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Scuds and Patriots: A Content Analysis of Letters to the Editor in The Tennessean and The Washington Post During the Persian Gulf War

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SCUDS AND PATRIOTS: A CONTENT ANALYSIS
OF LETTERS TO THE EDITOR IN THE TENNESSEAN
AND THE WASHINGTON POST DURING THE PERSIAN GULF WAR

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of Sociology
Western Kentucky University
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of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Donna L. Dorris
May 1994
SCUDS AND PATRIOTS: A CONTENT ANALYSIS
OF LETTERS TO THE EDITOR IN THE TENNESSEAN
AND THE WASHINGTON POST DURING THE PERSIAN GULF WAR

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES.................................................................vi
ABSTRACT.................................................................vii
CHAPTER 1  INTRODUCTION.............................................1
  Importance of Study..................................................2
  Organization of Chapters............................................6
CHAPTER 2  THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK...............................8
  Symbolic Interactionism..........................................8
    History of Symbolic Interactionism.........................9
    Mead’s Synthesis.................................................12
    Modern Symbolic Interactionism............................14
    Symbols..........................................................17
  Ethnomethodology...............................................18
    History of Ethnomethodology...............................18
    Central Concepts of Ethnomethodology....................20
    A Note on Radical Reflexivity...............................24
CHAPTER 3  REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.............................28
  Letters Research................................................28
  Use of Symbolic Communication...............................31
  Ethnomethodological Review...................................35
## LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>LETTERS PRINTED AND CODED DURING THE THREE TIME PERIODS UNDER STUDY</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>SEX OF LETTER WRITER</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>INTERCODER RELIABILITY COEFFICIENTS FOR TWO CODERS</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>TOP FIVE APPEALS USED BY WRITERS IN THE TENNESSEAN</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>TOP FIVE APPEALS USED BY WRITERS IN THE WASHINGTON POST</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>OBJECTS OF PERSONAL ATTACK IN THE TENNESSEAN</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>OBJECTS OF PERSONAL ATTACK IN THE WASHINGTON POST</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>LETTER WRITERS’ THEMES BY NEWSPAPER</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>CONTENT VARIABLES BY NEWSPAPER</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>LETTER WRITERS’ WAR STANCES BY NEWSPAPER</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>LETTER WRITERS’ ORIENTATIONS BY NEWSPAPER</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>LETTER WRITERS’ WAR STANCES BY TIME PERIOD</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>LETTER WRITERS’ THEMES BY TIME PERIOD</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>LETTER WRITERS’ ORIENTATIONS BY TIME PERIOD</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>OTHER CONTENT VARIABLES BY TIME PERIOD</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>NEWSPAPER VARIABLES BY SEX OF LETTER WRITER</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The purpose of this study was to examine the content of 186 war related letters to the editor written to The Tennessean and The Washington Post during three time periods during the Persian Gulf War. The time periods included the week before, of, and after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the beginning of the air war, and the beginning of the ground war. Content analysis was used to document patterns of and differences in letter content between papers. A qualitative analysis based on symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology revealed symbol use and use of ethnomethods among writers. Almost 25% of the letters were coded as personal attacks. Significant differences were found with the newspaper in which the letter was published and the time period in which it was published as independent variables. Sex of the letter writer was not significantly related to any of the variables under study.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The Persian Gulf War seems to many, if not most, Americans to have been an unequivocal success in terms of military victory and the relatively small number of American and allied casualties. But rather than relegate the war and all its surrounding issues, people, and events to the history books, I have examined a small part of the public's understanding of the war in greater detail.

The focus of this study was the content of war related letters to the editor published in The Tennessean and The Washington Post during three time periods during the war. These time periods included July 26th to August 15th, 1990; January 10th to January 30th, 1991; and February 17th to March 9th, 1991. The time periods were chosen so that letter content could be studied during the week before, of, and after three main events of the war. These events included the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the beginning of the air war, and the beginning of the ground war.

The two newspapers were chosen to facilitate a comparison between the content of letters published in a mass newspaper (The Tennessean) and a prestige newspaper (The Post). The prestige press is generally defined as the
15 newspapers considered to be the best in the United States (Stempel 1989).

Each war related letter printed during one of these three time periods was content analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively in order to document and describe any patterns of content difference and/or similarity that emerged.

Importance of Study

A newspaper's letters section is a valuable resource for research into the public's thinking about and understanding of current events and issues. It gives readers an avenue to interpret and evaluate events important to them. Davis and Rarick (1964) proposed that the letters section served as catharsis because it "gives the irate, the antagonist, the displeased a chance to speak out and be heard" (p. 109). The letters reflect opinions and evaluations of events as well as evaluations of the media's performance in covering these events.

Over the past twenty years editorial pages have become more important to both readers and publishers. As small, family-owned newspapers were sold off to large media companies, dissenting views once found in the letters section became fewer. In response to reader demands several newspapers overhauled and gave new emphasis to their letters sections. They had learned that "since what the public thinks is news, the press can hardly lose by knowing--and
running--more about it" ("Letting in the Public" 1974, p. 51).

The relevance of the content of letters to the editor, especially during times of war or other crises, lies partly in the fact that newspapers are important physical and historical records. But newspapers also bear an additional public responsibility. Though they are profit-seekers, newspapers are charged in the First Amendment of the Constitution with putting public roles and social responsibility above the pursuit of profit (Dreier 1982). In doing so, newspapers necessarily become ideological and set the agenda of political, social, and economic debate. They shape public opinion on crucial issues; socialize individuals to social roles behavior; and can legitimate or undermine powerful institutions, individuals and ideas. (Dreier 1982, p. 298)

Though few media researchers would agree totally with these specific purposes and effects of media messages, even fewer would maintain that newspapers are neutral information brokers. Some maintain that the press helps create the very news it purports to report. In his book Manufacturing the News, Mark Fishman writes that it is not useful to think of news as either distorting or reflecting reality, because "realities" are made and news is part of the system that makes them. (1980, p. 12)

As an example of news and the social construction of reality, Fishman cites a newspaper’s investigation of a so-called crime wave against elderly residents in New York in
1976 to illustrate how the mass media may in fact "produce news accounts in such a way that they create and recreate the social phenomena they report" (1980, p. 4). Fishman believes that the newspaper's editors helped create the appearance of the crime wave by organizing diverse incidents into the theme at hand, which was crime against the elderly. News themes, according to Fishman, "allow editors to organize an otherwise confusing array of events into packages or groups of interrelated news items" (1980, p. 5).

Other media researchers agree that newspapers and other types of media serve as gatekeepers and agenda-setters, and through these roles help shape the news and how it comes to be viewed by the public. Gaye Tuchman writes in her classic book Making News that in "seeking to disseminate information that people want, need, and should know, news organizations both circulate and shape knowledge" (1978, p. 2). And studies have shown that topics given the most coverage by media outlets are most likely the topics that people identify as the most important of the day (Tuchman 1978, p. 2).

Gatekeeping refers to the filtering process that information goes through as it enters and goes up the chain of command in news organizations. Reporters and editors identify the issues and events that are important enough to be pursued and/or printed. In this way the gate opens for some information while it simultaneously shuts out that information deemed not important, timely, or newsworthy.
enough. By fulfilling the gatekeeping function, newspapers also serve as agenda setters, identifying for readers the issues and events that are important enough for them to think and talk about.

The gatekeeping and agenda setting functions are also applicable to the letters sections of newspapers. Issues such as timeliness and newsworthiness are just as important to the letters editor and any others involved in selecting letters to be printed as they are to the editor of any other section. In this respect readers of the letters section are exposed to those letters that comment on the crucial issues that Dreier (1982) writes of, usually the same issues that have already been identified as being newsworthy in other sections of the newspaper.

Another important reason for studying newspaper content, in this case letters to the editor, is the sheer number of people exposed daily to this medium. During a six-month period ending September 30, 1992, the average daily newspaper circulation in the United States was 60,164,499 with 1,570 daily newspapers in print (Famighetti 1994, p. 291).

Both of the newspapers in this study ranked among the top 100 in circulation. The Washington Post ranked fifth in the United States with a total daily circulation of 802,057. The Tennessean ranked 79th out of the top 100 with a total daily circulation of 139,086 (Famighetti 1994, p. 291).
Additionally, in a survey of 1,979 adults, media researcher Leo Bogart (1984) found that 87 percent of the public reads a newspaper at least one day during the course of a week. He also found that on any given weekday, newspapers are read in 75 percent of all households in the United States and are in the hands of over 110 million adults (Bogart 1984). While these numbers may have changed in the last few years and while they certainly cannot tell us how many of these people are reading the letters section, it does seem logical to expect that newspapers do contribute something to readers' knowledge and understanding of important events. If that is the case, the letters sections should reflect the content of that knowledge and understanding.

Organization of Chapters

Chapter 2 traces the history and major concepts of symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology, with specific emphasis given to how they apply to the content (what is said) and the form (how it is said) of war time letters to the editor. Chapter 3 is a review of relevant literature in three areas, including research into the letters to the editor sections of newspapers, studies examining the media's methods of creating reality through symbolic communication, and ethnomethodological studies conducted by Harold Garfinkel and others. Chapter 3 reveals some links between
these diverse areas of research and shows their applicability to the study at hand.

Chapter 4 includes discussion of the methods used in the study, including quantitative and qualitative content analysis and the calculation of intercoder reliability. It also includes a discussion of some limitations and delimitations of these methods. Chapter 5 contains results and discussion of the similarities and differences found during the quantitative content analysis of the letters in each newspaper. Chapter 6 contains the results of the qualitative content analysis and a discussion of those results based on the theoretical insights of symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology as presented in Chapter 2. Presented in Chapter 7 are conclusions based on the quantitative and qualitative results including several implications for further research in this area.
CHAPTER 2
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

I have employed symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology as theoretical frameworks from which to examine both the content (what is said) and form (how it is said) of Persian Gulf War related letters to the editor printed in The Tennessean and The Washington Post newspapers during three, three-week time periods of the war. The time periods cover the week before, of, and after three events: Iraqi invasion of Kuwait; the beginning of the air war; and the beginning of the ground war. This chapter traces the historical roots and central concepts of both of these theories and examines how they can be applied to the content of war time letters to the editor.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism in all its varieties focuses on the capacity of active and interacting humans to create, use, and interpret symbols through the use of language, words, gestures, and actions. Symbols are defined by Charon (1985) as "social objects used to represent (or 'stand in for,' 'take the place of') whatever people agree they shall represent" (p. 39). Important to this study is the idea
that words are symbols since they represent the attitudes, values, and ideological positions of letter writers.

Because symbols are constantly interpreted and reinterpreted in social interactions among people, social reality is in constant flux. Through symbolic interaction "we give the world meaning and develop the reality toward which we act" (Charon 1985, p. 55).

History of Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism originated in the United States along with other interactionist thought in the early 1900s as the "grand analytical schemes" of early theorists such as Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim gave way to a focus on "the specific processes that link individuals to one another and to society" (Turner 1991, p. 369). George Herbert Mead consolidated these concerns and his own interactionist thoughts and ideas into a corpus of knowledge while at the University of Chicago from 1893 to 1931.

Mead was heavily influenced by three thinkers of his time: William James, Charles Horton Cooley, and John Dewey. James contributed to Mead the concept of the self. James believed that just as people could develop perspectives and actions toward other people and objects in their environments, so too could they treat themselves as objects toward which feelings, attitudes, and actions could be directed.

James created a typology of selves including the material, social, and spiritual self (Wilshire 1971, p. 83).
The material self consisted of a person's body, his or her clothing, family members, home, and other possessions. The social self was that self created through interaction with others. James noted that "a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him" (Wilshire 1971, p. 85). By this he meant that a person could present whatever self was necessary in a situation based on the way he or she wanted to be viewed. The spiritual self included a person's innermost and essential self, as revealed through self-reflection.

The emphasis on human interaction and its consequences on individuals became even more important as Cooley developed the concept of the looking glass self (Cooley 1964, p. 184). The looking glass self concept stressed that people come to view themselves on the basis of how they think others see them. Cooley wrote that "we always imagine, and in imagining share, the judgments of the other mind" (1964, pp. 184 and 185). Cooley also noted that primary groups, or those groups which allowed personal or intimate ties, were more important than other types of groups in shaping people's self images.

John Dewey (1929) emphasized the process of mind. Mind, to Dewey, was the process of thinking, or deliberating, on those lines of action or reaction that would best facilitate the mastery of conditions in one's environment. Through this emphasis on mind as a process of observing, analyzing, and choosing possible courses of
action, Dewey showed that mind exists only through interactions in and with the social world. Dewey did for mind what James and Cooley did for the self—that is, to link it to human interaction.

Three other philosophies combined to influence Mead: pragmatism, Darwinism, and behaviorism. There are four basic ideas of pragmatism. The first is that human beings create their own truths through the active process of interpretation. The second and third ideas are that humans judge both knowledge and objects on the basis of their usefulness to them. Fourth, humans come to understand one another through inferring motive and meaning to actions (Charon 1985). To the pragmatist, "meanings of objects reside in the behavior directed toward them and not in the objects themselves" (Manis and Meltzer 1978, p. 3).

Darwin’s influence led Mead to view individuals as having a measure of control over their own destinies. Mead expanded to human beings the Darwinian view that things in the natural world should be understood on the basis of laws, not supernatural explanations. Mead was also influenced by Darwin’s theory of evolution. Mead believed that humans, as a result of evolutionary traits, were uniquely able to recognize and sometimes alter the forces affecting them. Also, in those cases where humans were not able to alter these forces, they could at least find ways to adjust to them (Mead 1934).
Mead also carried Darwin's view of the universe as being dynamic into the human realm. In this view, the individual, as well as society, is seen as dynamic and changing, never static or simply "out there" (Charon 1985, p. 29).

