

American Misconceptions of Syria

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Introduction

“Let’s go to the Opera House in Syria this summer!” You would probably think that this is just a joke between two friends because it is implausible to go to an opera house in a war-torn country like Syria. However, in reality this is not a joke, and it can actually be done because there is normal life in Syria other than the war everyone talks about, and there are live concerts every week in the Opera House in Damascus. It is true that Syria is living in a horrendous war these days, but that does not prevent Syrians from preserving their culture and traditions because they are people who love life and are determined to live normally no matter how bad the circumstances are.

Since 2011, Syria and its people have been constantly associated with war and destruction in the eyes of Americans. Unfortunately, this misconception about Syria is probably the only thing that pops up in the vast majority of Americans’ minds when they hear anything about this country or interact with its people. This becomes a significant challenge for Syrians to prove to Americans that their country is not like what they’ve been led to believe. In this paper, I argue that the media’s framing of the war in Syria on news channels like Fox News is the main reason Americans have this horrific view towards a culturally significant country like Syria. I also show what these misunderstandings are and try to put forth an approach to journalism through which countries like Syria would not be defined by war.

Fox News is one of the most important media sources that give the wrong view about Syria because it only shows Syria as a country where everything is destroyed and where there is no normal life whatsoever, and that’s a false idea. Since it is impossible to take every US citizen to Syria to change their view about the country and the Syrian people, a report about normal life in Syria should be made by the United Nations (UN) and put on American TV. Through this solution, the first step towards waking Americans up about what is really going on in Syria would be accomplished by making them curious to know more about normal life in Syria, challenging the mainstream news they are watching on TV. This solution is very realistic because there are many UN reporters and employees in Syria and in Damascus specifically, in addition to the fact that Fox News and American TV channels more generally rely on UN reports because of the great importance this organization possesses.

1. Symptoms and Causes

The misunderstanding by Americans towards Syria and the Syrian people is a problem that emerged seven years ago due to the one-sided and incomplete story that US media outlets present about the war in Syria, especially TV channels like Fox News. Why does this misunderstanding persist and proliferate? You just need to ask yourself this question: "What do I know about Syria?" Your answer would prove to you that there is a problem. The fact that Americans know little to nothing about Syria other than war and destruction deprives this country of its historical importance and great cultural effect on the world. It also acts as an immense burden on every single Syrian citizen living in the US because of their responsibility to change this limited view towards Syria and Syrians.

Hornero Gil de Zúñiga et al. argue in "Selective Exposure to Cable News and Immigration in the U.S.: The Relationship between FOX News, CNN, and Attitudes toward Mexican Immigrants" that cable television has drastically affected people's attitude towards immigration during the last two decades. They provide the example that many conservative Republicans who watch Fox News show less support for Mexican immigration than others who have different political views. Fox News has always been linked with negative perceptions of Mexican immigration, and that shows the big correlation between those perceptions and the views of people watching this TV channel. Lyse Doucet agrees with Gil de Zúñiga et al. about the media's effect on people, and in "Syria and the CNN Effect: What Role Does the Media Play in Policy-Making?" she gives an example about President Trump, who decided to make an airstrike on Syria after seeing photographs of dead children on TV. Referring to photographs, Heide Fehrenbach and Davide Rodogno write in "A Horrific Photo of a Drowned Syrian Child': Humanitarian Photography and NGO Media Strategies in Historical Perspective" about how a horrific picture of a drowned three-year-old Syrian refugee child had a great effect on people from all around the world, presenting the history of using images and photography to get sympathy from people and fundraise for humanitarian organizations.

In "Visual Framing of the Syrian Conflict in News and Public Affairs Magazines," Keith Greenwood and Joy Jenkins show how TV channels like Fox News and CNN always focus on presenting war images, destruction, and bloodshed in international conflicts, and they give the Syrian conflict as a great example. They also question whether Americans know what is actually going on in Syria or just what is presented on TV. Fox News has a section for Syria on its website; however, not a single article or video talks about normal life in Syria. Some examples are obvious from their titles, like "Trapped in Syria's besieged Ghouta: 'life has ceased, the children are waiting to die'" or "ISIS slaughters 33 young men in Syria with sharp tools," and the list continues.

