

THE RHETORICAL PRESIDENCY IN ACTION: ANALYSIS OF  
CLINTON'S POLITICAL APOLOGIA IN RESPONSE TO THE  
LEWINSKY SCANDAL

THESIS

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For my husband Sam

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **CLINTON, SCANDALS AND THE PRESIDENCY**

#### **Introduction**

This study examines the aggressive nature of presidential leadership and communication strategies in an increasingly mass-mediated society, as well as the American public's conflicting cultural perceptions and expectations for the office of the presidency. I argue that this increasingly manipulative presidential communication behavior and leadership has influenced public opinions of the presidency and penetrated elements of the American political culture and ideology. Using the Clinton Administration as a backdrop, this thesis will focus on the "Scandal of the Decade," a controversy alleging the President had sexual relations with a 24 year-old intern, Monica Lewinsky, and then encouraged her and others to lie about it under oath (Isikoff and Thomas, "Clinton" 31). The time frame of this study extends from January 21, 1998, the date the initial allegations surfaced, to August 24, 1998, a few days after the President of the United States gave his Map Room speech. The most relevant presidential discourse during the Scandal of the Decade occurred in the first week after the allegations surfaced and later in August 1998. With the exception of these key presidential statements in January and August, this seven-month-period, for the most part, consisted of a long,

drawn-out legal battle over the nature of presidential privileges. Using presidential statements in response to allegations, resulting print media coverage in *Newsweek*, *US News & World Report*, and other key print articles, I will analyze how the Scandal of the Decade impacted Americans' expectations and opinions of the Clinton Administration, and of the presidency as a whole. Key interviews and events originating in the broadcast media will supplement the discourse in this study.

I argue that the scandals surrounding the Clinton Administration, and the resulting presidential leadership and communication strategies, present an excellent case study of the modern "rhetorical presidency" and impact our understanding of this theoretical construct. The model employed offers an alternative approach to analyzing presidential rhetoric, using the "rhetorical presidency" construct as the theoretical framework to examine presidential discourse. This thesis further presents a contemporary application of the *apologia* genre in the analysis of political scandals. Finally, this thesis examines modern presidential leadership tactics and responses to scandals, such as "going public" and election campaign strategies to foster positive media coverage.

### **Significance**

The nature of the presidency is quite different under President William Jefferson Clinton than it was under Theodore Roosevelt, nearly 100 years ago. While the role of the executive branch of government, as outlined in the Constitution of the United States of America, remains consistent, the nature of presidential leadership and public

communication has changed considerably through the years. No longer is it customary for presidents to submit formal written speeches to Congress; instead, speeches are presented orally to Congress and to interested citizens viewing in their own living rooms. Likewise, presidents regularly appeal for public support with press conferences and “swings” around the country, something clearly looked down upon in George Washington and Abraham Lincoln’s time (Tulis 210). This shift in presidential leadership strategies and the rise of mass media also have resulted in changing cultural perceptions of the American presidency.

Many of our changing cultural perceptions can be attributed to increased information about the president, more public communication, and a resulting reduction of the “mystique” surrounding the president as both a person and leader of the “free world.” For some time now, the extensive mass media coverage of the American presidency has served to humanize the role of the President by depicting him in everyday life settings and with more frequency. Gossip columns historically have reported tidbits about presidents’ private lives, but not nearly to the extent of media coverage today. Not only do we see the President at Rose Garden press conferences and state dinners, but we also see him jogging down the road in short running shorts, in his bathing suit with his wife on the beach, vacationing in Wyoming, dropping in at McDonalds, dancing at his inauguration ball to Fleetwood Mac, and carrying home a brand new puppy. The message to the public is that the president is an everyday person, one who vacations with family, has a love for Big Macs, struggles to keep physically fit, enjoys his pets, and is in general a “hip” person. While this coverage is interesting and provides an added



dimension to the President's personality and daily life, it also detracts from the mystery and esteem of the highest office in the country.

With each new presidential administration the phenomenon of decreased mystique and esteem for the office of the presidency increasingly becomes apparent. The barrage of scandals surrounding the Clinton Administration presents a quintessential illustration of the declining mystique and esteem of the American presidency, and of any single president except perhaps Richard Nixon. In Clinton's two administrations voters have heard about Whitewater, Travelgate, Troopergate, Filegate, the Paula Jones sexual harassment lawsuit, and numerous other scandalous incidents. There have been so many, in fact, that it is difficult to keep count. Alleged improprieties have touched President Clinton's staff and the first lady as in the case of "Travelgate;" his old financial partners, the McDougals in "Whitewater;" his Vice President in alleged campaign fundraising abuses at a Buddhist Temple; as well as the President himself, in a historic lawsuit brought by Paula Jones against a sitting president for alleged sexual harassment and abuse of power. The significant number of scandals in the Clinton Administration has caused many Americans to question the integrity and leadership of the President.

