

Image repair in President Bush's April 2004 news conference

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Abstract

As the war in Iraq heated up in March and April of 2004 and casualties continued to climb, President George W. Bush's reputation continued the downward spiral it had experienced during the past year (from 71% approval to 49%) as more and more voters questioned his policies and fitness for office. He responded to this situation by holding only his third prime time press conference on April 13, 2004.

This essay applies image repair theory to the president's persuasive discourse in this event. Bush created the impression that he was resolved and compassionate. On the other hand, he repeatedly denied making any mistakes and so refused to apologize for anything. This may have created the impression with many that his resolve actually represented inflexibility and a refusal to face facts. His use of transcendence raised more questions than it answered. Understandably, audience reaction was largely split, presumably along party lines. Still, his discourse did little to improve his image; clearly he was unable to return his approval rating to the levels he had enjoyed in the past. Not surprisingly, his approval rating did not improve after this persuasive discourse.

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1. Introduction

President George W. Bush's approval ratings declined steadily as the death toll in Iraq rose, and as the Democratic contenders attacked him in the primaries. In March of 2003, just before the first Democratic debate, the president's approval stood at 71%; a year later it had plummeted to 49% (Moore, 2004a). Insurgents stepped up attacks and casualties surged despite the fact that Bush had declared the end of major hostilities nearly a year earlier. (2004, p. 14A) explained that "March was the second deadliest month for American forces in Iraq since Bush declared an end to major combat, and April is off to a bloody start with the heaviest fighting" of the war. Polls the week before his April 13, 2004 news conference explain why the president considered it essential to hold only the third prime time news conference in his presidency (Moore, 2004b):

64% of Americans believe things in Iraq are going either "very badly" (33%) or "moderately badly" (31%) for the United States, up from 43% who felt that way a month ago. Just 35% believe things are going either "very well" or "moderately well," down from 55% in March. This is the most negative reading measured by Gallup since the war began last year.

Bush's image was damaged, so he used persuasive discourse to repair his reputation.

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An attempt by a president to repair a damaged image, justifying invasion of another country, clearly merits scholarly attention. The fact that this controversy arose while seeking re-election heightens its importance: Could the president justify his actions and secure a second four-year term in office? Of course, the outcome of the 2004 election was not to be determined solely by this event, but it was an important moment in America's foreign policy and President Bush's re-election hopes.

This essay applies image repair theory to Bush's April 2004 news conference in order to critically analyze his rhetoric. This theory will be explicated in the next section. Then the background, including the accusations against the president, will be described. Next, Bush's discourse in the April 13 news conference will be analyzed via image repair theory. Finally, the persuasiveness of his image repair effort will be evaluated and implications discussed.

2. Method: rhetorical criticism using image repair theory

Threats to an image have two components: blame or responsibility, and offensiveness; the image repair strategies concern these two elements (Benoit, 1995, 1997). Five general categories of image repair strategies are identified (denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification), three of which with sub-categories, 14 distinct image repair strategies. Denial has two variants: One may use simple denial to separate oneself from the offense or one can shift blame to the true culprit. A rhetor can try to evade responsibility for the wrongful act by pleading provocation (the offensive act was a reasonable response to an act committed against the rhetor), defeasibility (lack of information or power), accident (inadvertent harms), or good intentions (events went awry despite trying to do the right thing).

The accused can attempt to reduce the offensiveness of the act. Bolstering attempts to improve the audience's positive affect for the rhetor to outweigh the offensiveness of the wrongful action. Minimization argues that the effects of the wrongful act are smaller than they appear. Differentiation suggests that the act was less offensive than it seems (e.g., I did not *steal* your car; I *borrowed* it without asking first). Transcendence claims the rhetor was motivated by other, more important, concerns. Attacking one's accuser may diminish the credibility of the accusations (and if the accuser is the victim, it could create the impression that the victim deserved what he or she got). Compensation offers something of worth to the victim to redress the loss. Corrective action promises to repair the damage caused and/or prevent its recurrence. Mortification admits responsibility for the offense and requests forgiveness. These are the options for image repair.

3. Background

Bush was repeatedly criticized by the Democratic candidates in the primary (the first 2004 primary debate held in April of 2003). Bush was hammered on many topics, including jobs, tax cuts for the rich, and the mounting deficit. Because his press conference was about terrorism, I will limit the background to that topic.

The Democrats attacked the president on national security. Governor Howard Dean said in a New Mexico primary debate:

The president told us that Iraq was buying uranium from Africa. That wasn't true. The vice president told us that the Iraqis were about to get atomic weapons. That turned out not to be true. The secretary of defense told us he knew exactly where the weapons of mass destruction were, right around Tikrit and Baghdad. That turned out to be false as well. (9/4/03)

The Democrats also objected to invading Iraq without the support of the U.N. and some U.S. allies. Representative Dick Gephardt noted in an Iowa debate that the president "has not gotten the help of NATO. He's not gotten the help of the U.N." (1/4/04). A few countries, such as Great Britain, sent troops to Iraq, but many countries did not support the invasion. In April of 2004, the United States had over five times as many troops in Iraq as all other nations combined (Moore, 2004b).

Kerry also accused the president of having gone to war without an exit strategy: "The problem is you declared 'mission accomplished' but had no plan to win the peace" ("No, Mr. President"). Bush's image was also threatened by the news: television stories and newspaper articles, sometimes simply dealing with current events and sometimes reporting on the Democratic candidates' attacks, reported the failure to find weapons of mass destruction (WMD), the investigations into the intelligence failures leading up to 9/11, the continued fighting, and the steadily mounting U.S. death toll.

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