Image Restoration Theory and the Survival of President Bill Clinton

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William Benoit and Image Restoration Theory

Image restoration theory, introduced by William Benoit, creates a framework for crisis communication that includes strategies that can reduce the offensiveness of a situation that may tarnish a company or public figure’s image and reputation. Through a combination of intensive case studies and analysis of elite public figures and mass public opinion, Benoit provides a paradigm for the next generation of research on political management and impression. What he truly offers is a framework, a way for a public figure to face a crisis situation that threatens one’s reputation and image in the eyes of the public. Kimberly Elsbach, in speaking of Benoit’s strategies, writes, “Benoit’s use of rhetorical criticism paradigms and case study evidence focuses attention on the content and processes of image management rather than on the form of image management, as social psychologists do” (1997, p. 584). Image restoration theory outlines strategies, beginning with types of denial and evasion of responsibility as initial reactions and factors when one is accused of something negative. The bulk of Benoit’s theory lies in the reduction of offensiveness, and how strategies of bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking the accuser, and compensation can be used to restore the initial image of a political or otherwise public figure or company. Concluding his theory with the discussion of both corrective action and mortification, Benoit’s image restoration theory provides an effective framework to examine the choices that political figures, like former President Clinton, and administrations dealing with image crises, are able to positively restore image or fail to do so.
Abstract

President Bill Clinton entered the White House with a southern charm, a knack for pleasing the American people, and a keen eye for politics. Respected both as a politician and as a man, few American presidents prior to Clinton or since his two terms have found popularity both as a person and as the leader of the free world. In 1998, the Lewinsky sex scandal emerged, and the resulting investigation into the president’s extra-marital affair would result in the impeachment and subsequent acquittal for the beloved President Clinton. Between his charisma and political reputation, Bill Clinton remains a respected individual in American politics today, despite the scandal surrounding his affair with his 22-year-old White House Intern, Monica Lewinsky. The scandal arose not from Lewinsky herself, but rather in the case of Paula Jones, who in 1994 sued President Clinton for sexual harassment. It was during this investigation that allegations of an affair between Lewinsky and Clinton emerged. But even as Clinton’s initial denials and his misleading of the American public became evident, his image was restored.

William Benoit’s image restoration theory outlines strategies that a company, firm, or public figure can and should employ in order to mitigate damage to their image in an event of crisis. By using the framework offered to us by Benoit, we can examine which strategies President Clinton used throughout the Lewinsky sex scandal and its resulting investigation. Clinton, throughout his many statements and actions, as well as the actions and statements of his wife and his administration, employed all of the strategies outlined by Benoit. In doing so, the Clinton and Lewinsky sex scandal demonstrates how using multiple image restoration strategies is essential to reclaiming a positive reputation, or allowing a political reputation to remain untarnished by even the most harsh and most betraying of scandals. In his examination of sex
scandals and political figures, Benoit writes, “Our face, image, or reputation is so important to us that threats to our image impel us to attempt to restore our reputation” (Benoit, “Hugh grant,” 1997, p. 251). He continues to mention that the use of multiple strategies not only allows the best possibility of image restoration, but that it simultaneously highlights the flaws and limited natures of powers and persuasion (Benoit, 1997, p.185). Discourse, discussion, and public statements are the “remedy for threats to image,” and by placing Clinton’s actions within Benoit’s framework, it is clear as to how his image was completely restored and remains a positive and respected political image today (Benoit, “Hugh grant,” 1997, p. 255).

**Background**

At the age of 22, recent college graduate Monica Lewinsky was hired as a White House intern during Bill Clinton’s first term as the President of the United States in 1995. The details of her personal relationship with the president were not released until Paula Jones sued President Clinton for sexual assault. In 1998, Lewinsky had signed an affidavit denying any sexual interaction between Clinton and Jones. However, Linda Tripp, a co-worker of Lewinsky in the Defense Department, believed that Lewinsky was compensated and convinced to sign the affidavit in order to protect the President’s reputation. Tripp would eventually release tapes of Lewinsky discussing her own extra-marital affair with the President. These tapes were delivered to Kenneth Starr of the Independent Counsel, whom had opposed President Clinton in the Whitewater real estate scandal that plagued Clinton’s reputation just before. As the allegations of sexual contact and adultery began to gain traction both within the political sphere and in the
media, President Clinton’s reputation was taken apart and his role as the President constantly questioned. (Blaney, J., & Benoit, W., 2001, p. 74).

