Research Article

Entering the "foxhole": Partisan media priming and the application of racial justice in America

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Abstract

Can accessing a partisan media environment—irrespective of its content—change how Americans interpret and assess news? We examine this question by focusing on one of the most fraught issues in American society: racial justice. Although studies suggest that repeated exposure to right-leaning media messaging can amplify racial resentment, we leverage a pair of survey experiments to test whether merely seeing a conservative media masthead can make Whites render justice with racialized considerations. Results show that—even keeping the content of stories identical—entering a simulated right-leaning media environment significantly conditions racial attitudes. We find evidence of both anti-Black and pro-White biases that are activated when respondents consume information under the Fox News masthead. This study has important implications for understanding how partisan media priming shapes political views and the distinctive nature of racism in America.

Have outlets like Fox News and CNN become such potent ideological symbols in America that they act as political primes in and of themselves? Can the mere act of entering a media landscape associated with the political left or the right affect how people interpret and assess identical information? Repeated exposure to partisan media messaging is widely believed to shape views on a range of outcomes—from the handling of a deadly, global pandemic to the perceived legitimacy of the 2020 U.S. elections. An underlying assumption is that exposure to differential framing and facts drives these changes (cf. Broockman and Kalla 2022; Iyengar and Hahn, 2009; Ladd 2010; Lee 2010; Levendusky 2013). Research, however, not only reveals that various media venues tend to lean to the left or right politically (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2010), but also that Americans judge news as ideologically partial based on their mastheads alone (Turner 2007).

In this article, we ask whether simply accessing a partisan media environment—irrespective of its content—can change how Americans interpret and assess news. We examine this question through the lens of one of the most fraught issues in U.S. society: racial justice. Although studies suggest that repeated exposure to right-leaning media messaging can amplify racial resentment (McElwee 2015; McElwee and McDaniel 2015), we probe whether obtaining news under a conservative media masthead can make Whites

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render justice with racialized considerations. Building on research showing that implicit and explicit symbols can induce White Americans to exhibit more racist tendencies (cf. Ehrlinger et al., 2010; Tesler 2017), we predict that seeing a logo for Fox News—a network often accused of trafficking in racially charged content—will increase the propensity of White Americans to express racially biased judgments.

We assess the application of justice in the context of a unique category: U.S. servicemembers charged with violating U.S. military law. We use this distinctive case both because it should not be confounded by standard racialized framings that surround issues like domestic crime, policing, or welfare and because it should be arguably one of the hardest tests for detecting bias. Serving in an all-volunteer military, U.S. servicemembers willingly subject themselves to great personal risk for their country. Research reveals that among dozens of politically relevant groups, Americans judge veterans to be one of the most deserving, with the military enjoying an almost uniformly positive reputation (Kreitzer and Smith 2018).[1] Moreover, conservatives—who are generally more likely to express prejudiced attitudes (DeSante and Smith 2020)—are often the strongest defenders of the U.S. military.[2]

To test whether seeing a right-leaning media logo can make White Americans apply justice based on racial considerations, we conducted a pair of experiments (in Autumn, 2020 and Spring, 2022) looking at attitudes toward accused U.S. soldiers who look nothing like the traditional "GI Joe": non-White soldiers. We presented survey respondents with a vignette of an alleged war crime that randomly varied both the race of the accused servicemember (Black, Middle Eastern, Latino, or White) and the partisan-leaning of the news source reporting on the incident (Fox News on the right, CNN on the left, or no masthead). Results reveal that racial attitudes vary under different media mastheads, but in nuanced ways. In Study 1, respondents who learned of a Black servicemember accused of a war crime from Fox News were more punitive than those in every other condition. In Study 2, we find some evidence of a pro-White bias when learning of the incident on Fox News. To the extent that we find both anti-Black and pro-White prejudices activated by the Fox News logo, these findings speak to the plausibility that media mastheads, in and of themselves, may serve as important ideological symbols that can influence how Whites respond to information. Findings highlight the need for further research into the interplay between partisan media priming and expressions of racial prejudice.

