, may find the argument that the United States played a "demonstrable role in planting the seeds of [the Congo] conflict"⁷⁵ tenuous. The US government defends the military training programmes such as those

⁷² See Amartya Sen, for example, on the importance of a free press in averting disasters such as famine. See Sen (1999).

⁷³ Herman and Chomsky (1988), p. 298

⁷⁴ Hartung and Moix (2000), p. 2

⁷⁵ Hartung and Moix (2000), p. 1

conducted with the Rwandan army as “almost entirely devoted to human rights training.”⁷⁶ If this is true, and if there is no connection between the actions of the US government and conflict in ‘distant’ parts of the world, is media silence still of concern? Many would say no, agreeing with the “powerful moral meta-rule” that says we should look after our own people first: “‘Charity begins at home.’ Pressing domestic social problems should take priority over the perennial demands of far-off places.”⁷⁷

There are strong arguments, however, that contradict this position. First, Nicholas Wheeler makes the important contention that we must broaden our conception of personal and national interest: “Putting out the inferno of genocide is in both the national and the global interest because failure to do so risks creating a contagion that will undermine the values of all civilized societies.”⁷⁸ Wheeler uses the example of genocide, but his argument is easily extended to all instances of collective violence that result in widespread humanitarian emergencies, such as that in the Congo.

And second, beyond the practicalities of avoiding conflict ‘contagion’, it is important to know about the suffering of others as an affirmation of our “fundamental human equality.”⁷⁹ For Stanley Cohen, “there is only one way to include the distant stranger: to define the threshold of the intolerable as

⁷⁶ Duke, Lynne, *The Washington Post*, Jul. 14 1998, p. A01

⁷⁷ Cohen (2001), p. 20

⁷⁸ Wheeler (2000), p. 303

exactly the same for everyone."⁸⁰ This dissertation contends that there is a moral imperative to know about 'distant suffering' because, in spite of the debate about how far our boundaries of compassion extend beyond our intimate circle, people are concerned about human suffering: "They do not regard it as normal and tolerable. The gap is between concern and action."⁸¹

Perhaps this logic could be challenged as utopian, or as "pseudo-universalism", or "touchy-feely empathy."⁸² Luc Boltanski makes the important point, however, that "if human beings are able to recognize that they have something essential in common, join together in groups and constitute particular interests by adopting the cause of beings of a different species that they have never been close to – whales or bears for example – is it utopian to think them capable of forming, interpreting and demonstrating their interests...*by taking up the cause of human beings far away who they are aware of only through the media* [emphasis added]?"⁸³

If we accept that 'knowing', about suffering in the Congo for example, is crucial not only in terms of upholding our own democratic principles, but also in terms of asserting our common humanity, the challenge then becomes making information available in a way that can 'make people care'. Can we

⁷⁹ Glover (2001), p. 150

⁸⁰ Cohen (2001), p. 293

⁸¹ Cohen (2001), p. 289

⁸² Cohen (2001), p. 293

⁸³ Boltanski (1999), p. 190

expect the news media to fill this role? Many would argue that the news media are in fact the problem and not the solution.

There is no shortage of literature on the limitations of the news media in dealing with complex emergencies and humanitarian crises such as the Congo. Television, in particular, has a tendency to exacerbate a dualistic, or “Manichean”, world view – East versus West, capitalist versus communist, and ‘good’ versus ‘evil’. For Pierre Bourdieu, “television (much more than the newspapers) offers an increasingly depoliticized, aseptic, bland view of the world, and it is increasingly dragging down the newspapers in its slide into demagoguery and subordination to commercial values.”⁸⁴ And Michael Ignatieff points to the limitations of television as a medium that ‘tells’ more than it ‘explains’: “As moral mediator between violent men and the audiences whose attention they crave, television images are more effective at presenting *consequences* than in *exploring intentions*; more adept at pointing to the corpses than in explaining why violence may, in certain places, pay so well [emphasis added].”⁸⁵

But this does not have to be the case. In describing the way that Goya’s *Horrors of War* and Picasso’s *Guernica* confront horror and force the spectator to see it as if for the first time, Ignatieff comes to the conclusion that “there is no reason to suppose that the news media lack the same capacity of

representation to make the real truly real and to force the eye to see, and the conscience to recognize what it has seen.”⁸⁶ In other words, it is not the news media *itself* that presents the problem, but the way in which the news is presently covered.