With the tapes from Linda Tripp, in which Lewinsky tried to persuade Tripp to lie under oath in the Paula Jones case against the President, Starr was able to widen his investigation and seek a charge of perjury against Clinton. After the scandal with Lewinsky first broke in January of 1998, Bill Clinton would utter the following statement of denial, “I did not have sexual relations with that woman” (Clinton, 1998). After reiterating this statement in his deposition for the Jones case, Starr created his case of false testimony and perjury against the President. Various forms of media would then pick up the scandal, and Clinton, through further statements of denial, more information from Lewinsky and evidence from Tripp’s tapes, would become a national controversy and a case for President Clinton’s impeachment. With a famous apology, image restoration strategies, and the charismatic nature of one of our nation’s favorite presidents, Bill Clinton was able to navigate years of controversy and remain a respected political figure.

**Denial and Evasion of Responsibility**

Once the allegations of Lewinsky were released in January 1998, Clinton was quick to make a statement to a nation waiting for denial or confirmation of his extra-marital affair with his young intern. The strategy President Clinton chose was absolute denial and taking offense to the allegations and accusations of Lewinsky, Tripp, and Starr. According to Benoit, denial as a strategy of image restoration often only works when the accused truly is innocent. Mortification is usually a much more effective strategy to use for political figures, as their decisions and actions create consequences that affect a greater public (Benoit, “Hugh Grant,” 1997). In his
explanation of his theory, an article entitled, “Image Repair Discourse and Crisis Communication,” Benoit states that, “A firm may deny that the act occurred, that the firm performed the act, or that the act was harmful to anyone” (Benoit, 1997, p. 179). This is direct denial, and the first form that Benoit describes in his image restoration theory. Clinton’s infamous statement of “I did not have sexual relations with that woman” allows us to see denial in Clinton’s initial reaction to Lewinsky’s allegations. According to Benoit, “A second form of denial is shifting the blame, arguing that another person or organization is actually responsible for the offensive act” (Benoit, 1997, p. 180). The shifting of blame had been a strategy used by Clinton in previous scandals that had plagued his earlier political career. When his drug use came into question when he cut down the staffing of his drug control policy program, Clinton’s statement shifted the blame outside of his singular role as the President, and called into question other political leaders responsible. Clinton stated, “‘I think all of us in positions of responsibility are somewhat responsible for the fact that we’ve not turned around the increase in teen drug use’” (Benoit, “Hugh grant,” 1997, p. 260). Denial is not a new strategy to crisis communication, and is definitely not a revolutionary reaction in terms of public figures involved in sex scandals. However, this was not an effective strategy for Clinton. While at first it allowed Clinton to attempt to focus on his political goals in an effort to redirect the focus of the American public from the scandal, the evidence against him would prove this denial to be misleading and ultimately, a lie.

Benoit delves even deeper into strategies of image restoration in describing the concept of evasion of responsibility. Within these strategies, a company, firm, or public figure is able to focus on other issues instead of the scandal at hand. For Clinton, this meant shifting the focus of the American public to his political agenda instead of increasing media coverage and discussion.
of the sex scandal and allegations of his affair. Clinton began his term as a respected politician after serving as governor in Arkansas, and when the Lewinsky allegations went public, was preparing for his State of the Union speech. Despite many demands by political colleagues as well as the media to comment on the allegations, Clinton chose to not address them in the nationally and internationally viewed speech. Benoit outlines four strategic options in evading responsibility in order to restore ones image. In some crisis situations, it is appropriate for the act to be considered “merely a response to another’s offensive act, and that the behavior can be seen as a reasonable reaction to the provocation” (Benoit, 1997, p. 180). However, as Clinton was a political figure accused of creating the crisis on his own, this strategy of evading responsibility proved difficult and unattainable. However, Clinton was a master of defeasibility. Benoit defines defeasibility in that it “alleges a lack of information about or control over important elements of the situation” (Benoit, 1997, p. 180). An example of this would be an executive who misses a meeting, and then claims that he was not notified of the time changing for the meeting from which he was absent. For Clinton, this meant alleging that the investigation into his personal life did not have the information or evidentiary support to create true claims of perjury. Since the first allegations went public, Clinton was quick to mention that his private life should be held separately from his political life, and that the investigation led by the individual counsel of Starr was simply a political move based on zero evidence.

