# THE ART OF SIMULATED ATONEMENT:
# A CASE STUDY OF PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH

by

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ABSTRACT

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This study sought to explain how President George W. Bush used a unique form of apologia during his first six years in office to minimize accountability for his role in three major political scandals. After selecting appropriate texts for analysis and conducting research to establish the historical context of his remarks, I identified patterns in Bush's use of image repair tactics, made generalizations about his overall strategy, and determined the impact that his unique rhetoric had on his success, and eventual failure, as President.

Though Bush's use of simulated atonement allowed him to evade accountability for the Abu Ghraib and WMD scandals, his strategy failed to stem the public backlash following Hurricane Katrina. Several factors explained why simulated atonement might work for certain rhetors, and a few limitations of the strategy were explored. Several implications for rhetorical theory and understanding of the Bush administration emerge from the findings.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## Introduction and Rationale

Major crises of the post-Cold War era often have been disastrous for presidential administrations, and the head of the executive office has usually been held accountable for his failures. Lyndon Johnson, following his commitment of more troops to the Vietnam War, saw his approval ratings slide from seventy-five percent in 1963 to the upper thirties in 1967 (Schandler, 1977, p. 222). As the President understood it, he had spent all of his political capital, was left powerless, and had no choice but to withdraw from his party's primaries (Johnson, 1971, p. 433; Schandler, 1977, p. 269). Many presidents have followed in Johnson's footsteps since the 1960s. After his use of denial and avoidance in response to the Watergate scandal, Richard Nixon was eventually condemned by public opinion as well as Congress and, facing impeachment, was forced to resign. Jimmy Carter, who used the Iranian hostage crisis to his advantage in the Democratic primary of 1980, found that the eventual "frustrating and infuriating symbol of our impotence" led to his administration's ouster (Broder *et al.*, 1980, p. 326). Clinton, too, for his affair with Monica Lewinsky and the attempted cover-up that followed, was held accountable through impeachment by the House. Although he was not removed from office, Clinton's administration was weakened and he was able to accomplish little in the remaining days of his presidency. Until recently, presidents have been held directly responsible for their conduct in office.

By any standards, the administration of George W. Bush has faced colossal failures that demand responsibility. There are three crises that stand out ahead of the rest, and each will be examined in this project. First, the campaign to remove Saddam Hussein from power in 2003 was predicated on eliminating the threat of his regime's stockpiling of chemical and biological weapons, and its quest to acquire nuclear weapons in the future. In hindsight, reports have uncovered that the Bush administration acted on, and even exaggerated, faulty intelligence, turned its back to skeptics like Joseph Wilson, and was carrying out an agenda planned in the first days of the President taking office (Duffy & Carney, 2003; Eisenberg, 2004; Hersh, 2003; Sincere deceivers, 2004). The effects of these actions have been staggering. The country has added hundreds of billions of dollars in debt, tens of thousands of American troops have been killed or injured in action, American military forces are spread thin, and lingering instability in Iraq has made withdrawal unlikely without crippling America's reputation abroad. Second, because of the poorly planned invasion, the mismanagement of U.S. troops also led to horrific war crimes such as the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, which shocked the conscience of the Arab world and spoiled the trust that America earned after the events of 9/11 (Clancy & Zini, 2004). Finally, in the wake of one of the most destructive hurricanes to ever hit the United States, New Orleans was forced to wait five days for the Federal Government to take action as streets were overrun with thugs, citizens were left stranded in flooded neighborhoods, and the death toll mounted. Other crises occurred

during Bush's watch, but these are three events for which even he has, in some form, admitted responsibility.

Despite the President's involvement in several major crises, he managed to minimize accountability for most of his tenure in office. On one hand, Bush's poll numbers indicated that the American public grew increasingly frustrated with him especially after the invasion of Iraq. After the events of 9/11, Bush received some of the highest approval ratings of any president in United States history. From an approval rating of ninety percent, according to the *USA Today/Gallup* poll conducted in October 2001, the President's approval ratings hovered around seventy percent until October 2002. From that point until January 2004, with the war receiving significant attention and the election season heating up, the President's approval ratings fell to a respectable sixty percent. Following his reelection, however, Bush saw his approval ratings plummet from about fifty percent to thirty-one percent in May 2006, after which his poll numbers remained around forty percent until the midterm elections.

On the other hand, polls also demonstrated that, despite the Bush fatigue, the majority of Americans were against holding the President accountable. A *CNN* poll from August/September 2006 found that fifty-seven percent of Americans thought that it would be good "for the country if the Democrats in Congress were able to conduct official investigations into what the Bush Administration has done in the past six years." According to the same poll, though, sixty-nine percent were against using impeachment to punish the President. A *Fox News/Opinion Dynamics* poll in May

2006 came to the same conclusion, having discovered that sixty-two percent of Americans were against impeaching the President over the Iraq war and the weapons of mass destruction debacle. While those polled were more open to censuring Bush, there certainly was no consensus on that matter either. A *Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg* poll found that forty-six percent of those surveyed supported censuring the President over illegally authorizing government agencies to spy on American citizens. However, an *ABC News/Washington Post* poll in April 2006 discovered that fifty-three percent of Americans were actually against censuring Bush. Even though polls indicated that Americans became impatient with the Bush administration, they also showed that the public was not entirely willing to hold the President responsible for his actions.

Aside from public opinion, Bush slipped past all other forms of checks and balances that traditionally hold America's leaders accountable. The president, in general, is held in check not only by public opinion, but also by the press, Congress, the judiciary, as well as the electorate (Orman, 1990; Sorenson, 1975). In each case, however, little was done to hold the President responsible for his mistakes. First, Congress, while debating over the issues from time to time, was completely ineffective in punishing Bush for his misconduct. The opposition party found it impossible to gain support for any action against the President, and Republicans remained persistently loyal. Second, the press, while appearing critical at times, failed to maintain a consistent critique. "Reporters have handled Bush gingerly," Smolkin (2003) claimed, "particularly after September 11 terrorist attacks prompted a

surge of patriotism" (p. 17). As a result, Smolkin added, "The administration skillfully capitalized on that sentiment, just as it excelled at controlling information, staying on message and limiting access to Bush from the nascent days of his presidency" (p. 17). Along the same lines, Moeller (2004) suggested that the media allowed the Bush administration to set the agenda after 9/11. Summarizing what went wrong, Helen Thomas (2005, October), perhaps one of the sharpest critics of the President, explained, "The press went mute when it should have been asking the questions" (p. 28). Moreover, aside from a few controversial rulings regarding the rights of enemy combatants, the judiciary did little to thwart presidential power. The electorate, too, while complaining about Bush when surveyed by pollsters, chose to reelect him despite the serious problems during his first term. Though voters eventually ousted the Republican majority in Congress, this did not occur until the sixth year of Bush's tenure as President.

With at least three failures of the Bush administration evident, a very important question must be raised: Why did the President get away with so much? In a democratic tradition where presidents have been censured, impeached, or at least voted out for their failures, why did it take until the midterm elections in the sixth year of his presidency for Americans to hold President Bush responsible for his many mistakes? Though there are a number of explanations for this phenomenon, in this project I focus on the President's apologia following each of the crises already discussed. In particular, I argue that Bush resorted to a unique form of apology, a

strategy that I call simulated atonement, which allowed him to simultaneously accept responsibility for the disasters, but shift the blame elsewhere.

## Justification

This study is important for two main reasons. First, as already mentioned, a detailed analysis of the apologia of President George W. Bush will reveal a lot about how his administration maintained power and support while facing a plethora of political problems. More importantly, however, this study will expand upon the current literature regarding presidential apologia. In the section that follows, I suggest that while early research on presidential apologia defined its purpose as one tied to providing closure or maintaining legitimacy, the literature over the past thirty years has failed to adequately address both the strategic choices present when a president seeks forgiveness, and how context determines the reception and success of apologetic rhetoric.

## Review of Literature

Two areas of research are relevant to this thesis. In this section, I first review the literature regarding the various theories of apologia, and in particular, I summarize the existing research concerning image repair strategies utilized by United States presidents. Second, I review current studies regarding President Bush's use of apologia. In examining the second area of research, I maintain that little has been written on President Bush's apologia strategies and that existing studies are entirely inadequate in explaining his success in evading responsibility.

*Contemporary Understandings of Presidential Apologia*

Analysis of presidential apologia commenced after the Watergate scandal, and the research tended to address a number of important topics. In this section, I identify what some scholars suggested is the purpose of presidential apologia, and review the typologies that were developed in order to analyze these kinds of speeches. Additionally, I summarize what has been suggested by the existing literature as the dominant strategies in the apologies of previous presidents, and, finally, I end with a discussion concerning the neglect that context has received in relation to the study of apologia.

*Functions of presidential apologia.* Analyses of Richard Nixon's speeches of self defense indicated that presidential apologia serves two purposes. First, Katula (1975) found that Nixon's resignation speech "was delivered tastefully, but failed in [the] basic purpose" of apologia (p. 4), described by Ware and Linkugel (1973) as "a personal, direct refutation of charges made against a person's moral character" (p. 274). In this early work, Katula argued that presidential apologies are vital to providing closure for the American people. Katula contended:

> Until closure has occurred for a set of experiences, the Gestalt notion of "unfinished business" is present between communicators. Thus, Black's suggestion that an apology ought to be an "engulfment of the controversy," is sound advice for the apologist. Until an audience perceives that an apologist has made, "…the most personal of

> responses," and until an audience perceives that the apologist has told the whole story, closure cannot occur. (p. 4)

Thus, Nixon, in neglecting to answer the basic questions of fact that demanded an apology, did very little to "improve the acrimonious political climate" and was forced to pay the ultimate price (p. 5). Katula's position suggests that when a contentious environment develops as a result of some failure, a president must make peace by answering the facts of the matter directly.

Also during the Watergate scandal, Harrell, Ware, and Linkugel (1975) offered one of the most in-depth explanations of how apologia functions for the office of the United States presidency. In their own words, "Central to the successful execution of the office of the Presidency or, for that matter, any political office, is support of the governed at a level sufficient to provide enforcement of decisions by the office holder" (p. 247). For these authors, the president maintains power by maintaining legitimacy in the eyes of the American people. Legitimacy, Harrell, Ware, and Linkugel, in borrowing from David Easton, suggested, is composed of three bases of political authority. First, structural legitimacy, or the legitimacy of the office, may be used "only if [the president] acts within the broad limits of behavior acceptable to the people" (p. 248). Second, ideological legitimacy is guaranteed depending "upon the degree to which the public perceives [the president's] values and principles as similar to theirs" (p. 248). Third, personal legitimacy is "found in beliefs regarding his honesty, intelligence, and independence," with honesty being the most important of the three (p. 250). In maintaining legitimacy, Harrell, Ware, and

Linkugel contended that the president, or any politician, forms a persona based on "the auditor's symbolic construction":

> The rhetorical persona in political life represents the public's attribution of preferred personal, ideological, and structural legitimacy sources to the political agent. To the extent that the governed see the appropriate characteristics in the holder of an office they accord him the diffuse support necessary to both retention of the office and effective administration of it. (p. 251)

Thus, apologia for the president is the rhetorical instrument "best suited to the maintenance of rhetorical personae against charges that an individual is personally unsuited to wear the public mask and, hence, not fit for public trust and office" (p. 251).

*Typologies for analyzing apologia.* Various typologies available to the apologizer have been identified over the years. Ware and Linkugel (1973) established the framework on which many theories have been based when they identified four factors found in most speeches of self defense. Among the four were strategies of denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence. Benoit (1995) incorporated these in his larger list of strategies available for image restoration, which included denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification, among other secondary strategies. However, as Koesten and Rowland (2004) suggested, early researchers tended to focus on "denial, deflection, or justification to restore a damaged image, as opposed to accepting responsibility" (p.

69). As such, Koesten and Rowland identified a different sub-genre, that of atonement, to fill this gap. So, in some instances where traditional strategies of apologia are insufficient, and blame is obvious, atonement may be required for providing closure or maintaining legitimacy. Though each of these theories is discussed later in this chapter, it is important first to understand which strategies have been previously identified as dominating presidential apologetic discourse.

*Common strategies in presidential apologia.* The existing body of research describes the strategies that office holders typically use in order to avoid accountability. Rasmussen (1973) argued that Nixon was largely successful in the election of 1972 because of his strategy of avoidance. King (1985) examined how presidents and politicians have transformed scandal into tragedy. Denton and Hahn (1986) contended that Nixon's Watergate apologia, known for the use of denial, was largely successful until 1973. Most recently, Benoit (2006) wrote that incumbent presidents during a reelection year usually defend themselves through the use of evasive image repair strategies.

Research up until this point also has indicated that a sitting president typically cannot accept personal responsibility for a major mishap without suffering detrimental consequences. Gregg (1989) argued that Carter's confession, during a presidential debate, that he would learn from his first term was interpreted by the public as an admission of weakness, and undoubtedly played a role in his loss to Reagan (p. 394). Others have written about the president's acknowledgement of responsibility in one way or another, but the literature has failed to cover apologies

when the nation's leader is actually responsible. Gold (1978), for example, suggested that apologizing is essential in presidential elections, but she offered no examples of a sitting president admitting to personal misconduct. Likewise, Heisey (1988) argued that Reagan took responsibility for the Iran Contra affair, but the author admitted that the President was apologizing for the mistakes of his administration rather than something for which he was personally liable. Koesten and Rowland (2004) discussed Clinton's atonement for the Tuskegee syphilis study, but, like Reagan, he clearly shared no personal blame for the matter. The one anomaly is Clinton's admission of guilt in the Lewinsky scandal, though this was an apology more for a politicized mishap in the president's personal life, rather than a mea culpa for a policy failure. In short, previous research has indicated that presidents cannot apologize for their own failures without serious ramifications, but may easily apologize for something if they were not actually at fault. This paper, therefore, will address the hole in the present research concerning how presidents may go about accepting responsibility, how their strategies respond to the rhetorical situation they face, and what types of effects their rhetorical choices may have on their audience.

*The role of context in apologia.* In addition to explaining how a president's acceptance of responsibility impacts credibility, I also will focus on the role that context plays in the success of apologia. The matter of context has been largely ignored thus far in research regarding apologies. However, two critical studies have dealt with the matter. First, Vartabedian (1985) held that when a factual explanation of the situation is self-incriminating, a rhetor may, in order to avoid getting "hoisted

on the petard" (p. 61), discuss the situation in somewhat honest detail if "the charges themselves may not be so severe in the eyes of the public as to provoke condemnation" (p. 61). In other words, Vartabedian seemed to hint that the success of any given apologia strategy depends on the audience and the situation.

Second, Achter (2000) claimed that modern rhetorical criticism has for the most part treated apologia as too agent-centered, succeeding or failing due to the responses of the speaker. Achter argued that an audience may judge an apologizer not on the strategies he or she uses, but on how they fit within a larger narrative. Citing the work of Bruce Gronbeck, Achter suggested, "Media scandals, since 1992, are often placed not in a context concerning truth and morality of accused public figures, but in a meta-narrative concerning the state of journalism" (p. 314). "Since the Clintons appeared together on 60 Minutes in 1992 and through Clinton's admission of his affair with Monica Lewinsky," Achter argued, "voters seem increasingly likely to compartmentalize public and private actions of politicians, and increasingly disinterested in media obsession with such allegations" (p. 314). The success of any apology, but especially those garnering the attention of the media, then, may not be judged in relation to how the offense has been portrayed. Rather, those to whom the apology is directed may compare the wrongful act to other scandals to determine whether it warrants greater concern. Building off the research of Vartabedian and Achter, in this study I will analyze the contextual factors surrounding the crises for which Bush apologized to determine what role, if any, that

they played in determining the success of the president's rhetorical strategies in dealing with numerous policy failures.

*Recent Analysis of Bush Apologia*

A second area of relevant literature includes research on President Bush's success in maintaining support and avoiding accountability. At the general level, Lakoff (2004) argued that the secret to Republican dominance, at least before 2006, was the party's success in framing the issues of the day. More specifically, others have suggested that Bush's definition of the 9/11 terrorist attacks as acts of war made him a wartime president, with the approval ratings that often accompany the status, and that he created a demonized enemy which paved the way for manipulation of the public's fear (Bostdorff, 2003; Domke, 2004; Gunn, 2004; Ivie, 2005; Jewett & Lawrence, 2003; Lakoff & Frisch, 2006; Murphy, 2003; Noon, 2004; Schlapentokh et al., 2005; White, 2004). In addition, scholars have demonstrated that after 9/11, Bush adopted a language of certainty which proved both divisive and beneficial to his office (Abramowitz & Stone, 2006; Hart & Childers, 2004; Coe *et* al., 2004; Hart & Childers, 2005). Many others have contended that the Bush administration, under the guidance of Karl Rove, masterfully motivated Americans to vote on issues of Christian morality, and thus shifted their attention away from domestic and international policy issues (Domke, 2004; Frank, 2004; Ivie, 2004). Few academic studies, however, have focused on Bush's use of apologia.

Though the President was involved in several crises, he rarely apologized. Following a plea for forgiveness after his visit to Bob Jones University during the

campaign of 2000, President Bush remained largely unrepentant regardless of the situation (Eskenazi, 2000). In an interview with Bob Woodward after the invasion of Iraq, the President famously stated, “I'm the commander -- see, I don't need to explain -- I do not need to explain why I say things. That's the interesting thing about being the president. Maybe somebody needs to explain to me why they say something, but I don't feel like I owe anybody an explanation” (Woodward, 2003). In a press conference in April 2004, the president continued this trend of evasiveness, arguing that he would change nothing about his past decisions as president if given the opportunity. However, he added, “I don’t want to sound like I’ve made no mistakes. I’m confident I have. I just haven’t – you just put me under the spot here, and maybe I’m not as quick on my feet as I should be in coming up with one” (Bush, 2004 April 13, p. 10). Given almost six months to think about that same question, Bush had little more to add in the second presidential debate with Sen. John Kerry. Asked again if he made any mistakes, this time by moderator Charles Gibson, Bush responded, “I made some mistakes in appointing people, but I'm not going to name them. I don't want to hurt their feelings on national TV” (“The Second,” 2004, p.1). He eventually added, “But history will look back, and I'm fully prepared to accept any mistakes that history judges to my administration, because the president makes the decisions, the president has to take the responsibility” (p. 1).