Our paper contributes to substantial literatures on both the impacts of polarized media and the application of racial justice in America. It is well-recognized that different news outlets frame stories differently, such as the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, with CNN emphasizing "mostly peaceful" protests (Concha 2020) and Fox News depicting events as more violent (Brunner 2020). Our results, however, reveal that even when Americans are provided the exact same story with different mastheads, they can reach different conclusions about how to apply justice in the context of race. Not only do the findings suggest that ideological cues of news sources can outweigh the content presented by those news sources (Turner 2007) and that exposure to Fox News is associated with support for harsher criminal sentencing (Ash and Poyker 2019), but they indicate potential racial ramifications of this phenomenon.

Study 1

Using an opt-in, online survey of U.S. respondents collected by the Bovitz[3] survey firm between October 29th and November 2nd, 2020, we examined how partisan media and racial frames interact to shape perceptions of a purported war criminal.[4] In the non-probability sample, designed to be comparable to other national surveys (e.g., the ANES) in its representativeness,[5] we relied on an experimental design in which respondents were instructed to read a story about "a highly decorated U.S. Army Ranger" who entered a detention center and killed an already wounded "Taliban insurgent who was responsible for the death of U.S. soldiers."

The experiment manipulated both the partisan-leaning of the news source and the race of the soldier. Although the substantive text of the stories remained identical, respondents were randomly assigned to see either no corporate masthead (the control), the logo of Fox News, or that of CNN. The story either did not mention the name of the soldier (the control), or included a name racialized as Black, Middle Eastern, Latino, or White. Research on racial attitudes in America largely theorizes about the proclivities and nuances of racial animus harbored by Whites (e.g., DeSante 2013; Schuman et al. 1997; Sears et al. 2000),[6] so we follow conventions in the literature by restricting our analysis to 1149 White respondents.[7]

Fact pattern

The subject of the news story was a U.S. servicemember accused of killing a defenseless detainee in Afghanistan. The vignette presented a realistic, high-stakes ethical scenario regarding the legal and normative implications of his actions.[8] We included certain details intended to make the accused servicemember more sympathetic, such as a long and decorated career in the military and quotes providing some rationalization of his actions. However, the vignette makes clear that the killing was executed under little pressure and without regard for the law of armed conflict.[9]

The servicemember took what could only be referred to as extra-judicial actions that should reasonably be considered an unauthorized use of force.

Varying partisan news sources

We chose Fox News and CNN as the partisan news sources to randomly vary because they are prominent, widely-recognized, and established media outlets generally considered to the left and right of the political spectrum, respectively. According to recent polling (Pew 2020), Republicans and Republican-leaners trust Fox News more than any other news source (65% trust), whereas Democrats and Democratic-leaners trust CNN more than any other source (67% trust). Similarly, Fox News is the outlet that most Republican and Republican-leaners turn to for their news (60% most go-to source), whereas CNN is the source that most Democrat and Democratic-leaners turn to (53% most go-to source). Although these data suggest that partisans tend to be exposed to closed ideological echo chambers, prior research documents that a considerable number of Democrats consume conservative media, such as Fox News (Stecula and Pickup 2021), and that the ability of conservative media to shift attitudes to the right is not confined to Republicans (Goidel et al. 2021).

We also chose Fox News, in particular, because it has frequently been accused of trafficking in racial stereotypes and provoking racial bias. To take some recent examples, Tucker Carlson has lumped Black Lives Matter protestors together with "criminals…[and] antisocial thugs with…nothing better to do than hurt people and destroy things" (Owen 2020). One activist group started a petition against Fox News's airing of a presidential debate section on "Race and Violence in Our Cities," complaining that the network's "framing of the debate topic was anti-Black." Journalist and former Fox News host Eboni K. Williams has opined that "Fox has a reputation for being bigoted and racist, all for very good reason" (Moran, 2019). Popular articles—with titles like "Some of the most racist moments in Fox News history" (*New York Magazines*) (Miller 2017), "Fox News staff erupts over network racism: Bosses 'Created a White Supremacist Cell'" (*Daily Beast*) (Cartwright et al., 2020), and "How [Fox News's] Tucker Carlson stoked white fear to conquer cable" (*New York Times*, 2022) (Confessore 2022)—further document alleged racial hostility.