In order for evasion of responsibility to work effectively as a strategy to restore a tarnished image, the accused must either shift the blame, or portray that the actions of the accused were good intentioned. While extremely difficult for a political figure involved in a sex scandal to claim that adultery was good intentioned, Clinton often chose to use this strategy when discussing how he dealt with those investigating the allegations after they had reached the
public. In his apology in which he admitted to having an affair with Lewinsky, Clinton states, “I answered their questions truthfully, including questions about my private life, questions no American citizen would ever want to answer” (Clinton, 1998). In doing this, he demonstrated a loyalty to his country and begins to acknowledge that the questioning was unfair in the first place and thus should not be questions American people should be asked, much less himself. Clinton was often criticized for remaining silent for months after the Lewinsky allegations came to light. This was a part of using the evasion of responsibility tactics, as it allowed him to continue to focus on his political roles, and appear to not be perturbed by the personal nature of the sex scandal, despite its grand affect on his public perception and on his family life. This would lead him to more statements, and as he broke his silence, employed other image restoring strategies that would yield much more positive results in terms of rebuilding his reputation, both as a person and as a politician.

**Reduce Offensiveness**

The bulk of Benoit’s image restoration theory rests in his strategies to reduce offensiveness. While denial and evasion of responsibility are often seen in the early stages of a crisis, and are seen mostly in the initial and emotionally charged reactions of the accused, they do not seem to be the most effective way of restoring an image suddenly tarnished in the eyes of the American public. Using one single strategy, even those expertly outlined by Benoit and his suggestions for handling crisis situations, can completely restore one’s image, whether a political figure, corporate leader or entertainer. Rather, it is a combination of these strategies of image restoration that can effectively and efficiently reframe a crisis situation in the favor of the
accused. For Clinton, it was a mastery of his own charisma combined with multiple image restoration strategies that would allow him to return to the popular and respected politician and leader of the free world.

Benoit outlines the strategy of bolstering as a way to offset negative feelings associated with the wrongful act of the accused by strengthening, instead, the positive feelings once felt toward the accused or still felt by the American public. For President Clinton and his administration, this meant consistently highlighting his political accomplishments as well as the strength of his family. The latter was demonstrated in the statements by his wife, First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, known for her own political prowess and involvement in the policies instituted by the Clinton administration. After Lewinsky’s allegations went public, the First Lady’s opinion was described in newspapers at the time as in strong support of her husband. Soltis of The New York Post wrote, “First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton charged that the allegations were false and promulgated by Clinton’s political enemies” (Soltis, 1998, p. 002). President Clinton, in many of his public statements after the allegations, focused on his family in order to reiterate that the scandal was not of political or national concern, but was rather an issue he would need to deal with privately in order to protect his family. This was shown directly in his apology statement in which he stated his false denials in January of 1998 were evidence of him protecting his family, thus bolstering his trait as a devoted family man and respected father. Clinton stated, “I was also very concerned about protecting my family. The fact that these question were being asked in a politically inspired lawsuit, which has since been dismissed, was a consideration, too” (Clinton, 1998). Clinton continued to bolster his political accomplishments and directives and his relationship with private relationship with his family in order to reduce the offensiveness of the accusation of his adultery.
Clearly, negative feelings are associated with sex scandals and accusations of adultery, especially when those allegations are against the arguably most respected and powerful political figure in the world. In order to address these negative feelings, Clinton used minimization. By minimizing the negative feelings associated with his wrongful act (Benoit, 1997, p. 181), Clinton is able to restore his image as a respected politician. Much of this minimization was evident in the fact that he refused to even address the allegations explicitly until the investigation had led toward impeachment. However, its effectiveness was clear in his approval ratings and the public support he maintained in the year in which the Lewinsky scandal and investigation took place. In fact, it was Starr who was heavily criticized and remains so, as his act seemed politically motivated rather than revealing some sort of truth about Clinton’s life. Bob Weiner, a spokesperson from Clinton’s drug control policy office, noted this time as something that truly showed partisanship rather than a valid investigation, when stated, “‘We have just experienced the with hunt and the partisanship that more and more of the American people resent about this case,’ Mr. Warner declared. His attack reflected the Administration’s rising confidence, while the President enjoys record-high approval ratings in the polls, despite the sensational inquiry” (“Figure in scandal asserts,” 1998). Clinton’s administration consistently minimized the offensiveness of adultery by stating that Clinton and his wife’s relationship was solid and long-lasting, and minimized the accusations by Lewinsky by simultaneously criticizing those leading the investigation into President Clinton.