Though Bush rarely apologized, scholars have given the few occasions some attention. This research, however, has focused only on the evasive strategies employed by the Bush administration. Moreover, few analyses have been rhetorical

in nature, and treatment of apologia strategies after the 2004 election is lacking in this literature. In fact, only a few studies are notable. Ashby (2004) suggested that Bush avoided taking responsibility for the missing weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, partly due to the fear of a relentless media. Alaf (2004) and Marks (2004) both complained that the President's apology to the Arab world for the human rights abuses at Abu Ghraib was vague, insincere, too private, and failed to acknowledge any type of responsibility.

Only two studies so far have offered a detailed treatment of Bush's use of apologia, ultimately deeming it unsuccessful and ineffectual. Benoit (2006 August), in assessing how an incumbent president during an election year may utilize image repair strategies, analyzed the President's use of apologia in his February 2004 appearance on *Meet the Press* with Tim Russert, in which he answered criticism from his political opponents over the invasion of Iraq. Benoit recognized three trends in Bush's appearance, and noted the same in his analysis of the President's defense of the war during an April 2004 news conference (Benoit, 2006 June). First, Bush justified his actions through transcendence, by pointing out that he was a "war time president" and that whatever mistakes had been made needed to take the back seat to the defense of the nation. Second, the President relied on denial, maintaining that he in no way intentionally misled Americans. And, third, Bush used defeasibility throughout his rhetoric, having claimed that he lacked credible intelligence before deciding to invade the Middle Eastern state. Calling the strategies "reprehensible" (p. 304), Benoit held that Bush was ineffective in convincing Americans that terrorism

should be their top concern, and concluded that the President's use of defeasibility weakened his credibility and strength as a leader because "it undermines faith in [his] ability to deal with future problems" (p. 302).

Though Benoit's analysis furthers our understanding of how Bush used apologia to maintain credibility, his research is problematic for a few key reasons. First, Benoit asserted that Bush's strategy was largely ineffective. In support of this, he cited the President's falling poll numbers, and Americans' reluctance to consider terrorism as their top concern. But Benoit ignored the most important point: Bush was reelected. The real question that now must be answered is how the President, in issuing a number of apologies that have been judged as ineffective by academics, produced so much success throughout his first six years in office. The second problem with Benoit's analysis is that it focused on a few speeches dealing with just one issue. Bush apologized for the government's shortcoming in Iraq on more than one occasion (Bush, 2005 December 14; Bush 2005 December 18; Bush, 2006 April 24; Bush, 2006 May 25; Bush, 2007 January 10), and offered atonement for his role in other crises as well (Bush, 2004 May 5a; Bush, 2004 May 5b; Bush, 2004 May 6a; Bush, 2004 May 6b; Bush, 2005 September 15). As such, rhetoric scholars could learn more about him by looking at how he has defended his administration in a number of situations. The third problem is that Benoit focused his assessment on Bush's evasive rhetoric. As such, Benoit's work implicitly ignores the President's attempts to accept responsibility. In this study, I add to the present literature regarding Bush's use of apologia by considering his use of apologetic strategies in a

variety of settings, and also by explaining how those strategies translated into electoral success before the "thumping" of November 2006.

## Methodology

The goal of this study is to determine how President Bush's apologia allowed him to avoid political accountability. Three case studies, focusing on the Iraqi weapons of mass destruction debacle, the human rights abuses at Abu Ghraib, and the Hurricane Katrina disaster, will be examined. These three crises have been selected for analysis because they were widely seen by liberals and conservatives alike as failures on behalf of the Bush administration, and each instance led to a serious campaign of image restoration.

The process of analyzing Bush's apologies can be broken down into three phases. First, I will research the rhetorical situation that the President faced in all three instances in order to determine what role context played in the selection of his rhetorical strategies. Second, in order to observe how the President responded in each case, I will examine the text of a number of his speeches for particular typologies of apologia, as defined by Ware and Linkugel (1973), Benoit (1995), and Koesten and Rowland (2004). With the strategies identified, I will then, third, identify the rhetorical patterns that Bush used to avoid responsibility until the 2006 election.

The first step in this research is an analysis of the rhetorical situation facing the President in each of the instances already mentioned. Arguing for the importance of the rhetorical situation, Bitzer (1968) stated:

> A work of rhetoric is pragmatic; it comes into existence for the sake of something beyond itself; it functions ultimately to produce action or change in the world; it performs some task. In short, rhetoric is a mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the meditation of thought and action. (p. 61)

This reality-changing discourse, according to Bitzer, responds to the rhetorical situation, which he defined as "a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence" (p. 63). The rhetorical situation has three parts. First, the exigence is an "imperfection marked by urgency," or in other words, it is a problem that can be solved or modified with public address (p. 63). The second part of the rhetorical situation is the audience, which consists only of those people "who are capable of being influenced by discourse and of being mediators of change" (p. 64). The third constituent of the rhetorical situation, according to Bitzer, is composed of a number of constraints, whether it be "persons, events objects, [or] relations," that have the power to limit the effect of the discourse (p. 64). Thus, for each of the President's series of speeches responding to a particular political disaster, the three parts of the rhetorical situation were examined.

In the second step of my analysis, I conducted a close textual analysis of the President's speeches and determined which apologetic strategies dominated his

discourse. To accomplish this, I relied on three typologies of apologia already established. In one of the earliest descriptions of apologia, Ware and Linkugel (1973) identified four dominant factors, or strategies, utilized in most public speeches of self-defense. First, a speaker may resort to denial, by either denying the facts of the case, or by denying intent. Second, the rhetor could use bolstering, by reinforcing the existence of some fact, or, in other words, by attempting to "identify himself with something viewed favorably by the audience" (p. 277). Third, differentiation is present in apologies when the speaker attempts to separate some fact from the larger context (p. 278). In simpler terms, Ware and Linkugel suggested, differentiation is used when the accused requests "for a suspension of judgment until his actions can be viewed from a different temporal perspective" (p. 278). Fourth, transcendence strategies are used when the speaker attempts to "psychologically move the audience away from the particulars of the charge at hand in a direction toward some more abstract, general view of his character" (p. 280).

Ware and Linkugel also identify four dominant combinations of strategies, or postures, in apologia. An absolutive address results from the combination of differentiation and denial, and occurs most often when the speaker is attempting to clear his or her name (p. 282). The vindicative address occurs when transcendence is the strategy of choice. An explanative address is the product of bolstering and differentiation, and aims to convince the audience that once the true facts of the case are understood then forgiveness should follow (p. 283). And, finally, a justificative

address, which asks for approval and understanding, is the result of depending on bolstering and transcendence.

Building on Ware and Linkugel's descriptive theory of apologia, Benoit (1995) offered a larger set of image repair strategies. According to the author, individuals or organizations in need of improving their image may practice denial, evade responsibility, reduce the offensiveness of some event, commit themselves to corrective action, and even resort to mortification. However, each of these major strategies contains a number of sub-strategies. Denial is much like Ware and Linkugel's description, but also includes attempts to shift the blame. Strategies for evading responsibility include claiming that the act was provoked, proving defeasibility or pleading a lack of information or control, excusing the act as an accident, as well as arguing good intentions (p. 76). Strategies involved in reducing the offensiveness of an event include bolstering, differentiation, transcendence, minimization, attacking the accuser, and offering compensation (pp. 77-78). Corrective action comes about by either "restoring the situation to the state of affairs before the objectionable action," or by promising to make changes to prevent the action from occurring in the future (p. 79). Finally, mortification involves the speaker admitting responsibility and asking for forgiveness (p. 79).

A final typology, or sub-genre, of apologia includes Koesten and Rowland's theory of atonement. In contrast to Benoit's theory of image restoration, the authors contended that atonement does "not 'restore' the image directly, but admits that sinful behavior has occurred in an attempt to gain forgiveness and long-term image

restoration" (p. 60). Instead of defending one's actions, "the rhetoric of atonement functions as a purgative-redemptive device for an individual or an entire organization" (p. 61). Or in the true spirit of closure, "The rhetoric of atonement, as a sub-genre of apologia, offers a political leader the rhetorical tools necessary to let go of the past and heal old wounds" (p. 61). The strategy, according to the authors, includes five steps:

> The characteristics defining a rhetoric of atonement are: acknowledge wrongdoing and ask for forgiveness; based upon reflection offer a thorough change of attitude and relationship; take steps to develop a different kind of present and future; through public action or private mortification demonstrate the authenticity of the apology; and seek atonement in a public forum. (p. 64)

Though the authenticity of atonement is judged by the amount of mortification, I will argue throughout this study that an obviously disingenuous apology may still be accepted by the audience.

After determining the various apologia strategies present in Bush's major public addresses, I then moved to identifying the underlying rhetorical patterns in relation to the rhetorical context. I sought to discover the dominant apologia strategy for the speeches regarding each crisis, and compared and contrasted this information with the strategies for the other situations. After discovering similar strategies, I then sought an explanation for my findings by examining the contextual factors for each occasion.

## Plan of the Study

This project will be broken down into four more additional chapters. Chapter Two, "A Forced Apology for Abu Ghraib," examines the President's initial efforts to avoid responsibility for the prisoner abuse scandal, and then analyzes his apology to Arabic media and the King of Jordan. An historical analysis of the news coverage that shocked the world is offered. I then develop a theory of simulated atonement to explain Bush's success.

Chapter Three, "Accepting Responsibility for Somebody Else's Error; The Effective Use of Blame Displacement in Bush's WMD Apologia," focuses on Bush's apologia strategies in dealing with the failure to discover the weapons that led the nation to declare war on the Hussein regime. In the chapter, I identify a unique type of simulated atonement that I call blame displacement. I also offer the historical context of Bush's two phases of apology, discuss how he employed blame displacement, and explain why the strategy worked.

Chapter Four, "Singing the Blues in Jackson Square: The Limitations of Simulated Atonement," focuses on President Bush's Jackson Square address in which he sought atonement for the Federal Government's failure to respond sufficiently in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. A description of the context will be offered, the apologia strategies identified, and an explanation will be given for why the speech failed.

In the final chapter, "Conclusion," I summarize my findings concerning President Bush's use of apologia in order to evade accountability, and the use of

simulated atonement, in general, as a rhetorical strategy in crisis management. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of this project, and offer directions for future research.

# CHAPTER TWO

## A Forced Apology for Abu Ghraib

Riding the surge in his popularity following the attacks of September 11th, President Bush directed a war on terrorism that swiftly led the country to major battles in Afghanistan and Iraq, in addition to minor operations elsewhere. In a political climate hostile to opposing perspectives, the President was practically granted a blank check in order to secure the homeland, and his plans met little resistance for quite some time. However, hasty war plans eventually delivered a public relations disaster to the doorstep of the Bush administration, proving to be a major road block in establishing peace abroad. Nearly one year after the invasion of Iraq a series of gruesome images depicting the brutal and merciless torture of Iraqi prisoners at the hands of American soldiers appeared on all forms of media worldwide. With differences between the victim and violator of the post-9/11 world – the United States and al Qaeda – becoming fuzzier by the second, the President was forced to address the abuse in a manner that would restore the integrity of his country.

President Bush's response to the torture of detainees at Abu Ghraib was the first of a handful of apologies delivered during the first six years of his tenure in office. Aside from marking the beginning point of Bush's willingness to repent, the Abu Ghraib apologia is crucial to examine, for the long term impact of the incident, as I argue later in this chapter, was very different with the American audience than it was with those abroad. At home, on one hand, the shocking acts were hardly a crucial issue in the election of 2004, and beyond the initial media frenzy and public

disapproval, the stain on American honor received only modest attention. On the other hand, for the international community, the human rights abuses at Abu Ghraib became the straw that broke the camel's back. Why did Americans react so differently from the rest of the world? One answer, I contend, is found in Bush's apologia.

In this chapter, I argue that President Bush's Abu Ghraib apologia was successful with the American audience because he relied on the rhetoric of simulated atonement, which permitted the President to erect a façade of responsibility, guilt, and eagerness for redemption, while escaping any long term accountability at home. I argue that Bush's apologia, albeit flawed, was also successful with his national audience because the sin demanding apologia lacked salience for many Americans and that there were strong situational reasons for backing the President. To support my position, first, I clarify what I mean by "simulated atonement." Second, so that the immediate context of the President's attempts at image restoration is fully understood, I offer an historical analysis of the crisis that erupted after a few initial stories concerning the abuse of the Iraqi prisoners. Third, I examine the responses of the President, and the impact that his overall strategy had on domestic and international audiences. Finally, I discuss the contextual factors that explain why the President succeeded in eventually gaining forgiveness at home, while infuriating those abroad.

## A Theory of Simulated Atonement

Before identifying the main characteristics of a simulated atonement, it is necessary to define both the purpose and process of issuing a traditional atonement. After doing so, I describe the form and advantages that simulated atonement may have for a particular context, and then proceed to examine how President Bush's response to the Abu Ghraib scandal succeeded in gaining forgiveness with the American audience.

There are certain crises, or particular acts of wrongdoing, for which typical apologia or image restoration strategies are entirely inadequate in achieving forgiveness for a person, organization, or nation. In instances where a party is undoubtedly guilty and the infringement is too grave to simply ignore, use of atonement may be required. Koesten and Rowland (2004) argued that unlike strategies previously identified by scholars like Ware and Linkugel, and Benoit, "atonement rhetoric does not 'restore' the image directly, but admits that sinful behavior has occurred in an attempt to gain forgiveness and long-term image restoration" (p. 69). When one's guilt is unquestionable, the rhetoric of atonement is "a means of accepting guilt in order to create a new image as a redeemed individual or nation" (p. 70). In this sense, atonement serves the purpose of "[letting] go of the past and [healing] old wounds" when actions cannot be denied or justified, and acts of contrition and redemption are needed to bring a community back together (p. 70).

As stated earlier, atonement has five characteristics. First and foremost, the rhetor must clearly acknowledge wrongdoing and ask for forgiveness. Doing so

"sends a message that the behavior apologized for has brought shame to the country, is against the national interest, and should never occur again" (Koesten & Rowland, 2004, p. 78). Second, the speaker should demonstrate a change of attitude and relationship. Third, the wrongdoer needs to spell out a series of steps in developing a different kind of present and future. Fourth, through public action or private mortification, the accused must demonstrate the authenticity of the apology. Finally, atonement should be conducted in public.

The biggest variable that determines the success of the atonement is the demonstration of authenticity. As Koesten and Rowland maintained, "If the atonement is not perceived to be authentic, it will be seen as empty verbiage I'm sorry," or a part of "the theater of sham regrets" (p. 72). There does not seem to be a clear cut way to measure authenticity, however. In general terms, the authors contended, "A nation or a person demonstrates that they truly atone for their sin based on words and actions indicating genuine remorse and suffering for committing the sin" (p. 71). They later added, "We judge someone authentically sorry for their actions when it is clear they have suffered for their sin" (p. 71). Clarifying this point, Koesten and Rowland suggested, "the organization can use words to demonstrate repentance and combine those words with substantive actions to prove the commitment to atone for past actions. Those actions must be substantial enough to indicate true repentance, prayer, and charity" (p. 71).

Not all successful attempts at atonement, however, require real authenticity. In this chapter, I conclude that a rhetor may benefit just as well from an apology that

looks and sounds like atonement, but relies heavily on alternative strategies. As observed by Goffman (1972), some rhetors who offer apologies split themselves "into two parts, the part that is guilty of an offense and the part that disassociates itself from the [offense]. In this way [an] apology is likely to involve a disassociation from that part of the self that committed the unacceptable act" (p. 113). In terms of atonement, I call this dissociation the simulated atonement. Simulated atonement is similar to the concept of atonement, but is used as a strategy to avoid blame, rather than as a means of authentically atoning for sin. Like Koesten and Rowland's conception of atonement, simulated atonement must contain an acknowledgment of wrong-doing, a change of attitude, promise of corrective action, some level of mortification, and ought to be conducted in the public. Since the atonement is not real, however, these five stages do not fully define the apologies, which may be dominated by other traditional strategies of image restoration, including those that deny wrongdoing, evade responsibility, or reduce the offensiveness of the event.

There are at least two conditions under which simulated atonement will be successful in permitting the rhetor to sidestep accountability. First, the apology, even when lacking authenticity, may be accepted when the sin demanding apologia lacks salience for a significant portion of the audience. Benoit (1995) described how the "salience of the victims to the audience is probably an important factor in image restoration. The closer the audience is to the harm, the harder rhetors will probably have to work to restore their images" (p. 164). This "closeness" to which Benoit refers can be understood in two ways. In one sense, this applies to geographical

proximity. Benoit came to this conclusion in his analysis of the Union Carbide gas leaks of 1984 in Bhopal, India, and 1985 in West Virginia. While the Bhopal incident killed more than 2000 and injured 200,000, Benoit found that United States citizens responded more negatively to the West Virginia leak, even though it effected far fewer people (p. 140). However, salience goes beyond geographical proximity, and also applies to what the audience deems "important or relevant" to them in general (p. 140). In this sense, the more an audience perceives potential personal loss, the more it will demand an authentic apology. Likewise, the less the audience is actually affected by some wrongful act, despite its immoral nature, the easier it is for the rhetor to gain forgiveness.

The second condition under which simulated atonement may work is when there are situational reasons for backing the apologizer. There are numerous instances in which this could occur. In some instances an audience may conclude that the ends of an action justify the means, even when the means seem immoral. In other instances an authentic atonement from a leader on behalf of a group could bring consequences that negatively effect the physical, mental, or material well-being of the entire group, and in which case that audience may not need, or even want for that matter, authenticity. For example, if confessing to war crimes may lead to punishment of numerous citizens, the demise of a dominant group narrative, or the demoralization of troops in a time of war, then the simulated atonement could be seen as an acceptable alternative.

For the remainder of this chapter I demonstrate through an analysis of President Bush's response to the Abu Ghraib crisis how a simulated atonement can be successful, especially when the right contextual factors are present. My analysis begins, first, with an historical analysis of the prisoner abuse scandal. I then spell out in detail how Bush's statements functioned as a rhetoric of simulated atonement, and how his effort was ultimately successful with the American audience.