The third influence on Mead was behaviorism. On one hand Mead agreed with the behaviorist view that people should be understood in terms of behavior, but he believed there was much more to be concerned with than only that behavior which was overt or readily seen. Mead, interested also in mind behavior, was a social behaviorist who emphasized the particular experiences of individuals.

Mead's Synthesis

Mead's synthesis of the ideas discussed on the previous pages began with two basic assumptions, according to Turner (1991). The first was that the biological frailty of humans forces them to cooperate in groups. The second was that only those actions that facilitated cooperation, and thus survival, were retained. Working from these assumptions Mead created a unique conception of mind, self, and society that formed the basis of modern symbolic interactionism.

Mead stressed that mind had its genesis in social interaction. He wrote that "mind can never find expression, and could never have come into existence at all, except in terms of a social environment" (Strauss 1977, p. 242.) For example, as a newborn is rewarded by others for some gestures (and not others), those gestures generating rewards
come to have the same meaning for both parties. By coming to agreement on the meanings of gestures, humans then become able to imaginatively take on the role or perspective of another and to use that perspective to imagine, rehearse, and choose among actions. Mead believed mind existed when these capabilities were developed.

Through his conception of the self, Mead recognized that people can treat themselves as they treat any other object of experience. Mead saw the self as also emerging from repeated interactions with people. He believed that the self developed over time and that

it is not initially there at birth but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals in that process. (Strauss 1977, p. 199)

Mead noted three stages in the development of self. The first is the imitation stage, where children simply mock the actions of others in their environments. The second is the play stage, in which a child is capable of assuming the role of one or two particular others. The third is the game stage, where the child is capable of taking the role of the "generalized other" in order to understand the general beliefs or value system of a community or other large organization.

The concept of self remained central to symbolic interactionism as the theory evolved. All symbolic
interactionists view the self as an essential reference point for people as they receive and interpret social symbols. Handel (1993) writes that using symbols in thought, conversation, or other communication "involves the development of a self to which the individual can refer" (p. 132). He continues:

Choosing, interpreting individuals are able to think, to coordinate their conduct, and to make themselves predictable to one another by utilizing symbols in an interpretive process requiring awareness of and reference to oneself. (Handel 1993, p. 132)

Mead viewed society and social organization as interdependent with individuals' capacities for mind and self. Social institutions existed by virtue of people's common responses to situations in their communities (Strauss 1977, p. 249). Conversely,

without social institutions of some sort, without the organized social attitudes and activities by which social institutions are constituted, there could be no fully mature individual selves or personalities at all. (Strauss 1977, p. 250)

Mead also viewed the organized activities of society as always subject to change since people constantly interpret and reinterpret objects and their meanings, including themselves.

Modern Symbolic Interactionism

Modern symbolic interactionism developed as various thinkers selectively interpreted Mead's work. Most notable of these thinkers are Herbert Blumer, a student of Mead, and
Manford Kuhn, whose differing views about the nature of human personality and behavior took symbolic interaction in different directions.

There are generally considered to be two schools of symbolic interactionist thought: the Chicago school, advocated by Blumer, and the Iowa school, headed by Kuhn. While they do share several commonalties, they differ radically in their ideas about the stability and continuity of human personality, action, and organization.

Blumer and the Chicago school viewed people as creators of the worlds they respond to. Blumer believed that persons defined a situation prior to reacting to it. In addition, their responses were not made strictly on the basis of the facts of the situation but rather on the meaning imputed by the person to those facts. Thus,

> human interaction is mediated by the use of symbols, by interpretation, or by ascertaining the meaning of one another’s actions. This mediation is equivalent to inserting a process of interpretation between stimulus and response. (Blumer 1969, p. 78)

Blumer believed that people viewed themselves as objects and could insert themselves or any other object into their interactions. Thus, he viewed human behavior as dynamic and ever-changing. The Iowa school, on the other hand, saw human personality and behavior as being somewhat stable and predictable because people have a consistent core-self that dictates the way they define the various
situations in which they find themselves. (Meltzer and Petras 1972).

These opposing views about the self result in different views about the nature of human interaction and social organization. Blumer's emphasis on the individual's ability and tendency to insert any object into an interaction in order to define the situation and map out an avenue of action leads him to stress "the creative, constructed, and changeable nature of interaction" (Turner 1991, p. 397). Blumer extends this vision to the larger society. Social organization, to Blumer, is similar to separate human interactions—temporary and fluid.

Blumer also notes that social organization in the view of symbolic interactionism is unique. Rather than seeing social action as resulting from various structures in society, the symbolic interactionist views social organization as providing the framework within which social action can occur (Blumer 1969). Symbolic interactionists also view social organization and any changes to it as a "product of the activity of acting units and not of 'forces' which leave such acting units out of account" (Blumer 1969, p. 87).

Though these fundamental differences do exist, there are themes common to all symbolic interactionism. The primary commonality is the view of humans as uniquely capable of creating and using symbols in their interactions.
Symbols

Handel (1993) writes that the significant symbol, or a symbol that holds a common meaning for individuals, "establishes a theoretical continuity between society and mind" by allowing people to "communicate their plans, intentions, purposes, and thoughts--in short, their mental lives--to each other" (p. 131). Through the use of symbols, then, humans are able to read one another and have an idea of others' behavioral tendencies. They are able to take the role of the other and adjust their behaviors accordingly.

The use of symbols and symbolic communication allows humans to be time-binding and to base their present realities on what happened in the past or what is envisioned by the person to happen in the future (Handel and Lauer 1983). Time-binding occurs repeatedly in the letters under study as writers apply lessons learned in the past to the situation at hand. A good example of this occurs in The Post when writer Eva-Marie Michalski asserts that

Because the United States has not had the guts to push for a peaceful solution to other Middle Eastern conflicts in the past, Mr. Bush's ego simply does not allow him to share such an outcome with Saddam Hussein now (1991, p. A-20).

In addition to the focus on the use of symbols in letters to the editor during the Persian Gulf War is a focus on the methods by which letter writers create their versions of reality about the war. This second focus takes the study
into the realm of ethnomethodology, which is the second theoretical framework to be examined.

Ethnomethodology

Ethnomethodology views social order and patterns of stable social actions as originating in the activities of individuals and focuses exclusively on these activities and their consequences. It is the ethnomethodologists' contention that while conventional sociology assumes that society is governed by a stable system of norms, it does not see the need to examine the processes that create this system (Rogers 1983).

It is precisely these creative processes that are the domain of ethnomethodology, which Rogers defines as the empirical investigation ("-ology") of the methods ("method-") people ("ethno-") use to make sense of and at the same time accomplish communication, decision making, reasonableness, and action in everyday life (1983, p. 84).

History of Ethnomethodology

The publication of the first ethnomethodological studies in the late 1960s coincided with social movements concerning Americans' civil liberties and rights and political protests against the Vietnam War. In this atmosphere, Parsonian theory and its focus on the functional requirements of social structures to the exclusion of the actions of individuals was not practical. As an
alternative, theories were created that placed emphasis instead on the importance of the social actor's point of view and his or her subsequent construction of reality based on that view (Heritage 1984, p. 2).

Harold Garfinkel, the originator of ethnomethodology, wrote his doctoral dissertation under the tutelage of Parsons at Harvard University, but he ultimately disagreed with the most fundamental aspects of Parsonian theory. Parsons believed that shared internalized norms explained patterns of social behavior, but he never attended to the existence or importance of interpretive judgments Garfinkel believed were used in applying these norms.

Garfinkel rejected the idea that these judgments could be ignored entirely or treated as irrelevant to an analysis of social organization. He emphasized that people are not "judgmental dopes" (Garfinkel 1967, p. 67) blindly following the prescriptions and proscriptions of norms and rules.

In order to procure the conceptual tools necessary to begin examining these new types of questions, Garfinkel turned to phenomenological philosophy, which at the time provided the only major insights into the experience of individuals (Heritage 1984).

Phenomenology was growing in popularity at the time Garfinkel was doing his dissertation research. Phenomenology grew out of a crisis in mathematics in the late 1890s in which some of the basic foundations of math were being questioned.
To Edmund Husserl, a mathematician and the founder of phenomenology, all objects of consciousness existed "as the product of constitutive acts" and thus stood as "units of meaning which are established in their moments of recognition" (Heritage 1984, p. 42).

It was with phenomenological philosophy and the extension of the ideas of Alfred Schutz that Garfinkel rounded out the precepts of ethnomethodology. Schutz was concerned mainly with intersubjectivity, or the way in which people felt they shared common experiences with one another and how they communicated those experiences (Hilbert 1992, pp. 126 and 127).

Schutz felt that the fact that people could never have identical experiences was irrelevant since people "assume that their experiences of the world are similar and act as if their experiences were identical-for-all-practical-purposes" (Heritage 1984, p. 54). In his studies Garfinkel examined this assumption as well as its manifestations and consequences.

Central Concepts of Ethnomethodology

Ethnomethodology is built upon two main concepts, indexicality and reflexivity. Indexicality means that without some supplied context, or "indexical particulars," objects and events "have equivocal or multiple meanings" (Leiter 1980, p. 107). Garfinkel claimed that all natural language, the language used by society’s members daily, is inherently indexical in that members must know something
about the circumstances or facts attending an utterance or action in order to assign meaning to and understand that utterance or action.

Reflexivity means that people create a reality for themselves and others even as they participate in and describe it. Leiter writes that

The features of a setting that are revealed by descriptive accounts and behavior do not just explicate the setting; they, in turn, are explicated by the setting. (1980, p. 139)

Indexicality and reflexivity are not, in and of themselves, topics of ethnomethodological study. They are, however, fundamental properties of things such as talk, settings, and behavior that are essential in allowing people to produce, sustain, and reproduce a sense of external social order or reality and are necessary in order to understand other ethnomethodological concepts such as accounting.

Accounts.

The view that a sense of social order or structure is a managed and ongoing accomplishment of society’s members leads the ethnomethodologist to focus on the descriptive accounts, or stories, that people constantly communicate to "organize and render observable the features of a society and social settings..." (Leiter 1980, p. 161). Accounts are themselves indexical and reflexive in that "Talk is ‘a constituent feature of the same setting that it is used to talk about’" (Garfinkel 1967, p. 17).
It is the creation of the account through accounting practices, rather than the content of the account, that is the topic of ethnomethodological study. The documentary method of interpretation and the use of interpretive procedures are two accounting practices that ethnomethodologist's believe people use to achieve the perception of a factual social world.

Documentary Method of Interpretation.

The documentary method of interpretation occurs when a set of appearances is viewed as representing some underlying pattern (Garfinkel 1967). The use of this method is similar to time-binding discussed in the section on symbolic interactionism in that it provides people with a sense that events are consistent. Without this sense, objects and events would lose their facticity because they would be seen as idiosyncratic. They would thus lack elements such as typicality, likelihood, and comparability, elements people depend on to make their lives rational and understandable.

Interpretive Procedures.

Interpretive procedures can be seen as the vehicle by which the documentary method is achieved (Leiter 1980). With the concept of interpretive procedures, Aaron Cicourel tried to show how individuals translated their mundane knowledge into facts they based their view of reality on. Cicourel's interpretive procedures included the reciprocity of perspectives, the search for normal forms, and the et cetera principle (Cicourel 1974).
The reciprocity of perspectives means that in their communications with others people assume that if they switched places each would see what the other sees. They also assume at the outset that their unique biographies mean little to the interaction but only until cues or gestures suggest otherwise. At that point the biography of the other person may be taken into account in explaining how or why a person could come up with an interpretation of someone or something.

Searching for the normal form means that in their communications, people expect one another to use speech that is intelligible, understandable, and "embedded within a body of tacit common knowledge—'what anyone knows,'" to use Garfinkel's phrase (Leiter 1980, p. 174). This expectation presumes that actors have some sort of prior knowledge as to what the normal form is or can create one if necessary. So, should an interaction become strained or ambiguous, the parties will be capable of emitting gestures that direct the offending party to return to what is perceived as "normal" within the context at hand.

In order to sustain the normal form as well as the reciprocity of perspectives, the et cetera principle must constantly be invoked. The et cetera principle requires communicators to either fill in or wait for information that will allow them to achieve clarification or understanding of what a speaker has previously said or done.
It also means that the speaker or actor, in leaving out the meanings of his or her words or actions, assumes and expects that the hearer can and will fill in the intended meanings. The et cetera principle provides a way to "retrospectively reread" communication in light of present or changing circumstances to figure out what "really" existed "in the first place" and "all along" (Garfinkel 1967, p. 74).

A Note on Radical Reflexivity

In recent years, mainstream sociology has begun to recognize ethnomethodological literature and incorporate some of its findings into the discipline. Pollner, however, laments the fact that while ethnomethodology may be "settling down in the suburbs of sociology" (1991 p. 370), much of its original radicalism is being lost in the move. Pollner claims that radical or referential reflexivity, once a central concept of ethnomethodology, has been watered down or completely forgotten recently.

It has not been forgotten in terms of this study since the methods used lend themselves to the two related understandings of reflexivity in early ethnomethodology. The first understanding was "endogenous reflexivity," which means that a person’s knowledge or description of a setting "turns back" into the setting as a constituent feature of the setting’s organization (Pollner 1991, p. 372).

The second understanding, referential reflexivity, "conceives of all analysis—ethnomethodology included—as a
constitutive process" (Pollner 1991, p. 372). In this respect individuals and analysts alike are involved in creating endogenous reflexivity. Referential reflexivity is radicalized when it is recognized by analysts that they are involved in creating endogenous reflexivity and "when the formulation of reflexivity—as well as every other feature of analysis—is appreciated as an endogenous achievement" (Pollner 1991, p. 372).

In early ethnomethodological studies, radical reflexivity was important, even central. In differing degrees, Pollner writes, the early studies attended to the "practices and presuppositions of the researcher as they address those of participants in the settings" under study (1991, p. 372). Pollner cites Cicourel's (1967) study of the organization of the juvenile justice system and Lawrence Weider's (1974) study of a halfway house for drug addicts as examples.