Benoit describes a third strategy to reduce offensiveness as differentiation, or an act that “is distinguished from other similar but more offensive actions,” therefore Clinton’s original issue seems less offensive in comparison (Benoit, 1997, p. 181). One of the more explicit examples of Clinton using differentiation lies in his statements about how what he truly had done
wrong was sin against God, and therefore had lost the trust of his family. Clinton chose to differentiate between what the public, media, and his political colleagues seemed to think was an issue that affected his job as the President, and make it very much a problem he only has with himself, his family and with god. In his apology statement, Clinton stated, “Now, this matter is between me, the two people I love most – my wife and our daughter – and our God” (Clinton, 1998). By differentiating between what the public and media began to perceive as an attack on his presidency and what he considers a mistake within his family and his religion, Clinton continues to highlight for the American public that this issue simply does not reflect his job, decisions, and standing as President of the United States. Differentiation, however, was also used against President Clinton in the formation of the investigation. Adultery did not threaten to impeach the president, but rather his lying under oath put his reputation in legal jeopardy. As The New York Times wrote at the time of the investigation, Lewinsky “allegedly had been asked to lie to lawyers for Paula Jones, sources close to the investigation said yesterday “ (Schmidt, S., Baker, P., & Locy, T., 1998, p. 003). By differentiating between what is a legal problem (perjury and lying under oath, or coercing employees to do the same), and a personal transgression (adultery), the case against President Clinton also grew stronger.

For sex scandals specifically, image restoration heavily depends on the context, and creating a context around the accusation that is favorable to the accused person. This idea is evident in the strategy of transcendence, which often broadens the perspective of the public in order to see the accusation as insignificant compared to the context of the entire situation. For Clinton, this was an especially effective strategy in maintaining his image and approval ratings. In his apology in 1998, Clinton powerfully stated, “We have important work to do – real opportunities to seize, real problems to solve, real security matters to face” (Clinton, 1998). This
emphasized that his mistake in having sexual relations with his intern paled in comparison to his occupation, and issues of domestic and international policy. Benoit outlines attacking the accuser as another way to reduce the offensiveness of the accusation. For Clinton, rather than attacking Lewinsky as the person accusing him of adultery, perjury, and demanding she lie under oath, sees his accusers as those who perpetuate those allegations as a reflection of him as a politician, namely Starr, the counsel prosecuting him, the media, and his Republican colleagues. He believed the accusations and the investigation hurt more people than just him, in that it distracted the political sphere from focusing on issues of national and international importance. In his apology statement after his acquittal, Clinton stated, “This has gone on too long, cost too much and hurt too many innocent people” (Clinton, 1998). However, his strategy of attacking his accuser also rested on the fact Lewinsky initially denied the allegations she had a sexual relationship with Clinton. In a news article form the time, it stated that Lewinsky “said she never had a sexual relationship with Clinton, that he never asked for one and that she never benefited or suffered on the job as a result of any sexual overtures” (Schmidt, S., Baker, P., & Locy, T., 1998, p. 003). With her denial, the statements she would make later accusing Clinton were discredited. The media actually helped to discredit Lewinsky as the tapes from Tripp documented that Lewinsky seemed to have a naïve crush or obsession within her tryst with the president. According to new at the time, “Ms. Lewinsky told Ms. Tripp that she was in love with President Clinton, said one investigator and that their affair had lasted more than a year. Several investigators said that Ms. Lewinsky also played for ms. Tripp several taped telephone messages left on her answering machine by the President. Unbeknownst to Ms. Lewinsky, ms. Tripp also had taped this conversation, including the messages from the President” (Abramson, J., & Van Natta, D., 1998, p. 1). This gave Clinton a powerful pedestal when not attacking, but rather
addressing the accuser Lewinsky. The media helped him to portray her as a naive and young intern who was truly in love with the President, and perhaps those emotions worked against her and made her seem like a less credible source when she finally went public with her accusations.