## Historical Context of the Abu Ghraib Prisoner Abuse Scandal

In the early part of 2004, rumors were circulating around the Pentagon that at least a handful of sadistic soldiers serving in Iraq were tormenting prisoners in the American detention facility at Abu Ghraib. On January 19, 2004, Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, commander of the Combined Joint Task Force ordered an investigation into the practices at the base. Though the resulting investigation by Major General Antonio M. Taguba was swift, it failed to prevent the story from breaking. The abuse quickly evolved into a scandal that shocked the nation, spoiled the trust that the United States had gained from the international community in the wake of the September 11$^{th}$ attacks, and put the Bush administration on the defensive.

### *How the Crisis Developed*

On April 28, 2004, the CBS television network aired a story on *60 Minutes II* regarding unimaginable abuse, at the hands of the supposed liberators, in an American-run prison in Iraq. The program included a number of graphic and disturbing images, ranging from shots of a hooded Iraqi with wires attached to his hands and genitals, photographs of dogs attacking near-naked and unarmed male

inmates, to pictures of captives being forced to simulate gay sex. The images were terrible not only because they were taken by the soldiers as some sort of sick souvenir, but also because the images included a handful of American troops smiling and happily posing along the way. When confronted on the program, Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt, the chief spokesman in Iraq, offered an apology, claiming that the acts were conducted by a few bad soldiers who did not represent the other hundred-and-fifty-thousand troops in the Gulf region. By April 30th, only two days after the original story broke, Seymour Hersh, the same journalist who won the Pulitzer Prize during the Vietnam War for his work on the My Lai massacre, published an article in *The New Yorker* which contained additional images of the atrocious behavior. Photographs this time included a dead inmate wrapped in cellophane, and an empty room with blood-stained walls. More shocking than the pictures, Hersh used the Taguba study to prove that Pentagon officials had known about the abuse for months and that they did nothing to respond.

The news coverage embarrassed public officials. The United States government's investigation into the matter led to the discovery of at least two thousand additional pictures, including images of Iraqi women being raped or forced to undress, young boys being sodomized, prisoners forced to pose with feces rubbed all over their bodies, naked male bodies stacked in pyramid formation, and others of wounded inmates presumably beaten to death. These additional photographs were kept secret by the Defense Department from Congress, until a number of Senators

were eventually shown the evidence during a confidential session held on May 12, 2004 (Chehab, 2005, p. 106).

A number of factors suggested that the Bush administration was largely responsible for the matter. First, a memorandum from White House legal consultant, Alberto Gonzales, advised the President that the Geneva Conventions did not apply to America's detainees from the war on terror, and explicitly claimed that American soldiers should not be punished for the use of torture. The document, which responded to complaints by Guantanamo Bay prison administrators about the lack of effective interrogation tactics, was then distributed secretly throughout the Pentagon (Chehab, 2005, p. 125). The memorandum made it difficult for soldiers to challenge the abuse, some later complained, because the White House had "stamped the interrogation tactics with the imprimatur of legality, ensuring that any dissent from the field would have been ignored" (Carter, 2004, p. 26).

Bush's responsibility, though, extended well beyond acceptance of the memorandum prepared by Gonzales. Poor preparation before the invasion of Iraq was another cause of the criminal behavior of American troops. A shortage of trained international police and police advisors meant that the prisoner-to-guard ratio in Abu Ghraib was seventy-five to one, unlike the one to one ratio in Guantanamo Bay (Diamond, 2005, pp. 306-307). "Add to that," Duffy (2005) argued, "the facts that the Army's intelligence units were poorly trained and badly managed, and the military police units assigned to Abu Ghraib were filled with reservists who showed poor judgment--and some of whom are now the subject of courts-martial" (p. 42).

In addition to dismal pre-war preparation, and ignoring the Geneva Conventions, the Bush administration shared responsibility for the disaster because the President and his aids allegedly ignored several warnings about the abuse. Not only did the Pentagon supposedly alert the President about the misdeeds of its soldiers in January 2004, but "Amnesty International added to the controversy by saying it too had given warnings about Iraqi deaths and torture occurring in the custody of coalition forces, both to the Pentagon and the British Ministry of Defense" (Chehab, 2005, p. 123). Red Cross officials, as well, claimed to have alerted U.S. military command of the behavior in November 2003, though these warnings were reportedly laughed off by numerous officers (Barry, Hirsh & Isikoff, 2004, p. 26).

*Public Reaction to the Crisis*

Reports of the Bush administration's overall negligence caused strong public reaction at home and abroad. Those in the Middle East responded in three ways. First, it was increasingly apparent that President Bush and American military forces had lost the faith of some Iraqis who had once supported the invasion. Edmund Ghareeb, an expert on the Middle East from American University, claimed, "The symbolism of it is devastating. Some of these abuses have taken place at Abu Ghraib prison where some of the worst abuses of the Saddam Hussein regime took place" (Whitaker *et al.*, 2004). The parallels with the former regime could not be avoided. Second, the abuse brought to surface Middle Easterners' ultimate fear of Western imperialism. Following the news of the abuse, one commentator in the Palestinian daily *al-Ayyam*, as cited in Whitaker *et al.* (2004), wrote, "This Greater Middle East

that Washington promises is not a recipe for democracy, openness, freedom and respect for human rights; rather, it's a new formula to guarantee US control and a way to keep all Arab regimes humiliated and subjugated." Additionally, Diamond (2005) stated, "The sense of humiliation – in Iraq, and in the broader Arab world – only deepened with the exposure of the prison abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib, which was entirely about inflicting as much degradation and shame on Iraqi inmates as possible" (p. 301). There was another type of response by the Iraqis, far worse than the others. After the incident, many Arabs wanted American troops to be punished, and as a result, support, and perhaps even membership, for the insurgency began to grow. Carter (2004) eloquently concluded, "The [photos] have helped to energize the insurgency in Iraq, undermining our rule there and magnifying the risks faced by our soldiers each day. If Osama bin Laden had hired a Madison Avenue public relations firm to rally Arabs hearts and minds to his cause, it's hard to imagine that it could have devised a better propaganda campaign" (p. 21).

Immediate reactions in America to the news of human rights violations in Abu Ghraib were also harsh. For the most part, public officials targeted Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. Many prominent public officials, notably Democrats John Kerry, Joe Biden, and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi called for Rumsfeld's resignation. The media, too, demanded some sort of accountability for the disaster. By early May, editorials in *The New York Times* ("Donald Rumsfeld," 2004), *Boston Globe* ("Rumsfeld must," 2004), and *The Economist* had called for Rumsfeld to resign, and *The Army Times* ("A failure," 2004) demanded the same later

in the month. However, the reaction of the American public was mixed. An *ABC News*/*Washington Post* poll conducted on May 5-6, 2004 indicated that three-quarters of Americans claimed to be following the story closely, with two-thirds in favor of punishing the soldiers involved. Americans were not willing to target the chain of command, though, as fifty-four percent, according to the same poll, felt that punishment should have been limited to the small group of soldiers directly involved. An astounding sixty-nine percent were against Rumsfeld losing his job over the fiasco. However, fifty-nine percent suggested that the President should apologize directly to the Iraqi people. Facing this criticism, the President did just that in a series of speeches on May 5-6, 2004.

Analysis of President Bush's Simulated Atonement, May 5-6, 2004

In the week following the initial reports of abuse, the Bush administration was in full damage-control mode. In a press conference with Prime Minister Paul Martin of Canada, President Bush (2004 April 30) informally responded to questions about Abu Ghraib by emphasizing that he felt "a deep disgust," and stating that the "treatment does not reflect the nature of the American people" (p. 2). Though the President did not immediately offer an apology, his aids did it for him. White House spokesman, Scott McClellan "used the word 'sorry' half a dozen times, claiming clearly, 'The president is sorry for what occurred and the pain it has caused'" (Whitaker *et al.*, 2004, p. 2). Condoleeza Rice also stressed that the President was upset about the abuse. During an interview with the Al Arabiya television network on May 3rd, Rice (2004) claimed that Bush "said that he was personally sickened by

[the photos]," that he was "determined to get to the bottom of it…to make sure that whoever is responsible is punished for it," and announced that the President would eventually "speak directly to the Arab World" (p. 1).

The rest of this analysis focuses on the atonement that Bush publicly offered during two interviews with Alhurra and Al Arabiya television on May 5, 2004, and during his May 6, 2004 remarks and interviews alongside Jordanian King Abdullah II. Because similar messages were used for all of these speeches, I will discuss the four addresses as a single set. In the following analysis, I claim that Bush's remarks constitute a simulated atonement in the sense that on the surface he presented all the essential aspects of atonement while in part the address was dominated by more evasive strategies.

*Bush's Remarks as Atonement Rhetoric*

Bush's comments followed closely all of the parts of atonement. Throughout his speech, the acknowledgement of wrongdoing, promise of corrective action, and use of mortification were all very clear.

*Acknowledging wrongdoing.* Fairly quickly in each of his public appearances, President Bush both acknowledged the atrocious events that took place in the Iraqi prison, and clarified that Americans had the utmost respect for all law-abiding Iraqis. For instance, in the President's first interview, with Alhurra, he commenced by remarking, "People in Iraq must understand that I view those practices as abhorrent" (Bush, 2004 May 5a, p. 1). This description of the events was one that the President repeated throughout all four of his speeches (Bush, 2004 May 5b, p. 1; Bush, 2004

May 6a, p. 5; Bush, 2004 May 6b, p. 4). Bush also referred to the pictures as "images of cruelty and humiliation" (Bush, 2004 May 6, p. 2). Additionally, the President clarified that the abuse did not truly represent other Americans. He announced, "What took place in that prison does not represent America that I know. The America I know cares about every individual. The America I know has sent troops into Iraq to promote freedom – good, honorable citizens that are helping Iraqis every day" (p. 1). Though the President was clearly trying to repair the image of his military, he was also suggesting that Iraqis were supporting the war. In an attempt to address the humiliation suffered by all Iraqis, and to signify his true feelings toward the nation, Bush touted his country's mission to help the "decent, honorable Iraqi citizens" (Bush, 2004 May 5a, p. 1).

*Corrective action.* Throughout all four of his major public apologies, Bush offered two forms of corrective action. First, the President promised investigation into the matter. In his remarks to Alhurra, Bush (2004 May 5a) claimed, "We're an open society. We're a society that is willing to…fully investigate…what took place in that prison" (p. 1). In his second interview, with Al Arabiya, Bush also made several references to the promise of full investigations. Seeking the cause of the problem, Bush (2004, May 5b) held, "I want to know the full extent of the operations in Iraq. We want to make sure that if there is a systemic problem…that we stop the practices" (p. 1). In addition, the President also promised justice. To King Abdullah II, he promised, "people will be brought to justice in a way commensurate with how our system works" (Bush, 2004 May 6a, p. 5).

Second, the President provided ways that future abuses could be prevented. For example, he promised to cooperate with the International Red Cross in order to set a better example for other countries. The President said, "We will do to ourselves what we expect of others" (Bush, 2004 May 5a, p. 2). However, Bush's focus on cooperation with N.G.O.'s was limited, since he mentioned it just in that one speech, and only after being specifically questioned about the matter.

*Mortification.* The President's simulated atonement was also notable for his use of mortification, although his demonstration of authenticity was minimal. The President spoke on behalf of the country, and made comments about his own personal disgust. Speaking for all of his countrymen, Bush in the interviews of May 5, 2004 alluded to the embarrassment felt by every American. Halfway into the discussion with Alhurra, Bush confessed, "The American people are just appalled at what they have seen on TV as the Iraqi citizens" (Bush, 2004 May 5a, p. 2). The same exact statement was made at the beginning of his interview with Al Arabiya (Bush, 2004 5b, p. 1). Speaking about his own thoughts, details of the President's shame became more vivid in his appearances with King Abdullah. During his first press conference with the Jordanian King, Bush (2004 May 6a) remarked, "[The photos] sickened my stomach. Any decent soul doesn't want a human being treated that way. And…it's a stain on our country's honor" (p. 5). Recalling his private talk with Abdullah, Bush also declared, "I told him I was sorry for the humiliation suffered by the Iraqi prisoners, and the humiliation suffered by their families" (p. 2). Another personal apology came later that day in his second statement alongside Abudullah, this time

with Al-Ahram television. First, Bush mentioned, "I repeat to [King Abdullah], I am sorry for the humiliation suffered by those individuals. It makes me sick to my stomach to see that happen" (Bush, 2004 May 6b, p. 4). When prodded by reporters, Bush added, "Well I'm sorry for the prisoners, I really am. I think it's humiliating" (p. 5). Despite the mortification that completed the atonement, however, the President's apologies were more remarkable for the presence of rhetorical strategies that demonstrated a desire to evade the responsibility he claimed to accept.

*Bush's Use of Evasive Strategies*

Though the President gave the appearance of genuinely atoning for the Abu Ghraib crisis occurring under his watch, he employed several evasive apologia strategies in order to suggest that he was not really to blame. Overall, Bush relied most heavily on the strategies of shifting the blame, defeasibility, and bolstering.

*Shifting the blame.* Throughout Bush's four public statements, the events at Abu Ghraib were characterized in a way that actually shifted the blame away from the President and his administration. Two strategies were apparent in his attempt to shift blame. First, Bush acknowledged the evil nature of the abuse, and emphasized that it came at the hands of only a few twisted soldiers. Whenever questioned about the event, his first response was nearly identical to the one he gave in his first interview, with Alhurra, in which he stated, "People must understand that I view those practices as abhorrent" (Bush, 2006 May 5a, p. 1). He later elaborated, "We're finding the few that wanted to try to stop progress toward freedom and democracy" (p. 2). He repeated this message at the end of the Alhurra talk, maintaining, "[The] actions of

these few people do not reflect the hearts of the American people" (p. 2). He made similar statements twice in his interview with Al Arabiya (Bush, 2006 May 5b, p. 1), and twice in his short press conference with Abdullah (Bush, 2006 May 6a, p. 2). In his statements to Al-Ahram, Bush (2006 May 6b) again claimed, "…we reject this kind of treatment of people. It's abhorrent…not American [and] your viewers have to understand, this is not our country" (p. 4).

To separate himself and the rest of America from the likes of Pvt. Lynndie English and Specialist Charles Graner, and to truly demonize the other soldiers accused of the abuse, the President painted a picture of his native land as truly heroic. In a line that would be repeated often, Bush (2004, May 5a) claimed, "The America I know is a compassionate country that believes in freedom. The America I know cares about every individual. The America I know has sent troops into Iraq to promote freedom" (p. 1). Once more, in the press conference with Abdullah, Bush (2004 May 6a) bragged, "the troops we have in Iraq, who are there for security and peace and freedom, are the finest of the fine, fantastic United States citizens, who represent the very best qualities of America: courage, love of freedom, compassion, and decency" (p. 2).

By distinguishing between the good and evil people of the world, Bush pushed blame onto the evil doers. Bush's specific strategy of shifting the blame is one that has been noted before in analysis of his presidential rhetoric. For example, Ivie (2004) mentioned that the President's post-9/11 speeches followed the strategy "to stay on message and to say it often" (p. 2). In so doing, Ivy suggested, Bush

relied on rhetoric "laced with simple reassurances that Americans are good people defending themselves against evildoers" (p. 2). If Americans constituted the moral majority and were ultimately good, then the few soldiers violating human rights were simply un-American. Bush was creating the perfect villain easily distinguishable and separate from all of his good countrymen. As such, the President made a strong push in shifting the blame towards a few scapegoats, and away from his own administration which officially legitimized the practice to begin with. Nevertheless, Bush still had to confront the facts that his administration knew about this wild behavior long before it became public.

*Defeasibility.* In answering the accusations that his administration was made aware of reports of prisoner abuse long before May 2004, the President suggested that he was never given the information. His apologia rarely focused on this issue, but he managed to directly reply to the charges during his interview with Alhurra. Bush (2004 May 5a) explained, "The first time I saw or heard about the pictures was on TV" (p. 1). But to clarify about the Taguba report, the President claimed that "In early January, General Kimmitt talked about [an] investigation that would be taking place about…alleged improprieties in the prison. So our government has been in the process of investigating" (Bush, 2004 May 5a, p. 1). The report did not give him the full picture, though. Bush (2004 May 6b) confessed, "I did not know the extent of the abuse. And what you're hearing here in America is, why didn't I see the report? That's one of the questions I'm asking, because I first saw about the pictures on television screens" (p. 4). By maintaining that he knew nothing of the photographs or

the serious allegations of abuse – by claiming defeasibility – and by pointing out that numerous investigations were ongoing, the President attempted once again to avoid accountability.

*Bolstering.* Rather than humbly offer his sincerest regrets for the abuse, President Bush made numerous efforts to restore America's image by contrasting it with the evil Hussein regime. In other words, instead of expressing repentance, Bush resorted to attaching his good country to universally praiseworthy values. The most obvious of these attempts occurred when the President tied himself and the country to two values – that of truth and transparency. These values were referenced numerous times in each speech. In his first interview, with Alhurra, the President, reflecting on a recent conversation with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, stated, "I said, find the truth, and then tell the Iraqi people and the world the truth. We have nothing to hide. We believe in transparency, because we're a free society" (Bush, 2004 May 5a, p. 2). Bush's second interview, with Al Arabiya, contained numerous references to truth. Repeating the claims made in his first address, he suggested, "It's important for people to understand that in a democracy that there will be a full investigation. In other words, we want to know the truth" (Bush, 2004 May 5b, p. 1). Regarding transparency and an obligation to deliver justice to the Iraqi community, Bush promised, "The people of the Middle East must be assured that we will investigate fully, that we will find out the truth. They will know the truth, just like American citizens will know the truth, and justice will be served" (2004 May 5b, p. 1). This bolstering was apparently meant to demonstrate the differences between Bush and the

former Iraqi ruler. The President said this much when he suggested, “That stands in stark contrast to life under Saddam Hussein. His trained torturers were never brought to justice under his regime. There were no investigations about mistreatment of people. There will be investigations. People will be brought to justice” (Bush, 2004 May 5a, p. 1). Similar lines were used repeatedly in his appearances with Abdullah as well.