This framing of Syria in Fox News cannot be challenged by Americans because, as Lauren Feldman shows in "Partisan Differences in Opinionated News

Perceptions: A Test of the Hostile Media Effect,” people perceive bias in opinionated news; however, this perception depends on the person’s view towards the news. Americans don’t have any opinion towards what’s going on in Syria before watching TV, and that’s what makes it hard for them to perceive the bias.

Rico Neumann and Shahira Fahmy show in “Measuring Journalistic Peace/War Performance: An Exploratory Study of Crisis Reporters Attitudes and Perceptions” that conflict reporting can be separated into two categories: peace journalism and war journalism. This completes what Keith Greenwood and Joy Jenkins were saying about the focus of TV channels on war and destruction and gives an alternative path for TV channels to take concerning international conflict and war. An example of peace journalism that I will discuss in more detail in this paper can be seen in Anne Barnard’s “Damascus Diary: A Syrian City Filled with Life, and Hints of Brutal Death,” which talks about the normal life in Damascus despite the war and proves that there is normal life in Syria, but this life is never shown to Americans on TV channels like Fox News.

2. TV’s Effect on People

Watching cable television has an undeniably strong effect on the framing of the American people’s views and can sometimes affect their actions too. “I tell you that attack on children yesterday had a big impact on me—big impact” (qtd. in Doucet 143). That was President Trump’s reaction to what he saw about Syria two years ago most probably on Fox News because it’s the channel that supports his political views, and it is well known that he regularly watches it. Sixty-three hours after this reaction, the President decided to make an airstrike on Syria (Doucet 143). We can link this again to what was happening a year ago and how President Trump was threatening an airstrike on Syria because of the images and news he was seeing on TV. No matter how much support you have towards President Trump, this shocking fact must prove to you how dangerously effective is the one-sided portrayal of Syria on American TV. Media is now capable of affecting the world’s decision-makers, so what about the views of normal people?

Contemporary Americans’ views on Syria and Syrians do not seem to have been systematically studied before; however, here is a very similar example that applies to the Syrian case and proves the effect TV has on Americans. Mexican immigration is a controversial topic that has been standing out for years and that can be related to the Syrian case because of serious misunderstandings caused by or correlated with mainstream TV broadcasts. Gil de Zúñiga et al. concluded that the more individuals watch Fox News, the less likely they will be to support Mexican immigration or to hold positive views about Mexicans because they are convinced by the negative images portrayed about Mexicans in Fox News. 1,159 Americans who had different socio-political ideologies and who were exposed to different news outlets participated in this study. Comparing to the Syrian case, the same thing can be seen; showing nothing but war and destruction on TV

channels like Fox News would frame a wrong view about Syria and Syrians in the minds of Americans, causing them to be against Syrian immigration and putting Syrians living in the US in an uncomfortable position of trying to show the other side of Syria that no one talks about.

What makes TV news more influential on the views of Americans towards Syria is that Americans don't tend to have any prior opinion on the conflict there and that every TV channel or media source available for them presents the same perspective, which is the war perspective. This fact makes the framing of Syria presented by Fox News and other American TV channels unchallenged because how would someone even guess that there is normal life other than war if all they can see is war? A noteworthy quotation by Winston Churchill that illustrates this point is: "There is no such thing as public opinion. There is only published opinion." Feldman showed that people perceive more story bias in opinionated news than in non-opinionated news, but these perceptions vary as a function of the audience's agreement with the news content. In our case the audience does not have any agreement or disagreement with the news content, implying that they would never be able to perceive bias in news about Syria and that's what results in framing the wrong views about this country in their minds.

3. How Fox News Frames the War in Syria

Of course, not every American citizen watches Fox News; however, Fox News is a typical example of how American TV channels depict the war in Syria. It is also reputedly President Trump's preferred source of TV news, as previously noted. The visual representations of international news to American audiences have been well studied throughout the years, and the results show that it is more likely focused on violence and disaster than on peaceful solutions, unlike mainstream news in other countries. A great example of this is the Syrian war. As I have said earlier, there is a whole section for Syria on the Fox News website with not a single article or report on the normal life there. I will give you in the next few paragraphs some examples of what you can see on the Fox News website.