In Cicourel's study, the interpretations and decisions of researchers were considered even as the researchers considered the interpretations and decisions of the police and the juveniles' families. In the other study, Weider used the documentary method of interpretation to try to understand the convict code at the halfway house. He writes that had he not had a general idea that the code translated utterances into moral imperatives, he "could not have collected those utterances together as expressions of the same underlying pattern" (Weider 1974, p. 161).
Pollner writes that ethnomethodology "oscillates between reflexive and mundane epistemology" (1991, p. 379). In the mundane mode ethnomethodology suppresses and ignores reflexivity and "partakes of the practices that provide the sense of an 'always already there' world awaiting descriptions that are more or less comprehensive and true" (Pollner 1991, p. 379). In the reflexive mode, the basic suppositions and practices that allow the constitution of the domain of study become the phenomena, with the full recognition that whatever is produced is itself an "achievement"--including, of course, the characterization of them as an achievement. (Pollner 1991, p. 379)

The reflexive mode applies in this study, both in the construction and application of the coding categories and in the qualitative analysis. In analyzing the letters qualitatively the researcher uses the documentary method of interpretation to document instances of the documentary method of interpretation; that is, sentences from letters are chosen, then grouped, and then described as examples of the documentary method of interpretation. Having an awareness of the reflexive nature of social science methods allows this researcher to see how a study could be done on the methods used to create and conduct this research project and to provide some sort of interpretation of the "results."

This chapter provided an overview of the history and main concepts of the two theories to be applied to war time
letters to the editor in this study. Insights from symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology are used to examine and describe any patterns of content that emerge in the letters.

Herbert Blumer's vision of symbolic interactionism is used to show how writers interpret, or give meaning to, the facts of the war. Specific attention is given to the types of symbols used by the writers and some possible intended effects of these symbols.

Examples of the documentary method of interpretation and Cicourel's interpretive procedures are noted in order to show how writers use similar ethnomethods in arriving at sometimes opposing viewpoints. Attention is also given to the inherent indexical and reflexive nature of the letters.
CHAPTER 3
LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, relevant literature from three diverse areas of research will be reviewed. First is a discussion of several studies done on the letters to the editor section of newspapers. Second is a review of two studies that examine the print media’s methods of creating reality through the use of symbolic communication and an example of how individuals use the same types of symbolic communication in their dealings with the media. Third is a review of some of the classic ethnomethodological studies conducted by Harold Garfinkel during the late 1960s and 1970s.

The chapter is organized along these lines due to a lack of research into the content of letters to the editor. For this reason, this chapter focuses on theoretical studies and attempts to reveal the links among these elements and the relevance of these links to the study at hand.

Letters Research

It is interesting that very little research has been done on the content of the letters that appear on the editorial pages of America’s newspapers. Only one related study was located in the literature. In that study, Lau
(1991) attempted to pinpoint audience preferences for and concerns about Chinese television shows through a content analysis of letters to the editor in the *Chinese Television Broadcasting Magazine* from 1983 to 1986.

The majority of letters research, however, has focused on the types of people who write letters to the editor. Though there is also a lack of recent research of this type, two early studies do yield some insights (Buell 1975; Vacin 1965).

Vacin's data indicated the typical letter writer was male; middle-aged or older; well-educated (with an average of 14 years of school completed); above average in income; a long-term resident of the community; a regular reader of newspapers and books; and a Republican. The letter writers Vacin studied were from all occupational levels and were politically active, with 104 out of 109 eligible voters having voted in the 1960 Presidential election (1965, p. 465).

Buell's 1975 study revised somewhat Vacin's description of the typical writer. In a secondary analysis of 1972 national election study data, Buell found 163 people who said they had, at one time or another, written a letter about politics to a newspaper or magazine. Buell compared these people to 2,027 others who said they had never written a letter.

Buell's results showed the letter writers were more evenly divided by gender than the non-writers and the
writers were not necessarily middle-aged or older. He also found that the writers were not significantly different from those who had never written in regard to the length of time they had lived in a community. And, though the writers were less inclined than non-writers to be Democrats, they were no more committed to the Republican party than those who had never written.

Buell also delved into the issue of the political ideologies of letter writers. While conventional wisdom usually labels letter writers as "cranks who chronically vent their emotions in print" (Buell 1975, p. 448), Buell found evidence that letter writing "is not the work of a 'crank,' but the logical activity of the political activist" (1975, p. 448).

Buell had hypothesized that letter writers would be more polarized ideologically than non-writers, but found the opposite. The two groups were similar on scales measuring policy preferences on political issues of the day (including the legalization of marijuana, school busing, and government health insurance), and the letter writers were, in fact, somewhat more liberal. Buell noted the irony of these findings in light of the "alleged emotional instability and political extremism of letter writers" (1975, p. 448).

Another area of letter research sought to determine if a so-called marketplace of ideas exists in the letters section. That is, are a variety of ideas and opinions presented? Hill (1981) found evidence that the marketplace
did, indeed, exist. In a study of 632 letters printed in 48 newspapers in response to the proposed Equal Rights Amendment, Hill found that letter opinion closely approximated public opinion on the issue.

These results also lent some support to Buell's assertion that letter writers are not atypical of the general population. The similarity between letter and public opinion "indicates that letter writers share the opinions of their neighbors who do not write letters" (Hill 1981, pp. 390 and 391).

Buell had his doubts that the marketplace of ideas exists, at least in the prestige papers. He found that only six percent of the 75 to 200 letters received daily by The New York Times were printed, and he believed those printed were probably carefully chosen to protect the reputation of the paper. Buell conceded that this probably isn't a problem at less elite newspapers, which are able to print a larger percentage of the letters they receive.

Use of Symbolic Communication

Another area of research, one that has relevance to this study, reveals the link between symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology by showing how the print media may use symbolic communication to create and recreate social realities. The first study examined the language used by
the print media in three newspapers when the Soviet Union launched the Sputnik spacecraft in October of 1957.

Lule (1991) conducted a qualitative analysis of news and editorial coverage of the event in the St. Louis Post Dispatch, The New York Times, and The Los Angeles Times. He noted that

*Sputnik, a 23-inch aluminum ball capable of relaying radio signals to Earth, had no fixed meaning. Reaction to Sputnik, interpretations of Sputnik - were the truly significant phenomena.* (1991, p. 85)

Lule found that the three newspapers, through opening their pages to certain officials, legislators, and scientists, controlled the language that ultimately shaped the public debate on the issue. The media structured the discussion primarily in terms of "a drama of defeat" for the U.S., as a devastating loss in the space race (Lule 1991, p. 76).

Lule also draws attention to the fact that the language used was purely reflexive:

> It was a question of language, of actors, symbols, metaphors and worlds. The language of the press drew from cultural context to explain and report Sputnik; by its use of that language, the news confirmed and sustained that context. (1991, p. 85)

The media's attempt to create a reality must have worked. Lule writes that media coverage of the event and the ensuing public outcry had far-reaching effects, including prompting Americans to take a hard look at their educational system and priorities and contributing to the
creation of the National Aeronautic Space Administration (NASA) in 1958.

The second study shows that reality can be rather fluid, with conceptions and ideas changing as new information, whether accurate or not, is revealed. Cavender and Hufker (1990) studied the media’s social construction of immigrants sent by Fidel Castro to the United States in the Mariel boatlift in 1980.

The researchers found that media coverage was initially favorable, with the 125,000 Cubans being viewed as political refugees. The tide turned when Castro was quoted as saying the group really consisted of prostitutes, homosexuals, and the criminally insane. When the FBI and CIA agreed that the group did, indeed, contain some of these people,

the media’s frame shifted and, with it, the description of the Mariel immigrants from political refugees to "social undesirables." (Cavender and Hufker 1990, p. 321)

Cavender and Hufker claim that "fact by triangulation" occurred, whereby the media combined the individual perspectives of a diverse group of sources into a factual news story (1990, p. 328). Information from several sources, including the CIA, the FBI, the immigrants, boat captains, and then-President Jimmy Carter became the facts, with little attention paid to the personal agendas of the sources.

The media is itself subjected to much symbolic communication from individuals (such as news sources, letter
writers, and others) who seek to represent their attitudes, opinions and business and personal activities in a certain way. Charon (1985) writes that symbol use is intentional on the part of the user to further some aim. He writes that "there is a purpose, and symbols selected are used as a means to that purpose" (1985, p. 41).

A good example of the purposeful nature of the use of symbols comes from The Republican National Committee, which tried to plant pro-war letters in newspapers across the country during the war. The committee mailed a form letter to the editor, already addressed to a newspaper, to 500,000 party contributors and asked the receiver to sign the letter and send it to the local newspaper. The letter criticized the media "for giving 'so much attention' to the anti-war protesters," and was accompanied by a letter from Senator Alan Simpson "urging members to mail the prepared letter to 'demonstrate, in the eyes of the world, America's strong, unyielding resolve' for the war effort" (Fitzgerald 1991, p. 8).

The symbolic communication in this instance was threefold. First was the content of the form letter, which, by attacking the media's coverage of the war protesters, was supposed to show the "writer's" support for the war effort. Second was the form letter itself, intended to symbolize to newspaper editors across the United States that their readers were tired of the coverage of "anti-war protesters." Third was the enclosed letter from Senator Simpson, whose
aim was to convince the contributor it was worthwhile to expend the effort to sign and mail the form letter in the interest of displaying "unyielding resolve" to "the world" (Fitzgerald 1991, p. 8).

Ethnomethodological Review

Harold Garfinkel coined the term "ethnomethodology" after participating in a 1945 study of jurors. He was to listen to tape recordings of the jurors at work and then talk to them in order to see how they would explain their deliberations.

While preparing two papers for presentation, Garfinkel conceived the idea of analyzing the jurors' deliberations. He had observed that the jurors used and required each other to use "some kind of knowledge of the way in which the organized affairs of society operated," and he was interested in using this observation to gain insight into "how the jurors knew what they were doing in doing the work of jurors" (Garfinkel 1974, p. 15).

Around the same time, Garfinkel came across the terms "ethnobotany," "ethnophysics," and "ethnophysiology." Ethno, to Garfinkel, referred to common sense knowledge available to members of society "as common-sense knowledge of the 'whatever'" (Garfinkel 1974, p. 15). For example, ethnobotany concerned a person's "knowledge of and his grasp
of what were for members adequate methods for dealing with
botanical matters" (Garfinkel 1974, pp. 16 and 17). And:

> Just as "botany" in "ethnobotany" refers
to a corpus to be treated as data, so does
"methodology" in "ethnomethodology" stand
for a subject matter, rather than a scientific
apparatus. (Turner 1974, p. 13)

Garfinkel believed mainstream sociologists took
socially structured scenes at face value and as a point of
departure to inquire into the social world and neglected the
more general question of how this common sense world was
possible (Garfinkel 1967, p. 36). To him, the mainstreamers
implied that the answer to the above question was that "the
possibility of the everyday world is either settled by
theoretical representation or is merely assumed" (Garfinkel
1967, p. 36).

To Garfinkel, the answer to the question lay in the
study of individuals' actual common sense knowledge and
activities. The ethnomethodologist was required to
"bracket," or suspend, a belief in a factual social world so
that the vast amounts of interpretive work done in creating
this world could be examined. Thus, Garfinkel's studies
centered on

> treating as problematic the actual methods
whereby members of a society doing sociology,
lay or professional, make the social
structures of everyday life observable.
(Garfinkel 1967, p. 75)

Each of Garfinkel's studies has two fundamental themes:
the indexicality and reflexivity of expressions, gestures,
actions, etc. Indexicality, as discussed earlier, points to
the contextual nature of words, statements, or actions.

Rogers notes that:

Members are interested in the particular not in idealized, standardized or typical meanings as such. They want to know what that guy meant then by that particular remark; what that gesture was I made to you yesterday; what that notice on the common room door means, and so on. (1983, p. 101)

The indexical property of utterances and actions results from the fact that people rarely verbalize the meaning of the expressions they use. But while an utterance could theoretically mean any number of things, people don’t perceive or experience them as being "plurismatic" because they continuously embed their talk in a context already "assembled to decide its meaning" (Leiter 1980, p. 108).

Another concept inherent in Garfinkel’s studies is reflexivity. Garfinkel revealed the reflexive nature of sociological research by extending a study of the criteria used to admit patients to a psychiatric hospital to include the coding decisions of two U.C.L.A. graduate students.

The students were directed to code information contained in the intake applications and case folders of people applying for treatment at the U.C.L.A. Outpatient Psychiatric Clinic. Garfinkel found that, in completing their coding tasks, the students "were assuming knowledge of the very organized ways of the clinic that their coding procedures were intended to produce descriptions of" (Garfinkel 1967, p. 20).
Garfinkel then examined the methods the coders actually used to decide in which category on the coding form the information in the case folders belonged. He found that ad hoc considerations, including but not limited to "et cetera," "unless," and "let it pass" held the answer. By "ad hoccing" the coders were able to "recognize the relevance of the coding instructions to the organized activities of the clinic" and thus allow them to "treat folder contents as reports of 'real events'" (Garfinkel 1967, p. 21). The ad hoccing considerations, in effect, "operate as the grounds for and as methods to advance and secure researchers' claims to have coded in accordance with 'necessary and sufficient' criteria" (Garfinkel 1967, p. 22).

Garfinkel believed that the ad hoccing procedures tainted the study of the "careers" of the patients at the clinic since the coded results may have had little or nothing to do with the actual order of the clinic's operations. He wrote that any account given based on the coding would be itself part of the actual order of the clinic's operations, in much the same way that one might treat a person's report on his own activities as a feature of his activities. The actual order would remain to be described. (1967, p. 24)

Garfinkel also focused on the use of the documentary method of interpretation in several of his studies. In one such study, Garfinkel examined the ways in which personnel
at the Los Angeles Suicide Prevention Center formulated accounts "of how a death really-for-all-practical-purposes-happened" (1967, pp. 13 and 14).