Ironically, the President was preaching truth and transparency while his administration was trying to obscure what really happened. The investigations at the time of Bush’s apologies instantly demonstrated that the Pentagon was going to protect its own. Hirsh and Barry (2004) discovered that those involved with Congressional inquiries found that Rumsfeld’s department was “doing its best to stop potentially incriminating information from coming out, that [it was] deflecting Congress's inquiries and shielding higher-ups from investigation” (p. 1). The Defense Department banned any discussion of the Taguba report that had already been leaked, warning that it was still classified information and that further leaks would result in criminal prosecution (p. 1). In addition, members of the Senate Armed Services Committee were complaining that 2,000 out of 6,000 pages of the files related to the Taguba Report delivered by the Pentagon were either blacked out or missing (p. 1). Even more concerning, the numerous internal investigations that the President promised lacked impartiality. In one investigation, the Pentagon selected Maj. Gen. George Fay, the second in charge of Army Military Intelligence, to investigate his own officers (p. 1). Fay, however, was forbidden by military doctrine to hold anyone

above a one-star general accountable (p. 1). In another investigation led by Rumsfeld's Defense Policy Board, the independent panel was instructed to make recommendations only about the future (p. 1).

The President's promise of truth and transparency, though remarkably insincere, served a clear rhetorical purpose. The strategy of bolstering, alongside that of atonement, functioned to offer Iraqis a simple choice. In characterizing the former-Hussein government as a great evil, and Americans as fair and reasonable people, the President was once again using language to paint a black and white picture of the world. Bush argued that Iraqis should accept the truth-seeking, freedom-loving American occupation as vastly superior to the previous regime, regardless of the abuses. Thus the President attempted to justify whatever wrongdoing occurred even as he offered atonement.

## Public Reactions to the Bush Apologia

The world had different opinions regarding Bush's apologia. Iraqis largely rejected the apology, and the insurgency retaliated for the abuse. At home, public approval ratings of the President indicated that disappointment with the prisoner abuse scandal grew substantially, and Americans were, for the first time, losing confidence in the government's war in Iraq. However, analysis of the long term impacts of the Abu Ghraib scandal suggests that the American public's frustration was ephemeral and that within a short period of time after issuing the apology, even as the war grew bloodier, the President had successfully diverted responsibility.

*The Iraqi Response*

Many Iraqis saw the President's attempt to apologize for the torturing of prisoners as inadequate. As Holtz (2004) summarized, "the Bush administration floundered and — despite Bush's lukewarm apology to King Adbullah — has not been able to deliver the point of the apology to the rest of the world" (p. 2). According to many Iraqis, the apology lacked authenticity. This feeling was expressed in several ways. Some Iraqi citizens, for example, complained that the apology lacked clarity (Chehab, 2005, p. 122). Deputy Foreign Minister of the Iraqi Governing Council, Dr. Hamid Al-Bayati said, "I think the president was short of this apology" (Al-Bayati, 2004, p. 1). Whitaker *et al.* (2004) noted, "'Few Iraqis appeared convinced of Mr. Bush's sincerity" (p. 2). For example, one Iraqi student cited in Whitaker *et al.* (2004), complained, "I don't believe what Bush has promised. I don't believe the people that did this will go to jail. I don't even believe they will face justice" (p. 2). The result of this perceived lack of authenticity was that the President's efforts did little to soothe angry Iraqis. As Holtz (2004) declared, "The question of whether the apology Bush delivered to King Abdullah was enough to quell the storm has been answered: It wasn't" (p. 2). The impact, according to Iraqi journalist, Saad Al Hassani, was that "the…division in between the American forces in Iraq and…the Iraqi people, themselves, started to…be bigger and bigger everyday" ("Rather: Bush Finally," 2004, p. 4). Consequently, groups like Al-Qaeda in Iraq gained membership, and violent acts against Americans in the Middle East, such as

the killing of Nick Berg by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi on May 11, 2004, became more common.

*The American Response*

In general, the President's apology did little, at least immediately, to gain the forgiveness of his American audience. Individuals in the media considered his apology incomplete, and public approval ratings indicated that Americans were increasingly disappointed with the scandal as well as with the President's leadership in Iraq. But to only examine immediate reactions offers an incomplete picture. Though Bush's atonement was met with skepticism, it ultimately succeeded in allowing him to escape accountability for the incident.

American media quickly declared that Bush's atonement was insufficient. Mainstream sources criticized Bush's speech for a number of reasons. First, it was widely seen as an insincere attempt to save face. For example, Carter (2004) contended, "The Bush administration has condemned the abuses as the work of a few bad apples, while working diligently to get the story off the front pages and out of the presidential campaign" (p. 21). Second, several reporters noted the President's failure to actually apologize, or show mortification, for the abuse. John King of CNN's *NewsNight* told his viewers that "the President did not use the words 'I'm sorry' or apologize in any way" ("Networks Stress," 2004 May 6, p. 2). Claire Shipman of ABC's *Good Morning America* suggested that "Eyebrows are being raised at the fact that he never actually apologized" ("Rather: Bush Finally," 2004, p. 3). Bill Plante from CBS's *The Early Show* remarked, "The President deplored what happened but

he didn't make any outright apology" (p. 3). In yet another example, Terry Moran of ABC's World News Tonight reported, "While the President denounced the abuse of Iraqi prisoners, he pointedly did not apologize for it. Instead, he left that to others" ("Networks Stress," 2004, p. 3). Furthermore, many other reporters claimed that Bush did not go far enough in promising corrective action. Dan Rather on May 6, 2004 focused his news segment on the President's failure to fire Rumsfeld ("Rather: Bush Finally," 2004, p. 2). Additionally, of the five stories on the apologies that appeared on ABC, CBS, and NBC on the evening of May 7, 2004, four clearly called for Rumsfeld's resignation ("Rather: Bush Finally," 2004, p. 2). To say the least, the President's speech did not impress the media.

The poor apology also weighed heavily on the American public. An *ABC News*/ *Washington Post* poll from May 23, 2004 found that for the first time fewer than half of Americans approved of Bush's overall job performance. Nearly fifty-eight percent disapproved of Bush's handling of Iraq, up from around twenty-five percent from the beginning of the month. A *USA Today* poll showed that most Americans believed the abuse of Iraqi detainees severely damaged the country's reputation as a protector of civil liberties and made it more likely that our own troops would be endangered in the future (Locy, 2005). However, it is notable that a majority of Americans, sixty percent, according to the ABC News/*Washington Post* poll, agreed with the President that the abuse was an isolated case.

Despite the American public's apparent dissatisfaction with the President's response to the Abu Ghraib disaster, the Bush administration escaped the crisis

without any long term repercussions. American politicians, although continuing their demands for a Rumsfeld resignation, eventually allowed the Abu Ghraib scandal to slip off the radar. On one hand, there were some political mavericks who stepped up their attacks. For example, Al Gore delivered a riveting address on May 26, 2004 calling for the resignation of almost everyone in the Bush administration. Additionally, John McCain eventually questioned the CIA's lagging response to the abuse (Diehl, 2004). Even John Kerry occasionally targeted the President for failing to accept responsibility for the matter (Johnson, 2004). On the other hand, the attacks on Bush were few and far between, and the scandal was largely ignored as the election season progressed. As Carter (2004) pointed out, "A month from election day, almost no one in the press or the political class is talking about what is, without question, the worst scandal to emerge from President Bush's nearly four years in office" (p. 21). Kerry, for instance, was criticized frequently for refusing to make Abu Ghraib a bigger issue (Coman, 2004, p. 30; Harding, 2004, p. 9; Marlantes, 2004; "Remember," 2004). Even when the media, or anyone in Congress for that matter, had the perfect opportunity to hold the administration accountable for Abu Ghraib, they failed to do so ("Remember," 2004). For example, in writing on the Congressional approval of the nomination of Alberto Gonzales, Applebaum (2005), observed, "In most of the world, something that happened eight months ago is considered 'recent.' In Washington, however, it seems that eight months ago is considered 'ancient'" (p. A17). In less than a year after the scandal and tentative apology, all seemed forgotten. By November 2006, as one author put it, "more than

two years after the crisis, not a single high-ranking administration official or military officer submitted a resignation ("Who is responsible?," 2004, p. 7). To top it all off, public faith in the President's ability to lead in Iraq rebounded substantially, and his reelection came easier than expected (Marlantes, 2004).

## A Contextual Explanation of Bush's Abu Ghraib Apologia

There are two reasons for why President Bush's simulated atonement was, ultimately, a success. In this section, I argue, first, that the abuse of Iraqi prisoners lacked salience for a significant portion of Bush's audience, thus making it much easier for the President to gain forgiveness without demonstrating authenticity. Second, I contend that the situational factors of wartime led many Americans to believe that the acts were justified in the context of the war on terror.

President Bush's simulated atonement was successful, first of all, because the incident at Abu Ghraib lacked salience for many Americans. A significant portion of the American public did not perceive the abuse at Abu Ghraib to be anything close to torture, and as such, the charges lacked importance. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld made this distinction on many occasions. In sworn testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, for instance, Rumsfeld clarified, "I'm not a lawyer. My impression is that what has been charged thus far is abuse, which I believe technically is different from torture" (Milam, 2004, p. 25). The abuse, as Rumsfeld called it, was eventually described by some as nothing more than fun and games. A guest on *Hannity & Colmes* asserted that "Frat hazing is worse than this" (Rich, 2004, p. 1). Rush Limbaugh made the same comparison, arguing, "This is no

different than what happens at the Skull and Bones initiation and we're going to ruin people's lives over it.... You know, these people are being fired at every day. I'm talking about people having a good time, these people, you ever heard of emotional release?" (Rich, 2004, p. 1). The majority of Americans in some sense agreed with this perspective. While sixty-three percent of Americans, according to an *ABC News*/*Washington Post* poll conducted on May 23, 2004, believed that torture was unacceptable in all cases, sixty percent of those polled considered what occurred at Abu Ghraib to be abuse, and not torture. Even though abuse, in general, was seen by most Americans as unacceptable, according to the same poll, the fact that sixty percent felt that the treatment was an isolated incident probably explains why only thirty-one percent said they were angry about the scandal. For at least sixty percent of his audience, the President, then, was not apologizing for systematically violating human rights, but for the lesser problem of abuse.

Bush's simulated atonement was also successful due to unique situational factors. Whether the treatment of the Iraqi detainees was abuse or torture probably did not matter for some Americans. Before Abu Ghraib was in the news, a *FOX News/Opinion Dynamics* poll of March 11-12, 2003 suggested that forty-four percent of Americans felt that physical torture was justified in obtaining from prisoners information that might prevent a terrorist attack. Likewise, a *Newsweek* poll from November 10-11, 2005 indicated that sixty-two percent of Americans felt that torture was justified in at least some rare cases, and fifty-eight percent felt that it was justified in extracting information from suspected terrorists. Thus, because America

was fighting a war on terrorism and Iraq was an extension of that war, Iraqi prisoners were hardly presumed innocent by some Americans. Rush Limbaugh, for example, claimed that even if the treatment of detainees was morally questionable, it was still acceptable to some degree. He claimed, "We hear the most humiliating thing you can do is make one Arab male disrobe in front of another. Sounds to me in the context of war this is pretty good intimidation. Maybe the people who executed this pulled off a brilliant maneuver. Nobody got hurt. Nobody got physically injured. But boy there was a lot of humiliation of people who are trying to kill us--in ways they hold dear" (Milam, 2004, p. 25). Limbaugh was not alone. In an editorial column in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, White (2004 May 20) argued, "The abuse of prisoners in Iraq certainly merited an apology. But we do not expect prisoners who may know where the next car bomb is to be handled gently. Protect our soldiers, crush the insurgency, and if putting women's underwear on the face of a suspect gets him to talk, so be it" (p. C13). For those who understood the acts to be torture, many saw the treatment as acceptable in a time of war. Add this to the fact that a substantial percentage of people viewed the acts as mere abuse, and the explanation for the success of simulated atonement becomes clear.

## Conclusion

The abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, undoubtedly one of the most shocking revelations during Bush's presidency, was quickly erased from public memory. The scandal caused outrage in America and all over the Middle East, and forced the President to respond. In a series of interviews, Bush expressed condolences to the

victims, but attempted to avoid any political accountability for the actions of his administration. His reluctance was noticed by many Americans, and his apologia was widely seen as inadequate – but it still succeeded, at least at home, in gaining forgiveness for the nation's leader. In the right context, then, when a wrongful act lacks salience and situational factors demand support for some rhetor, even simulated atonement can work.

# CHAPTER THREE

## Accepting Responsibility for Somebody Else's Error; The Effective Use of Blame Displacement in Bush's WMD Apologia

On October 7, 2002, President Bush, with absolute certainty, outlined the threat posed by Iraq and publicly declared, "Saddam Hussein is harboring terrorists and the instruments of terror, mass death and destruction. Knowing these realities, America must not ignore the threat gathering against us" (Bush, 2002 October 7, p. 3). However, nine months after the March 2003 invasion of Iraq, former U.S. weapons inspector David Kay (2004), testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee about the fact that no WMD (Weapons of Mass Destruction) were ever discovered, confessed, "It turns out that we were all wrong" (p. 1). This realization was embarrassing for the Bush administration because it directly contradicted the original rationale for the war. Consequently, public support of the Bush administration plummeted. Between March 2003 and November 2006, according to a *USA Today/Gallup* poll, Bush's public approval ratings dropped from seventy-one to thirty-eight percent. Though this slide was partially the effect of other political crises, public frustration regarding the WMD scandal played a key role in the trend. For instance, while only thirty-six percent of Americans polled by *Newsweek* in May 2003 thought that the Bush administration had misinterpreted intelligence reports leading to the war, that number increased to sixty-one percent by October 2006. More damning for the President, according to the same *Newsweek* poll, was that the percentage of Americans who felt that the misrepresentation was intentional increased

from thirty-six percent to fifty-eight percent over the same time period. Overall support for the war fell, too. An *ABC News/Washington Post* poll found that seventy percent of Americans in April 2003 felt that the war in Iraq was worth fighting, but that only thirty-five percent reported the same by October 2006. Miraculously, however, the President successfully avoided responsibility even in light of the extraordinary shift in public opinion.

Despite a consensus that the President misled the public into supporting a war, George W. Bush, at least domestically, was not held accountable for his errors, until the mid-term elections of 2006. Aside from some criticism by his liberal rivals in the presidential campaign of 2003-2004, little was done by the government to punish Bush. Congress was fairly quiet. The few calls for impeachment and efforts to censure the executive office received little support. Although the investigations by the Iraq Survey Group, the Senate Intelligence Committee, and the Iraq Intelligence Committee concluded that the President was in some way responsible for starting a war on false premises, their reports did little more than offer recommendations on how the problems could be prevented in the future. Even with the knowledge that Bush had exaggerated military intelligence, more than fifty-one percent of voters re-elected the President in 2004. This lack of accountability for one of the worst mistakes by a President in American history left some flabbergasted. For example, Helen Thomas, the outspoken columnist for Hearst Newspapers, stated, "I am astonished at the acceptance of this deception by voters. I've seen two U.S. presidents go down the drain – Lyndon B. Johnson on Vietnam and Richard Nixon in

the Watergate scandal – because they were no longer believed. But times change – and I guess our values do, too" (Thomas, 2005 May 13, p. 1). The American public's apparent tolerance for Bush's deception raises an interesting question. How exactly did the President avoid responsibility? One possible answer is that the President successfully utilized a unique form of apologia to address the charges.

I argue that President Bush avoided accountability for the WMD scandal, in part, because of his use of a somewhat different variant of simulated atonement than the one discussed in the previous chapter. Bush's simulated atonement was successful with his national audience because it made him appear honest, and having gained the audience's trust, subsequently made it easier for Bush to shift the blame to Saddam Hussein, the intelligence community, political opponents, and the terrorists of 9/11. I develop this position in the following sections. First, I explain how simulated atonement permits rhetors to displace blame. Second, so that the immediate context of the President's attempts to repair his image is fully understood, I offer an historical analysis of the crisis as it developed between October 2002 and December 2005. Third, I examine two of the President's speeches – his December 14, 2005 remarks at the Woodrow Wilson Center, and his December 18, 2005 Address to the Nation from the Oval Office – to show how his apologia allowed him to dodge accountability for his part in leading the country to an unnecessary war. Finally, I conclude by drawing implications from this analysis.

## Blame Displacement as a Variant of Simulated Atonement

In the last chapter concerning Bush's Abu Ghraib apologia, I outlined a variant of simulated atonement based on two characteristics. First, simulated atonement may be accepted when the sin demanding apologia lacks salience for a significant portion of the audience. Second, simulated atonement may work if audience members have other reasons for not wanting to blame the person atoning. In this chapter, I identify another variant. Simulated atonement can be accepted by an audience when a wrongdoer combines traditional atonement with a plausible appeal to shift blame. I label this type of simulated atonement as blame displacement. To fully understand the concept of blame displacement, it is crucial to comprehend how it relates to previous theories describing the strategy of shifting blame.

In some sense blame displacement shares much in common with the image repair strategy that Benoit called denial through shifting the blame. Based on the Burkean concept of victimage, Benoit (1995) suggested that shifting the blame "can be considered a variant of denial, because the accused cannot have committed the repugnant act if someone else actually did it" (p. 75). The strategy is effective, Benoit argued, because "it provides a target for any ill will the audience may feel, and this ill feeling may be shifted away from the accused" (p. 76). Thus, the purpose of shifting the blame, in Benoit's terms, is to damage the reputation of others in hope that the audience will then exonerate the source (p. 81). This strategy is relatively common in efforts to repair one's image. For example, President Bush, as I argued in the last chapter, shifted the blame for the prisoner abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib to the

few bad soldiers who were photographed while engaging in the atrocious acts. Also recently, U.S. Representative Mark Foley blamed a sexually abusive priest from his childhood for his own inappropriate conduct toward teenaged boys in the Congressional page program (Babington & Balz, 2006). Additionally, former director of FEMA Michael Brown blamed the botched recovery efforts following Hurricane Katrina on the local governments of Louisiana and New Orleans ("Ex FEMA," 2005).