This continual pattern of alleged improprieties proposes serious challenges to the prestige and honor of the presidency, as well as to the ability of politicians to focus on the business of the country. In this thesis, I will examine Clinton's strategies to respond to the allegations, as well as the subsequent media coverage during the Scandal of the Decade, analyzing the short and long-term impact on our national discourse, the office of the presidency and future administrations. Similarly, using the Clinton Administration as

an example, I will delve into the issue of scandals, decreased privacy, and the presidency, looking at the implications for the institution of the presidency and the American electorate. These allegations and responses, in turn, provide a means to test the theoretical construct of the “rhetorical presidency” in the tumultuous environment of a political scandal in the media.

The term “rhetorical presidency” describes a philosophy of governing and a communicative leadership strategy. James Ceaser, Glen Thurow, Jeffrey Tulis, and Joseph Bessette highlight the rise of the “rhetorical presidency” that they say is attributed to three main factors: a modern philosophy of presidential leadership, the rise of mass media, and the perpetual presidential campaign (161). The modern presidential leadership strategy involves more decisive influence in setting legislative agendas, solving the country’s problems and in addressing public needs. Theodore Roosevelt often is described as the first president to decisively use the presidency as a “bully pulpit” to lead the nation and generate public support for his policies (Tulis 97). This modern doctrine illustrates a more aggressive leadership stance, and the use of public opinion to bolster policies in Congress. With a more modern leadership approach and direct communication with the American people also comes a new set of public expectations. For Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, the “rhetorical presidency” illustrates a rhetorical adaptation of the role of the President from rather ambiguous presidential responsibilities, as outlined in the Constitution of the United States, to more specifically defined responsibilities (*Deeds* 3). Accordingly, through public address and leadership, each

president has added to the role, responsibilities, and cultural expectations for the American Presidency (Denton 206).

### **Expectations for the American Presidency**

For some time now, critics justifiably have called out for more integrity and honor in American politics. The substantial number of scandals plaguing the Clinton Administration, and the especially damaging and tawdry evidence of the Scandal of the Decade, challenge Americans' cultural expectations and perceptions of their national leader. The once unspoken journalistic code to ignore rumors of presidential promiscuities has been replaced with a new morbid fascination with a president's private sex life. Current public opinion polls reveal an apparent tendency among the American public to support a clearer demarcation between politicians' public and private lives (Turner 48). Some Americans appear to be taking a more "European" and less puritanical perspective regarding the relevance of presidents' private lives in their ability to lead the country (Broder C7). Yet, although the public may desire to overlook charges related to the Clinton's private sex life, the allegations have already taken a toll on the President's credibility, honor and integrity (Broder C7).

If the allegations against President Clinton are true, they potentially demean the highest office in the country. As Robert Denton observes, the Presidency is primarily a symbolic institution, influenced for the most part by what each president does. Legends of George Washington's cherry tree story, or of Abraham Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address*

and the *Emancipation Proclamation*, illustrate important presidential qualities of honesty, integrity, fairness, and “love of freedom” that have developed throughout history (Denton 201). Denton describes the complexity and vastness of what the American Presidency represents: “The Presidency is an office, a role, a persona, constructing a position of power, myth, legend, and persuasion. Although the Presidency is indeed a real office, with an elected official, space, desks, and staff, it remains elusive and undefined” (200). Former President William Taft once observed that the presidency is “the personal embodiment and representative of [our] dignity and majesty” (qtd. in Rossiter 16). Thomas Cronin adds that “the Presidency is nearly always a mirror of the fundamental forces of society: the values, the myths, and the quest for social control and stability” (239). In short, the President reflects all that is good and honorable about the United States of America.

Yet, Americans’ expectations for presidents are contradictory and ambiguous (Denton 208). While we want the president to be an everyday American, to embody the “common man,” we also demand enormous intelligence, political savvy, education and leadership. Though our forefathers strongly objected to a system of monarchy, we retain many of the symbolic expectations of a monarchy. John Barber contends that “we elect a politician and insist that he also be a King” (205). The Presidency symbolizes and reflects our American ideals, our values, aspirations, and national character. Our political ideology clearly suggests that Presidents, as leaders of our nation, should espouse and live by the very ideals that they uphold. If questions of presidential dishonesty and abuse of

power remain, this represents a fundamental challenge to our American values and ideals as a whole.