Staff would first examine the "remains" of the deceased, including physical objects such as the body, notes left, pieces of clothing, etc., as well as other remains such as "rumors, passing remarks, and stories..." (Garfinkel 1967, p. 17).

These whatsoever bits and pieces that a story or a rule or a proverb might make intelligible are used to formulate a recognizable coherent, standard, typical, cogent, uniform, planful, i.e., a professionally defensible, and thereby, for members, a recognizably rational account of how the society worked to produce those remains. (Garfinkel 1967, p. 17)

In effect, the staff was expected to "make do" with whatever bits of evidence remained in deciding how the death occurred (Garfinkel 1967, p. 18). In some ways, this is similar to the graduate students in the coding study, in that the students had to "make do" with sometimes incomplete patient information in trying to code the relevant information into meaningful categories. In both studies, indexicality, reflexivity, and the documentary method are revealed.

Three diverse areas involved in this study were examined in this chapter: the letters section of newspapers; communicating ideas, attitudes, and values through the use of symbols; and the methods used by people
to create some sense of or reality about their environments. The studies reviewed show what fertile ground the written word is for finding and describing symbolic communication and sense-making methods.

The following methods chapter explains how these three areas were integrated into a workable research format to discover the methods people use to create reality and the words they use to communicate those realities. Content analysis and its components, including reliability and validity, are described and some limitations of the method are noted. Coding categories, operational definitions, and coding procedures used in the study are outlined and initial characteristics of the sample presented. Also included are results of the calculation of intercoder reliability, both overall and in individual coding categories.
CHAPTER 4
RESEARCH METHODS

In this study I examined the content of and language use in war related letters to the editor in The Tennessean and The Washington Post during nine weeks of the Persian Gulf War. The nine weeks were broken down into three, three-week time periods so that letters printed in the midst of three major events in the conflict could be examined.

The first time period covered July 26th to August 15th, 1990, which included the week before, of, and after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The second time period covered January 10th to January 30th, 1991, which included the week before, of, and after the beginning of the air war. The third time period covered February 17th to March 9th, 1991, which included the week before, of, and after the beginning of the ground war.

Content analysis was used as a tool of exploratory research in order to provide a description of the sample of letters upon which a qualitative analysis was based. While crosstabulations and the chi-square test of significance were used, no hypotheses were formulated or tested. Hypothesis testing was avoided because there were no studies on which to base hypotheses about the content of war related letters to the editor.
The Sample

A total of 812 letters were printed during the nine weeks under study, including 438 in The Tennessean and 374 in The Washington Post. Of these, 23 percent (N=186) were judged by the researcher to be war-related and were coded.

Of the 186 letters 52.7 percent (N=98) came from the Tennessean and 47.3 percent (N=88) from The Post. Of these, 9.1 percent (N=17 letters) were coded in the first time period, 43.5 percent (N=81 letters) were coded in the second time period, and 47.3 percent (N=88 letters) were coded in the third time period, as shown in Table 1. Thus, as the conflict escalated and the United States became more involved increasing numbers of letters dealing with it were printed.

Table 1. Letters Printed and Coded During the Three Time Periods* Under Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Period</th>
<th>Tennessean Printed</th>
<th>Coded</th>
<th>Post Printed</th>
<th>Coded</th>
<th>Totals Coded</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>43.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>47.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>N=438</td>
<td>N=98</td>
<td>N=374</td>
<td>N=88</td>
<td>N=186</td>
<td>(100.0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Time period I is 7-26 to 8-15, 1990
Time period II is 1-10 to 1-30, 1991
Time period III is 2-17 to 3-9, 1991
The majority of letters in both papers were written by males, as results in Table 2 indicate. Of the 186 letters coded, 61.8 percent (N=115) were written by males, 28.5 percent (N=53) were written by females, 1.6 percent (N=3) were jointly written by a male and female, and 8.1 percent (N=15) were written by someone whose sex could not be determined by the name signed to the letter.

In The Tennessean 57.1 percent (N=56) of the letters coded were written by males and 31.6 percent (N=31) were written by females. The Tennessean also had three letters written jointly and eight letters whose sex was coded as unknown.

In The Post the gender gap was more obvious, with 67 percent (N=59) of the letters being male-written and 25 percent (N=22) female-written. The Post had no letters jointly written and seven letters whose sex was coded as unknown.

Table 2. Sex of Letter Writer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex of Writer</th>
<th>Tennessean</th>
<th>Post</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>57.1%</td>
<td>67.0%</td>
<td>61.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>31.6%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>28.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(N=87)</td>
<td>(N=81)</td>
<td>(N=186)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Content analysis was used to code the 186 letters into 14 categories. Content analysis was ideal for a study of war related letters to the editor because

as long as a flow of symbols occurs, content analysis can be used to detect the characteristic attitudes of their user for or against selected ideas and policies, individuals and groups, parties and nations. (Laswell, Lerner, and de Sola Pool 1952, p. 39)

Content analysis has been used in a variety of research projects. It was used during World War II to measure changes in troop concentration by monitoring and comparing the types of songs played on German radio stations with those played on other stations in occupied Europe. It has been used to ascertain the authorship of certain historical documents by counting words in the documents whose authorship is questionable and comparing their frequencies with documents whose author was known. More recently, the method has been used to measure propaganda in newspapers, magazines, and radio as well as violence and stereotyping in television shows and commercials (Wimmer and Dominick 1987).

Content analysis is built on systems of specifically-defined categories into which units of analysis are coded. The categories should be mutually exclusive, meaning that each unit of analysis fits into only one category; exhaustive, meaning there is a place for every unit of analysis; and reliable, meaning that in the vast majority of
cases, independent coders agree on the proper category for each unit of analysis.

Recently located was a content analysis that studied letters to the editor. Though done on a topic unrelated to this one, it is reported here since its purpose and methods were similar to the ones used in this study. The author, cited earlier in the literature review, examined four years' worth of letters to the editor in the Chinese Television Broadcasting Magazine to attempt an understanding of the Chinese television audience's preferences, interests, and concerns (Lau 1991).

The letters were analyzed for types of programs discussed, the theme of the letters, attitudes expressed in the letters (as being favorable, unfavorable, or neutral), and the month and the year the letter was published. The results were then analyzed according to simple percentages to document any patterns of content that occurred. The author employed two independent coders (Chinese-speaking students) and reported intercoder reliability percentages of 89, 92, and 91 on the three content areas under analysis.

**Intercoder Reliability**

Scott's pi (Wimmer and Dominick 1987) was used to calculate intercoder reliability in this study. Scott's pi takes into account

the complexity of the category system,
the agreements expected by chance alone, and corrects for the number of categories and the frequency with which each is used. (Kaid and Wadsworth 1989, p. 209)
Scott's pi yields a ratio of "actual differences between obtained and chance agreement over the maximum difference between obtained and chance agreement" (Kaid and Wadsworth 1989, p. 209). The formula for Scott's pi is as follows:

\[
\pi = \frac{\% \text{ observed agreement} - \% \text{ expected agreement}}{1 - \% \text{ expected agreement}}
\]

For example, in this study there are four coding categories for the sex of the letter writer, including male, female, both, and unknown. If intercoder reliability were calculated without taking into account that by chance alone a four-category system would result in 25 percent reliability, the reliability would be artificially high. By taking agreement expected by chance into account, the intercoder reliability calculated for this study reflects agreement over and above that expected by chance.

Two coders, including the researcher, coded 18 letters (around 10 percent of the total sample of letters) for the intercoder reliability check. Each letter contained 11 coding decisions, for a total of 396 coding decisions between the two coders.

The variables coded included the sex of the letter writer (coded on the basis of the name signed to the letter); the appeal or issue the writer used in expressing a viewpoint; the theme used; letter orientation (concern with local, national, or global issues); letter stance (pro- or anti-military action or neutral); whether or not the letter was a response to a previous media message; and the use of
prophecies, rhetorical questions, religious references, World War II references, or references to the Vietnam War (see Appendix 1 for complete coding rules).

An intercoder reliability coefficient was calculated for each of the 11 variables coded. (See Table 3.) For example, for the variable sex of the letter writer (a four-category system) the coders agreed on 17 out of a possible 18 times for a 94.4 percent observed agreement. To calculate Scott's pi, however, the percent of expected agreement must also be calculated. To do this the percentages in each category (male, female, both, and unknown) were figured. In this case 83.3 percent of the letters were coded as male-written, 13.9 percent were coded as female-written, 2.7 percent were coded unknown, and none were coded as both. These percentages were then converted to proportions, squared, and summed to arrive at the percent of expected agreement. In the case of sex of the writer, then, the percent expected agreement was calculated as follows: \((.833)^2 + (.139)^2 + (.277)^2 = .789\). The numbers were plugged into the formula as follows:

\[
p_i = \frac{.944 - .789}{1 - .789} = \frac{.155}{.211} = .73
\]

Thus, the reliability coefficient for the variable sex of the letter writer was .73, with the denominator (.211) indicating the maximum difference between obtained and chance agreement and the numerator (.155) indicating the
actual differences between obtained and chance agreements. Thus, the two coders could have improved 21.1 percent over the reliability expected by chance and actually improved 15.5 percent.

As results in Table 3 indicate, intercoder reliability for the variables ranged from a low of .60 for use of prophecies to a high of 1.00 (perfect agreement) in the war stance, rhetorical question, religious reference, and World War II reference categories. An average of the reliability coefficients yielded a coefficient of .83.

Holsti’s 1969 formula (Wimmer and Dominick 1987), a widely used method of calculating intercoder reliability, was also used in order to give an overall reliability coefficient. Holsti’s formula is as follows:

\[
\text{Reliability} = \frac{2M}{N_1 + N_2}
\]

In this formula M equals the number of decisions upon which the coders agree, \(N_1\) equals the total number of coding decisions by coder one, and \(N_2\) equals the total number of coding decisions by coder two. For this study M was equal to 185, and \(N_1\) and \(N_2\) each equaled 198 (11 coding decisions per letter \(\times\) 18 letters). These numbers were plugged into Holsti’s formula as follows:

\[
\text{Reliability} = \frac{2(185)}{198 + 198} = \frac{370}{376} = .934
\]
Thus, the overall reliability percentage using Holsti's formula was 93.4 percent agreement between the two coders. This percentage must be interpreted with care as it does not take into account the agreement that occurred by chance.

Table 3. Intercoder Reliability Coefficients for Two Coders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Percent Expected Agreements</th>
<th>Percent Observed Agreements</th>
<th>Reliability Coefficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>78.9%</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>94.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appeal</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>88.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
<td>27.6%</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>88.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>54.8%</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stance</td>
<td>38.9%</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prophecy</td>
<td>72.1%</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>88.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical Questions</td>
<td>55.4%</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response to Media</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>88.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious References</td>
<td>89.4%</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World War II References</td>
<td>80.2%</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam War References</td>
<td>84.8%</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>94.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td></td>
<td>185</td>
<td>93.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Validity

In addition to being reliable, content analyses must yield valid results. Validity is "the degree to which an instrument actually measures what it sets out to measure" (Wimmer and Dominick 1987, p. 186). The issue of validity poses special problems for content analyses since the object of measurement varies according to the aim of the research, category construction, and operational definitions.

These problems were solved in this study by employing face validity, or the assumption that if the categories are "rigid and satisfactorily defined" and the "procedures of the analysis have been adequately constructed," the instrument will in fact measure what it purports to measure (Wimmer and Dominick 1987, p. 186). Kaid and Wadsworth note that face validity is "satisfactory if the researcher intends only to provide a description of a particular sample" (1989, p. 210). Such was the case in this study. The purpose was to examine and describe the content of letters present at a particular and unique time in history.

Categories, Operational Definitions, and Coding Procedures

There were 14 variables under analysis in this study. The first three were descriptive in nature and included the newspaper in which the letter was published; the time period in which the letter was published; and the sex of the letter writer (male, female, both, or unknown). The sex of the writer was inferred from the name signed to the letter. If
the name was not clearly male or female (such as Pat), the sex of the writer was coded as unknown.

The rest of the variables were content-related and included the appeal used; the theme used; the object of personal attack, if any; letter orientation; war stance; use of prophecies; use of rhetorical questions; response to a previous media message; religious or scripture reference; reference to World War II; and reference to the Vietnam War (See Appendix 1 for complete coding rules).

After being coded for the descriptive variables, letters were coded for appeal. Appeals were defined as sentences with similar meanings that a writer used to state a viewpoint. There were 18 possible appeals including alternatives, American values, Constitutional guarantees, duty, economics, environment, history, humanity, justice, media coverage, necessity, parents in the military, personal attacks on political leaders, media figures, or letter-writers or other persons or groups, religion, support troops, and U.S. role.

After identifying the appeal used, each letter was coded as employing one of five themes. Themes were simply groups of appeals. The first was the practical theme, which included any letter appealing to alternatives, economics, environment, necessity, history, or support troops. For example, if a letter’s appeal was coded as economics, the theme was coded as practical.
The second theme was the political theme, which consisted of those letters using appeals to Constitutional guarantees, U.S. Role, parents in the military, or personal attacks on George Bush, Saddam Hussein, or other political leaders or entities. For example, if a writer questioned the legality of interviewing Arab-Americans about their knowledge of terrorist activities, the appeal was Constitutional guarantees and the theme was political.

The third theme was the moral theme. It consisted of those letters using appeals to American values, duty, justice, humanity, or religion. When a letter writer quoted passages of scripture or referred to his or her religious beliefs, the appeal was to religion and the theme was moral.

The fourth theme was the media theme. It consisted of those letters using appeals to media coverage or personal attacks on media figures (reporters, editors, broadcasters, etc.). For example, letters attacking CNN journalist Peter Arnett for staying in Baghdad and allowing his reports to be censored were coded as using the media coverage appeal and the media theme.