The strategy of blame displacement differs from traditional approaches to image repair, however, because it violates the prevailing perspective that guilty parties should avoid coupling evasive techniques with mortification when responding to public charges of malfeasance. Scholars writing on crisis communication long have held that honesty is the best policy (Benoit, 1995; Benoit, 1997; Seeger & Ulmer, 2001; Sellnow et. al., 1998). Benoit (1995), for example, suggested, "It seems desirable for a person who is at fault to admit this immediately. A person who initially denies responsibility for actions reasonably attributable to that person can suffer substantially damaged credibility when the truth emerges" (p. 160). In his analysis of Bush's response to the WMD scandal, Benoit (2006 June) came to the same conclusion. Scolding the President for not coming clean when so many Americans were certain of his guilt, Benoit argued:

> Such refusal compounds the damage to image from the initial mistake, risking creating the impression of pig-headedness, stupidity, or even cowardice in owning up to one's mistakes. Certainly the Judeo-

> Christian belief system that pervades our culture suggests that those who are at fault should confess, and then others should forgive them. (p. 143)

As this view implies, nothing short of admitting responsibility will repair the image of those who are undoubtedly guilty, and resorting to evasive strategies will only make matters worse. Benoit's (1995) criticism of Exxon's apology for the Valdez oil spill, for example, further supports this position:

> It was a mistake even to try the strategies of shifting the blame and minimization. We expect people to be honest enough to confess their transgressions. We deplore those who, after committing an error, lie about it. This principle is illustrated in Exxon's attempt to shift blame when evidence contradicted its statements. Not only is the audience unlikely to accept this strategy, but it adds insult to injury. (p. 160)

The idea of coming clean while still shifting the blame to others, then, is in direct contradiction to the advice offered in traditional research concerning image repair.

It should be stated, however, that the strategy of a wrongdoer offering some sort of atonement characterized by the simultaneous use of mortification and the shifting of blame has been analyzed by a few scholars. Brinson and Benoit (1999), in their investigation into Texaco's image repair strategies in response to charges of racism during the late 1990s, categorized this approach as "an unusual twist in the form of shifting the blame that we label separation" (p. 504). The authors identified three conditions under which separation may be maximally effective (pp. 505-506).

First, the apologizer must establish that those "actually" responsible were in violation of some important policy. Second, the "actual" malefactor "should not only be symbolically but physically separated" from the accused (p. 506). Third, the accused "should take action to discourage future violations" of the established policy, especially if it occurred under their watch (p. 506). While Brinson and Benoit's conclusions were important, they failed to recognize the form that this type of apology normally takes. By suggesting that blame displacement follows the form of atonement, in this chapter I demonstrate more clearly why an audience might be misled into supporting the wrongdoer, and also cite the characteristics that critics could use to identify this deceptive apologia. In addition, blame displacement, or separation, is not nearly as "unusual" as Brinson and Benoit contended (p. 504).

Contrary to what most scholars specializing in apologia or image repair have argued, a carefully planned effort to shift blame while offering atonement, may sometimes allow wrongdoers to avoid accountability. The type of simulated atonement that relies on blame displacement has three defining characteristics. First, like all other instances of simulated atonement, blame displacement follows the five characteristics of traditional atonement discussed in previous chapters. Second, because the effectiveness of the strategy hinges on the perceived honesty of the rhetor's unambiguous admission of guilt, blame displacement emphasizes the parts of the atonement in which the rhetor acknowledges wrongdoing and engages in mortification. Consequently, the third formal characteristic is blame displacement. The benefit of atoning before shifting the blame has been noted once before. Benoit

(1988) said of Ted Kennedy's Address to the People of Massachusetts, that the Senator's admission of guilt for leaving the scene of an accident "functioned to condition the audience to accept his description of the events, which subtly shifted the blame away from him. Why should the audience question his statements, or think that he was twisting or slanting the facts, when he had just admitted his guilt?" (pp. 191-192). The same point applies to President Bush in his WMD apologia.

## Historical Context

By September 2002, President Bush was lobbying the global community to address what he considered the growing threat of Saddam Hussein's evil regime. Laying out the case for intervention before the United Nations General Assembly, Bush (2002 September 12) expressed concerns about: Hussein's failure to destroy his arsenal of weapons following the first Gulf War, his alleged connections to Al Qaeda, the Iraqi government's abuse of its own citizens, and the dictator's success in circumventing economic sanctions. Nothing that Bush said received more attention than his later claim that the Iraqi leader was trying to acquire mass quantities of uranium from Africa (Bush, 2002 October 7). Having served as the one piece of evidence that most convinced skeptical members of Congress to support the war (Duffy & Carney, 2003), later confirmation that the Niger uranium story was false proved problematic for the Bush administration. In this section, I discuss how the WMD scandal eventually developed, the public's reaction to the accusations that the President intentionally misled the world, and how Bush attempted to address the crisis both before and after his reelection in 2004.

*How the Scandal Developed*

Accusations that the President knowingly relied on false intelligence in order to rally support for the war started surfacing just weeks after the invasion of Iraq. Journalist Seymour Hersh (2003) wrote that analysts from the Department of Energy and the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research had questioned the authenticity of documents related to Iraq's nuclear weapons program, but were ignored by higher ranking government officials (p. 41). In a key development, diplomat Joe Wilson, asked by the C.I.A. to investigate the Niger uranium story in the fall of 2002, later reported that his warnings about the evidence being weak were disregarded. In an Op-Ed published in *The New York Times* on July 6, 2003, Wilson (2003) argued, "I have little choice but to conclude that some of the intelligence related to Iraq's nuclear weapons program was twisted to exaggerate the Iraqi threat" (p. 1).

Multiple statements made by members of the Bush administration, just months after the March 2003 invasion, supported Joe Wilson's conclusion. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, for example, stated that an attack on Iraq, with or without evidence of Saddam's nuclear ambitions, was planned right after the events of 9/11. Recalling the early discussions concerning America's counterterrorist strategy, Wolfowitz (2003) said that the debate to target Hussein "appeared to be about not whether but when" (p. 1). Wolfowitz was not alone in his honesty. Richard Perle, an adviser to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, freely conceded that the invasion was illegal, claiming, "I think in this case international law stood in

the way of doing the right thing" (Burkeman & Borger, 2003, p. 1). Summarizing this philosophy, Iraqi leader Ahmad Chalabi, once a close ally of the Bush administration, shrugged off the charges that allied forces relied on false intelligence, stating, "We are heroes in error" (Fairweather & La Guardia, 2004, p. 1).

In January 2004, the Iraq Survey Group, an investigative body set up by the U.S. government, confirmed that the Niger uranium story, along with most of Bush's other suspicions, was dead wrong. Onetime head of that committee, David Kay (2004), confessed that "our understanding of Iraq's WMD program was always bounded by large uncertainties and had to be heavily caveated" (p. 1). Kay's replacement, Charles Deulfer, reported that no serious weapons were found and that Iraq's WMD program was essentially destroyed in 1991. Thus, by the beginning of 2004, the President found himself with a major credibility problem.

*Public Reaction to the Scandal*

Reactions to the WMD scandal came in two waves. With the President's campaign for reelection in 2004, significant attention was given to Bush's job performance, and his justification for the war in Iraq came under direct attack. Perhaps more than anyone else, the Democratic presidential candidates criticized Bush for his failed leadership. Especially during the primary debates, most Democratic candidates harped on Bush's failure to find the weapons that he warned the world so much about (Benoit, 2006 June, p. 289). Candidates' negative characterizations of Bush ranged from "misleading" and "deceptive," to "intentionally misleading," and "a liar" (Benoit, 2006 June, pp. 289-290). The

accusations had a strong impact on the President's image. Where eighty-one percent of Americans questioned by an *ABC News/Washington Post* poll in April 2003 felt that the country did the right thing by going to war, that number fell to fifty-two percent by April 2004. In March 2004, fifty-five percent of Americans polled by *Newsweek* felt that the President had made a mistake in his justification for the war, and forty-six percent felt that Bush had intentionally misled the public. Bush's approval ratings also suffered. Between March 2003 and October 2004, his numbers fell from seventy-one percent to forty-eight percent, according to the *USA Today/Gallup* poll.

With his reputation hurting just months before Election Day, President Bush delivered a series of speeches to defend his decision to invade Iraq. Benoit (2006 June; 2006 August) analyzed two such attempts – Bush's appearance on *Meet the Press* on February 8, 2004, and a primetime press conference held on April 13, 2004 – and found that the President defended himself by refusing to admit that he made mistakes, expressing his faith that the mystery of the missing weapons would be solved, attacking opponents for making the same decision after seeing the same evidence, and shifting to a new justification for the war based on the need to free Iraq from Saddam's cruelty. Although Bush temporarily repaired his image enough to win reelection, new developments in the WMD scandal would force him to address the charges once again.

The WMD scandal returned to the news following the presidential election. There were a few key developments responsible for this. First, U.S. weapons

inspectors in Iraq officially ended their search for WMD in January 2005 (Starr & Labott, 2005, p. 1). Second, a number of intelligence officials came forward to report how the President ignored their warnings about faulty military intelligence (Bradley, 2006). Third, in early 2005, a confidential document, the so-called Downing Street Memo, was leaked. Written in July 2002 by British national security aide Matthew Rycroft, it was reported in the memo that Bush wanted to remove Saddam through military action and was willing to fix the necessary evidence to justify an invasion (Clark, 2005, p. 1). To make matters worse for the President, the nine-member Iraq Intelligence Commission released their findings in March 2005, and concluded that the pre-war military intelligence was flawed, "making this one of the most public — and most damaging — intelligence failures in recent American history" (Diamond, 2005 March 31, p. 1). With the scandal in the news again and the war getting bloodier, public support for the President continued to slide. In November 2005, according to the *NBC News/Wall Street Journal* poll, fifty-seven percent of Americans felt that Bush deliberately misled the public to make a case for invading Iraq. Public support for the war, the *ABC News/ Washington Post* poll reported, was down from about forty-five percent in November 2004 to thirty-six percent one year later. The President's approval ratings, too, according to the same poll, plunged from fifty-five percent just after Bush's reelection to thirty-seven percent in November 2005.

With his credibility damaged and labeled by one popular newsmagazine as "the most isolated president in modern history" (Thomas & Wolfe, 2005, p. 1), Bush

aimed to repair his image and restore faith in the war with a two-week, four speech blitz, starting in the beginning of December 2005. Delivering two speeches at the beginning of the month addressing how to strengthen Iraqi security forces, and how to rebuild Iraq's economy ("Continuing theme," p. A6), Bush used his speeches of December 14th and 18th to offer a simulated atonement for his previous errors.

## Simulated Atonement, Blame Displacement, and WMD

In this section I focus on two of Bush's public appearances during his image repair campaign of December 2005. Because his remarks on December 14th at the Woodrow Wilson Center and the December 18th Address to the Nation from the Oval Office were similar in content and purpose, I will discuss them as a single speech set. Suffering from a credibility crisis, the President's speeches served three important functions. First, through acknowledging that his administration had made mistakes in its pre-war planning, Bush sought to rebuild confidence in his leadership so as to gain enough support for a new plan to win the war in Iraq. Second, in order to make his new plan appear more reliable, the President admitted that the current strategy in Iraq was failing due to the complexities presented by insurgents. Third, the President continued his efforts in establishing a new justification for the war. Though many different strategies were utilized to meet these ends, I focus on how Bush attempted to rebuild his credibility as a leader by offering a simulated atonement combined with blame displacement. First, I examine how the speeches followed the form of atonement. Second, I offer examples of how Bush shifted blame to others. Third, I

analyze the public reaction to the speeches to show that they were successful in allowing the President to evade accountability for his role in the WMD scandal.

*Bush's Remarks as Atonement Rhetoric*

Both of the December 2005 speeches closely followed the form of atonement. By admitting mistakes, Bush sought to demonstrate that he was a new kind of leader, willing to work with his opponents to find a solution to the failing war effort. On the surface, it looked as if this confession was genuine. As I demonstrate below, all of the formal characteristics of atonement were evident in the text.

*Acknowledging wrongdoing*. Bush admitted to two kinds of errors in his speeches. First, he addressed the faulty justification for the war by admitting that he was ultimately responsible for the false claims that Hussein possessed WMD. This occurred just once in his remarks on December 14th. Very simply, he admitted, "[It] is true that much of the intelligence turned out to be wrong. As President, I'm responsible for the decision to go into Iraq" (Bush, 2005 December 14, p. 1). The admission was repeated multiple times in his appearance four days later. During the primetime address, Bush (2005 December 18) said, "After the swift fall of Baghdad, we found mass graves filled by a dictator; we found some capacity to restart programs to produce weapons of mass destruction, but we did not find those weapons" (p. 1). Claiming once again that he was at fault, Bush suggested that "much of the intelligence turned out to be wrong" and "[as] your President, I am responsible for the decision to go into Iraq" (p. 1).

Second, Bush acknowledged that his country was put in a very difficult position because of his errors. He stated very bluntly, "I know that some of my decisions have led to terrible loss" (Bush, 2005 December 18, p. 1). Surprisingly, Bush did not hide from the fact that the war was not going well. In a sense, he was trying to show that he, too, saw the failures that the country was witnessing. Referring again to the "suffering and loss" that resulted from his decision, Bush (2005 December 18) admitted, "This loss has led some to ask if we are creating more problems than we're solving" (p. 1). Though the President was optimistic about the future, he confessed that "the work in Iraq has been…more difficult than we expected," and that the country would "continue to see the grim results on the evening news" (Bush, 2005 December 18, p. 1). In short, the President was trying to break out of "the Bush Bubble" (Thomas & Wolfe, 2005 December 19) to show that he was not as out of touch as many were describing him.

*Demonstrating a change of attitude*. Since the President was apologizing for relying on the faulty intelligence that led to the war, he needed to address the cause of that problem. Except for the Downing Street Memo, which received only modest attention in the United States (Clark, 2005), there was little proof that Bush intentionally misled the American public. In fact, only fifty-three percent of Americans, according to the *CNN/USA Today/Gallup* poll, believed that his justification was intentionally deceptive. However, Bush still needed to explain why he presented evidence, such as the secret Nigerian uranium deal, despite having been

warned by multiple intelligence officials that the reports were not true. His solution, clear throughout his atonement, was to indicate a change of attitude toward his critics.

Rather than attack his opponents as he had in the past, Bush appeared to embrace constructive criticism. Though he had previously indicated that it was "perfectly legitimate to criticize my decision or the conduct of war," the President (Bush, 2005 November 11) had characterized anti-war critics as irresponsibly trying to "rewrite history of how the war began" (p. 1). Moreover, Bush portrayed his skeptics as enemies of the state, contending:

> The stakes in the global war are too high for politicians to throw out false charges. These baseless attacks send the wrong signal to our troops and to an enemy that is questioning America's will. As our troops fight…they deserve to know that their elected leaders who voted to send them to war continue to stand behind them. (p. 1)

Rather than call for blind support in a time of war, Bush (2005 December 18) this time acknowledged the thoughts of his critics, and responded, "[To] those of you who did not support my decision to send troops to Iraq: I have heard your disagreement, and I know how deeply it is felt" (p. 1). Moreover, the President showed a deeper appreciation for their perspectives even while disagreeing with them. For example, Bush (2005 December 14) claimed that a withdrawal of Iraq "might make sense," only if the situation were not so complex. Most importantly, the President valued some of the critics so much that he expressed a desire to work more closely with those who opposed his policies. From his desk in the Oval Office, Bush (2005

December 18) stated, “we have learned from our experiences, and fixed what has not worked. We will continue to listen to honest criticism, and make every change that will help us complete the mission” (p. 1).

*Promise of corrective action*. Though the President was apologizing for having relied on poor military intelligence, his promise to correct the situation did not deal with that issue directly. At the beginning of his first speech, Bush (2005 December 14) suggested, “I'm also responsible for fixing what went wrong by reforming our intelligence capabilities” (p. 1). However, few, if any, of his comments offered a solution to prevent the errors from reoccurring. The President might have indicated that he would fire top aides responsible for ignoring skeptical intelligence officials. He could have also recognized a need to reorganize the Department of Homeland Security or the Pentagon. At the very least, he could have announced the creation of another investigative committee to recommend a series of changes. Bush, however, recast the need for change from intelligence to improving plans to win the war.

Promising to fix the problems caused by his mistakes, the President made it clear that a victory in Iraq was the only way for the nation to regain the respect of the international community. During his second address, Bush (2005 December 18) argued that the country had to make a decision:

> Now there are only two options before our country -- victory or defeat. And the need for victory is larger than any president or political party, because the security of our people is in the balance. I don't expect you

> to support everything I do, but tonight I have a request: Do not give in to despair, and do not give up on this fight for freedom. (p. 1)

Indicating that further sacrifice was needed, the President put forth a plan based on improving the security, democracy, and reconstruction of Iraq. Rather than set a date for withdrawal, Bush (2005 December 18) suggested, the new plan in Iraq required that coalition forces "remain on the offense -- finding and clearing out the enemy, transferring control of more territory to Iraqi units, and building up the Iraqi security forces so they can increasingly lead the fight" (p. 1). Coalition forces, he added, needed to continue "helping the Iraqi government establish the institutions of a unified and lasting democracy, in which all of Iraq's people are included and represented" (p. 1). Finally, the United States, he argued, had to continue "moving forward with a reconstruction plan to revive Iraq's economy and infrastructure -- and to give Iraqis confidence that a free life will be a better life" (p. 1).

*Mortification*. There were two ways that the President expressed mortification in his remarks. First, through his language choice, he acknowledged the horror of the war for which he was responsible. The battle was "difficult" and had caused "suffering and loss," and "terrible loss" (Bush, 2005 December 18, p. 1). Second, Bush confessed that he was deeply impacted by the consequences of the war. At the end of his Address from the Oval Office, the President contended, "not one of those decisions has been taken lightly. I know this war is controversial -- yet being your President requires doing what I believe is right and accepting the consequences" (p. 1). The consequences, he later suggested, weighed heavily upon him. In one of

his final lines, Bush maintained, "I see the consequences of those decisions when I meet wounded servicemen and women who cannot leave their hospital beds" (p. 1). The authenticity of this claim might have been questionable to many audience members. Those dying in hospital beds, he added, "summon the strength to look me in the eye and say they would do it all over again" (p. 1).