Varying race

To signal the race of the servicemember across conditions, we randomly identified the servicemember with one of several racialized names. Scholars have used a similar approach in audit studies to measure racial discrimination in the job market (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004), how legislators respond to requests from their constituents (Butler and Broockman 2011; Costa 2017; Mendez and Grose 2018), how Americans think about the working poor (DeSante 2013), and how implicit bias affects judicial decisions (Rice et al. 2018). Compared to the control condition, where the soldier was unidentified by name, the racialized treatments identified the servicemember as one of the following: Jamal Booker or Tyrone Washington (Black), Mustafa Husain or Ahmad Muhammad (Middle Eastern), Santiago Gonzalez or Alejandro Hernandez (Latino), and Todd Becker or Jake Walsh (White). To mitigate concerns about idiosyncratic reactions to certain names (Sen and Wasow 2016), we employed two names for each racial group and then collapsed them into their respective racial categories. As summarized in Table 1, our design was a 3x5x2 factorial design, which we transformed into a 3x5.

Vignette

The full text of a sample news story appears below in Figure 1.

Dependent variables

After reading this story, respondents were asked two questions, which we used as our dependent variables, both of which assumed standard seven-point Likert agree/disagree scales. First, respondents were asked how strongly they agreed that "the Sergeant should be convicted for killing the insurgent"; second, they were asked whether they agreed that "the Sergeant was justified for his actions in killing the insurgent."
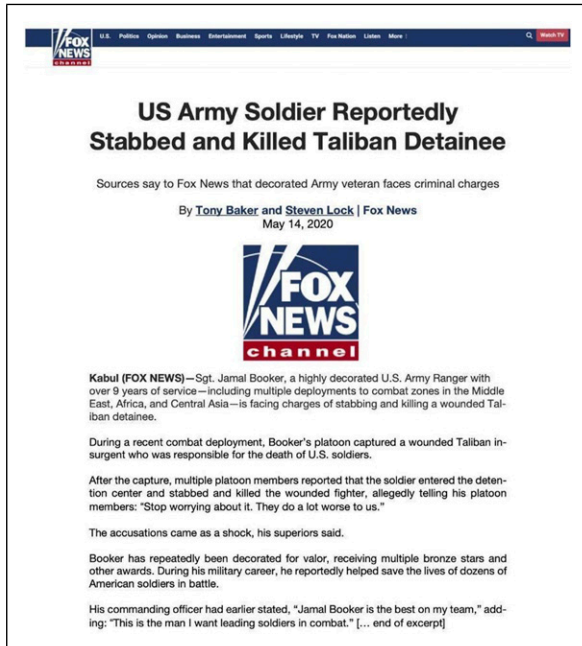
Analysis

We estimated the differences in the means across the conditions using a fully interactive model through ordinary least squares (OLS), with the DVs recoded from 0 (strongly disagree) to 1 (strongly agree). As shown in Table 2, exactly one of our conditions changed opinions on both of our DVs: When respondents were exposed to a Fox News story about a Black servicemember, they were more likely to believe that he should be convicted, and less likely to agree that his actions were justified. Even when keeping the details of a news story the same, seeing the Fox News logo appeared to prime individuals to judge Blacks more harshly.

Figure 2, as an illustrative example of our findings, shows the point estimates and 95% confidence intervals for one of our DVs: agreement with whether the officer should be convicted. Given that the number of possible pair-wise comparisons that can be made between these 15 points is very large (105), the dashed line in the figure shows the mean for the control condition, which is intended to make comparisons between groups easier to interpret.[10] The plots reveal that respondents assigned to the Fox News/Black

Table 1. Summary of experimental conditions.

News outlet	Racial category
(1) Control (no masthead)	(1) Control (no name identified)
(2) Fox News	(2) Black
(3) CNN	(3) White
	(4) Middle Eastern
	(5) Latino

Figure 1. Vignette (fox news, black soldier condition).

Table 2. Results from Study 1.