The fifth and final theme was other. It included appeals not categorized as any other appeal, and attacks on other letter writers, war protesters, or other persons or groups. For example, when Post writers attacked students at Vanderbilt University for making elitist comments, the appeal was a personal attack on other persons or groups, and the theme was other.
If the appeal used was coded as a personal attack, the letter was coded as to the object of the attack. The object of the attack was used to identify under which theme the letter would be coded.

For example, a letter coded as a personal attack on then-President George Bush was subsequently coded as employing a political theme. A letter coded as a personal attack against CNN journalist Peter Arnett was coded as employing a media theme.

After coding for appeal, theme, and object of attack, letters were coded according to orientation (local, national, or global). A letter had a local orientation when it dealt with issues of only local interest, such as troops from the immediate area or local media coverage. Letters with a national orientation were those that dealt with issues of national interest only, such as loss of American lives. Letters with a global orientation were those that dealt with issues of global interest, such as the people, policies, and welfare of another nation or nations.

War stance was the next coding category. Letters were coded as being pro-military action, anti-military action, or neutral.

Letters with a pro-military action stance were those letters whose theme expressed a positive or favorable attitude toward military action against Iraq. Letters with an anti-military action stance were those letters whose theme expressed a negative or unfavorable view of action.
against Iraq. Neutral letters were those that expressed no definitive viewpoint of military action against Iraq.

Letters were also coded according to whether or not they were a response to a previous media message. If the writer mentioned a previous letter, news story, television broadcast, etc., the letter was coded as a response.

The remaining variables were coded according to their presence or absence in the letter. These included prophecies (predictions about events), rhetorical questions (the writer asked the reader a question), references to religious beliefs or scriptures, and references to World War II or the Vietnam War.

Qualitative Analysis

The content of the letters was examined for symbol use and use of ethnomethods and was discussed in terms of the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2. The results of the qualitative analysis can be found in Chapter 6.

Limitations of Study

Like all research methods, content analysis has weaknesses that should be addressed. Content analysis findings are necessarily delimited by the sampling method, categories, and definitions used. These vary by researcher as well as by the aim of the research.

In this study the nonprobability sample of content may also appear to be a weakness though this type of sampling "under certain circumstances (e.g., exploratory research), may outweigh the advantages of using probability sampling"
(Nachmias and Nachmias 1992, p. 175). Nonprobability samples are "commonly advocated where generalization to a larger population isn't of primary importance" (Goldenberg 1992, p. 161). Such was the case in this study. The content at a particular point in history was to be described and discussed. Generalizing to a larger population was not an issue in this study.

Second, the inability to generalize is based in part on the fact that items studied using content analysis "are selectively deposited and retained; the surviving data are therefore not a representative sample of the originally created data" (Goldenberg 1992, p. 246). Representativeness is particularly troublesome in this study because the letters printed were only a part of the total received.

Thus, any differences noted in the analyses may be editor-related or actual differences in letter writers. This is true because there is no way of knowing for the purposes of this study if the letters published are in any way representative of all those letters received.

In addition only letters that appeared on the editorial pages of one of the newspapers were included here. Special sections about the war, which may or may not have included letters from readers, were not considered. An additional delimitation is that only nine weeks worth of letters were analyzed as opposed to all the war related letters printed.
Third, the fact that content analyses are "rarely ever finished" (Krippendorf 1980, p. 170) may also appear to be a weakness. However:

Although a good content analysis will answer some questions, it is also expected to pose new ones, leading to revisions of the procedures for future applications, stimulating new research into the bases for drawing inferences, not to mention suggesting new hypotheses about the phenomena of interest. (Krippendorf 1980, p. 170)

Chapter 7 includes suggestions for future research in the area of letters to the editor based on this study's methods, data, and findings. The findings are presented in the next two chapters. Chapter 5 includes the quantitative results and Chapter 6 contains the qualitative analysis of these results.
 CHAPTER 5
QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the results of the quantitative content analysis. First the main appeals and objects of personal attacks in each paper are examined. Results of crosstabulations are then presented using the newspaper in which the letter was published, the time period in which it was published and the sex of the writer as independent variables. The chi-square test of significance indicates which of these relationships are statistically significant.

In presenting and discussing the statistically significant results found among the variables, it is assumed that the reader will keep in mind that there is no way to know whether the relationships reflect true differences among letter writers or if they are a function of the editorial philosophies and practices of those choosing and approving the letters for publication. On the other hand, the point of this research is to discover, document, present, and discuss any patterns and relationships evident in letter content at a specific and unique time in history, regardless of how the content arrived in the letters section. With this caveat in mind the remainder of this chapter includes a presentation and discussion of the quantitative findings.
In order to identify the main issues letter writers used to state an opinion or viewpoint, frequencies were run on the appeals used in each paper. In *The Tennessean* 22.4 percent of the 98 appeals were coded as personal attacks, 11.2 percent were coded as humanity, 10.2 percent were coded as media coverage, 8.2 percent were coded as religion, and 8.2 percent were coded as support troops. (See Table 4.) Personal attacks were the most popular appeal in *The Tennessean*. They were coded twice as many times as humanity, which was the second most popular appeal.

Other appeals in *The Tennessean* included alternatives and U.S. role, each coded in six letters; economics, coded in five letters; history and duty, each coded in four letters; American values, Constitutional guarantees, and other, each coded in three letters; justice and necessity, each coded in two letters; and environment, coded in one letter.

In *The Post*, as in *The Tennessean*, personal attack was the most used appeal, coded in 25 percent of the letters. The remaining top five appeals in *The Post* included media coverage, coded in 18.2 percent of the letters; history, coded in 12.5 percent; parents in the military, coded in 10.2 percent; and economics, coded in 9.1 percent. (See Table 5.) Other appeals in *The Post* included humanity and other, each coded in five letters; alternatives, U.S. role and duty, each coded in three letters; and religion,
necessity, and Constitutional guarantees, each coded in one letter.

Table 4. Top Five Appeals Used by Writers in The Tennessean

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appeal</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Attack</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanity</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Coverage</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support Troops</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>60.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Percentages do not total to 100% because only the top five of 18 possible appeals are noted.

Table 5. Top Five Appeals Used by Writers in The Washington Post

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appeal</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Attack</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Coverage</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents in Military</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Percentages do not total 100% because only the top five of 18 possible appeals are noted.
The fact that personal attacks and appeals to media coverage were among the top three appeals in both papers lends credence to the view that the letters section gives the displeased a forum to vent their anger about issues as well as the media's performance in covering them. It may also show that those selecting the letters feel that providing such a forum is the role of the letters section.

The remaining top appeals in each paper suggest that, aside from personal attacks and appeals to media coverage, different types of issues were used by writers in each paper. Writers in *The Tennessean* seemed to view the war in moral terms, using appeals to humanity and religion in 19.4 percent of the letters. *Post* writers, on the other hand, used practical appeals more, with appeals to history and economics accounting for 21.6 percent of all the appeals in *Post* letters.

It is also interesting that the top five appeals in *The Post* accounted for 75 percent of all appeals coded while in *The Tennessean* the top five appeals accounted for only 60.2 percent of the appeals coded. This indicates that a wider variety of appeals was presented in *The Tennessean*.

Because personal attack was the most used appeal in both papers, the objects of these attacks were examined next. Results are presented in Tables 6 and 7.

In *The Tennessean*, when a letter was coded as a personal attack, then-President George Bush was the most frequent object of this attack. He accounted for 40.9
percent of the personal attacks in The Tennessean, being attacked on nine occasions. Bush was criticized for his statements, actions, and policies and was characterized on several occasions as a bully. Typical of the attacks on Bush was the one launched by A. Ray Williamson who wrote that Bush, whom he initially considered to be an intelligent man,

is acting like the neighborhood bully and seemingly has no remorseful thoughts at the thousands of young lives that will be lost in the event of an all-out war in the Persian Gulf (1991, p. A-6).

Williamson then became more strident in his attack, asking

Who is going to pay the estimated $347 million per day of the war costs for "Big Pants" to satisfy his apparent ego, or obsession, to kick "Saddam’s Butt." If he wants Saddam’s Butt kicked, let him go over and do it himself. Why wreck my country and slaughter my countrymen in an undisputed act of aggression. (1991, p. A-6)

Other political leaders and entities were also popular targets of personal attack, accounting for 22.7 percent (N=5) of the attacks. These letters targeted the United States Congress for authorizing military action against Iraq as well as Arab countries and their leaders for failing to act quickly enough to condemn Iraq.

The remaining personal attacks in The Tennessean were evenly distributed among Saddam Hussein, other letter writers, anti-war protesters, and other persons and groups.
Each of these accounted for 9.1 percent (N=2) of the personal attacks.

Table 6. Objects of Personal Attack in The Tennessean

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Object</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>George Bush</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>40.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Political Leaders/Entities</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saddam Hussein</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Letter-Writers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protesters</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Persons/Groups</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td>N=22</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In The Post other political leaders or entities and other persons or groups were most frequently the objects of personal attack, as indicated in Table 7. Each of these accounted for 27.3 percent (N=6) of the personal attacks in The Post.

The prime political target was Senator Alan Simpson who was criticized for meeting with Saddam Hussein and blaming Saddam’s problems on the Western media. Also targeted was the Federal Bureau of Investigation for interviewing Arab-Americans about their knowledge of terrorist acts.

Other persons and groups targeted in The Post included Yolanda Huet-Vaughn, the Army reservist turned conscientious
objector who refused to obey orders to go to Saudi Arabia; and Vanderbilt University students, several of whom reportedly made elitist remarks of the nature that America's best minds should not be on the front lines.

George Bush and media figures were also popular targets in The Post, each accounting for 18.2 percent (N=4) of the attacks. Media targets included CNN's Peter Arnett and The Post's Coleman McCarthy, who chastised American fighter pilots for gloating over their successes in the air over Baghdad. Finally, personal attacks against war protesters accounted for 9.1 percent (N=2) of the attacks in The Post.

Table 7. Objects of Personal Attack in The Washington Post

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Object</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other Political Leaders/Entities</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Persons/Groups</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Bush</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Figures/Reporters</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protesters</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>N=22</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results presented in Tables 6 and 7 are of interest in two respects. First is the relative lack of personal attacks against Saddam Hussein. Several of the writers indicated they simply assumed Hussein was a madman, and thus
they were not surprised at anything he had done or might do. The need to attack him may have thus been minimized. 

George Bush, on the other hand, was attacked much more often. Several writers indicated that he was acting entirely out of character and inappropriately for the situation. Thus, the need to question or condemn him may have seemed more real.

Also interesting is The Post's focus on attacking other persons and groups and political leaders other than Hussein or Bush. Regional differences in the readers of the papers may explain the use of these objects. Readers of The Post, for example, are likely to be nearer to the nation's capital and might have more awareness of the actions of individual members of Congress and federal agencies such as the FBI.

Crosstabulations

The next analytic procedure used was crosstabulations, which allow "an analysis of the differences between categories of one variable as they relate to categories of a second variable" (Grimm and Wozniak 1990, p. 91). Crosstabulations were used to examine relationships between the content variables and three independent variables, including the newspaper in which the letter was published, the time period in which the letter was published, and the sex of the writer.
The chi-square test of significance was used to determine if statistically significant differences existed. The following three sections discuss the results of these crosstabulations.

**Effect of Newspaper**

Three significant relationships were found using the newspaper in which the letter was published as the independent variable. These included theme used (see Table 8), response to a previous media message (see Table 9), and references to World War II. (See Table 9.)

Both papers had very similar percentages of letter-writers using practical and political themes (see Appendix I for definitions of themes). In *The Tennessean* 26.5 percent (N=26) of the letters used the practical theme compared to 26.1 percent (N=23) in *The Post*, as shown in Table 8.

The political theme was coded in 25.5 percent (N=25) of letters in *The Tennessean* and in 26.1 percent (N=23) of the letters in *The Post*. Over half (52.1 percent) of the letters coded used either the practical or political theme.

The papers differed in the number of letters using the moral, media, and other themes. In *The Tennessean* 28.6 percent of the letter writers used the moral theme as compared to 10.2 percent of the writers in *The Post*. Post writers were more likely than Tennessean writers to use the media theme (22.7 percent to 10.2 percent) or the other theme (14.8 percent to 9.2 percent). The chi-square test
indicated that these differences were significant at the .01 level (chi-square=13.59, 4 d.f., p<.01).

Results in Table 8 also indicate that when not addressing practical or political issues, Tennessean writers tended to question the morality or appropriateness of the war. Post writers, on the other hand, tended to address issues and events surrounding the war.

Table 8. Letter Writers' Themes by Newspaper

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Tennessean</th>
<th>Post</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Practical</td>
<td>26.5%</td>
<td>26.1%</td>
<td>26.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>25.5%</td>
<td>26.1%</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>19.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Media</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
<td>14.8%</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Totals (N=186) 100% 100% 100%

Chi-square=13.59; df=4; p<.01

Two other variables, including response to a previous media message and references to World War II, were significantly related to the newspaper in which the letter was published, as reported in Table 9. In The Post a letter was much more likely to have been written as a response to a previous media message than were letters in The Tennessean (68.2 percent compared to 30.1 percent). This relationship
was significant at the .01 level (chi-square=26.2, Yates' correction=24.7, 1 d.f., p<.01).

References to World War II were also more likely to appear in Post letters than in Tennessean letters. Results in Table 9 indicate that 14.8 percent of the Post letters contained references to World War II as opposed to 5.1 percent of the letters in The Tennessean. This relationship was significant at the .05 level (chi-square=4.96, Yates' correction=3.92, 1 d.f., p<.05). The remaining variables in Table 9 (the use of prophecies, rhetorical questions, religious or scripture references, and references to the Vietnam War) were not significantly related to the newspaper in which the letter was published.