"Trapped in Syria's besieged Ghouta: 'life has ceased, the children are waiting to die.'" This is one of the many articles that talks about the destruction and helplessness (McKay). How would Americans react to an article like this other than being sympathetic? Would they not have an idea that children in Syria are uneducated because of the war? Would they not be surprised if I say that I was studying in an international school in Syria during the war and that its language of instruction is English? Being sympathetic is one of the most important factors affecting the view towards a country's people, and it makes those people feel inferior because of how they are being looked upon. Again, I want to be clear that there is a big war in Syria, but that does not mean that everything there is destruction and death.

“UNICEF: More than 40,000 children at risk in Syria's Raqqa” is another title of an article talking about children’s helplessness. We can see that there is a big focus on children because of how easily Americans and people in general feel enraged and intrigued when they see or hear about an instance of a child dying. “Humanitarian photos are composed, edited, narrated and circulated with an eye toward creating a specific effect: to stimulate emotions, such as empathy or outrage, in viewers, and cause them to act” (Fehrenbach and Rodogno 1125). However, this framing is destroying the picture of the Syrian child. The Syrian child is now being used as a commodity by Fox News to present highly rated news, and that is specifically non-humanitarian and unacceptable for any human being.

4. Effect on Syrians in the US

You will never believe that this wrong view is a real problem until you see what Syrians in the US experience on a daily basis. I have conducted some interviews with Syrian students living in the US to ask them about their experiences with the misunderstandings towards Syria and Syrians, and their responses were noteworthy. The method of choosing interviewees relied upon my own network of Syrian international students. I found subjects through acquaintances and connections of those acquaintances and did not have any requirements other than being a Syrian student living in the US. What makes these subjects reliable is that they all are Syrians and they experienced the misunderstanding about them with their own eyes. Another thing is that they are living in different parts of the US, and all three had instances of a wrong view towards them, which proves that there is a real problem.

I need to emphasize that every person who lived in Syria in the days of war was affected by this war in one way or another depending on their circumstances such as location, economic status, etc. However, people who were extremely affected by the war to a devastating effect can rarely be found in the US due to the restricted policy on immigrants and refugees from Syria. According to the US Department of State’s Refugee Processing Center, a very small number of Syrian refugees were admitted to the US in the calendar years 2011-2015. However, as the conflict in Syria intensified in 2016, President Obama’s final year in office, there was a big spike of 14,192 Syrian refugees admitted, and then this number began to decrease drastically in 2017 and again 2018, with 3,024 and 38 refugees respectively, followed by a slight increase in 2019 that showed that 588 refugees were admitted. That dip in the number of refugees after 2016 happened in part due to President Trump’s 120-day refugee ban, which made it almost impossible for any refugee to be admitted to the US in the summer of 2017. After this ban expired there was a pause on the admission of Syrian refugees, and then there was the travel ban issued by president Trump on countries like Syria, Libya, Iran, Somalia, Yemen, North Korea and Venezuela (Amos; Lind).

The first interview was an email interview with Sami Nazha, a Syrian student living in California. Sami talked about an incident in which he discovered that his friends were shy to ask him about Syria, thinking that it is an extremist country due to the war that is happening there. Sami felt as if someone slapped him in the face because of what he had discovered. He could not accept anyone talking about his country in this way and was very irritated and depressed; however, he tried to conceal those emotions so that he could change his friends' views and talk about his country in a realistic and persuasive manner. He started asking them questions about how they imagined Syria so that he could know what they really meant by an "extremist country." The responses varied: "You cannot be anything other than Muslim because you will be murdered," "ISIS is killing people everywhere," "you cannot go out with women unless you are married," "you cannot drink alcohol," etc. Sami clarified, first of all, by saying that in Syria there is great diversity and not all people are Muslim and gave an example of himself because he is a Christian. He then started saying that ISIS is in control of a very small part of the country, not the whole country and that there is war in Syria but there is normal life too. He also said, "There is normal life other than what you see on TV. I used to have friends from the opposite gender, drink alcohol, play tennis and swim, all during the war years. Life should continue."

The second interview was a phone interview with Fozi Massouh, a Syrian student living in Rhode Island. Fozi once had an incident where he was thought to be a refugee because he is Syrian. The stereotypical view of relating Syrians to refugees was very pervasive in the last seven years because of the framing of news on TV and social media. Fozi was at work when his coworkers asked him if it was hard coming to the US, assuming that he was a refugee. Fozi's response that he was not a refugee shocked his coworkers: he clarified that there are no Syrian refugees in the US because the government does not allow them to come to the US. He also added that not every Syrian abroad is a refugee. He felt extremely miserable because of the first impression he had from his coworkers, who judged him without even knowing the truth and felt enraged at the same moment because his country is thought of as a refugee's country; however, he still believes that this misunderstanding can be altered one day.