Much of the ambiguity of the office of the Presidency is due in large part to the vague description of presidential responsibilities in the *Constitution of the United States of America*. The Constitution contains more about the election process, eligibility and term of the president than the responsibilities once in office. Section two of Article II says that the President will act as “Commander in Chief,” “make treaties” “grant reprieves and pardons,” and “appoint Ambassadors, other public Ministers and Consuls and judges of the Supreme Court” (Rorabaugh and Critchlow A-8). Section three continues saying the President “shall take care that the laws are faithfully executed,” “convene both Houses,” “from time to time give to the Congress the State of the Union,” and “receive Ambassadors and other public Ministers” (Rorabaugh and Critchlow A-8). This, for the most part, concludes the discussion of presidential responsibilities and duties. Throughout history presidents have developed their own understanding of their responsibilities, building on the actions of their predecessors (Campbell & Jamieson, *Deeds* 1). Much of these presidential duties evolved to address public and cultural expectations.

Americans’ cultural expectations for the President of the United States can be divided into two types, those of individual personality or character, and those of job performance (Herzik and Dodson 172; Easton 273; Denton 207). Character includes individual characteristics of honesty, integrity, fairness, and a love of freedom. A study in *Time* magazine elaborates on the personal characteristics adding two additional elements of “the

body” and “brains or intelligence” (Hedly 20). The study highlights certain physical expectations for the president, including height, athleticism, and maturity (Hedly 20). Likewise, presidents must be intelligent and illustrate straightforward, common sense problem solving, decision-making and planning skills (Hedly 20). Moreover, presidents are expected to have compassion for others, dignity, and above all, courage (Hedly, 20; Denton 217). According to Bruce Buchanan, a president has four basic job functions, to advocate policy, mediate conflicting interests, manage crisis, and most importantly, to serve as a symbol for the nation (29). The function of symbolic representation is potentially the most problematic for President Clinton in view of the barrage of scandals surrounding the Administration. If the Presidency is the mirror of the American ideology and values, as historians note, what does it say about the American people if the President’s character, integrity and morals are in question? Many around the world expect questionable morals and integrity from politicians, yet Americans remain idealistic in their expectations for politicians, even though they are aware of the reality. Is the American Presidency different than presidential offices in other countries, or are Americans just naive, as some contend? This thesis will delve into these questions, examining the impact of the Scandal of the Decade on our perceptions and expectations of the American Presidency.

## Communication Studies of Political Rhetoric

Scholars traditionally have analyzed key presidential speeches using a Neo-Aristotelian method of analysis. In inaugural addresses or presidential campaign speeches for example, rhetorical critics using this method focused on aspects such as the context of a speech, a speaker's delivery and the effect on an audience (Nichols 73; Leff and Mohrmann 346). Today genre criticism commonly is used to analyze various types or categories of presidential speeches (Lucas 1; Campbell and Jamieson, *Deeds* 9). The most comprehensive study of presidential rhetoric and genre analysis can be found in *Deeds Done in Words* by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. The authors analyze State of the Union addresses, inaugural addresses, veto messages, declarations of war, farewell addresses, and other genres of speeches by presidents throughout history (*Deeds* 6). Their analysis reveals unique substantive, stylistic, and situational characteristics present in each genre of speech (Campbell and Jamieson, "Form" 9). Thus, when presidents give a certain type of speech such as a war address, they typically face similar situational constraints and must use similar messages to reassure Americans of the right course of action.

In other related studies, critics have examined farewell speeches, inaugural, and State of the Union addresses using various rhetorical methods such as analog comparison, Bitzer's situational analysis, variations of Neo-Aristotelianism, ideology, narrative, myth, and metaphoric analysis to discern underlying messages and themes in presidential discourse (Daughton 427; Moore, "Reagan's" 52; Hahn and Gustianis 43; Medhurst,

“Reconceptualizing” 195; Lewis 280). While each of these articles reveal insightful conclusions about presidential messages, the most relevant studies for this essay are those that focus on discourse stemming from scandal and controversy.