Benoit continues with his strategies to reduce offensiveness in outlining how compensation is used in order to restore the image of a company or public figure, stating that, “if it is acceptable to the victim, the firm’s image should be improved” (Benoit, 1997, p. 181). In the case of the Lewinsky sex scandal, compensation was not used in order to settle the case against him, but rather was a part of the investigation in that Clinton’s administration was accused of compensating Lewinsky in order for her to sign the affidavit for the Paula Jones case. According to “The day that shook the presidency”, Soltis writes, “It was disclosed that Clinton pal Vernon Jordan referred Lewinsky for a $40,000-a-year public relations job in New York at about the same time she was signing an affidavit denying the affair” (1998, p. 002). It appeared the use of compensation was done outside the parameters of the legal system in order to prevent Clinton’s image from being tarnished in the first place. Compensation is often less effective in sex scandals, as that only promulgates the idea that Clinton did not place any worth on Lewinsky as an employee or human being, and simply wanted to “pay her off” to keep her silence. Clinton, instead, looked to use a carefully calculated combination of Benoit’s strategies to reduce offensiveness. By focusing on his political goals, aspirations, and sterling reputation as a Democrat, he was able to focus the attention of the public and the media on those issues and highlight the idea that the accusations of him as an adulterer were to be dealt with privately as if any American had been the accused. This was not the first time President Clinton had been involved in a sex scandal, as he fought a similar accusation during his reelection campaign for governor of Arkansas. However, when he decided to confront these allegations, he determined
that it was differentiating it from the campaign that would be the most effective. In the Boston Globe, Curtis Wilkie wrote:

> Over an intense 24-hour period of discussions and conference calls between Clinton and his key advisers, the Arkansas governor concluded yesterday that instead of trying to fend off each new report of scandal it was essential for him to return to the position he had taken at the inception of his campaign last September, according to sources close to the situation. At that time, the sources said, Clinton made a determination that he would not lie if allegations of extramarital affairs became a campaign issue. Clinton had faced down public accusations of infidelity during his 1990 reelection campaign in Arkansas. Discussing his quandary last week, Clinton said he had anticipated the attack and he had held meetings to plan for it. ‘I decided to tell the truth,’ he said (1992, pp. 1).

This further supports the concept that not only were Clinton’s statements and actions as well as those of his administration purposeful, but were built from experience in how to deal with issues of crisis. This alone set Clinton aside from other past presidents and politicians accused of sex scandals, as he understood that there was a formula that could help restore his image, if he was able to use his skills as a speaker and politician in order to minimize the negative feelings attributed to him by Lewinsky’s allegations.

