



## Full Length Article

## Barack Obama's 2008 speech on Reverend Wright: Defending self and others



William L. Benoit

Professor of Communication Studies, 401 Schoonover Center, Ohio University, Athens OH 45701, United States

## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 7 June 2016

Received in revised form 1 August 2016

Accepted 13 September 2016

Available online 28 October 2016

## Keywords:

Senator Barack Obama

Reverend Jeremiah Wright

Racism

Third party image repair

Denial

Bolstering

Provocation

## ABSTRACT

During the 2008 presidential campaign Senator Barack Obama's values were attacked using guilt by association. An ABC News story reported incendiary remarks made by Reverend Jeremiah Wright, Senator Barack Obama's pastor. Obama gave a speech to repair his image. Obama attempted to repair his image using denial and differentiation; however, Obama did not repudiate Wright entirely. Instead, Obama also engaged in engaged in third party image repair, using attack accuser, bolstering, and differentiation to repair Wright's reputation.

© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

During the 2008 presidential campaign ABC News broadcast a story about Senator Barack Obama's pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright. Ross and El-Buri (2008) reported that "an ABC News review of dozens of Reverend Wright's sermons, offered for sale by the church, found repeated denunciations of the U.S." This news report portrayed an attitude that was not patriotic, reporting that "an ABC News review of dozens of Reverend Wright's sermons, offered for sale by the church, found repeated denunciations of the U.S." Ross and El-Buri offered quotations from Reverend Wright to support their allegations: "The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law and then wants us to sing 'God Bless America.' No, no, no, God damn America, that's in the Bible for killing innocent people." This attitude would likely evoke condemnation in much of the audience.

The authors continued, saying that "in addition to damning America, he told his congregation on the Sunday after Sept. 11, 2001 that the United States had brought on al Qaeda's attacks because of its own terrorism." Their support from this claim came from one of Wright's sermons from September 16, 2001: "We bombed Hiroshima, we bombed Nagasaki, and we nuked far more than the thousands in New York and the Pentagon, and we never batted an eye." The authors continued with more words from Wright: "We have supported state terrorism against the Palestinians and black South Africans, and now we are indignant because the stuff we have done overseas is now brought right back to our own front yards. America's chickens are coming home to roost." These sentiments would clearly be offensive to many viewers. Wright's blame is obvious because these are reported to be his statements.

E-mail address: [benoitw@ohio.edu](mailto:benoitw@ohio.edu)

However, it is clear that Ross and El-Buri intended to attack Senator Obama as well. Several elements of the story clearly spread the blame to Senator Obama using guilt by association. The title of the news story linked Wright's incendiary statements to the Democratic Senator: "Obama's Pastor: God damn America, U.S. to blame for 9/11." Similarly, the first sentence of the story declared that "Senator Barack Obama's pastor says blacks should not sing 'God Bless America' but 'God damn America.'" The article also reported that "the Reverend Jeremiah Wright [was] Obama's pastor for the last 20 years" and noted that Reverend Wright married Obama and his wife Michelle, baptized their two daughters and is credited by Obama for the title of his book, *The Audacity of Hope* (Ross & El-Buri, 2008). So, this news story attacked both Reverend Wright and Senator Obama.

## 2. Materials

This analysis is based on the speech Senator Barack Obama gave about Reverend Wright (and himself) on March 18, 2008: "A More Perfect Union" (Obama, 2008). This image repair effort merits scholarly attention: The attack occurred in the midst of the Democratic presidential primary contest between Senators Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. The outcome of the primary was still in doubt in March: Obama did not clinch the nomination until over two months after this speech. The accusation of unpatriotic and racist attitudes was an especially serious threat to Obama's image because he was running to be the first African-American president of the United States.

## 3. Method

This essay reports a rhetorical criticism of President (then Senator) Barack Obama's 2008 speech ("A More Perfect Union," 2008) about attacks on Obama and his pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright. Most studies of image repair follow Ware and Linkugel's (1973) lead in analyzing "self-defense" messages. However, third party image repair – where one person or organization defends another (the victim is one party, the alleged perpetrator is the second party, and another person or organization is the third party in image repair) – can also occur. For example, on May 16, 1997 President Bill Clinton apologized for the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, in which African-American men were denied treatment for syphilis. The study ran from 1932 to 1972, ending 20 years before Clinton took office. Clinton was not defending his own actions but the past actions of others in the government. Benoit (2015a) explains that "third party image repair can occur in very two different circumstances: Third party image repair can occur historically – attempting to repair an image from past offenses – or contemporaneously – attempting to repair an image from relatively recent offenses" (p. 99). Clinton's Tuskegee speech illustrates historical third party image repair. Obama's speech is interesting because it includes self-defense and third-party (contemporaneous) defense. Wen, Yu, and Benoit (2009) contrast self-defenses by the New York Yankee pitcher Chien-ming Wang and third party defenses by Taiwanese newspapers (Wen et al., 2009). The newspapers, as a third party, were able to use strategies (such as shifting the blame for losses to Wang's teammates) that the pitcher himself should not employ.

There is a rich literature on *apologia*, image repair, or crisis communication (see, e.g., Barton, 2001; Lukaszewski, 2013; Mitroff & Anagnos, 1999; Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). Hearit (2006) identifies three responses to guilt: denial, shift blame, and mortification. Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (2012, 2013) lists five options for responding to crises: denial, distance, ingratiation, mortification, and suffering of the accused. Koester and Rowland (2004) advance a theory of atonement, which is designed to shift the focus of attention from self-defense to atonement. Seeger and Griffin-Padgett (2010) articulate their theory of renewal, which has four key characteristics: it is leader-based, taking a prospective rather than a retrospective perspective, offers a provisional rather than a strategic response to crisis, with a view to reconstituting the organization by taking advantage of situational opportunities. Benoit's Image Repair theory focuses on self-defense and offers a more comprehensive list of message strategies for responding to crises. Regardless of whether one defends oneself or another, the basic options for repairing an image are the same. Image Repair Theory (Benoit, 1995a, 2015a) identifies five general strategies and a total of 14 strategies that are more specific (see Table 1).

### 3.1. Denial

Denial is divided into two more specific strategies. First, simple denial can take three discrete but related forms. Those accused of wrong-doing may deny that the offensive act occurred, deny that they performed the objectionable act, or deny that the act is harmful. Any of these instantiations of denial, if accepted by the intended audience, can conceivably repair the rhetor's reputation. Second, those accused of wrong-doing may also try to shift the blame. If another person (or group, or organization) actually committed the offensive act, the accused should not be held responsible for that offensive act. Denial rejects blame for the offensive act.

#### 3.1.1. Evade responsibility

The second general image repair strategy has four versions. A rhetor may allege the offensive act was a reasonable response to someone else's offensive act (typically an act of the alleged victim) so the accused's response was a reasonable reaction to that provocation. Defeasibility asserts that the rhetor lacked the knowledge or ability to avoid committing the

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/4761839>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/4761839>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)