	Convicted	Justified
Constant	0.627***	0.389***
	(0.0354)	(0.0348)
White	0.00332	−0.0105
	(0.0497)	(0.0489)
Black	−0.0162	0.0103
	(0.0486)	(0.0478)
Latino	0.00345	0.0162
	(0.0514)	(0.0505)
Middle Eastern	0.0723	−0.00
	(0.0486)	(0.0478)
CNN	−0.0303	0.0192
	(0.0489)	(0.0483)
Fox News	−0.0577	0.0141
	(0.0510)	(0.0501)
White X CNN	−0.0115	−0.0327
	(0.0694)	(0.0685)
White X Fox News	0.0917	−0.0841
	(0.0701)	(0.0692)
Black X CNN	0.0652	−0.0501
	(0.0680)	(0.0670)
Black X Fox News	0.180*	−0.142*
	(0.0705)	(0.0693)
Latino X CNN	−0.00709	0.0120
	(0.0691)	(0.0682)
Latino X Fox News	0.0709	−0.0296
	(0.0714)	(0.0703)
Middle Eastern X CNN	−0.0207	−0.0123
	(0.0688)	(0.0680)
Middle Eastern X Fox News	0.0142	−0.0169
	(0.0697)	(0.0685)
Observations	1149	1140

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses.
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

treatment responded more harshly than those in the control condition. No other combination of treatments exhibits a similar outcome.

Discussion

We reason that findings from Study 1 could be rooted in two interrelated causes. One is that Fox News has a reputation for depicting Blacks according to a violent, criminal stereotype (Mills 2017), which predispose respondents to think of the Black servicemember in this way. Research has found that Fox News and others that "fly the flag" of Fox News, so to speak, have managed to be effective in their shared messaging and niche marketing, such that their reputation is well-established (Goidel et al., 2021). This finding brings to mind the concept of cognitive fluency—whereby fluent processing is "easy on the mind" and characterized by snap judgments in particular contexts (Lick and Johnson 2015).

That is, when the conservative media and race primes interact, respondents may be influenced to offer more punitive responses for the Black servicemember as a matter of implicit reasoning.

A second, related issue is that different racial minorities in America have been imbued with negative stereotypes, but the shape and history of each are group specific. Latinos, for instance, are often associated with (undocumented) immigration (Farris and Silber-Muhammed 2018; Pérez, 2016), and Middle Eastern Americans (who are often conflated with Muslims) with terrorism (Lajevardi 2020). Black Americans, meanwhile, are commonly linked to violence and criminality (Oliver 2003; Young 2006). Because Black Americans are often stereotyped as violent and criminal—and Fox News has gained a reputation for amplifying these stereotypes—Whites may be predisposed to judge Blacks more punitively when seeing the Fox News masthead.
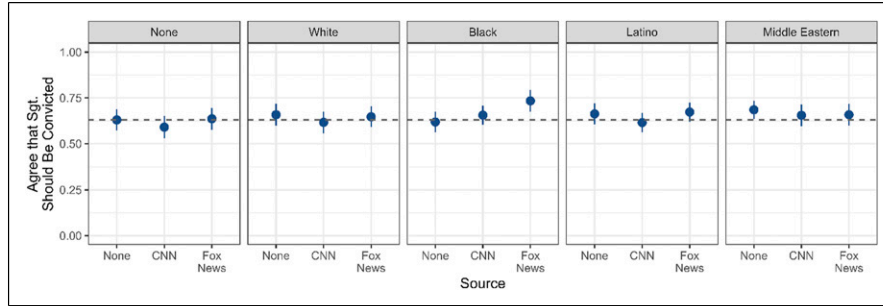
Figure 2. Results from Study 1.

Overall, Study 1 offers evidence of a racial bias expressed by White respondents when they consume news from a conservative media outlet. That said, there may be limitations to our results. First, we collected the data for Study 1 in the weeks immediately preceding the 2020 U.S. Election and not long after the peak of Black Lives Matter protests. The salience of both partisanship and racial attitudes pertaining to Black Americans during this period might have been especially heightened. Second, given the statistical probability of committing a Type 1 error at conventional levels (5%), we might have found our experimental results by chance. To address these concerns, we replicated the first study using a larger (though far more convenient) sample.