Studying the news media silence in Phase II of the Congo conflict, and more broadly media silence on ‘forgotten conflicts’ around the world, brings to light the importance of making changes to our mainstream media and political culture: Stanley Cohen concludes that “assertions such as ‘I didn’t really know what happened to the Kurds in Iraq’ calls for radical changes in the media and political culture rather than in tinkering with private, psychological mechanisms. *We must make it difficult for people to say they ‘don’t know.’*”⁸⁷

While this paper has focused on government policy and the news media, humanitarian and non-governmental organisations – what Minear *et al* call the third branch of the *crisis triangle*⁸⁸ – also have a crucial role to play in the process of communicating ‘distant suffering’ such as that suffered by the people of Congo. The investigative work of policy advocacy agencies and

⁸⁴ Bourdieu (1998), p. 74

⁸⁵ Ignatieff (1998), p. 25

⁸⁶ Ignatieff (1998), p. 30

⁸⁷ Cohen (2001), p. 11

⁸⁸ Minear, Scott and Weiss (1996), p. 2

human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch could be described as a “daily, weekly, monthly assault on denial.”⁸⁹

Beyond the research and advocacy work of human rights agencies, the broader community of international development and aid agencies also has an important contribution to make in communicating suffering. Much has been written about the importance of reducing the complicity of aid agencies in stereotypical ‘formula reporting’: for example, the camera pans to a Western aid worker tending to a mass of women and children...bodies loll on stretchers...the shot closes in on a ‘starving child’ with wide eyes and a distended belly. Henrietta Lidchi has observed positive trends to this end in her study of British development charities. She describes “a move towards positive imaging, producing images which stressed the strength, dignity, and self-determination of the human subject in the face of adversity, rather than images which objectified and dehumanized the subject of development.”⁹⁰

To reduce the chance that future conflicts are ‘forgotten’ or ‘ignored’, further research is required into the role that non-governmental organisations and aid agencies play in setting the media agenda. A search for empirical cases that have ‘broken’ the ‘manufacturing consent’ model – where empathetic and informative coverage brings information to the public despite government preference to ‘divert’ the media searchlight – would enable

⁸⁹ Cohen (2001), p. 11, quoting Arthur Miller

theorizing about the circumstances that can bring the world's hidden tragedies out of the 'abyss'.

Conclusion

This dissertation sought to demonstrate that, contrary to popular assumptions about the power of the news media to influence foreign policy in the United States, in the case of the Congo in the late 1990s the US government was able to 'guide' news media coverage to serve its own interests. The extensive news media coverage of Phase I of the Congo conflict in October and November 1996 demonstrates the way that a story – in this case, the plight of the Rwandan refugees in eastern Congo – can be 'fed' to the media through frequent press briefings and official statements. In contrast, the negligible coverage of Phase II of the Congo conflict after August 1998, demonstrates the way that news media coverage can be 'avoided' (by sending 'cues' during press briefings that a topic is not high on the government agenda, for example) when it may prove discomfiting to government interests.

Given the importance of a free and 'cantankerous' press -- both for upholding the principles of democracy and for enabling informed empathy towards 'distant suffering' -- empirical evidence in support of 'manufacturing consent' theory is especially worrying. As this study of news

⁹⁰ Lidchi (1999), p. 100. See also Benthall (1993).

media coverage of the Congo conflict between 1996 and 2001 suggests, and as Jonathan Mermin observed in US news media coverage of the Somalia intervention, at the very least “journalists set the news agenda and frame the stories they report *in close collaboration* with actors in Washington [emphasis added].”⁹¹ A more damning conclusion is that, as observed by Herman and Chomsky, the US government is able to manipulate the mainstream news media into producing a sort of ‘propaganda’ that masks the true nature of US foreign policy.⁹²

It is the contention of this dissertation that existing analyses of the relationship between news media coverage and foreign policy, such as that by Piers Robinson, are limited in their ability to illuminate the interaction between media in policy in cases of ‘forgotten conflicts’ such as the Congo. By focusing only on the extent to which media coverage can or cannot influence military intervention, these analyses do not address important questions relating to *media silence*. There is a need for further analysis to test the assumptions of ‘manufacturing consent’ theory more broadly, using contemporary case studies such as that of the conflict in the Congo.

By broadening our understanding of the interaction between media silence and foreign policy, we can work towards developing a framework of important questions such as those raised at the outset of this dissertation --

⁹¹ Mermin (1997), p. 403

What dynamics may be obscured by media silence towards a particular conflict? What 'interventions' (for example arms sales, military training, or natural resource exploitation) may be taking place behind the veil of this silence? Alternatively, what has led the news media searchlight to suddenly 'find' a conflict? Whose interests does this serve? Asking questions such as these in a structured way will allow us to not only better understand the dynamics of conflict, with the goal to preventing widespread suffering, but will also enable us, as citizens of democratic countries, to question our governments and the policies they pursue in our name.

When one considers that more people have died as a result of the war in the Congo than in any other conflict since World War II, the urgency of these questions becomes clear. The prospects that Congo would hold a more prominent place in the 'hearts' of the international community seemed to improve after Joseph Kabila (Congo's President since the assassination of his father Laurent in January 2001) demonstrated a greater interest in building diplomatic ties. And in June 2003, with the establishment of the Government of National Unity in Kinshasa, it seemed that peace might be in sight. But while this dissertation has focused on the period between 1996 and 2001, as at August 2004 the outlook for Congo's 46 million people still remains murky. Peace has eluded the eastern parts of the country. There are intermittent

⁹² See Herman and Chomsky (1988)

reports of Rwandan incursions into Congo, and tensions in the broader Great Lakes region continue to mount. Citizens of democratic countries around the world must ask themselves if their news media coverage reflects these realities. If the answer is no, they must ask why.

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