The third interview was an email interview with Ramy Ghawji, a Syrian student living in Ohio. Ramy talked about an incident where his college friends were shocked that he was going back to Syria during the winter break because they thought that traveling to Syria was like committing suicide. Ramy had a very rigorous job of trying to persuade his friends that what they see on TV is not the full story of what is going on in Syria and that there is normal life other than war there. He began by saying that all of his friends and relatives are still living there, determined to live a normal life, and continued by showing them pictures of the bright side of Syria in the war years. They were shocked by the things Ramy was saying and the pictures he was showing because they had a totally different image in their minds, but the good thing is that they now know the full story and

not part of it, and that's what I am trying to do in the next section by speaking about my own experiences in Syria and the ones of a reporter.

5. What Living in Safe Parts of Syria Looks Like

I have lived in Damascus from 2011 until 2017, and that's why I can describe in detail what it is like to live there and who the Syrian people are. First of all, Damascus is the capital of Syria, and it is one of the safest cities there in the years of war. There is normal life in Damascus; however, that does not deny the fact that there is a risk on everyone's lives too. Damascus was experiencing constant shelling and innocent civilians died as a result, but that did not stop people from living their lives. Syrians were determined to live a normal life, challenging death and war with the power of life, and they accomplished it. Students go to schools, employees go to work, restaurants are open, streets are packed with people, the Opera House has concerts every week, etc.; everything gives you an impression that this is not the country you see on TV and that the determination of Syrians is impeccable. Syrians are educated people; war did not prevent them from learning, and public schools are still free. They are the most generous people you will ever meet in your life to the extent that they would open their house for you if you ask for it and treat you as part of their family. Walking in the streets of Damascus and seeing how people are living normally with the simplest factors available would make you think again of the war view you have towards Syria and appreciate the amazing power Syrians showed facing the prolonged and bitter war. I have encouraged you previously to ask yourself what you know about Syria; however, now I am going to ask you a different question: Have you ever thought of all of this information when hearing the word "Syria"? If the answer is no, then that is a great proof that this misunderstanding is a big problem.

Searching for a reporter who talked about normal life in Syria, in the years of war, was an arduous challenge because every American media source was always focusing on the war perspective. The type of journalism I was searching for is defined as peace journalism. Peace journalism "evolved as an alternative to challenge traditional war coverage," encouraging "a focus on proactive coverage and nonviolent approaches for journalists covering conflict zones" (Neumann and Fahmy 223). In the Syrian war, peace journalism is rare, but one of those rare examples is the article "Damascus Diary: A Syrian City Filled with Life, and Hints of Brutal Death" by Anne Bernard. This article describes to an extent what I mean by a normal life, going away from the typical way of reporting the news in a war-torn country, however still failing to mention any of the solutions that could be done to end this war. This is a reason as to why it is not the best example of peace journalism. Bernard starts by saying, "More than five years into Syria's chaotic civil war, the capital is relatively undamaged and functioning, bustling with commuters, markets and restaurants" (para. 2). She then describes what she saw in the old city of Damascus and says: "At the base of the Umayyad Mosque, one of the most beautiful sites in the Old City, couples and families

hang out, feed pigeons and pose for a man who's been using the same Polaroid camera for decades" (para. 5). She then was astonished to see a "lavish" wedding at the Sheraton Damascus Hotel and people lounging by the pool, too (para. 7). Afterwards, she mentioned going to the fanciest restaurant in old Damascus, Naranj, and talked about the great spread of Syrian traditional food that was presented and that all she paid there was \$10! She continued to describe the taxi and bus drivers in a funny way when she said: "Taxi and bus drivers have always seen themselves as impresarios in Damascus: playing Arabic classics and Western pop music, making coffee in little electric pots while weaving through traffic, setting up romantic lights that they flick on at night for an instant party atmosphere" (para. 16). Finally, she concludes the article by describing The Tiki Bar where people drank and smoked with a DJ playing music, and that was how her trip went in Syria in 2015. All of those images show us that American media outlets are not doing a really good job in showing the full story, and in the next section, I will discuss how that can be reversed.