The most common studies examining discourse during times of controversy and scandals focus on speeches of *apologia* where rhetors respond to allegations such as legal or sexual misconduct. The genre or category of *apologia* describes a “speech of self defense” intended to rebuild one’s character and reputation (Ware and Linkugel 274). In the most simplistic statements of *apologia*, rhetors would simply admit their guilt or deny the accusations (Kruse 14). Rather than deflecting guilt or accusations as is common practice today, apologetic discourse often included a justification if a rhetor was in fact guilty as charged (Downey 49). Indeed, there was honor in defending one’s reputation and using all “available means of persuasion” to exonerate oneself (Aristotle 1329). An effective speech of *apologia* even could symbolically paint an individual as a martyr in the eyes of the people (Burkholder 289). B. L. Ware and Wil Linkugel, in their influential article, illustrate typical responses to allegations such as outright denial, bolstering, transcendence, or differentiation (273). The mechanics of their traditional apologetic responses will be outlined in more detail in the second chapter. In reviewing communication studies focusing on *apologia*, I have selected those studies that are most relevant in the current political arena.

Since Ware and Linkugel’s initial study on *apologia*, critics have identified additional strategies in speeches of *apologia* to add to their typical responses of denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence. One of the increasingly tried and true responses of



political *apologia* is that of avoidance (Winn 1985; Downey 59). Presidential hopeful Gary Hart would have benefited from the strategy of avoidance when questioned about an adulterous affair in his 1989 bid for the presidency (Downey 60; Rowland 1). In addition to avoidance, Larry James Winn adds other strategies of diversion, humor, and counterattacks to Ware and Linkugel's primary apologetic elements. Ellen Reid Gold contends that "apologetic strategies" actually can serve as a "form of self-disclosure" for politicians (315). As Sharon Downey argues, Bill and Hillary Clinton's "up close and personal" interview on *60 Minutes* during the 1992 presidential campaign illustrates the use of self-disclosure to deflect criticism and political attacks from their opponents. In the interview with his wife at his side, Bill Clinton openly discussed allegations of an extramarital affair with a former Arkansas news anchor Gennifer Flowers. The interview ultimately served to mitigate Bill Clinton's political attacks and revive his campaign for presidency (60). These subsequent studies of *apologia* by Winn, Downey and Gold each suggest a trend in the use of apologetic disclosure by politicians. Rather than giving speeches of self-defense, apologetic responses are becoming more fragmented and less responsive (Moore, "Rhetorical" 1). Instead, politicians are turning to *apologia* as one of the many possible strategies to deflect criticism and address allegations.

Another body of research examines persuasive strategies employed by rhetors using a variety of different rhetorical methods. These studies illustrate campaigns by politicians to reshape public perception about an individual or a policy. The approach by most of the speakers is to blame allegations or controversy on something that is much larger than themselves and is out of their control. One such example is a study by Susan Mackey-

Kallis and Dan Hahn who examine rhetoric in the “War on Drugs” campaign conducted during the Bush Administration. In their essay they illustrate a public strategy of identifying scapegoats to take the blame for the drug problem in America (1). Using a “Burkean/metaphorical framework” of the guilt-redemption cycle, the authors illustrate “guilt-based drug rhetoric” that seeks to define and vilify the enemy, and unite the “good guys” in an all out war to redeem our communities (5). The study illustrates a tendency on the part of the Bush administration to blame the Colombian drug cartels for the problem, rather than advocating a societal responsibility for drug use in America (Mackey-Kallis and Hahn 8).

Additionally, Mark Moore’s analysis of Senator Bob Packwood’s response to charges of sexual misconduct and harassment highlights a strategic and purposeful public relations campaign response intended to obscure individual fault or blame. Moore illustrates Packwood’s explicit failure to take responsibility for his actions. According to Moore, Packwood deflects the blame for his actions on a larger problem that Moore refers to as the “Senate’s hierarchical psychosis” (“Rhetorical” 3). Packwood contends that the Senate hierarchy is a system so flawed that using sex for power and advancement is a way of life (Moore, “Rhetorical” 3). Drawing on Kenneth Burke’s theory of the principle of perfection, Moore illustrates Packwood’s characterization of himself as simply a victim of a larger, imperfect system (“Rhetorical” 14).

Finally, in a related study of mass media *apologia*, David Ling employs another Burkean theory, the dramatistic pentad, in his classic analysis of Senator Edward Kennedy’s address to the people of Massachusetts surrounding the death of Mary Jo

Kopechne on July 25, 1969. Ling discusses Senator Kennedy's remarks of being completely overwhelmed by the scene, so much so that he was too disoriented to save Miss Kopechne or report the accident promptly (83). This strategy of personal detachment from responsibility is indeed a convenient political response to damaging or difficult rhetorical or societal dilemmas.