Table 9. Content Variables by Newspaper

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Use of.....</th>
<th>Tenn.</th>
<th>Post</th>
<th>Totals</th>
<th>Chi-square</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prophecies</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical Questions</td>
<td>39.8%</td>
<td>35.2%</td>
<td>37.6%</td>
<td>.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous Media Message</td>
<td>30.1%</td>
<td>68.2%</td>
<td>48.4%</td>
<td>24.72**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion/Scripture</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>2.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World War II</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>14.8%</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>3.90*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam War</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Totals

N=98   N=88   N=186

*df=1; p<.05
**df=1; p<.001
A crosstabulation was also run to determine if a letter writer's war stance varied according to the newspaper in which the letter was published. While there were some differences in a writer’s war stance between the newspapers, the differences were not large enough to be statistically significant at the .05 level though they were significant at the .10 level. (See Table 10.)

The greatest percentage differences occurred in the neutral category, where Post letters were more likely than Tennessean letters to be neutral (62.5 percent neutral compared to 48 percent). Tennessean letters, on the other hand, were more likely to be anti-military action (32.6 percent vs. 18.2 percent). Similar percentages of letters in both papers were found to be pro-military action, 19.4 percent in The Tennessean vs. 19.3 percent in The Post.

These results again indicate that writers in The Post were more concerned with the issues, events, and people surrounding the war than with the appropriateness of the war itself. They expressed viewpoints about peripheral issues, thus the larger number of neutral letters.

Writers in The Tennessean were more likely to express a war stance, with that stance much more likely to be anti-military action than pro-military action (32.6 percent compared to 19.4 percent). These differences might be attributed to regional differences between the papers as far as attitudes about war or they could reflect different editorial philosophies.
Table 10. Letter Writers' War Stances by Newspaper

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stance</th>
<th>Tennessean</th>
<th>Post</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pro Military Action</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti Military Action</td>
<td>32.6%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>48.0%</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>54.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(N=98) (N=88) (N=186)

Chi-square=5.5; df=2; p=n.s.*
*Significant at the .10 level.

A crosstabulation was also run to determine whether letter orientation differed by newspaper. Similar percentages were found in each of the three orientations. (See Table 11.) National orientations were the most prevalent, accounting for 57 percent of the letters coded (53 percent in The Tennessean and 61.4 percent in The Post). Global orientations were the second most prevalent, accounting for 40.9 percent of the total (43.9 percent in The Tennessean and 37.5 percent in The Post). Local orientations were hardly used, accounting for only 2.1 percent of the total letters.

These results are consistent with the previous results on appeals used. In using the humanity appeal Tennessean writers many times expressed concern for people in other nations and lands, thereby resulting in a larger number of letters with global orientations. In the Post's case the
emphasis on national news events and issues translated into more letters having national orientations.

Table 11. Letter Writers’ Orientations by Newspaper

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Orientation</th>
<th>Tennessean</th>
<th>Post</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>53.0%</td>
<td>61.4%</td>
<td>57.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global</td>
<td>43.9%</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>40.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>100% (N=98)</td>
<td>100% (N=88)</td>
<td>100% (N=186)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-square=1.82; df=2; p=n.s.

Effect of Time Period

Several significant relationships were found when time period was the independent variable in the crosstabulation. The reader is cautioned, however, that some of the crosstabulations violate the assumptions of chi-square. These assumptions are that each cell of the table will have an expected frequency of at least one and that no more than 20 percent of the cells will have an expected frequency of less than five. With these violations in mind, results of the crosstabulations are shown in Tables 12, 13, 14, and 15.

Results of the first crosstabulation, reported in Table 12, indicated that the relationship between a writer’s war stance and the time period in which the letter was published was statistically significant. The most obvious percentage
differences occurred in the anti-military action and neutral categories. A larger percentage of anti-war letters were coded during the second time period than in the first two time periods combined (37 percent compared to 34.6 percent).

Table 12 also indicates that neutral letters were more likely to be found in the first and third time periods. Pro-military action letters gradually decreased as time passed, with 23.5 percent (N=4) coded in the first time period, 22.2 percent (N=18) coded in the second time period, and 16 percent (N=14) coded in the third time period. The chi-square test indicated that the relationship between war stance and time period was statistically significant at the .01 level (chi-square=13.43, 4 d.f., p<.01) though 22.2 percent (or two of nine) of the cells have expected frequencies of less than five.

It should be noted that when the first time period was dropped to avoid violating the chi-square assumption that no more than 20 percent of the cells in a table should have expected frequencies of less than five, the relationship between the variables was still significant at the .01 level. These results are available upon request.

Results in Table 12 suggest that letters were much more likely to be anti-military action during the second time period. While 41.2 percent (N=7) of the letters in the first time period expressed a pro- or anti-military action stance, that number increased to 59.2 percent (N=48) in the second time period, during which time the ultimatum for war
was issued to Saddam Hussein by George Bush. The number of anti-military action letters decreased considerably in the third time period, as other issues such as parents in the military started to be discussed in the letters.

Table 12. Letter Writers' War Stances by Time Period

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>War Stance</th>
<th>First</th>
<th>Second</th>
<th>Third</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pro military action</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-military action</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
<td>37.0%</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>58.8%</td>
<td>40.7%</td>
<td>67.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N=17)</td>
<td>(N=81)</td>
<td>(N=88)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-square=13.43*; df=4; p<.01
*22.2 percent of cell frequencies less than five.

The effect of time period on theme used was also statistically significant though in this instance 33.3 percent of the cells in the table had expected frequencies of less than five. (See Table 13.) Percentage differences were especially prevalent in the practical, moral, and media categories.

The practical theme appeared most dominant in the first time period, where it was coded in 70.6 percent (N=12) of the 17 letters coded. Use of the practical theme decreased
to 19.3 percent (N=17) of the 88 letters coded in the third time period.

The moral theme, on the other hand, was not used at all in the first time period. Its use increased in the second time period to 27.2 percent (N=22) of the 81 letters coded before decreasing to 17 percent (N=15) of the 88 letters coded during the third time period.

The media theme was used in each of the time periods but was coded most often in the third time period when it was coded in 25 percent (N=22) of the 88 letters.

The chi-square test indicates a significant relationship at the .001 level between theme used and time period, with a chi-square value of 32.29 and eight degrees of freedom. Again it should be noted that when the first time period is eliminated to avoid violating the assumptions of chi-square and the crosstabulation re-run, the relationship between time period and theme used remains significant (at the .05 level). The chi-square value when time period one is eliminated from the analysis is 11.36 with 4 degrees of freedom.

These results suggest that before war became a reality the majority of writers viewed it in practical terms, such as what the economic results of a war might be. Only directly before, during, and directly after the war did writers consider it in moral terms, writing about such things as humanity, duty, justice, and religion. As the war proceeded the letters became more political than practical,
and letters about the media's performance in covering the war became more numerous.

Table 13. Letter Writers' Themes by Time Period

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>First</th>
<th>Second</th>
<th>Third</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Practical</td>
<td>70.6%</td>
<td>24.7%</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
<td>29.6%</td>
<td>23.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>27.2%</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Media</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>14.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>100% (N=17)</td>
<td>100% (N=81)</td>
<td>100% (N=88)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-square=32.29*; df=8; p<.001
*33.3 percent of cell frequencies less than five.

The third crosstabulation with time period as the independent variable was with letter orientation. While the relationship was significant at the .001 level, both assumptions of chi-square were violated due to the few letters coded during the first time period (N=17). In this case one cell in the first time period had an expected frequency of less than one, and 33.3 percent of all the cells had expected frequencies of less than five. When the first time period was dropped from the analysis, letter
orientation was no longer significantly related to time period.

Table 14. Letter Writers' Orientations by Time Period

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Orientation</th>
<th>First</th>
<th>Second</th>
<th>Third</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
<td>59.3%</td>
<td>60.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global</td>
<td>52.9%</td>
<td>39.5%</td>
<td>39.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Totals

100% (N=17) 100% (N=81) 100% (N=88)

Chi-square=24.36*; df=4; p<.001

*33.3 percent of the cells have frequencies of five or less.

The final crosstabulations with time period as the independent variable involved the remaining content variables. Two additional significant relationships were apparent including the use of rhetorical questions and response to a previous media message. (See Table 15.)

Rhetorical questions were used in 37.6 percent (N=70) of the total letters coded. Their presence gradually dropped from 58.8 percent (N=10) of the 17 letters coded in the first time period to 29.5 percent (N=26) of the 88 letters coded in the third time period. The relationship between the use of rhetorical questions and the time period in which the letter was published was significant at the .05
level with a chi-square value of 6.35 and two degrees of freedom.

Around 48 percent (N=90) of the 186 letters were coded as a response to a previous media message. Responses increased from 23.5 percent (N=4) in the first time period to 58 percent (N=51) in the third time period.

The relationship between response to a previous media message and time period was significant at the .05 level, with a chi-square value of 8.3 and 2 degrees of freedom. The remaining variables in Table 15 were not significantly related to time period in which the letter was published.

Table 15. Other Content Variables by Time Period

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Presence of Content Variables</th>
<th>First</th>
<th>Second</th>
<th>Third</th>
<th>Totals</th>
<th>Chi-square</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prophecies</td>
<td>41.2%</td>
<td>17.3%</td>
<td>23.9%</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
<td>4.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical Questions</td>
<td>58.8%</td>
<td>42.0%</td>
<td>29.5%</td>
<td>37.6%</td>
<td>6.35*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response to Previous Media Message</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
<td>43.2%</td>
<td>58.0%</td>
<td>48.4%</td>
<td>8.3*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion/Scripture</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>1.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World War II</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>.214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam War</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>N=17</td>
<td>N=81</td>
<td>N=88</td>
<td>N=186</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*d.f=1; p < .05
Effect of Sex of the Letter Writer

The sex of the letter writer was not significantly related to any of the content variables, as results in Table 16 indicate. Thus, sex of the letter writer had no effect on the types of appeals and themes used or on the presence or absence of the other content variables.

Table 16. Newspaper Variables by Sex* of Letter Writer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Chi-square</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Practical, Political, Moral, The Media, or Other)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Local, National, or Global)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War Stance</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Pro, Anti, or Neutral)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prophecies (Yes or No)</td>
<td>.037</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical Questions (Yes or No)</td>
<td>.462</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World War II (Yes or No)</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam War (Yes or No)</td>
<td>.303</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous Media Message (Yes or No)</td>
<td>.098</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Letter writers' whose sex was coded as "both" or "unknown" were excluded.
CHAPTER 6
QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

This chapter includes the results of the qualitative analysis of both the content and form of the letters. In keeping with the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 2, the letters were analyzed for instances of symbol use and the use of ethnomethods, or sense-making strategies.

The qualitative analysis seeks to show that "reality is symbolic" (Charon 1985, p. 57), by examining how letter writers combined symbolic communication and ethnomethods to create and communicate their realities about the Persian Gulf War. The letter writer's accounts were first examined for symbol use. Second, the structure of the accounts was examined for indexicality and reflexivity; the use of the documentary method of interpretation; the reciprocity of perspectives; and the search for normal forms.

Symbol Use

Just as accounts are indexical, or dependent upon context, so are symbols. This becomes evident in the letters, where symbols and their meanings differed according to various indexical particulars, such as the writer's war stance, orientation, or personal biography. Perhaps the
best example comes in the interaction between two letter writers toward the end of the war. Randall Norris, of Pleasant Hill, Tennessee, wrote on February 25:


Guy Dunn responded to Norris's letter on March 1:

> Without these actions, Pleasant Hill might not be so pleasant. (1991, p. A-16)

In both of these letters the battles were chosen by the writers to symbolize something about America and Americans. In Norris's letter the battles symbolized America's aggressiveness, unpreparedness, brutality, and cruelty. The second writer countered with battles that symbolized bravery, heroism, patriotism, military strength and organization, and coming to the defense of weaker nations.

A similar letter appeared in The Post early in the conflict when the writer used previous military actions as symbolizing the United States' own aggressive tendencies in the world arena. Arthur Rowse asked:

> Will someone tell me the difference between what Saddam Hussein has done to Kuwait and what our sanctimonious nation has done to Grenada, Panama, Nicaragua, and Libya? (1991, p. A-20)

Writer Wesley Sheffield used various symbols in an attempt to explain the difference in his Post letter on August 8, 1990. Sheffield wrote that any comparison between
the United States invading Panama and Iraq invading Kuwait "doesn't quite fit" because

U.S. forces moved into Panama to rescue that country from the toils of a dissolute dictator who was a key player in international drug traffic. And those same forces withdrew as rapidly as possible, after law and order had been restored. (1990, p. A-20)

Sheffield used words that connote extremes in making his point regarding the difference in the military actions. His use of the word "rescue" implied that the Panamanian people would have faced imminent extinction if the United States had not intervened. His depiction of Manuel Noriega as a "key" player in drug trafficking attempted to make the United States' actions more plausible. He then asserted that the forces withdrew in great haste but only after bringing stability and civility back to a country in chaos.