6. Balancing Between Conflict and Peace

Reporting on war and peace at the same time in a country that is witnessing a humanitarian crisis doesn't sound like an easy task to many journalists; however, it can be done successfully by taking the approach of peace journalism. A great example of this is the coverage of the Sri Lanka civil war of 1983 by the two English-language dailies *Daily Mirror* and *Daily News and Sunday Observer*. *Daily Mirror* had 76.1% of its stories framed as peace journalism, and the *Daily News and Sunday Observer* had 59.8% (Lee 372). That proves to us that war can be covered by peace journalism, so why wouldn't it be the case for the Syrian war?

When you mention the phrase "peace journalism," people start to think that this is the type of journalism that wants the general public to think that everything is going great in a country and that there is no war happening whatsoever, and that's a false idea. Peace journalism requires journalists to have a fair and balanced approach when getting information from their sources and prohibits them from ignoring the elements of a conflict (Ersoy). This would encourage those journalists to do more research on the war they are trying to address and shows the multiple perspectives on this war in order to reach the goal of giving the full story to the general public. Regarding the war in Syria, I would say that balancing between war and peace in the type of journalism I am calling for can be achieved by having journalists go to Damascus and make a full report on how people are living a normal life, and then go to Northern Syria in which the war is still going on and speak about that equally. In that case, information would be retrieved from different sources showing different views of people living in Syria and not concealing any part of the full story. However, in our case right now, US media outlets are already reporting about Northern Syria, showing the war perspective, and not reporting about normal life in Damascus and many other

cities that are safe. That's where the problem arises, revealing the missing part that should be reported to show the full story to Americans.

7. The Solution for This Misunderstanding

A great but impractical solution is that Fox News sends a reliable and well-known reporter to Damascus so that they can stay there for a week and show people what they are seeing in Damascus on a daily basis. If Americans saw a daily report made by a well-known American reporter in Syria, they would surely begin to think twice about what is going on in Syria, developing a fuller story in their minds. Getting visas to Syria can be easily achieved for the reporter, the camera operator, and the crew; however, there would be some restrictions by the Syrian government, and that is completely normal. The restrictions would be that the journalistic team cannot go to places where there is fighting because the main reason for them to come is showing the bright side of Syria, not the war side that everybody knows about. If this term was accepted by Fox News, it is guaranteed that the visas would be out in a short period of time. I should be clear that this restriction does not affect the freedom that the journalistic team has inside Damascus or in any city where there is no fighting. Another thing is that the government would assure safety for this team inside the unrestricted areas.

Unfortunately, this term won't be accepted by Fox News because they are not going to change their agenda so that they can show the bright side of Syria, and that's what makes this solution impractical. Surprisingly, an American TV channel called One America News Network did part of what I am calling for and sent a reporter to Damascus last month; however, that did not have any positive effects because the TV channel does not have a high rate of viewers, and the reporter was not well known, and that's why I am emphasizing those two aspects to get good results. The fact that this step was accomplished by an American TV channel encourages me to suggest it to *Slate* or *The New Yorker*, because those two news outlets are more likely to take up this effort than Fox News.

A more practical solution can be achieved by the cooperation between the UN and well-known American TV channels. As I have said earlier, Fox News and American TV channels more generally rely on UN reports because of the importance this organization has. A proof to my point is the article "UNICEF: More than 40,000 children at risk in Syria's Raqqa," which is an Associated Press article covering a UN report about Syria and published on the Fox News website. Asking the UN to make a specialized report for American TV channels about normal life in Damascus is not a peculiar thing and can be done without needing huge funding. There are many UN reporters and employees living normal life in Damascus, and they would never refuse to make such a report because it is about the life they are living, but the thing is that nobody asks them to do that. I believe I am the first one to do that, and I hope that my voice gets heard. I believe that those reporters have some respect for Syria no matter where they are from, and they really would be interested in trying to change Americans'

views towards Syria because this country gave them their work and it's a responsibility for them to give it something in return. You would probably say that Syria did not give them their work; however, that is not a good argument because Syria is where they are working, and if your place of work is gone that means that your work is gone too. The funding of this report can be achieved by a non-governmental Syrian organization called Massar because this organization's goal is to help Syrians wherever they are, and funding this report can help Syrians abroad with their big challenge of changing people's views towards their country. After this report is specially made for well-known American TV channels, those American channels should present it in their news because then they would not have any excuses. Why would they rely on UN reports but ignore this report? Refusing a report like this would not give a good reputation for American TV channels.