Study 2

Study 2 replicated Study 1 with minor modifications. First, the experimental design was pre-registered at aspredicted. org (affiliated with the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton Credibility Lab).[11] Second, respondents were sampled via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) crowd-sourcing service[12] (a total of 2579 participants with IP addresses within the U.S. were paid $0.20 to complete the survey, which took an average of about 5 minutes). Third, we employed only one racialized name per racial category.[13] Finally, we employed an attention check.[14] In accordance with our pre-registration, we dropped from the analysis any respondent who identified as non-White or who failed the attention check.[15]
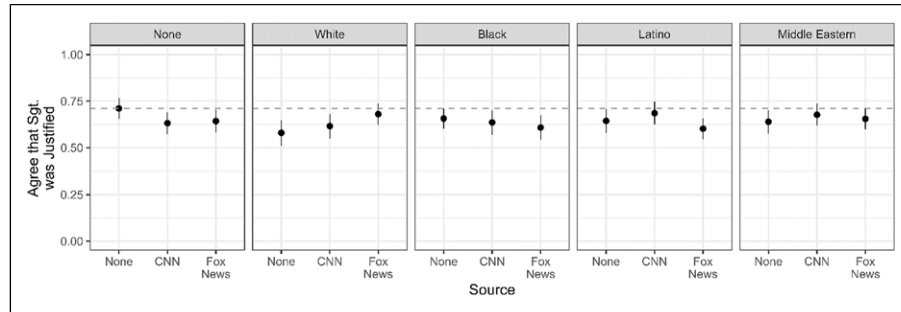
As shown in Table 3, the MTurk results follow a slightly different pattern to the Bovitz sample analyzed in Study 1. Still, we find interactions between racial considerations and exposure to partisan media branding. Rather than the Fox News masthead activating a specific anti-Black effect, we find some evidence that it promotes a pro-White effect. While none of the regression coefficients are statistically significant regarding whether the soldier ought to be convicted, race and media source cues seem to alter perceptions of whether he was justified. If the soldier was White and the media source was

Table 3. Results from Study 2

	Convicted	Justified
Constant	0.680***	0.711***
	(0.0234)	(0.0316)
White	0.0449	−0.131**
	(0.0326)	(0.0439)
Black	−0.0244	−0.0543
	(0.0321)	(0.0434)
Latino	0.0170	−0.0669
	(0.0331)	(0.0448)
Middle Eastern	0.0121	−0.0716
	(0.0328)	(0.0444)
CNN	0.0249	−0.0793
	(0.0315)	(0.0426)
Fox News	0.0506	−0.0685
	(0.0324)	(0.0438)
White X CNN	−0.0550	0.116
	(0.0450)	(0.0607)
White X Fox News	−0.0724	0.169**
	(0.0456)	(0.0615)
Black X CNN	0.0150	0.0583
	(0.0455)	(0.0617)
Black X Fox News	−0.00371	0.0199
	(0.0453)	(0.0613)
Latino X CNN	−0.0233	0.121*
	(0.0454)	(0.0613)
Latino X Fox News	−0.0589	0.0266
	(0.0458)	(0.0618)
Middle Eastern X CNN	−0.0285	0.117
	(0.0453)	(0.0612)
Middle Eastern X Fox News	−0.0476	0.0833
	(0.0458)	(0.0620)
Observations	1428	1426

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses.
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

unnamed, respondents judged him to be significantly *less justified* in his actions, but when the same information was presented under the Fox News logo, respondents found him to be significantly *more justified* in his actions.[16]

Figure 3. Results from Study 2.

Figure 3 presents the results graphically, with point estimates and 95% confidence intervals for each of our conditions. This figure allows us to compare each treatment condition with the control (no masthead/no name) more directly. Here, it is clear that in comparison to the control, those in both the Latino/Fox and Black/Fox condition judged the officer as less justified than the soldier in the control condition. Still more, the White soldier in the Fox News condition is not judged more harshly than the soldier in the control condition, an advantage in comparison to the soldiers of color.

Conclusion

This article presented results from two original survey experiments parsing the relationship between exposure to partisan media branding and how Americans interpret and assess news, with a focus on racial justice. In Study 1, we found that, in the case of U.S. servicemembers accused of war crimes, the priming effect of the Fox News logo led Whites to discriminate against one group: Black Americans. In Study 2, we found some evidence of a pro-White bias when respondents were exposed to a Fox News masthead. Taken together, results indicate that partisan media may shape attitudes not just through specific content, but also by acting as an ideological or even racialized prime. Specifically, we discovered that a prominent conservative news outlet appears to influence how White Americans apply judgments across racial groups.