Analyses of Bush's speeches concluded that the President was successful in expressing mortification. Lehigh (2005) noted that the President abandoned "his usual combativeness" and "struck a humbler, more unifying tone than his previous nationally televised stay-the-course speeches" (p. A21). Writing of the President's remarks of December 14th, Stevenson (2005) suggested that "Mr. Bush struck a tone of realism and spoke more bluntly than usual" (p. 24). Though his atonement was hardly perfect, critics saw Bush's effort to sound sincerely concerned as a big improvement. Light (2005), for example, stated, "Conceding that mistakes had been made must have been difficult for President Bush. In all of his years as president he rarely, if ever, has admitted that his administration's moves and policies have not been on the money. His critics often say that he is too proud or stubborn to admit that mistakes have been made and have been costly in Iraq" (p. H3). Thus by shedding his image as a stubborn leader, the President managed to at least give the appearance of authenticity.

*Bush's Attempts to Displace Blame*

Despite the appearance of authentic atonement, the President actually relied heavily on blame displacement. Throughout the two speeches, Bush blamed Saddam

Hussein, anti-war critics, the intelligence community, and the 9/11 terrorists for the WMD scandal.

According to Bush, there were several reasons why Saddam Hussein was responsible for the WMD scandal. First, Saddam Hussein was an evil man who deserved to be removed from power, even if he did not possess WMD. Outlining the parts of the pre-war justification that turned out to be true, Bush (2005 December 18) professed:

> Our coalition confronted a regime that defied United Nations Security Council resolutions, violated a cease-fire agreement, sponsored terrorism, and possessed, we believed, weapons of mass destruction. After the swift fall of Baghdad, we found mass graves filled by a dictator; we [also] found some capacity to restart programs to produce weapons of mass destruction. (p. 1)

It was not unreasonable, according to Bush (2005 December 14), to conclude that Hussein still possessed WMD, and was willing to use them against the United States. After all, the President stated, "He had pursued and used weapons of mass destruction. He invaded his neighbors. He fought a war against the United States and a broad coalition. [And] he had declared that the United States of America was his enemy." (p. 1). Moreover, Bush noted that even Charles Duelfer, who concluded that Saddam had destroyed most of his weapons after the first Gulf War, "found that Saddam was using the U.N. oil-for-food program to influence countries and companies in an effort to undermine sanctions, with the intent of restarting his

weapons programs once the sanctions collapsed and the world looked the other way" (p. 1). As a result, Bush declared, "Saddam was a threat -- and the American people and the world is better off because he is no longer in power" (p. 1).

In addition to describing the general threat that Saddam posed even without a cache of weapons, Bush pinned the responsibility for the WMD scandal on the Iraqi leader because he knowingly misled weapons inspectors in the days leading up to the war. Speaking from the Oval Office, Bush (2005 December 18) stated, "It is true that he systematically concealed those programs, and blocked the work of U.N. weapons inspectors" (p. 1). Four days earlier, Bush (2005 December 14) charged:

> [Saddam Hussein] deceived international inspectors, and he denied them the unconditional access they needed to do their jobs. When a unanimous Security Council gave him one final chance to disclose and disarm, or face serious consequences, he refused to comply with that final opportunity. At any point along the way, Saddam Hussein could have avoided war by complying with the just demands of the international community. (p. 1)

For President Bush, Hussein's failure to comply with the orders of the United Nations was what made him solely responsible for the war. It was quite simple, he concluded, "The United States did not choose war -- the choice was Saddam Hussein's" (p. 1). Clarifying this statement, Bush (2005 December 18) later stated, "He was given an ultimatum -- and he made his choice for war" (p. 1).

Aside from pinning responsibility on Saddam, Bush gave at least two reasons why some of his critics were to blame for the WMD scandal. First, many of his critics were liars, he argued, and were bringing forth false accusations for political reasons. These critics, he held, "have launched irresponsible charges. They say that we act because of oil, that we act in Iraq because of Israel, or because we misled the American people" (Bush, 2005 December 14, p. 1). Worst of all, Bush added, these charges were unpatriotic for "they hurt the morale of our troops. Whatever our differences in Washington, our men and women in uniform deserve to know that once our politicians vote to send them into harm's way, our support will be with them in good days and bad, and we will settle for nothing less than complete victory" (p. 1). It was impossible to please these skeptics, Bush implied, for they were fundamentally unpatriotic. Speaking from the Oval Office, Bush (2005 December 18) argued, "There is a difference between honest critics who recognize what is wrong, and defeatists who refuse to see that anything is right" (p. 1). In short, dishonest critics were making mountains out of mole hills, and were forgetting the other aspects of his justification for the war. Second, critics bore just as much responsibility for the WMD scandal as the President, because they, too, saw the same intelligence that the President had viewed, and came to the exact same conclusion. On this point, Bush (2005 December 14) stated, "Some of the most irresponsible comments about manipulating intelligence have come from politicians who saw the same intelligence we saw, and then voted to authorize the use of force against Saddam Hussein" (p. 1).

There were also claims in the President's speeches that the international community was culpable for the false claim that Saddam Hussein possessed WMD. For example, Bush (2005 December 14) stated that "When we made the decision to go into Iraq, many intelligence agencies around the world judged that Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction. This judgment was shared by the intelligence agencies of governments who did not support my decision to remove Saddam" (p. 1). Again, four days later, Bush (2005 December 14) said, "It is true that many nations believed that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction. But much of the intelligence turned out to be wrong" (p. 1). The implication of this strategy was that the President could not have been misleading if the whole world agreed with him.

A final strategy that Bush adopted to shift the blame for the WMD scandal was to accuse the terrorists of forcing the United States to act quickly in response to post-9/11 threats. For example, Bush (2005 December 14) explained, "September the 11th also changed the way I viewed threats like Saddam Hussein. We saw the destruction terrorists could cause with airplanes loaded with jet fuel -- and we imagined the destruction they could cause with even more powerful weapons" (p. 1). This was, in many ways, a strategy of differentiation; the President was reminding his audience that he faced a unique context that required a quick reaction. He added, "At the time, the leaders of both political parties recognized this new reality: We cannot allow the world's most dangerous men to get their hands on the world's most dangerous weapons. In an age of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, if we

wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long" (p. 1). As such, the President displaced blame because the frenzy following the cruel attacks of 9/11 made it difficult to resort to a carefully planned response.

*Did the Displacement of Blame Work?*

By most accounts, the President's December 2005 campaign to repair his image by admitting his mistakes while shifting blame was a resounding success. In particular, Bush's strategy of blame displacement was very effective in both rebuilding public support in the short term, and allowing him to avoid long term accountability for his role in the WMD fiasco. Immediate reactions from politicians to the apologia were fairly positive. Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, for example, argued that the speech went a long way with those people frustrated with the administration. Graham said, "I think it is a long overdue, smart approach to what has been questioning by the Congress and the American people, and I think it paid dividends" ("Continuing theme," 2005, p. A6).

The media's reaction to the President's apology was mixed. Some praised the President for being more realistic than in the past. For instance, an editorial from *USA Today* reported, "Americans don't expect their presidents to be infallible, but they do expect to be leveled with. To the extent Bush is doing this on Iraq and other issues, it's an improvement" ("Hard to be," 2005, p. 12A). There were, though, other members of the media who openly attacked the speech for further exemplifying a deceptive strategy. Lehigh (2005), for example, argued, "even as he admitted those errors, the president insisted he was right to invade Iraq" (p. A21). Questioning the

authenticity of Bush's atonement, Thomas and Wolfe (2005) noted, "Such concessions may be more show than substance. White House officials, as well as one of his closest friends say that Bush remains sure that he is on the proper course in Iraq and that ultimately he will be vindicated by history" (p. 1). Concurring with the doubt concerning the authenticity of Bush's atonement, Cohen (2005) claimed, "Had the word "responsible," in all its permutations and declensions, made an occasional appearance in the president's rhetoric, it would not be worth a comment. But it is a theme…of deflecting apt criticism. This recitation of the obvious is…a way of ducking the ultimate in responsibility: accountability" (p. A31).

Public opinion polls, more than anything else, indicated that Bush's strategy was effective in repairing his image. According to the *ABC News/Washington Post* poll, Bush's job approval ratings shot up eight points, rising from thirty-nine percent in mid-November 2005 to forty-seven percent by mid-December. Support for Bush's handling of the war, according to the same poll, increased by ten points, rising from thirty-six percent in November to forty-six percent in December. America's frustration concerning the justification of the war was subsiding, too. The *CNN/USA Today/Gallup* poll reported that the number of Americans who felt that the war was worth fighting had risen by seven points to forty-six percent by mid-December. According to the *ABC News/Washington Post* poll, the percentage of Americans who rated Bush as an honest and trustworthy leader increased by nine points, from forty percent in November to forty-nine percent just after the Address from the Oval Office. Though the President and his war were hardly popular with Americans, the

approval ratings clearly showed that his strategy of simulated atonement and blame displacement was successful in buying him more time to fix the situation in Iraq.

Beyond short term image repair, the December 2005 apologies also allowed the President to avoid accountability for the crisis. First, members of Congress increasingly focused their criticism less on Bush's deception, and more on his plans to secure a victory in Iraq. Second, the WMD scandal largely dropped from media coverage after the President's apology. Mainstream newspapers and magazines contained few, if any, articles on the matter until January 2007, when Bush apologized again for failing to draft an adequate plan to counter the insurgency in Iraq. Additionally, most public opinion polls ceased asking questions concerning the misrepresentation of military intelligence. In fact, the scandal failed to appear as a major factor in any of the exit polls following the midterm elections of 2006, suggesting that the ousting of Republicans had little to do with Bush's justification for the war.

## Conclusion

Had the war in Iraq ended as quickly as the first Gulf War, President Bush might not have faced intense scrutiny of his original justification for the invasion. However, as the body count increased, hundreds of billions of dollars were spent, and no weapons of mass destruction were ever found, claims that the nation's leader intentionally misled his people about Saddam Hussein's nuclear weapons program received greater attention. Democratic presidential candidates tried to push the issue into the public sphere, but the President countered their strategies by addressing the

issue well before the election. With the effort in Iraq failing, however, the accusations of misconduct resurfaced, and the President's credibility was lower than ever before. Rather than surrender entirely, Bush resorted to a unique form of apologia in which he accepted responsibility for the intelligence failures, but claimed that others, too, were responsible for the crisis. His strategy of simulated atonement, or displacement of blame in this case, violated what experts have traditionally acknowledged as the norms of apologizing, yet still succeeded in letting him avoid accountability. By admitting his faults, the famously stubborn President won respect with his apparent honesty, and regained supporters.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## Singing the Blues in Jackson Square: The Limitations of Simulated Atonement

Three months before he apologized for the deceptive justification leading to the invasion of Iraq, President Bush was confronted with the biggest crisis of his tenure. In the final days of August 2005, Hurricane Katrina battered the states along the Gulf of Mexico. The storm's surge, which flattened much of southern Mississippi and Alabama, also breached the levees of New Orleans and severely flooded significant portions of the beloved American city. Shortly after the deadly hurricane moved north, a manmade disaster pushed the region into a state of anarchy. Though the President declared a state of emergency days before the storm made landfall, several days passed until F.E.M.A. had taken control of the situation. Consequently, millions of Americans watched in horror as survivors, local politicians, and media pundits desperately pled for action. Unlike the September 11th attacks, after which the President comforted and rallied the country, Bush stayed away from the new Ground Zero. Instead, he passed responsibility to state and local government officials, as well as F.E.M.A., and even praised those initially responsible for the inept relief effort.

The President's absence had serious consequences for his administration. By September 13th, according to the *CBS News/New York Times* poll, sixty-four percent of Americans agreed that Bush's response was too slow. Moreover, according to the *ABC News/Washington Post* poll conducted on September 11th, fifty-five percent of Americans felt that the President was mostly to blame for the government's inaction.

The slow response also worried Americans about Bush's ability to deal with other crises. According to the *Newsweek* poll of September 9th, forty-seven percent of those surveyed had reportedly lost confidence in the government's ability to prevent future terror attacks. Facing another credibility problem, the President issued a primetime apology, similar to the other instances of his use of simulated atonement, on September 15, 2005 from Jackson Square, New Orleans.

In contrast to his apologies for his role in other major crises, President Bush's simulated atonement for the Hurricane Katrina disaster had little effect on public opinion. According to the *CBS News/New York Times* poll, the percentage of Americans disapproving of Bush's handling of the response hovered around fifty percent from early September to the end of the year. As time passed, though, Americans grew increasingly frustrated with the President. According to the *Associated Press/Ipsos* poll, those surveyed who disapproved of Bush's response to the crisis increased steadily from fifty-one percent in September to fifty-nine percent by April 2006. Despite Bush's apology for the bungled relief effort, his approval ratings also continued to fall. According to the *Gallup* poll, Bush's job ratings dropped from forty-five percent in early August 2005 to thirty-eight percent by November, and fell further to thirty-one percent by May 2006. By the time November 2006 came around, the botched response was one of the major factors that turned the midterm elections into a referendum on the President (Kohut, 2006 November 14, p.1). As Former DNC chief Terry McAuliffe said just weeks before

Republicans lost the majority in both chambers of Congress, "The end of the Bush administration was Hurricane Katrina" (Easton, 2006 October 19, p. 1).

The fact that President Bush failed to evade accountability for his part in the government's slow response raises an interesting question. Why didn't simulated atonement work in relation to Hurricane Katrina? In this chapter, I argue that the President's failed rhetorical strategy illustrates the limitations of simulated atonement. In particular, I argue that when the public sphere is healthy, simulated atonement will backfire if the rhetor's credibility has been weakened by previous crises, and when those harmed can be seen as representative of others in the nation. I develop this position by explaining first why simulated atonement will not work if credibility has been lost and the case is significant for the nations. Second, I offer an historical analysis of the crisis as it developed between August 28 and September 15, 2005. Third, I examine the President's simulated atonement offered during his address from Jackson Square. Finally, I conclude by drawing implications from this analysis.

## The Public Sphere and the Limitations of Simulated Atonement

There are two situations in which simulated atonement is unlikely to work. Both stem from the presence of a healthy public sphere in which citizen interest in political events is high, media sources are willing to extensively cover political crises, and citizens have full access to information. Such conditions are rare, I argue, but do surface on occasion. In this case, an energized and informed public may hold wrongdoers accountable. Before discussing the specific limitations of simulated atonement, I first explain what it is that I mean by the public sphere, and what

political communication scholars have said about its ability to function well enough to ensure that political leaders are held responsible for their errors.

The political public sphere, according to Habermas *et* al. (1974), is the realm of human social life in which public opinion is formed. It exists when private citizens assemble to form a public body, conferring in unrestricted fashion about matters of public interest (p. 49). The public sphere, Habermas argued, "mediates between society and state, in which the public organizes itself as the bearer of public opinion" (p. 50). As Fraser (1990) summarized, the idea of the public sphere is that there is "an institutional mechanism for rationalizing political domination by rendering states accountable to the citizenry" (p. 58). In order for accountability to be enforced, however, it is required that "information about state functioning be made accessible so that state activities [will] be subject to critical scrutiny" (Fraser, 1990, p. 58). In its ideal condition, the public sphere allows for an "unrestricted rational discussion of public matters," open and accessible to all, with the emphasis of discussion being placed on consensus about the common good (Fraser, 1990, p. 59). When the public sphere is healthy, then, the government answers to the people.

There is considerable disagreement concerning the health of the modern American public sphere, and thus debate about the present level of political accountability is also prevalent. On one hand, some argue that recent generations in America are less knowledgeable about political issues than those before them (Schudson, 2000), that the quality of public debate is in decline (Gates & O'Connor, 2000; Zarefsky, 1998), and that voting patterns and civic engagement are also on a

downward slide (Johnson, Hays & Hays, 1998; McKinney, Kaid, & Bystrom, 2005; Patterson, 2002; Putnam, 2000). On the other hand, others argue that while the modern public sphere is far from perfect, it has proven effective when it matters the most (Delli Carpini, 2005; Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 2005). More specifically, Just *et al*. (1996) argued that the presidential campaign of 1992 was a good example of the political process functioning as a dialogue between the media, candidates, and voters. Recently, some have argued that the public sphere experienced a resurgence after the September 11$^{th}$ attacks, with Americans growing more interested in political events (Prior, 2002) and expressing more of a desire to support the government (Traugott et al., 1998).

When the public sphere is functioning correctly, the use of simulated atonement has at least two serious limitations. First, simulated atonement is likely to backfire if the rhetor's credibility has been weakened by previous crises. Even if apologizers have been forgiven for their role in a crisis, the previous transgressions are likely to lessen credibility and add presence to the views of critics (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969). In this case, evasive strategies accompanying the form of atonement will be less effective in shifting responsibility.

Another limitation of simulated atonement, especially when the public sphere is healthy, is that the strategy will not be as effective if those harmed are in the rhetor's domestic audience. In essence, this is similar to the argument that I raised in chapter two, when I claimed that simulated atonement will be less salient if the domestic audience is geographically removed from the effects of the wrongful act. If

the rhetor's domestic audience is harmed, promises of corrective action may fail as an atonement strategy if the corrective action is not carried out promptly. These two factors best explain why Bush's strategy of simulated atonement in response to Hurricane Katrina, while successful in confronting other crises, ultimately failed.

## The Apology in Context

Public frustration with the Bush administration developed after the hurricane struck the southeast United States. In order to illustrate why discontent was so rampant, and why the President had little choice but to apologize, I explain how the crisis developed, how the Bush administration initially responded to the charges against them, and how the strong public backlash to the President's attempts to shift responsibility eventually forced him to admit his mistakes and ask for forgiveness.

### *Four Problems with the Government's Response to Hurricane Katrina*

The Bush administration's response to Hurricane Katrina had many shortcomings, but four specific problems were most responsible for public frustration. First, the Federal Government failed to assert control of the situation for almost five days after the storm. Though Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Blanco asked the President to declare a state of emergency on August 27th, Bush did not organize a task force for the relief effort, or even visit the region, until August 31st – three full days after the levees were first breeched. The delayed response was received negatively in America. According to the *CBS News/New York Times* poll of September 13th, sixty-four percent of Americans felt that Bush's response to the disaster was too slow. In addition, the *ABC News/Washington Post* poll found that fifty-five percent of those

surveyed on September 2nd reported being shocked by the Federal Government's tardiness.