Each of these three studies illustrates a public effort in the media to deflect and divert the blame to something else, much like the theory of *apologia*. Underlying these public statements by politicians is an apparent attempt to produce questions of doubt or personal responsibility. In the process rhetors seek to plant seeds of diversion in the media to shape the public response to controversy and conflict. Essays on Richard Nixon's Checkers speech and Ronald Reagan's Bitburg speech illustrate the melodrama played out on television, and the speakers' contributions in shaping a controversy (Flaningham 2; Olson 43). Similarly, Christa Arnold and Dean Fadely focus on strategic speaker strategies to influence public opinions of the controversial sex scandal involving preacher Jimmy Swaggart. They argue that Swaggart employed a form of "compliance-gaining *apologia*" which mitigated the public's response to allegations (Arnold and Fadely 2). Swaggart accepted personal responsibility, but ultimately sought to "maintain his livelihood as a TV minister" by preserving his ministry programs (Arnold and Fadely 9). Other studies in corporate settings also focus on compliance gaining *apologia* in the context of a concerted media-blitz campaign. Scholars focus on successful public relations campaigns by Toshiba and Tylenol intended to shape specific public perceptions about

the quality of their products using compliance gaining *apologia* (Benoit and Lindsey 138; Hobbs 323).

Such studies using Burkean or compliance gaining *apologia* models illustrate an effort to shape public perception through the media, and in some cases, show blatant attempts to control public responses by encouraging specific desired behavior, such as buying products or continuing to donate to Swaggart's ministry. These studies illustrate mass media campaigns by politicians aimed at ameliorating conflict and controversy, and shaping public perception. They are not unrelated to the Clinton Administration's effort to respond to the Scandal of the Decade.

This thesis will focus on Clinton's responses to allegations of sexual misconduct and suborning perjury that clearly are part of a strategic campaign to protect the President's legacy in American history. Howard Kurtz outlines similar political campaigns by the Clinton Administration in his book entitled *Spin Cycle: Inside the Clinton Propaganda Machine*. In this study, I will focus on Clinton's campaign in response to accusations and examine the political campaign machine in operation since the initial Whitewater allegations surfaced early in the President's first term. Drawing on observations from studies by Ceaser et al., Jeffrey Tulis, and Martin Medhurst, this thesis focuses on an often-used strategy in the modern rhetorical presidency--the perpetual political campaign. In order to capture the Clinton campaign response to the allegations of sexual misconduct and suborning perjury, the essay weaves in elements of *apologia*, political counter-attacks, and the notion of the rhetorical presidency. A review of related studies on political rhetoric reveals methods used by critics to target a component of political

campaign responses to scandals. However, none of the rhetorical studies have focused on an organized, campaign-style public relations response by the President of the United States to address allegations of personal or legal misconduct. The notion of the “rhetorical presidency” provides the necessary methodological framework and perspective of modern presidential leadership to examine a president’s campaign-style response to scandal and controversy.

### **Focus and Preview of Chapters**

The Clinton presidency presents a particularly intriguing example of the modern presidency that has refined, and perhaps even perfected, the art of rhetorical leadership. Clinton’s use of the triangulation strategy has further blurred the party lines, impacting our political practices and traditional Republican and Democratic party ideology. As his second term evolves, Clinton’s continued reliance on public campaigns and leadership through public opinion is becoming more and more prevalent. This study will examine a variety of compelling issues such as how the messages in the media and Clinton’s responses to the Scandal of the Decade will influence our expectations for the type of individual that is appropriate to be President of the United States. The thesis further will analyze both short and long-term implications related to Clinton’s ability to preserve his legacy, the impact of the scandal on the American Presidency, and the potential of a public outcry for stronger ethics in politics. The study will also focus on possible shifts in presidential leadership and communication strategies to accommodate an increasingly

entertainment-oriented mass media. These and other related questions will be addressed in this thesis.