Other symbols in the letters are used to represent people and their intentions, actions, or reactions in a certain way. A major use of symbols appears in personal attacks against Saddam Hussein. At various points Hussein was described as a "demon" (Hangey 1991, p. A-10); "an evil, vicious, murdering dictator" (Bondzeleske 1991, p. A-24); "an evil and dangerous threat" (Meek 1991, p. D-4); the "lunatic of Baghdad" (Wells 1991, p. A-8); a "power crazy ruler" (Meyer 1991, p. A-8); a "psychopathic dictator" and "evil monster" (Faulkner 1991, p. A-10); and a "brutal
dictator" (Boling 1990, p. A-20). The "demonizing" of Hussein makes of one's political opposition pure, cartoonish evil, while making of oneself a heroic crusader for righteousness, justice, and progress. (Zorn 1991, p. 44)

Many writers also represented Saddam Hussein's actions against Kuwait as blatant aggression, while at the same time representing the American and allied response as defensive and necessary. When viewed in this manner, Hussein is characterized as

an irrational aggressor out to conquer the region if not the world. His victim was Kuwait, the wealthy but innocent socialite. And we were the protector, nobly prepared to sacrifice for the highest principles: freedom, the integrity of established borders, the security of the economic order. (Zorn 1991, p. 44)

An example of this belief was noted in The Tennessean, where a writer stated that the war was not about oil but, instead, was about

a tiny country pleading for help from the United Nations and allies because of the atrocities committed by a madman when he raped their country. When a country cries for help, we can't just turn our backs and ignore their pleas. We are the greatest country on this earth. We are free and we believe in a free society....(Prestwood 1991, p. A-8)

Note Prestwood's masterful use of symbols as she depicted Kuwait as "pleading," not asking, for aid and Hussein as a madman raping a country rather than a leader invading a country.
Todd Allison asked how there can be peace "when there are men like Saddam Hussein invading and oppressing weaker powers?" (1991, p. D-4). He wrote that "sometimes actions such as this are necessary to secure peace for future generations" (Allison 1991, p. D-4). He concluded:

Sometimes parasites like Hussein find unjustifiable reasons to inflict terror on society, and he must be stopped now, by whatever means necessary. Sanctions would have just prolonged the inevitable. This is not just a war about oil. It is about freedom for a deserving people. (1991, p. D-4)

Other letter writers used emotion-laden symbols to whip up readers' patriotic spirit. Al Borgman ranted that Saudi Arabia forced American Army chaplains to remove crosses from their helmets "and to practice undercover religion only!" (1991, p. A-8). Borgman then exhorted readers to


Other writers urged people to display unconditional support for the troops, America's leaders, and their policies. Sue Bondzeleske wrote in The Post that she is not in favor of war but what will be will be. This is supposed to be the United States of America, and no matter what, I will support my country, my president, and more than anything, my troops. Anyone who does not support those three things does not deserve to reap the benefits of this great country. (1991, p. A-24)
Still other writers used symbols to explain their position on some issue. Chip Marce, a member of the Nashville peace movement, wrote, "Let’s get the record straight. I’m not a kook, communist, flag burner or any other emotional label" (1991, p. D-4). Marce then characterized the people involved in the peace movement as "patriotic Americans who proudly support our troops but bitterly oppose our government’s aggressive political posture" (1991, p. D-4).

Randy Kovic expressed displeasure at Marce’s characterization and instead offered his own definition of the types of people he perceived to be involved in the movement:

WAR PROTESTERS - A diluted byproduct drawn from the full urn of freedom; a raucous mob of extremity, drunk with liberty and sick from an overindulgence in self interest and self preservation. Those who understand nothing, respect no one, and fear everything. (1991, p. A-12)

Use of Ethnomethods

After examining the symbolic content of the letters, the use of ethnomethods was examined. These methods included the documentary method of interpretation, the reciprocity of perspectives, and the search for normal forms. First, however, the inherent indexical and reflexive
nature of the accounts was examined since these concepts provide the underpinnings of the ethnomethodological view.

**Indexicality and Reflexivity of Accounts**

Accounts, as described in Chapter 2,

> provide a definition upon which action can be based. Accounts establish what people in a situation will believe, accept as sound, accept as proper — that is, they establish what is accountable. (Heritage 1984, p. 39)

Every account in every letter in this study was indexical in that it was written in response to some existing circumstance. In order to understand what was being communicated in a letter one must know something of the circumstances that created the account.

For example, when Douglas Neal lamented that "there was barely a peep mentioned" by Hussein’s Arab neighbors when he invaded Kuwait and instead there was "only cowardly silence," his account is indexical (1990, p. A-12). One needs to know that initially the Arab nations were silent on the issue and that this created Neal’s frustration.

The accounts are also inherently reflexive in that they "become constituent parts of the very thing they describe" (Benson and Hughes 1983, p. 102). A letter printed in The Post on March 9, 1991, provides a good example of indexicality and reflexivity.

Drage Vukcevich took to task the "professional doomsayers and negativists" who predicted dire results if
the United States got involved in war with Iraq. Vukcevich wrote that the analyses offered by various experts were not only flawed, but actually had little to do with reality. The Iraqi trenches did not claim thousands of allied lives, the war did not "go chemical," the coalition did not break apart, U.S. public support did not erode, the terrorist threat did not materialize and the ground campaign did not continue endlessly. In four days, that Iraqi military colossus we had heard so much about was crushed like an eggshell. (1990, p. A-12)

Vukcevich closed his letter by inquiring Why, as a society, do we continue to allow mature debate and political discussion to be dominated by intellectual disciples of Chicken Little? (1990, p. A-12)

Vukcevich’s letter is indexical because one must know that many people described by the media as experts on one thing or another did caution against joining or escalating the conflict and predicted large numbers of U.S. casualties and that those predictions later proved incorrect. The letter is reflexive because, while his account describes the failure of the experts, his account exists only because of the failure of the experts. The situation he accounts for accounts for his account! The same is true for all of the letters: The writer’s account of a situation is explained (explicated) by that very situation.

Both of the letters examined above illustrate another important aspect of the letters under study. In reading any letter it is easy to see that the content would certainly be different given a different set of circumstances.
For example, if Neal had waited a few days, his letter may not have been written or at least would have made no sense given the circumstances. This is because on August 10, 1990, 12 Arab countries approved a resolution condemning Saddam Hussein's actions and demanded that Hussein remove his army from Kuwait immediately.

In the case of Vukcevich, if the experts had been proven correct, one of several things may have happened. First, The Post may have printed a letter praising the foresight and talent of the experts and not printed a letter raising doubt about why they were so important in analyzing the war. Also, it is possible that Vukcevich would have either not written a letter at all, would have written a letter commenting on the accuracy of the experts' forecasts, or, more likely, would have written a letter on an entirely different aspect of the war.

Regardless, the resulting reality would probably have been a different one. This realization is very important to this study. It mirrors the symbolic interactionist and ethnomethodological perspectives that people are active participants in creating reality and that they focus on defining and interpreting events, actions, words, etc., as they presently exist. The dynamic nature of symbols and individuals' attitudes and perspectives allows for constant interpretation and reinterpretation of people, facts, events, issues, and actions.
The Documentary Method of Interpretation

As explained in Chapter 2 the documentary method of interpretation is used to treat a set of appearances as indicative of an underlying pattern. The most prevalent use of the documentary method in the letters involved the construction of historical analogies to make events and issues in the Persian Gulf War seem similar to those in past wars.

Historical analogies in the letters tended to include the writer predicting results of present strategic military moves based on experiences the United States had in other wars such as World War II, the Vietnam War, or the Korean War. Post writer Brent Peabody noted the low estimates of American casualties by the experts and then asked:

Has anyone looked at history? We are talking of more than 1 million men with thousands of tanks meeting in head-on fighting. During the Battle of the Bulge in World War II, approximately 1 million men and well over 1,000 tanks met in head-on battle. (1991, p. A-10)

Peabody went on to note that the Battle of the Bulge, fought in December 1944, resulted in 81,000 American casualties, 19,000 of whom were killed.

In using the documentary method through historical analogy, the writer many times included a scenario whereby the analogy's relevance to the situation at hand became apparent. For example, John Wicklein wrote in The Post about land wars in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam that "cost the country dearly in American lives," then expressed
his view that "We are now possibly facing another 30,000 dead in a land war against Iraq" (1991, p. A-20).

He continued his letter with this scenario:

By ordering an air strike, which would most certainly bring a counter-attack by Iraqi ground forces against our own front-line troops, President Bush would be responsible for the deaths of thousands of American soldiers--men and women--to say nothing about the deaths of untold thousands of children, women and men in Iraq and Kuwait. (1991, p. A-20)

Another use of historical analogy involved the "Hitlerizing" of Saddam Hussein. Hitlerizing is similar to the "demonizing" discussed in the symbols section but is historical in nature. Post writer Fritz Schonbach provided an example of this when he wrote that the comparison of Saddam Hussein to Adolph Hitler "comes naturally" and with "good reasons":

Their humble beginnings, relative lack of education and ignorance of other countries coupled with their ruthlessness and ability to speak in simple and convincing terms to an aggrieved population propelled both men in the direction of almost unlimited power and ultimate disaster. (1991, p. A-16)

Schonbach then provided some biographical information that helped explain his views. He continued:

Living in Austria at the time of Hitler and later in Britain as a refugee, I heard all of today's buzzwords: peace, negotiation, solving the "crisis" by diplomacy, fighting in a faraway land for an unworthy cause. They were meaningless to me then because I knew what Hitler was up to. (1991, p. A-16)
He went further to make the connection between then and now when he wrote:

> Millions of lives would have been saved had someone confronted the bully when the price was still relatively low. Fortunately, this country learns from history. Right on, George Bush. (1991, p. A-16)

In some cases letter writers used the same historical events (and ethnomethods) to arrive at diametrically opposing views. Edwin Wells argued that a previous writer's use of Ulysses S. Grant's siege of Vicksburg as an argument for sanctions, not war, "is just short of ridiculous":

> The Union forces surrounded the city, cut off all supplies and shelled the garrison for weeks from both land and river until the place was a pile of rubble. Surrender was the last remaining alternative. It seems to me that is what we are doing to the lunatic of Baghdad, and it is working. (1991, p. A-8)

**Reciprocity of Perspectives**

The reciprocity of perspectives, or the assumption that people would see things the same way if they switched places, became apparent in the letters in two main ways. In using the pronouns "we" and "us" in their letters some writers revealed their assumption that others see things or believe the same way the writer does.

A prime example of this appeared in *The Tennessean* when Idelle McDaniel wrote that the best news she knew was that so many servicemen and women had accepted Christ while in Saudi Arabia. She added:
Perhaps you have seen the pictures of the temporary baptismal pools they have made out of plastic, right there in the desert. God is answering our prayers! (1991, p. A-8)

McDaniel assumed that others were praying for the same things that she was (namely that the troops convert to Christ) and that this collective prayer was getting results. She continued to act on this assumption by writing "God bless our faithful chaplains! We should remember them in our prayers...."

McDaniel also noted that there is no law against carrying out the Great Commission along with their dedicated, patriotic duties. Wouldn't it be wonderfully phenomenal if a great worldwide revival would start right there in the desert? (1991, p. A-8)

What McDaniel failed to note, however, is the seeming contradiction between "the Great Commission" (winning souls for Christ) and the fact that soldiers' "dedicated, patriotic duties," often include seeking out and killing enemy soldiers.

Another use of the reciprocity of perspectives occurred when letter writers included biographical facts about themselves in accounting for their views of the war. In this way, the writer accounted for seeing things a certain way and may have also indicated that others would see the same things had they had the same experiences.

The Search for the Normal Form

The search for the normal form means that people believe their words and actions are understandable and
reasonable (normal) to others because they assume the other party understands at least something about the purpose and meaning behind those words and actions. They also assume the other party shares a world view similar to their own and will be willing and able to fill in their intended meanings as the interaction progresses.

If the interaction becomes strained or ambiguous because the words or actions are not intelligible or reasonable (or don’t have conventionalized meanings for both parties), the offending party is steered back in the right direction through the cues or gestures of others. These cues may indicate to the offending party where the problem is and how it can be corrected. The problem results many times from the use, or misuse, of certain symbols.

Examples of the search for the normal form abounded in the letters, especially in those letters that included personal attacks against previous letter writers. The responding letter writer usually had a different understanding or meaning for the symbols used by a previous writer. For example, Maribeth Shanley contradicted the interpretation that another writer had of what constitutes "humaneness." Shanley wrote that she was aghast as she read a previous writer’s inference that nuking the people of Iraq would be a humane method of killing them. To kill is to kill. To infer the concept "humane" is a contradiction, just like calling a war moral is contradictory. Killing cannot be humane. Neither can a war be moral! (1991, p. A-10)
Another example occurred when one writer chastised another for insensitivity. The first letter was from a writer who stated that he was "a white man with just enough Cherokee Indian blood in me to go on the warpath now and again" (Davis 1991, p. A-10). The responding letter asked Davis to not use such words in referring to his heritage because "using antiquated words such as 'warpath' only serves to promote stereotypes and misunderstanding" (Haynes, 1991, p. A-10).

The qualitative analysis above revealed how the language used in letters to the editor was almost invariably symbolic in nature. The analysis also showed how different people used the same symbols and ethnomethods in arriving at diametrically opposed viewpoints and how people used their personal biographies and experiences to create a version of reality acceptable to themselves. The analysis revealed the construction of reality as a personal, creative process but also included examples of interaction among the writers.

Chapter 7 presents discussion and conclusions based on the quantitative and qualitative analyses. It makes several connections between the results and the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2 and also includes several suggestions for further research into the content, purpose, and writers of letters to the editor.
CHAPTER 7
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This study was focused on the form and content of war related letters to the editor printed in The Tennessean and The Washington Post newspapers during nine weeks of the Persian Gulf conflict and war. The time periods included July 26 to August 15, 1990; January 10 to January 30, 1991; and February 17 to March 9, 1991. These nine weeks were chosen in order to compare letters printed during the three major events of the conflict—the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the beginning of the air war, and the beginning of the ground war.

Quantitative and qualitative content analyses were conducted to examine the major issues and themes employed by letter writers and to document the use of symbols and ethnomethods in the letters. For the quantitative analysis every war related letter printed during one of three time periods under study was content analyzed according to 14 variables.

These variables included the newspaper in which the letter was published; the time period in which it was published; the sex of the letter writer; the appeal used; the theme used; the object of personal attack, if any; the writer’s orientation (concern with local, national, or
global issues); the writer's war stance (pro-military action, anti-military action, or neutral); the presence or absence of prophecies and rhetorical questions; references to religious beliefs or scripture, World War II or the Vietnam War; and whether or not the letter was written in response to some previous media message.

An intercoder reliability check was conducted using two coders, including the researcher, who each coded 18 randomly selected letters (around 10 percent of the total sample of letters). This check resulted in an overall reliability coefficient of .934 (using Holsti's reliability formula) and reliability coefficients for individual variables ranging from .60 to 1.0 (using Scott's pi).