A second problem was that while those in the Gulf were left struggling for survival, members of the Bush administration were spotted continuing on as if it were a normal week in Washington. President Bush, for example, stuck with his previously planned schedule and on August 29th delivered speeches in Arizona and California regarding the Medicare Drug Benefit Program (Bush, 2005 August 29a; Bush, 2005 August 29b). Seen playing guitar with country singer Mark Willis on August 30th, Bush even returned to Crawford, Texas for an additional day of vacation. The President was not alone in responding with little urgency. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld attended a baseball game in San Diego on August 29th, and Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice continued a vacation and was spotted attending a Broadway show on August 31st as well as visiting the U.S. Open and shopping for expensive shoes a day later.

A third problem with the Bush administration's response was that key members appeared unduly positive even though the government's relief effort had been a stunning failure. For the most part, administration officials justified their actions by describing the disaster as unpredictable. FEMA Chief Michael Brown, for example, reported on August 31st that the hurricane was much bigger than anyone expected (Walter, 2005). The President said something similar, claiming that nobody anticipated the breach of the levees ("Interview with," 2006). Arguing that they were caught off guard, officials suggested that the government adapted the best that it

could. Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff on August 31st, for instance, announced, "We are extremely pleased with the response that every element of the federal government [has] made to this terrible tragedy" (Borenstein, 2005, p. 1). President Bush echoed this praise. While touring the Gulf on September 2nd, the President stated, "I am satisfied with the response" (Schneider, 2005, p. 1), and also commended Michael Brown for "doing one heck of a job" (Bush, 2005 September 2, p. 1). The American public, however, disagreed. Sixty-seven percent of Americans, according to an *ABC News /Washington Post* poll, believed that the Federal Government should have been better prepared for the disaster. Moreover, Americans blamed Bush, specifically, for the government's inaction. Fifty-two percent of those polled on September 7th disapproved of the President's handling of the relief effort, according to *Pew Research Center for the People & the Press,* and sixty-seven percent felt that Bush could have done more.

Finally, the government's failed response to Hurricane Katrina was attacked by some critics as exhibiting racist attitudes towards poor, black Americans. During a one-hour fundraiser airing on NBC, MSNBC, and CNBC, popular rapper Kanye West ignored the remarks on the teleprompter and exclaimed, "George Bush doesn't care about black people" (Moraes, 2005 September 3, p. 1). West's controversial statement was instantly supported by many in the black community. According to the *ABC News/Washington Post* poll from September 11th, seventy-six percent of African Americans believed that the response to the hurricane would have been faster if it had hit a whiter and wealthier region. Black leaders agreed, too. Rev. Jesse Jackson, for

instance, argued that race was "at least a factor" in the slow response ("Race an issue," 2005, p. 1).

As a result of the slow relief effort, many Americans wanted those responsible to be held accountable. The *CNN/USA Today/Gallup* poll of September 11th reported that seventy percent of Americans felt that investigations were needed in order to determine what caused the government's failures. Moreover, forty-five percent of those polled by *Newsweek* on September 9th felt that somebody in the Federal Government needed to be fired for failing to respond adequately to the crisis. Recognizing the discontent, the President set out to address the charges against his administration.

*Bush's Early Responses*

Before September 13th, the President's strategy to repair his image involved attacking his critics and shifting blame to other parties. Though optimistic about the relief effort in public, at times Bush admitted that the federal response was unacceptable and that government investigation into the matter would be necessary. However, when Democrats demanded an independent commission comparable to the 9/11 Commission, the President accused his critics of wanting "to play a blame game" (Benedetto, 2005, p. 1). Instead of spending precious time figuring out what went right and wrong, he said, "What I'm interest in is helping save lives" (p. 2).

For a President unwilling to "make decisions based upon polls" (Bush, 2005 September 12, p. 1), however, Bush, too, certainly attempted to play the blame game. Acting on a plan drafted by Karl Rove in early September, the President and his staff

concentrated their efforts on blaming state and local governments for the crisis (Nagourney & Kornblut, 2005, p. 1). Additionally, the President eventually tried to save face by distancing himself from members of his own staff. Just days before his apology from Jackson Square, Bush (2005 September 12) claimed, "I sent Mike Chertoff down here to make an assessment of how best to do the job. He made a decision; I accepted his decision. But we're moving on" (p. 1). In the same speech, the President clearly indicated that responsibility rested with those he had appointed to lead the relief effort. He stated, "I rely upon good people. And so when I come into a briefing, I don't tell them what to do. They tell me the facts on the ground, and my question to them is, do you have what you need" (p. 1).

*Further Public Outcry*

Bush's attempts to shift the blame for the Katrina disaster made Americans more critical of his administration. "Incompetence is bad enough," an editorial from the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* stated, but "not taking responsibility for it is shameful. Blaming it on others is a national disgrace" (Accountability; Little," 2005, p. 22A). According to the polls, many Americans were also upset about the President's refusal to admit his mistakes. The *ABC News/Washington Post* poll from September 11th reported that forty-nine percent of those surveyed felt that Bush was trying to avoid taking responsibility for the failed relief effort. This reaction clearly damaged the President's credibility. According to the *ABC News/Washington Post* poll from September 2nd, forty-seven percent of Americans disapproved of Bush's handling of the crisis, and that number grew to fifty-four percent just nine days later. Confidence

in the President's leadership was shrinking, too. According to the *ABC News /Washington Post* poll, the fifty-five percent of Americans, who in early September felt that Bush did not have a clear plan to deal with the hurricane's aftermath, soared to sixty-three percent by September 11th. With his evasive strategies failing, Bush resorted to simulated atonement.

## Bush's Simulated Atonement from Jackson Square

Just a day after Michael Brown resigned as director of F.E.M.A., President Bush, on September 13, 2005, made a stunning admission of responsibility for the Hurricane Katrina crisis. Taking questions from the media during an appearance with Iraqi President Talabani, Bush (2005 September 13) confessed that "Katrina exposed serious problems in our response capability at all levels of government. And to the extent that the federal government didn't fully do its job right, I take responsibility" (p. 1). The comments were recognized as a "departure from earlier statements…and marked a rare admission of shortcomings by an administration that [had] been reluctant to concede mistakes" (Alpert, 2005, p. A03). The comments also signaled a new White House strategy to stem the political damage to the administration, and a prime-time address scheduled for September 15th was meant to deliver a clearer message that the President would accept responsibility for the disaster.

### *Bush's Remarks as Atonement Rhetoric*

The President's address from Jackson Square followed the form of atonement. By admitting that he was responsible for the disaster, Bush aimed to repair his relationship with federal, state, and local officials so that the country could focus on

plans for rebuilding the afflicted region. As I demonstrate below, all of the formal characteristics of atonement were present in the speech.

*Acknowledging wrongdoing.* Though the President did not suggest that he was directly responsible for the disaster, he did indicate, in a very Truman-like manner, that the buck stopped with his office. Bush admitted that the failed response to Hurricane Katrina was especially worrisome in the age of terrorism. "Four years after the frightening experience of September the 11th," he stated, "Americans have every right to expect a more effective response in a time of emergency" (Bush, 2005 September 15, p. 1). As the Commander in Chief, Bush suggested, he was in charge of all aspects of the Federal Government. Speaking of the relief effort, Bush confessed, "When the federal government fails to meet such an obligation, I, as President, am responsible for the problem, and for the solution" (p. 1). Thus, the President put an end to the blame game and admitted that the government's failure was his fault.

*Demonstrating a change of attitude.* Criticized for being unduly optimistic about the relief effort in the Gulf, and attacked for failing to portray a sense of urgency after the storm, the President used his apology to demonstrate a change of attitude that would address both of those problems. First, going against his previous praise of the initial response, the President acknowledged that the government failed its people. However, Bush insisted that he was not totally wrong about the federal response. Paying homage to the first responders, Bush contended, "Many of the men and women of the Coast Guard, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the

United States military, the National Guard, Homeland Security, and state and local governments performed skillfully under the worst conditions" (p. 1). Nevertheless, the performance was less than satisfactory. Admitting what critics had been saying all along, the President stated, "Yet the system, at every level of government, was not well-coordinated, and was overwhelmed in the first few days" (p. 1).

Second, Bush emphasized that the Federal Government was finally taking the disaster seriously. In response to the claims that he was not acting urgently enough, the President declared, "Throughout the area hit by the hurricane, we will do what it takes, we will stay as long as it takes, to help citizens rebuild their communities and their lives" (p. 1). To those who argued that the Bush administration was paying more attention to wealthy, white regions affected by the storm, the President had a clear message. Bush stated, "all who question the future of the Crescent City need to know there is no way to imagine America without New Orleans, and this great city will rise again" (p. 1). Thus the President, who once seemed unconcerned about the evacuees, promised to make the reconstruction of New Orleans a top priority.

*Promise of corrective action.* The most dominant feature of the President's simulated atonement was his promise of corrective action. Having admitted his mistakes, Bush clearly wanted to draw the public's attention to the future. As Rosen Bee (2005) suggested, "the president appeared to be trying to shift the debate away from finger-pointing to focus on the reconstruction of New Orleans" (p. A1). To this end, the President made five important promises.

First, as he had done before, Bush promised to investigate what went wrong with the relief effort so as to prevent the mistakes from reoccurring in the future. He stated, "I've ordered every Cabinet Secretary to participate in a comprehensive review of the government response to the hurricane. This government will learn the lessons of Hurricane Katrina" (Bush, 2005 September 15, p. 1). Second, the President discussed his plan to offer immediate assistance to evacuees. In what he billed as the first stage of the relief effort, Bush claimed that he had "unprecedented [funding for] an unprecedented crisis" in the form of sixty billion dollars. A registration system run by the Department of Homeland Security would be developed in order to reunite separated family members. Additionally, emergency funds would be spent to provide special arrangements for healthcare professionals, the Social Security Administration, the Department of Labor, and the Postal Service to serve the region.

Third, Bush promised to provide long-term housing to those displaced by the storm. For those who decided to relocate, the government would be "providing direct assistance that allows [evacuees] to rent apartments" (p. 1). For people desiring to stay in the area and rebuild their homes, the President promised that the government would "bring in mobile homes and trailers for temporary use" (p. 1). And to help house those providing important services during the reconstruction of the area, the President promised to provide ships for temporary shelter.

Fourth, Bush promised to work closely with the Gulf States to assist them with reconstruction. The Federal Government, he claimed, would "cover the great majority of the costs of repairing public infrastructure in the disaster zone, from roads

and bridges to schools and water systems," but would make sure that the region was rebuilt "in a sensible, well-planned way" (p. 1). "When communities are rebuilt," he argued, "they must be even better and stronger than before the storm" (p. 1). To prevent the corruption that made the reconstruction in Iraq so inefficient, the President promised "a team of inspectors general reviewing all expenditures" (p. 1).

Finally, the President, committed to helping the Gulf "rise above the legacy of inequality," proposed several policies to improve life for the poor, black communities of New Orleans (p. 1). First, Bush called for the reconstruction to include plans for more minority-owned businesses, and homes that were owned rather than rented (p. 1). Second, and more specifically, the President proposed the creation of a Gulf Opportunity Zone which would provide financial assistance to small businesses, "including minority-owned enterprises, to get them up and running again" (p. 1). Third, Bush proposed the creation of Worker Recovery Accounts to provide up to $5,000 which evacuees could use for job training. Fourth, the President proposed the Urban Homesteading Act, which would use property in the region owned by the Federal Government as building sites for low-income citizens free of charge, through a lottery.

*Mortification.* Because Bush emphasized corrective action above all else, thus attempting to evade accountability for past failures through the promise of future success, there were only a few instances of mortification in his speech. First, the President acknowledged the despair that Americans experienced because of government inaction. "We've witnessed the kind of desperation no citizen should

ever have to know," he admitted, including "fellow Americans calling out for food and water, vulnerable people left at the mercy of criminals, and the bodies of the dead lying uncovered and untended in the street" (p. 1). Expressing concern for victims, Bush remarked, "You need to know that our whole nation cares about you, and in the journey ahead you're not alone" (p. 1). The President added, "To all who carry a burden of loss, I extend the deepest sympathy of our country" (p. 1).

*Bush's Attempts to Evade Responsibility*

Despite the appearance of authentic atonement, the President relied heavily on three types of evasive strategies. First, he utilized differentiation to imply that the hurricane was a rare storm that made planning for a proper response nearly impossible. Second, he shifted the blame to specific federal agencies, implying that the problem came from the bureaucracy rather than his administration. Third, Bush tried to minimize the offense of the delayed response by discussing the tremendous progress in the region.

Throughout his apology, President Bush used the strategy of differentiation to characterize the hurricane as a rare storm for which governments could not adequately prepare. According to Bush, everything about the hurricane was surprising. Mentioning some of the unique challenges that his government faced, Bush contended, "The storm involved a massive flood, a major supply and security operation, and an evacuation order affecting more than a million people" (p. 1). Tragically, he concluded, "It was not a normal hurricane -- and the normal disaster relief system was not equal to it" (p. 1). The government, though, was also a victim,

according to Bush's logic. Hurricane Katrina, he concluded, was comparable to some of the worst natural disasters in American history. As Bush reminded his audience, "We're the heirs of men and women who lived through those first terrible winters at Jamestown and Plymouth, who rebuilt Chicago after a great fire, and San Francisco after a great earthquake, who reclaimed the prairie from the Dust Bowl of the 1930s" (p. 1). Emphasizing that "nature is an awesome force," the President described the hurricane as a rare, historic crisis that lacked simple solutions.

Though he admitted that he shared the responsibility for the government's failures, Bush's acknowledgement of wrongdoing also shifted much of the blame to various agencies in the Federal Government. The President was responsible if, as he stated, "the federal government fails to meet [its] obligation" (p. 1). The phrasing of the President's admission of guilt suggested that he had little to do with the bungled response, and was simply cleaning up after others. The fact that the government "was not well-coordinated and was overwhelmed in the first few days," the President stated, was proof that there was a need for "greater federal authority and a broader role for the armed forces" (p. 1). In short, because of their failures, Bush was taking power away from the leaders he once said that he trusted.

Finally, there were at least two examples of the President minimizing the impact of the government's tardiness after the storm. First, he explained how the actions of everyday people made a difference in the absence of the government. Insisting that citizens were resolving the situation themselves, Bush argued, "These days of sorrow and outrage have also been marked by acts of courage and kindness

that make all Americans proud" (p. 1). Among those who stepped up, Bush cited religious congregations welcoming "strangers as brothers and sisters and neighbors" (p. 1), doctors and nurses going hungry so their patients could eat, and even everyday citizens giving shelter to burglars (p. 1). Second, the President minimized the offense of the government's delayed response by reading a laundry list of tasks that had already been accomplished. "The work of rescue is largely finished," the President announced, and "the work of recovery is moving forward" (p. 1). Among the accomplishments, Bush cited the Coast Guard rescuing tens of thousands of people, trade returning to the Port of New Orleans, gasoline pipelines being fixed, the breaks in the levees being repaired, and the water being pumped from flooded areas (p. 1). Ultimately, Bush's list of completed tasks functioned to refute claims that the government did not have control of the situation.

*Public Reaction to Bush's Simulated Atonement*

By all accounts, the President's simulated atonement was successful in temporarily relieving the public's frustration with the Federal Government. Immediately, the speech was recognized as "an exceedingly rare expression of fault from the president" (Sandalow, 2005 September 14, p. A1). According to Mary Landrieu, a U.S. Senator from Louisiana, Bush's apology did "more to move our country forward from this tragedy than anything that has been said by any leader in the past two weeks" (Sabludowsky, 2005, p. 1). Reducing the animosity towards his administration, the President, according to one editorial, "[put] the nation on much firmer and comforting ground," ('Bush's mea culpa', 2005 September 15, p. 22A).

Bush's confession also had a deep impact on Gov. Kathleen Blanco, who, in her own apology, declared, "I want the people of Louisiana to know that we have a friend and partner in President George W. Bush" (Maggi, 2005, p. 1).

Critics of the speech, however, had two major complaints. First, some felt that the President was being dishonest. Noting that Bush changed his strategy quite suddenly, Gonsalves (2005) remarked, "You can't preach personal responsibility out of one side of your mouth and 'stop the blame game' out the other and still expect people to take you seriously" (p. 1). The cause of the leader's change of heart, many argued, was the realization that the public backlash could make Bush a lame duck president (Sandalow, 2005 September 14). Though they considered Bush's apology a good start in repairing his relationship with the public, many Americans questioned the authenticity of his remarks. According to the *CNN/USA Today/Gallup* poll conducted immediately after Bush's address from Jackson Square, fifty-six percent of those surveyed felt that he apologized for political reasons rather than out of sincere care for the victims of Katrina. Questions of his honesty aside, there were more reasons why Bush's speech came under attack.

While some found Bush's promise of corrective action "refreshing" ("Bush's mea culpa," 2005, p. 22A), others, especially in Washington, criticized the President for promising too much. Marion Berry, a United States Representative from Arkansas, for example, praised the President for committing to do whatever was necessary to rebuild the region, but also chastised Bush for not offering "any way we are going to pay for all this" (Barton, 2005). Similarly, after leaving a meeting with

White House budget director Joshua Bolten, Sen. John McCain called Bush's Hurricane Katrina proposals "very entertaining," adding, "I haven't heard any specifics from the administration" (Murray & VandeHei, 2005, p. A01).