**Public Reaction and Impeachment**

Clinton’s use of multiple strategies of image restoration as outline by William Benoit can only be properly evaluated when investigating the public reaction regarding the scandal.
Clinton’s image was produced by the public, his political reputation, and his image as a man and American, and therefore in order to see if that image was fully restored, we must delve into both the public’s reaction to his statements and strategies as well as the reaction and investigation made by his political colleagues in Washington, D.C. It is important to note the public’s initial reaction to Lewinsky as an accuser, as well. When the President was first accused of having sexual relations with is intern, while some were quick to condemn her, others stated that she was too young to have understood what she was doing in having an affair with Clinton. One newspaper article wrote, “‘She worked very hard,’ the official added. On one overseas trip, he said, Ms. Lewinsky was ‘up around the clock dealing with the logistics, with the transcripts of the secretary’s comments.’ He added: ‘I think people feel very bad that she’s being dragged through this. What 24-year-old deserves this?’” (Abramson, J., & Van Natta, D., 1998, p. 1). However, the sympathy for Lewinsky would soon fall to the wayside, being immediately usurped by the respect the American public has always had for President Clinton. This was shown in his approval ratings remaining positive and in his favor throughout the yearlong scandal and investigation, including the attempted impeachment. In an article revisiting the scandal, this is supported when the author states, “Despite copious coverage of the scandal, and the public’s concern over the president’s alleged lying and obstruction of justice, Clinton’s approval ratings were not negatively affected. When asked ‘Do you approve or disapprove of the way Bill Clinton is handing his as president?’ the majority of respondents indicated approval at several time periods throughout the year” (Yioutas, J., & Segvic, I., 2003, p. 571). Benoit’s theory of image restoration suggests that by using certain strategies in public statements, apologies and public appearances, the public is more willing to forgive. In his article specifically dedicated to discussing sex scandals, Benoit writes, “…our willingness to forgive someone who
engages in mortification is not assured Forgiveness is surely influenced by the nature of the act and the apparent sincerity of the rhetor” (Benoit, “Hugh grant,” 1997, p. 262). Clinton had the skills of a gifted orator and a charismatic southern politician long before he ran for President, and was able to identify and use those skills along with some of Benoit’s strategies to maintain his positive approval ratings throughout the investigation, and even when he misled the American people in saying that the allegations were false.

Political figures have more to work against in terms of restoring their image as they have enemies. Benoit writes that, “…not only do politicians have opponents who initiate attacks, but these partisans may attempt to sustain how long the offensive act remains in the public eye” (Benoit, “Hugh grant,” 1997, p. 255). Their decisions truly affect the people as well as the many policy decisions made by different branches of government. Because Clinton had Republican enemies, many political leaders attempted to keep the sex scandal in the media and in the discourse surrounding Clinton in order to threaten Clinton’s leadership. When Starr officially developed a case for impeachment, there was uproar from the public and a mixed reaction by those in Washington. An interesting take on the impeachment came from an article in Rolling Stone, in which prominent figures in the entertainment and music industry voiced their opinions on Clinton and the Lewinsky scandal. Their statements, while coming from other elite figures, illustrate how Clinton’s charisma and strategies of minimization and differentiation made the impeachment seem silly and unnecessary. Jack Nicholson stated, “I’m a big Clinton supporter. I think he understands the mechanics of the job better than anyone who has ever held the position, and that’s really what I want. The degree to which he is able to wear his heart on his sleeve, for a man who has lived his life in the executive branch of the government, is somehow more impressive tome than the negative side of all this” (Nicholson, J., 1998, p. 68). The guitarist of
Metallica asked that “the punishment fit the crime,” even though he agreed that adultery was a terrible mistake and a horrible action that was disappointing to see in the leader of the American people (Nicholson, J., 1998, p. 68). Even Tom Wolfe was critical of the cries for impeachment, saying that, “this strikes people generally as nothing more than simple fairness and common sense” (Nicholson, J., 1998, p. 68). So as Republicans and other enemies of Clinton fought against him and fought for impeachment, the general public and leaders of pop culture clearly functioned under the rhetoric that Clinton had been doling out in his statements and few appearances, in that the “crime” of which he was accused had absolutely nothing to do with how he functions as the President.