Going forward, scholars should assess our findings further and explain the somewhat varied results. Given research showing that consumption of Fox News predicts consumption of other right-wing media (e.g., Breitbart and Rush Limbaugh) (Stecula and Pickup 2021), future studies ought to determine whether similar effects are distilled in other types of media platforms (e.g., radio and newspaper) and/or whether a "ratchet-up" effect can be detected as news outlets move further to the right (e.g., Newsmax and OANN). Furthermore, researchers could probe whether seeing a conservative media logo depresses support for reforms against anti-Black policy brutality or anti-racist

initiatives, and whether other races are seen more negatively when engaged in activities aligned with their group stereotypes (e.g., Latinos and undocumented immigration). Studies could also examine whether partisan media cues affect attitudes toward a range of non-race-related issues, from tax cuts to abortion to climate change. Conservative and liberal media present news stories differently, but we discovered that partisan media branding alone may be enough to alter citizens' attitudes.

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Notes

1. According to the 2018 *General Social Survey,* the U.S. military was the only national institution to elicit a modal response of "a great deal of confidence."
2. War crimes cases became especially salient after President Donald Trump pardoned or granted clemency for three U.S. servicemembers accused or convicted of war crimes in November 2019 (Philipps 2019) and pardoned four Blackwater contractors for war crimes in December 2020 (Safi 2020). The controversial moves elicited positive receptions on Fox News,

whereas the reaction on liberal-leaning networks was much more negative.

3. Data from Bovitz have been used in a number of political science studies. See, for example: Bolsen et al. (2014); Chong and Druckman (2013); Druckman et al. (2013).

4. This experiment was not pre-registered.

5. 50.5% of respondents were female, the modal educational attainment was a college degree, 65% of respondents were non-Hispanic whites, 16% identified as Hispanic, and the traditional seven-point measures of both partisanship (mean = 3.60) and ideology (3.70) were just slightly left of center.

6. However, see Kam and Burge (2018, 2019) and Burge and Johnson (2018) for important exceptions. When we do estimate results for all respondents, findings remain similar (see Appendix Table A4).

7. The survey queried demographic information prior to the experimental manipulation.

8. Although the article does not directly depict any actual person or events, details from this scenario are loosely derived from cases of detainee killings by U.S. Navy SEAL Chief Petty Officer Eddie Gallagher and U.S. Army Special Forces officer Major Matthew Golsteyn.

9. Such conduct is presumptively unlawful under both the U.S. Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) and the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols.

10. While some confidence intervals may appear to overlap, for example the CNN and Fox News conditions which depicted a black soldier, they are actually statistically different from one another (t = 1.97, d.f. = 195, p < 0.05). Other differences, however, like that between the "Black/Fox News" and "Middle Eastern/None" condition, are statistically indistinguishable from one another (t = 0.80, d.f. = 214, p = 0.42). Again, given the number of pair-wise comparisons that *could* be made, we acknowledge that if all 105 comparisons *were made*, none of our differences would be statistically distinguishable from one another after using either Tukey's honest significant difference corrections or a Bonferroni multiple testing correction.

11. The study was registered on April 24th 2022 as "Race, Source, and Culpability for Alleged War Crimes" (study #94995), and the main question being asked/tested was given as: "White Americans who see a story about a non-white soldier will be more likely to say the soldier should be punished for their alleged crime than either an unnamed soldier or a white soldier. We also expect there will be an interaction between soldiers with black names and the source of the story participants are reading, such that those subjects in the Black*Fox News condition will be more likely to say the soldier should be convicted and less likely to say he was justified in his actions.

12. Although such samples are both convenient and can be as representative as in-person convenience samples (Berinsky et al., 2012; Clifford et al., 2015), MTurk samples have been shown to be susceptible to some degrees of fraud (Kennedy et al., 2020). The survey described to respondents as a research study on "typeface and its effect on reading comprehension, particularly comprehension of news stories."

13. Names were: Tyrone Washington (Black), Santiago Gonzalez (Latino), Mustafa Husain (Middle Eastern), and Todd Becker (White).

14. Immediately after reading the simulated news story, respondents were asked to identify the "branch of the United States military [NAME] was serving in when the alleged crime took place." Given that the article included the words "US Army" in the headline and the words "US Army Ranger" in the first sentence, we believe this to be a reasonable question for anyone who had read the story to accurately answer. 81% of our respondents answered correctly.

15. Appendix Table A1 shows summary statistics for each of our 15 conditions.

16. A similar effect is also seen when the Latino soldier's story is told under a CNN masthead, though we made no hypotheses about this specific condition.

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