Over time, the President's critics grew in number and his poll numbers continued to decline. While fifty-four percent of those polled by *CNN/USA Today/Gallup* on September 11th had disapproved of Bush's handling of the crisis, the number increased three points in just a week. Bush's other approval ratings also continued to slide. Just a day after the apology, Feldmann (2005) found that "for the first time, less than half the public (49 percent) say [Bush] has 'strong leadership qualities,' down from 63 percent last year, according to a *Newsweek* poll" (p. 1). Moreover, the President's job approval ratings also dropped to new lows. According to the *ABC News/Washington Post* poll, Bush's approval rating fell from forty-five percent just before the crisis, to forty-two percent days before his apology, to thirty-nine percent by the end of October. The President even lost significant support within his own party. "The pushback on Katrina aid," as Murray and VandeHei (2005) noted, represented "the loudest and most widespread dissent Bush [had] faced from his own party since it took full control of Congress in 2002" (p. A01). The dissent spilled over into other policy matters, too. Former Bush loyalists Senator Rick Santorum, conservative columnist John Fund, and Republican Representative Gil Gutknecht, for example, all challenged "a White House that seems sluggish and way off its game" by opposing Bush's plans for social security reform and criticizing his efforts in Iraq (VandeHei & Baker, 2005, p. A01).

## Explaining the Failure of Bush's Address from Jackson Square

The President's simulated atonement failed to repair his image for three main reasons. Above all, Hurricane Katrina reenergized America's public sphere. Decribing a typical response to government failure, Lerner (2005) suggested, "What too frequently happens when disasters like this hit is that everyone gets momentarily worked up, then a few weeks later forgets the whole thing, and rarely do we get a serious discussion (p. 1). Though there was some skepticism about the conditions of America's post-Katrina public sphere, especially concerning the fact that charges of racism by African Americans failed to be taken seriously (Dawson, 2006; Janzen, 2005), most signs suggested that Americans had been moved to action. Media coverage of the disaster was heavy and citizens were following the crisis more closely than they did earlier crises. According to an *ABC News/Washington Post* poll from September 2nd, ninety-one percent of Americans reported that they closely followed the news about the aftermath of the storm. Consequently, the coverage left a deep impact on viewers. The *CNN/USA Today/Gallup* poll of September 6, 2005 discovered that ninety-three percent of Americans considered Hurricane Katrina to be the worst natural disaster in the USA in their lifetimes. Interest in the event also sparked rich public dialogue. As Al Gore (2005) remarked months later, "In the aftermath of [the hurricane], there was - at least for a short time - a [high] quality of vividness and clarity of focus in our public discourse" (p. 1).

With the public closely following the crisis, the President faced two serious problems in seeking forgiveness. First, as an apologizer, Bush was severely limited

by his involvement in other major crises. In particular, critics instantly tied the government's failed relief effort to the same incompetence that led the country to an unsuccessful war in Iraq. Democratic pollster Celinda Lake, for instance, cited parallels between the two crises in that both included, "A lack of thinking through the consequences, a lack of being able to pivot when things go wrong, and a lack of long-term planning" (Yeager, 2005, p. 1). The Katrina disaster was a reminder of Bush's hasty decision to launch a war, and critics cited the conflict in Iraq to caution others against whatever the President offered the public. "There are plenty of reasons for concern," editors of *The New York Times* stated, "After 9/11, Mr. Bush responded not only with a stirring speech at the ruins of the World Trade Center and a principled response to the Taliban in Afghanistan. He also decided to invade Iraq, with disastrous results, for which the country continues to pay every day" ("Mr. Bush," 2005, p. 26). In short, then, for his American audience, the President's previous mistakes made his simulated atonement a lot harder to swallow.

A second problem that Bush encountered in apologizing to the nation was that those harmed by his incompetence were part of his domestic audience and expected him to follow through on his promises. Unlike the crises of the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal and the false justification for the war in Iraq, the failed relief effort had great salience for Americans because the disaster happened in their own back yard. As political scientist Brigitte Nacos suggested, "The hurricane [was] different [because it was] a domestic situation" (Merkin, 2005, p. 1). Separated by oceans from the effects of the President's other mistakes, Americans felt that the Katrina

disaster could impact their own lives. Eighty percent of those surveyed in early September by a *CNN/USA Today/Gallup* poll felt that the hurricane would hurt their family's financial situation over the following twelve months. As such, the President was praised for his apology, but as Pimental (2005) suggested, the mea culpa functioned only as a small down payment. "It will be important," the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* explained, "that he follow through, with maximum transparency, on identifying what went wrong and making the necessary corrections." ("Bush's mea culpa," 2005, p. 22A). *The New York Times* added, "[forgiveness] will happen only if [the promises] are followed by deeds that are as principled, disciplined and ambitious as Mr. Bush's speech" ("Mr. Bush," 2005, p. 26). Judging by the fact that forty-three percent of Americans felt that the Federal Government was responsible for paying for the reconstruction of the Gulf, according to the *CNN/USA Today/Gallup* poll, and that sixty-four percent, according to the *Associated Press/Ipsos* poll, believed that the reconstruction deserved higher priority than the war, the public was focused on the relief effort.

Of course, many of the promises went unrealized. According to an investigative report by *USA Today* conducted one year after the storm ("A year after," 2006):

> The job of clearing debris remains unfinished, and has been plagued by accusations of fraud and price gouging. Tens of thousands of families still live in trailers or mobile homes, with no indication of when or how they will be able to obtain permanent housing. Important

> decisions about rebuilding and improving flood defenses have been delayed. (p. 1)

To make matters worse, at the time of the one year anniversary the flood protection system in New Orleans had not been enhanced. Most of the President's policies to deal with racial inequality were never passed by Congress, and reports suggest that "between $600 million and $1.4 billion [were wasted by FEMA] on improper and potentially fraudulent individual assistance payments" (p. 1). Confronting a public finally interested in accountability, it was the President's failure to deliver on his promises that led to the ultimate failure of his simulated atonement in Jackson Square. That failure was reflected in the election results in November 2006.

## Conclusion

The botched relief effort in the days following Hurricane Katrina presented a major crisis for President Bush. As his administration appeared unconcerned about the Gulf States, and took its time rescuing survivors, the President became the focus of widespread criticism. Caving into public pressure, Bush accepted responsibility for the disaster, and offered an apology which contained several evasive strategies designed to relieve him of guilt. Though his use of simulated atonement was successful in answering criticism for his role in other major crises, in this case the President ultimately failed to escape accountability for the government's misconduct. The eventual public backlash, which caused the President's political party to lose control of Congress for the first time in ten years, was the result of a reinvigorated public sphere. Paying careful attention to a domestic crisis that shocked the public

conscience, Americans appeared more concerned than ever before about the President's credibility. Having missed his opportunity to make amends by failing to follow through on his many promises, President Bush lost respect and political clout.

# CHAPTER FIVE

## Conclusion

Encountering multiple crises, President Bush used the same strategy again and again to respond to public accusations against him and his administration. When the administration's misconduct gained the public's attention and the situation grew into a scandal, the President offered atonement to the nation. For each major crisis that he faced, the President acknowledged wrongdoing, indicated that his attitude had changed, promised corrective action, and expressed some sort of mortification. Careful not to accept full responsibility, however, Bush utilized evasive image repair strategies throughout his atonement. His use of simulated atonement, I have argued in this study, was successful in allowing him to avoid accountability for two of the three biggest scandals during his first six years in office.

After the investigative reports by American media sources made the world aware of the torture and abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, the President had no choice but to respond directly to the charges that the treatment was deliberately ordered by top government officials. The President apologized to the victims and to Iraqi citizens for the humiliation that they suffered, admitted that the abuse had in fact occurred, and promised to hold the guilty parties accountable. Falling short of authentic atonement, though, Bush claimed that he did not know about the abuse beforehand, despite claims by Major General Antonio Taguba that the administration was given a confidential report about the matter months earlier. Additionally, the President shifted the blame to a few bad apples, despite his administration's

distribution of a memo to top military officials which claimed that the Geneva Conventions did not apply to the War on Terror. By most accounts, the President's apology was simply an attempt to deflect the charges against the government. Nevertheless, following Bush's simulated atonement, the criticism against his administration largely ceased. Judging by his successful campaign for reelection, during which Abu Ghraib was rarely mentioned even by his political opponents, the President's apology was a remarkable success.

The President's decision to invade Iraq also transformed into a scandal that required public apologia. In persuading the world that Saddam Hussein was a threat and needed to be overthrown, Bush relied on military intelligence suggesting that Iraq possessed chemical and biological weapons, and was on its way to becoming a nuclear state. In the months following the invasion, coalition forces failed to discover any signs of weapons of mass destruction, and the growing instability in Iraq led Americans to criticize the President's initial justification for the war. As key government officials reported that their warnings about the reliability of military intelligence were completely ignored by the Bush administration, and that the President knowingly misled the country, Bush responded to his doubters with apologia. The President's denial of the facts worked in maintaining just enough support to get him reelected, but as the war dragged on his critics grew in number. With little doubt remaining about his guilt, the President eventually accepted responsibility for the disaster, admitted that mistakes were made, expressed mortification to the soldiers who sacrificed their lives in the poorly planned war, and

promised a new plan to ensure victory. At the same time, Bush shifted the blame towards a number of other parties. Despite causing some in the President's audience to question the authenticity of his remarks, Bush's simulated atonement was effective in both temporarily restoring support for his war plans, and in ending public discussion about his deceptive pre-war lobbying.

The strategy of simulated atonement did not always get the President out of trouble. After the Federal Government's failure to provide an adequate response to Hurricane Katrina, Bush received his lowest approval ratings and lost most Americans' faith in his leadership. Unable to simply shift the blame to various state and federal authorities, the President, once again, resorted to simulated atonement. Having acknowledged that the Federal Government failed its people because the relief effort was disorganized and overwhelming, Bush promised all sorts of corrective action. As he had done before, he added to his atonement many reasons for why he was not responsible for the crisis. Failing to deliver on his promises, however, the President's approval ratings continued to plummet and the public's frustration with his leadership caused voters to punish the Republican Party in the midterm elections of 2006.

Throughout the last three chapters, I have explained when and why simulated atonement is successful in allowing a rhetor to avoid accountability. This study suggests three conditions in which the strategy is likely to be effective. First, as I argued in my analysis of Bush's apology for the Abu Ghraib crisis, simulated atonement works best when the sin demanding apologia lacks salience for the rhetor's

audience. Though Americans were horrified by the dramatic photographs of Iraqi inmates being tortured, some people viewed the treatment as nothing more than fun and games. Second, simulated atonement may be effective when there are situational reasons for the audience to support the apologizer. Americans were willing to forgive the President for the Abu Ghraib scandal, I discovered, because they found the abuse necessary in a time of war. Third, simulated atonement works when mortification appears sincere so that the audience accepts the rhetor's account of an ordeal, and, consequently, believes in his or her displacement of blame. Bush's apology for the WMD fiasco, for example, was viewed as a rare admission of guilt, made the President seem honest, and thus made his strategy of scapegoating seem more truthful. Of course, it is difficult to generalize to all instances of a sub-genre of apologia based on three case studies. As such, further research is needed to see if the generalizations I have identified apply broadly to simulated atonement.

Though simulated atonement may work in the right context, I also have explored two of the limitations of the strategy. First, simulated atonement may not work if the rhetor's credibility has been weakened by other crises. As I contended in the fourth chapter, by the time that he faced the Hurricane Katrina disaster, President Bush appeared untrustworthy due to his involvement in several other scandals. Accordingly, Americans waited to judge his apology until the President followed through with the corrective action that he had promised. Second, simulated atonement is less effective when those harmed are seen as representative of others in the rhetor's immediate audience. Unlike the abuse of Iraqi prisoners, who were

viewed by many Americans as enemies in the ongoing war, those afflicted by the government's incompetence following Hurricane Katrina were perceived as fellow citizens. Consequently, Americans felt closer to those harmed by the disaster, and were less accepting of Bush's apologies. Most likely, there are more limitations than those which I identified in this study. As such, future research could also explore additional limitations of the strategy.

## Implications

The study of how President Bush utilized simulated atonement to minimize accountability has several implications. In regards to rhetorical theory, there are three implications. First, this study suggests that apologizing for a major mishap may be much easier than previously thought. As I stated in the third chapter, scholars writing on crisis communication long have held that it best for guilty parties to accept responsibility, and immediately admit their faults (Benoit, 1995; Benoit, 1997; Seeger & Ulmer, 2001; Sellnow et. al., 1998). Additionally, Koesten and Rowland (2004) stated that there are some crises for which evasive strategies will not repair the image of the accused. By explaining that simulated atonement worked for President Bush, when his guilt was undeniable, I have presented an alternative to confessing one's sins. Simulated atonement allows wrongdoers to clear the air by acknowledging that misconduct occurred, but permits them to evade accountability by using the trust that they establish with their confession to safely offer reasons for why they are not entirely to blame.

Second, this study supports the argument that apologia is best understood through subgenres. As recent research (Koesten & Rowland, 2004; Rowland & Jerome, 2004) has suggested, one of the major problems with the various typologies of apologia described by Ware and Linkugel (1973) and Benoit (1995) is that taken alone they offer a limited understanding of the role that form plays in an apology. Literature that traditionally focuses on the use of various image repair strategies, for example, oftentimes does not offer a step-by-step explanation of how particular apologies should unfold. Aside from failing to offer guidelines for potential apologizers, this approach also does not adequately explain the persuasive effects of ordering image repair strategies in a certain way. My analysis of the subgenre of simulated atonement, though, indicates that in the right context following the five parts of atonement with evasive image repair strategies can allow the rhetor to benefit from the appearance of honesty and evade accountability for his or her misconduct. A mere description of the image repair strategies that Bush applied in his apologies, however, would have missed this phenomenon entirely.

Third, this project enhances the literature concerning the role played by the audience in apologies, because it shows that while deceptive rhetors are not always held immediately responsible, accountability is likely over time. In my analysis of the President's rhetoric, I found that Bush's persistent use of half-apologies to answer accusations of misconduct led to a growing mistrust of his administration that he could no longer escape. The fact that he evaded accountability for so long suggests that the political public sphere may not be perfect, but the eventual backlash by

American voters indicates that the public sphere functions successfully when it matters the most. A rhetor's continual mistreatment of an audience is bound to reach a tipping point, and this as true for other communicators as it was for President Bush.

This study also has a few serious implications for research regarding the Bush administration, and, more broadly, the United States presidency. First, in this thesis I have presented an alternative explanation for how the President maintained support despite involvement in multiple crises of such magnitude that they likely would have led to major negative ramifications for other presidential administrations. Recent explanations for Bush's ability to defer accountability have focused on the President's polarizing political rhetoric and demonization of his opponents, his use of the events of 9/11 to maintain the power of a wartime president, and the administration's motivation of its Christian supporters. In this project, I have explained that President Bush also maintained support by, doing what American leaders rarely ever do, appearing to atone for his mistakes. Though Bush's audience realized that he simultaneously attempted to evade accountability, his admission of guilt along with offering a plausible account of events was just enough, until 2006, to prevent political mutiny.

Another implication of this study in regards to the larger questions concerning the Bush administration is that it offers one explanation for the Democratic Party's overwhelming victory in the 2006 midterm elections. For the most part, the cause of the public's backlash has been up for debate. When asked about a possible tipping point, some Republican strategists were quick to suggest that the election results

signified only temporary frustration with the GOP. For instance, Karl Rove, just days after the election, reported, "Iraq mattered, [b]ut it was more frustration than it was an explicit call for withdrawal" (Allen, 2006, p. 1). Instead, Rove argued, "The profile of corruption in the exit polls was bigger than I'd expected. Abramoff, lobbying, Foley and Haggard added to the general distaste that people have for all things Washington, and it just reached critical mass" (p. 1). Others disagreed with Rove. Arianne Huffington, for example, claimed "there were three reasons why Democrats won, and they are Iraq, Iraq, and Iraq" (Povich, 2006, p. 1). Robert Novak (2006) concurred, having suggested that opposition to the war had "produced a virulent anti-Republican mood" (p. 1). In reality, though, both of these explanations are too simplistic. The President faced accusations of corruption long before the midterm elections. The major difference was that Bush's strategy of denial, followed by offering simulated atonement, eventually stopped working. The Republican disaster at the polls, then, was less about Bush's corruption, and more about the failure of his rhetoric to protect the image of his administration and his party.

A final implication of this study, pertaining to Bush but more generally to the office of the presidency, is the discovery that presidents can, at least under the right conditions, accept responsibility for their failures. In the introduction, I argued that the literature concerning presidential apologies has suggested that the nation's leader cannot publicly admit to personal wrongdoing without undercutting his or her credibility. What I have found in my examination of Bush's apologia is that

presidents may apologize, and actually improve their reputation, but only as long as the atonement possesses authenticity and they also displace responsibility elsewhere.

## Ideas for Future Research

Future research stemming from this project could address the limitation that my findings may not be generalizable for an entire sub-genre of apologia. Bush's presidency is unique for three reasons, all of which could explain why the President's rhetorical strategy was successful, and even why it eventually failed. First, during his tenure in office the country faced a rare and catastrophic attack on domestic soil which ushered in a kind of war that this county had never before experienced. To say the least, Americans were quite afraid, and having been swept up in a revival of patriotic sentiment, strongly supported President Bush. Second, Bush benefited from a powerful ideological agenda that won the support of a base of religious voters who were numerous, well-organized, and fiercely loyal to the Republicans. Third, the President's political party had control of the United States House of Representatives, the Senate, and eventually the Supreme Court, which made it difficult for his opposition, especially in a time of war, to challenge his administration. However, there are a few reasons to believe that my analysis would apply to additional instances of simulated atonement. Every presidency or political position is unique in some way, yet the characteristic of genres and sub-genres still seem to apply. Moreover, a few studies, as I previously mentioned, have already hinted that the strategy has worked in other cases (Benoit, 1988; Heisey, 1988; Ling, 1970). Regardless, in order to better answer this question, future research could examine the conditions in which

simulated atonement works in response to other crises in the political, organizational, and even interpersonal contexts.

## Conclusion

For almost six years, between 2000 and 2006, the administration of President George W. Bush almost seemed invincible. While Bush's numerous transgressions irritated his political opponents, they came almost without consequence. The key to the President's ability to minimize accountability for so long was his use of simulated atonement. However, Bush's propensity to find himself in the midst of another crisis, without fully or successfully committing his administration to resolving the situation, was eventually the cause of his own undoing. Ultimately, Bush's fall from power proved true the age old maxim attributed to Abraham Lincoln: "You can fool all the people some of the time, some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time."

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