The impeachment of President Clinton was announced with the following statement in newspapers across the country:

In a scathing report released today, the White water independent counsel built a case for impeachment of President Clinton on an avalanche of salacious details of an affair with Monica S. Lewinsky and the Nixon-era concept of abuse of Presidential power in using aides to cover up the relationship…The House must now judge whether Mr. Starr has presented a compelling case for the impeachment of the President…The White House angrily responded that the Starr report was a lurid and politically motivated attempt ‘intended to humiliate the President and force him from office.’ Mr. Clinton’s lawyers said Mr. Starr and his team of prosecutors had, after four years of intense investigative labor, found ‘personal, not impeachable’ misconduct by the President (Broder, J. M., & Van Natta, D., 1998, p. 1).

According to analysis of the report at the time, its strongest sections were those describing the illicit sexual activity between Lewinsky and Clinton, rather than the charges of perjury. Starr
accused Clinton of being evasive and lying under oath, but the only real strength was in the taped recordings offered by Tripp. This argument made Clinton’s strategies of minimization and differentiation work even more effectively, as the report was criticized for focusing too much on the President’s private life rather than any transgressions within the framework of the law (Broder, J.M., & Van Natta, D., 1998, p. 1). The most damaging portion of the report said “that Mr. Clinton lied under oath five times, both in the Paula Jones deposition and in his grand jury testimony last month, when he denied that he had had ‘a sexual affair, a sexual relationship or sexual relations’ with Ms. Lewinsky” (Broder, J.M., & Van Natta, D., 1998, p. 1). But as the last president to face impeachment resigned after Watergate, and privacy became a focal point of political discourse, the impeachment case against Clinton was found to be inconclusive, and invasion of the respected politician’s privacy, and unrelated to his accomplishments and duties as the President of the United States.

Corrective Action and Mortification

William Benoit stresses the promise of corrective action and the use of mortification in order to restore the image of a public figure and especially that of a politician. In corrective action, the “company promises to correct the problem. This action can take the form of restoring the state of affairs existing before the offensive action, and/or promising to prevent the recurrence of the offensive act” (Benoit, 1997, p. 181). In a close reading of Clinton’s apology statement given on August 17, 1998, we see the promise of corrective action clearly in that he wants to restore his role as a politician and focus on those goals. Early in his statement, Clinton stated, “I must put it right, and I am prepared to do whatever it takes to do so” (Clinton, 1998).
Benoit writes that corrective action requires not only solving the current problem but preventing future problems. Clinton is able to do this in apologizing profusely to his family rather than to his constituents, and asking the public to help him prevent this from happening again by focusing on what is important, which is the presidency and the status of the Republic. He closed his apology in saying, “And so tonight, I ask you to turn away from the spectacle of the past seven months, to repair the fabric of our national discourse, and to return our attention to all the challenges and all the promise of the next American century” (Clinton, 1998). By asking the American public to help him solve the problem, he shows his immense leadership skills while simultaneously reminding that he will keep his promise to the people and to whatever he can to rectify his image in the eyes of the American public, for they are whom are most important to him in terms of his role as the President.

Mortification is an absolutely essential strategy for a politician to restore his image in a situation of crisis. Whether a sex scandal or otherwise, admitting guilt in a sincere and genuine way is the most powerful rhetorical choice a politician can make. Benoit recognizes this, defining this final general strategy for image restoration as the need “to confess and beg forgiveness, which Burke labels mortification,” and this is often found in the form of a formal and public apology (Benoit, 1997, p. 181). He continues to say that when one commits an offensive act, it is often best to employ mortification, and when we look at past presidents such as Nixon and Reagan, mortification was what either restored their image (Reagan), or what they failed to use as a strategy (Nixon). Sincerity is key in mortification, as Benoit writes, “We are willing to forgive some offenses more readily than others. The contrast between political and entertainment image repair suggest that it is probably more risky for some rhetors (politicians, corporate officials) to engage in mortification. Still, mortification is a potentially effective
strategy, even if most people are afraid to use it” (Benoit, “Hugh grant,” 1997, p. 264). Clinton
denied the claims immediately in his first public statement, but as the impeachment investigation
and evidentiary support began to show that he was not telling the truth, he effectively used
mortification in order to apologize sincerely to the American people and restore his image as a
beloved and respected President and politician. Clinton’s most effective use of mortification, in
his August apology, is found in the following excerpt:

Indeed, I did have a relationship with Miss Lewinsky that was not appropriate. In fact, it
was wrong. It constituted a critical lapse in judgment and a personal failure on my part
for which I am solely and completely responsible…But I told the jury today and I say to
you now that at no time did I ask anyone to lie, to hide or destroy evidence or to take any
other unlawful action…I know that my public comments and my silence about this matter
gave a false impression. I misled people, including even my wife. I deeply regret that
(Clinton, 1998).