The UN has always had a great role in bringing invisible issues to the forefront such as marburg fever, cholera sufferers, child soldiers, modern-day slavery and many other issues that we would never have heard of without this organization. On Google Scholar, I searched for the term "Marburg fever" all the years before the UN began publishing reports and news articles on marburg fever, starting in 2005 with the report "Marburg virus has killed 244 but fatalities are decreasing, UN health agency reports," and all the years after. Google Scholar turned up 217 articles published in all the years prior to 2005, and after, it turned up 436, which represents a 50% increase in the number of articles over a much shorter period of time. This correlation doesn't represent a causation; however, it gives me hope that the UN has an effect on raising awareness in the world and that the solution I am calling for can be realistically achieved by this organization.

8. Expectations and Stakes

If the second solution suggested above was applied, a very first step of changing Americans' views towards Syria would be achieved. Americans would then have a source of news that gives a different perspective they have never heard or thought of before. The UN report would ignite Americans' curiosity of knowing more about normal life in Syria and would eventually give them a rightful view of this country and its people. By doing this, Americans would be more willing to flip their misunderstandings upside down when this war ends, resulting in Syria restoring its position of being one of the safest countries in the world. Of course, it would not change the view of every American because not everyone would see this report, but it would act as a first step. Americans should care about this topic because they don't know the hidden truth behind what is being presented to them about Syria on TV channels and don't have the chance to challenge it. This paper gives them a new perspective that allows them to challenge this framing. Furthermore, these viewers won't be happy if they know that they possess a faulty view towards Syria and Syrians, and that's why they would be eager to change it. In the next section, I will be discussing how Syrians can react to this misunderstanding in a positive way.

9. What Syrians Can Do

First of all, they should believe that this misunderstanding will not stay forever and that no one is capable of changing it except themselves. Syrians should work hard to get peace back to their country because that's the hardest step of the process. Of course, I don't have the authority or the ability to tell them how because that's further from the scope of my paper; however, I believe that it can be done because Syrians have an incredible determination that can never be underestimated. Another thing, and this is directed for Syrians living abroad, is that they should never get tired of trying to change people's views of their country and always feel proud of where they are from because it is the country of civilizations where one of the first complex civilizations arose.

Conclusion

I would like to share with you some images from Syria three years ago where people were watching one of the last games for Syria to qualify for the World Cup for the first time in history. People gathered in the streets and backed their national team. Although having very different political views, many of them agreed on the point that this national team was something that united Syria for the first time in a very long time.



Figure One: Photograph by Louai Beshara. Published caption describes how the celebratory mood of Syrians watching the World Cup qualifying match in Damascus, Syria, on September 5, 2017, spread to rebel- and extremist-controlled areas, as well (Agence France-Presse)



Figure Two: Photograph by Youssef Badawi. Published caption explains that Syria has never qualified for the World Cup, so Syrians are very excited watching the World Cup qualifying match (Agence France-Presse)

I call in this paper for peace journalism in Syria, and those pictures can act as ideas for what type of pictures journalists can include in their reports when they are taking the peace journalism approach. Of course pictures like these cannot solely replace the mainstream pictures of war and destruction that we can see everywhere. Journalists must also support those pictures by speaking about the complexity of life in Syria but at the same time never forgetting the ongoing war and also trying to give solutions to end the conflict.

In conclusion, I believe that the misunderstanding towards Syria and Syrians by Americans is a very important topic that should be studied more and eventually eradicated. In this paper, I gave Americans a starting point from which they can finally start challenging the news they see about Syria and not merely accepting the biased reporting that is presented to them. In addition to that, I gave them proof that there is normal life in Syria and that Syrians are a strong people who are determined to fight the horrific circumstances in order to preserve their right to live a normal life. Finally, I gave journalists an alternative route that they could take regarding reporting on Syria and other countries facing the same situation. I am proud to be among the first people to talk about this important topic, and I hope that this paper catalyzes a change first in you, and from you to the whole country.

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