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze the coded data. The chi-square test of significance was used to determine if significant differences in content existed between the papers. Results of the quantitative analysis were presented in detail in Chapter 5.

Next, a qualitative analysis, based on the theoretical insights of symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology, was conducted to document the content of the letters (what was said) and the sense-making methods (how it was said) used by letter writers to create and communicate their understandings of the war and its surrounding issues. These results were presented in Chapter 6.
Summary of Quantitative Results

Results of the quantitative analysis showed that the majority of letter writers in both papers were male, with the gender gap being wider in *The Post*, where 67 percent of the writers were male. Overall, 68.5 percent of the writers were male. That large a gender gap indicates more males did, in fact, write letters to the editor and that the difference probably is not a function of letter selection. An explanation for the gender gap might be that war is typically considered a male pursuit and thus males might have been more likely than females to follow closely and respond publicly to the events of the war.

Another possible explanation is that while women use the broadcast media at rates similar to men, they use the print media less. Use of the print media results in "greater increases in political knowledge and participation" than use of broadcast media (Ford, Jankowski, and Strate 1994, p. 167).

The print media present detailed information on political issues and candidates as well as the "background and context that surround political events" (Ford, Jankowski, and Strate 1994, pp. 167 and 168). The broadcast media, by contrast, present less detailed and more dramatic coverage of fewer issues with visual information preferred over contextual information (Ford, Jankowski, Strate 1994).
Men, by virtue of using the print media more than women, tend to be more knowledgeable about politics. Thus, they should be better aware of opportunities to participate, be better able to perceive a stake in politics, and thus have a stronger motivation to participate. Therefore, the gap in print media use between the sexes should be reflected in gaps in rates of political participation. (Ford, Jankowski, and Strate 1994, p. 168)

Personal Attacks

Personal attacks accounted for the majority of appeals in both papers. Overall, almost one quarter of the letters were coded as personal attacks. The primary target of these attacks differed according to the newspaper in which the letter was published. Tennessean writers attacked George Bush and other political leaders most frequently while Post writers attacked other political leaders and entities (such as Senator Alan Simpson and the FBI) and other persons and groups (such as war protesters and Yolanda Huet-Vaughn) most often.

The fact that personal attacks were popular in letters published in both papers lends credence to the view held by Davis and Rarick (1964) discussed in Chapter 1. They proposed that the letters section allowed the displeased to make their views known to a wide audience. It seems that writers to both papers felt this was, in fact, the function of the letters section.

The differences in the objects of personal attack may be explained by noting the regions of the country in which
readers of the papers reside. Post readers, by virtue of being close to the capital, may have had more exposure to the actions of Congresspersons and federal agencies and probably were more aware of the war protests because several were held in Washington, D.C. Post readers might also be more loyal to the Republican party than Tennessean readers and thus support George Bush more.

**Effect of Newspaper**

In running crosstabulations with the newspaper in which the letter was published as the independent variable, three significant relationships were found. These included the theme used, response to a previous media message, and references to World War II.

Regarding theme, letters in both papers used primarily practical and political themes. These themes were coded in over half of the 186 letters. When not employing one of these two themes, however, Tennessean writers used the moral theme most often (appealing primarily to humanity and religion), and Post writers used the media theme most often (primarily attacking the performances of specific media figures).

The fact that The Tennessean is printed in Nashville and serves a readership more rural in nature than that of The Post may explain the tendency for Tennessean writers to focus more on religion and related themes such as humanity and duty. Regarding the media theme it is possible that those selecting the letters at The Post might view the
letters section primarily as an outlet for readers to comment on the paper's performance. Post writers may also have this impression of the letters section and write their letters accordingly.

**Effect of Time Period**

Significant relationships were also found when the time period in which the letter was published was the independent variable. These included war stance, theme, orientation, use of rhetorical questions, and response to a previous media message.

Regarding war stance, letters were most likely to be anti-military action during the second time period (January 10 to January 30, 1991), when ultimata were being issued and deadlines for air strikes being set. Neutral letters were found primarily in the first and third time periods, as writers focused more on issues surrounding the war.

The use of rhetorical questions was of particular interest. Their use was most prevalent in the first time period (July 26 to August 15, 1990), indicating that writers may have used them to try to convince or persuade readers to take a certain stance on the war. Persuading became less an issue as the war progressed positively for the United States.

**Effect of Sex of the Letter Writer**

No significant differences were found with the sex of the letter writer as the independent variable—that is, the sex of the writer had no apparent bearing on the types of
appeals or themes used or on letter orientation or war stance. This might be attributed in part to the fact that there was little ambiguity among writers about the need to condemn Saddam Hussein’s actions. When writers disagreed, it was generally about what type of action should be taken to thwart Hussein, not whether or not action should be taken.

Had there been more ambiguity about the appropriateness of Hussein’s actions, sex of the writer may have made a difference. For example, women might have been more likely than men to suggest nonviolent solutions to conflict.

Summary of Qualitative Results

The qualitative analysis revealed how writers used symbols and ethnomethods to create and communicate personal versions of reality. They used symbolic communication to vent their feelings but also to persuade others to view things in a certain way. Symbolic interaction took place among the writers as they responded to one another’s letters and opinions through a third party, in this case the letters section of a newspaper.

Symbol Use

A major use of symbols appeared in personal attacks against Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. In Hitlerizing and demonizing Hussein, vast assumptions were made about his psychological makeup, motives, and actions.
The writers repeatedly noted Hussein's seemingly irrational and ruthless actions, but not one writer addressed the fact that Hussein may have had legitimate complaints against the Kuwaiti government prior to the invasion. Hussein had massed his troops on the Iraq-Kuwait border during negotiations with the Kuwaitis over three major issues.

First, Iraq alleged that Kuwait had raised oil production quotas, thus reducing the price of oil on the world market; second, Iraq demanded payment for oil it said Kuwait had taken from oil fields in Iraqi territory; and third, Iraq was asking Kuwait to forgive the debt Iraq had incurred while fighting the eight-year Iran-Iraq war because it viewed itself as fighting the war for all the Arab countries in the region. In addition, U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, April Glaspie, told Iraqi leaders in a closed-door meeting on July 25, 1990, that the negotiations and the troop movements were an Arab, not American, concern (Yant 1991, pp. 18 and 19).

When these issues are taken into account, Hussein's actions can be interpreted from a different perspective. Zorn (1991) writes that in light of these facts, Hussein "seemed less a madman than a leader pursuing his country's and his own interests ruthlessly but quite rationally" (p. 46).

Writers also tended to use extreme words in their letters in order to focus on worst-case scenarios and
represent people and their motives and actions in a certain way. There tended to be very little middle ground as far as symbols were concerned. Writers may have focused on worst-case scenarios in order to give their arguments or opinions more weight or make them seem more plausible. Many of the writers may also be from the World War II era and have vivid memories of that time.

Use of Ethnomethods

The analysis of ethnomethods showed that people sometimes used the very same methods and symbols to arrive at diametrically opposing viewpoints. Symbolic interactionists might explain this by referring to the self and the way in which humans interpret ideas, events, etc., based on their particular and unique experiences, thoughts, and values.

The qualitative analysis also revealed how people used past events to formulate opinions about the present and future. The documentary method of interpretation was used extensively as writers used the past to make the situation at hand reasonable and understandable.

Suggestions for Further Research

As noted in Chapter 5 content analysis has several inherent limitations. Several improvements could be made to this study to mitigate some of these. To extend this study and improve validity every war related letter published
during the Persian Gulf War could be coded rather than just the nine weeks included here.

**Longitudinal Study of Letter Content**

There are several other avenues that could be taken to expand research on the topic of letters to the editor. One would be to focus on letter content in one newspaper and compare it over time. A study such as this could be done anytime, not just during a war, and would allow an examination of any subject or issue of interest. A comparison could be made to determine if public opinion and letter opinion were similar.

**Letter Content during Previous Wars**

A similar study could be conducted on the content of letters written during previous wars. It would be interesting to discover what types of appeals, themes, orientations, stances, and historical events were used by earlier writers. The Vietnam War might be exceptionally fertile ground for research into symbolic communication because it aroused such emotion and controversy among Americans.

**Study of the Method of Letter Selection**

By focusing on the media rather than the letter writers, a study could be conducted on a newspaper’s method of selecting letters for publication. The method of letter selection could be examined and a comparison made between those letters printed and those not chosen for publication. Gaining access to the process of selection and the letters
might be difficult, but such a study would indicate whether published letter content was representative of that received or whether it was more a function of the editorial philosophy at the paper.

**In-depth Interviews with Letter Selectors and Writers**

In-depth interviews could be conducted with letter selectors to see how they explain their roles in choosing letters for publication and how they evaluate the letters they receive. Interviews could also be conducted with a sample of letter writers to determine their social, personal, and demographic characteristics and their purposes for writing letters to the editor. Interviews with letter writers would allow further research into gender differences that proved not significant in this study and would also update earlier research. If writers to papers in different parts of the country were interviewed, regional differences in writers could also be studied.
APPENDIX 1
CODING RULES

Sex of Letter Writer - Each letter is coded according to the sex of the letter writer as evidenced by the name signed to the letter. In cases where the name signed is not clearly male or female, sex is coded "unknown." Letters authored by both a male and female are coded "both."

Newspaper - Each letter is coded according to the newspaper it was published in, The Tennessean or The Washington Post.

Time Period - Each letter is coded according to the time period in which it was published. Time period one is July 26 to August 15, 1990. Time period two is January 10 to January 30, 1991. Time period three is February 17 to March 9, 1991.

Appeal - Each letter is coded according to the appeal, or main issue, that the writer uses in expressing a viewpoint. When a writer uses more than one appeal, the letter is coded according to what the coder judges to be the most substantial appeal. There are 18 possible appeals, defined below.

1. Alternatives - The writer states that there are means other than violence, aggression, or war to solve conflicts among peoples and/or nations.

2. American Values - The writer uses beliefs or values he or she holds or those it is assumed that most Americans hold.

3. Constitutional Guarantees - The writer uses a guarantee Americans are given by virtue of the Constitution, such as the freedom of speech or the right to privacy.

4. Duty - The writer states that citizens, service members, political leaders, or others have certain duties or responsibilities to perform.
5. Economics - The writer uses economic issues, such as the cost of military action, the price of oil, the money that other countries are, are not, or should be contributing to the war chest, etc.

6. Environment - The writer uses an environmental issue or event such as the possibility of nuclear, biological, or chemical weaponry being used or the burning of oil fields, etc.

7. History - The writer uses historical events or personalities.

8. Humanity - The writer uses the issue of the consequences that war has on all humankind and/or refers to human qualities such as compassion, kindness, etc.

9. Justice - The writer uses the issue of justness or unjustness of military action against Iraq and/or states that Iraq is getting what it deserves.

10. Media Coverage - The writer uses the issue of the media’s role or performance in covering the invasion, the war, and/or surrounding events and issues.

11. Necessity - The writer states that military action is necessary to achieve some end or that action must or should be taken sooner rather than later.

12. Parents in the Military - The writer uses the issue of parents being sent to war.

13. Personal Attack on George Bush, Saddam Hussein or Other Political Leaders - The writer uses negative or inflammatory language to question or condemn the actions, inactions, policies, motives, statements and/or psychological states of either president or other political leaders.

14. Personal Attack on Letter Writer or Others - The writer uses negative or inflammatory language to question or argue with the ideas, actions, etc., of other letter-writers or other persons or groups.

15. Personal Attack on Media Figures - The writer uses negative or inflammatory words to question and/or condemn the performance of a specific media figure.

16. Religion - The writer uses religious beliefs, stories, or events and/or passages of scripture.
17. Support Troops - The writer uses the issue of supporting American and/or allied troops.

18. U.S. Role - The writer questions or states how the U.S. chooses when and where to intervene in the affairs of other countries and/or questions or states the role the U.S. should play in international affairs.

Object of Personal Attack - If a letter’s appeal is coded as being a personal attack, the object of that attack is then identified. Objects of attack include political leaders, media figures, and other letter writers or other persons or groups. The theme of letters having objects of personal attack is determined by the object.

Theme - After coding the letter’s appeal, the letter is coded as having one of five themes. The themes are simply appeals collapsed into groups. They are defined as follows:

1. Practical Theme - Includes appeals to alternatives, economics, environment, history, necessity, and support troops.

2. Political Theme - Includes appeals to Constitutional guarantees, personal attack on George Bush, Saddam Hussein or other political leaders, U.S. role, and parents in the military.

3. Moral Theme - Includes appeals to American values, duty, justice, humanity, and religion.

4. Media Theme - Includes appeals to media coverage and personal attacks on media figures.

5. Other Theme - Includes other appeals and personal attacks on letter writers, protesters, and other persons or groups.

Orientation - Each letter is coded as having one of three orientations, defined as follows:

1. Local - The writer expresses interest in local issues exclusively, such as troops from the immediate area, local media coverage, or the local economy.

2. National - The writer expresses interest in national issues exclusively, such as American troops, policies, leaders, or people.
3. Global - The writer expresses interest in global issues such as the people, troops, policies, and welfare of another nation or nations.

**War Stance** - Each letter is coded as having one of three war stances defined as follows:

1. Pro-military action - The writer expresses a favorable view toward military action against Iraq.

2. Anti-military action - The writer expresses an unfavorable view toward military action against Iraq.

3. Neutral - The writer expresses neither a favorable nor unfavorable view toward military action against Iraq.

**Prophecy** - Each letter is coded according to the presence or absence of prophecies, or predictions of what might happen as the result of some action or inaction.

**Rhetorical Question** - Each letter is coded according to the presence or absence of rhetorical questions, or questions the writer poses to the reader.

**References to World War II or Vietnam War** - Each letter is coded according to the presence or absence of references to either World War II or the Vietnam War.

**Religious References** - Each letter is coded according to the presence or absence of references to religious beliefs or scripture.
APPENDIX 2

LETTERS CITED


REFERENCES