Clinton, with his eyes directly on the camera, not only admits to misleading the American
people, but truly and sincerely that he has made a lapse in judgment and he feels as though he as
failed. This mortification works because it is so straightforward and directed at himself rather
than mentioning any accuser, Lewinsky, or anyone besides his own guilt. He admits that the
made a grand personal error, but that he knows it has not and will not affect his presidency. This
mortification is not simply an apology, but it is Clinton showing his confidence that in admitting
his guilt, he and the rest of the country, can move forward. By admitting that he, too, has faults
as any other human and American, he won over the hearts of the American public and his image
is restored to one that is political and respected.
**Conclusion**

Clinton has often been referred to as an anomaly of political sex scandals. After using denial as his only strategy when Lewinsky accusations went public, he was on the path toward a permanently tarnished reputation as a politician and as a man. Because the country had such confidence in him and was so wooed by his charisma prior to the scandal, it makes sense that the accusations of his extra-marital affair with his intern, Monica Lewinsky, disappointed both his colleagues and the American public greatly. So the question remains in how Clinton was able to remain so well-respected not only throughout his initial lies in public statements, months of investigation, and a case for impeachment, but that he remains, more than fifteen years after the fact, extraordinarily respected as a successful former President and as a current politician working for the Democratic party. We see other modern politicians fail miserably at employing Benoit’s image restoration theory and strategies to repair tarnished political reputations. As the digital age progresses, nothing is private anymore, and the pictures and scandals surrounding public figures such as Anthony Weiner, for example, make strategies like denial and evasion of responsibility, fruitless in the eyes of a well-informed American public. However, Clinton was able to maintain his reputation as a man and as a leader, by employing a calculated combination of image restoration strategies, all functioning within the image restoration theory framework provided by William Benoit.

Clinton knew his audience, he knew they loved him and he knew how to use his charisma and his charm to work for him when employing methods of differentiation and minimization of the accusations of sexual relationships held against him. This directly aligns with Benoit’s suggestion to “clearly identify the salient audience(s)… a key part of persuasion is tailoring one’s message to the audience” (Benoit, 1997 image 182). And while Clinton’s one weakness
was not immediately admitting his responsibility and fault when the allegations were first made against him by Lewinsky, Tripp, and Starr, his ability to tailor his messages to an audience that wanted him to succeed, for the better of the public and what had been a successful presidential administration so far, allowed his image to only be briefly tarnished, but repaired within six months. In “Image Restoration in Political Sex Scandals,” Moran writes, “While it cannot be concluded that one restoration strategy is most effective or can predict the outcome of a scandal, this research can support the growing role that communication plays in today’s digital age, and that this increased media attention has forced more and more politicians to admit to their transgressions… the strategies and tactics used to respond to scandals must evolve with the changing media landscape” (Moran, M., 2012, p. 52). Clinton simply knew what he was doing and how his target audience perceived him. In directing the attention of his constituents to his political needs, accomplishments, and directives, while simultaneously emphasizing that the investigation was private, not political, and therefore an offensive, politically motivated attack, he was able to remain respected throughout his presidency, and still maintains that reputation, that image, in its restored form, today. The fact that the could withstand this, as Jack Nicholson once state about the president, is “a tribute to his power, to his strength. I don’t know how anyone could stand up as well as he has. If this man wants to stay and do his job, do his duty, that’s what he will do.” (Nicholson, J., 1998, p. 68). Clinton’s strength was in knowing his audience, differentiation between the personal and political, and relying on his charisma and gifts as an orator and rhetor, to maintain and restore an image only briefly tarnished by his adultery.
References