Using the ideas of the “rhetorical presidency” as a contextual framework, this thesis will examine modern campaign-style communication strategies employed by the Clinton Administration during the Scandal of the Decade. Chapter two examines the *modus operandi* of a “rhetorical presidency” in greater depth, beginning with the observations of the originating authors, Ceaser et al., and continuing through current scholarship on the topic. The chapter continues by illustrating the importance of the “rhetorical presidency” construct when examining presidential communication strategies. Chapter two also outlines a hybrid method of political *apologia*, incorporating the paranoid style and campaign counter-attacks, which illustrates the Clinton Administration’s comprehensive response strategy to address the Lewinsky allegations. Chapter three first presents a background of the Independent Prosecutor’s investigation against the President. The chapter then examines President Clinton’s statements in response to allegations of sexual misconduct and suborning perjury, as well as the resulting media coverage and public opinion polls. Analysis of the President’s responses to the allegations are divided into two parts: part one analyzes the Clinton Administration’s initial statements from January 21 to 27, 1998, and part two examines Clinton’s televised Map Room speech on August 17, 1998. Chapter four concludes the thesis first with an analysis of the media’s role in the scandal, and its impact, and then presents concluding statements and a discussion of the implications for the Clinton Administration, for the institution of the American

presidency, and for our American electorate. Chapter four also presents theoretical implications for the study of presidential communication and media scandals.

## CHAPTER II

### CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE AND APPROACH

This chapter examines the “rhetorical presidency” construct and presents a hybrid critical model for the analysis of presidential statements and subsequent media coverage during national scandals. The construct provides the appropriate framework, perspective, and contextual background to examine the nature of modern presidential leadership, common communication strategies, and public expectations in practice--all integral factors when analyzing presidential responses to allegations. While the “rhetorical presidency” provides tools to better understand modern executive leadership and communication strategies, as well as the cultural mythology and expectations of the President, additional methods are required to examine how strategic language is used during scandals and how scandals evolve in the media. Political communication scholars have struggled with the paradoxical nature of the “rhetorical presidency” construct because it highlights the role of communication in modern presidential leadership yet ignores the specific rhetoric utilized. In this chapter, I present a rationale and strategy for incorporating the rhetorical presidency into studies of presidential rhetoric and the media. The chapter concludes with an overview of my critical method that weaves together traditional *apologia*, paranoid *apologia*, and *kategoria-based apologia* or the



counterattack, using the “rhetorical presidency” as the overarching methodological framework.

### **Overview of the Rhetorical Presidency**

Jeffrey Tulis elaborates on the roots and the phenomena of the “rhetorical presidency” originally discussed by Tulis and his co-authors, James Ceaser, Glen Thurow, and Joseph Bessette, in the “Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency” (158). His book represents the most significant and comprehensive examination of this construct to date. Tulis describes the “rhetorical presidency” as the use of rhetoric as a “principle tool for presidential governance” (4). He describes a significant shift in presidential leadership philosophy in the early 1900s, as presidents began to make direct contact with the people, using communication techniques such as “going over the heads of Congress” to seek public support for a program or issue. Tulis observes that today we expect presidents to “constantly defend themselves publicly, to promote policy initiatives nationwide, and to inspire the population” (4). Yet this was not always the case.

For over a century, public presidential speeches were limited to inaugural addresses, state of the union addresses, messages to Congress, proclamations and a few other constitutionally-designated rhetorical functions (Tulis 55). Presidents preferred giving written, rather than oral addresses to the general public. When they did address the public, they had to be careful of not openly appearing to shape or influence public opinion. An extreme example of this caution towards open oral address and a reticence to

cater to public opinion is illustrated by a speech Abraham Lincoln gave in Pittsburgh in 1861 shortly before the Civil War. In this address he states,

It is naturally expected that I should say something upon this subject, but to touch upon it at all would involve elaborate discussion of a great many questions and circumstances . . . and would perhaps unnecessarily commit me upon matters which have not yet been fully developed themselves (qtd. in Tulis 210).

The crowd cheered at his decision to “stonewall” on a very important issue of the time (Tulis 5). This type of political maneuvering would be mocked today. Little by little, Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson began to use public appeals to support their efforts, making it increasingly more commonplace. The concept of the “rhetorical presidency” is thus described as leading the people through rhetoric and popular opinion — in an effort to “inspirit” the public about policy and a guiding American political ideology (Tulis 134).

Tulis attributes a president’s need for public appeals to an inherent flaw in the separation of powers specified in the *Constitution of the United States*. He contends that Woodrow Wilson was the first president to incorporate this modern doctrine of presidential leadership and direct communication with the public, as described in the phenomenon of the “rhetorical presidency.” According to Wilson, our system of “checks and balances negated the power of one branch over the other” (qtd. in Tulis 120). In Wilson’s opinion, this fatal flaw in our American political system “failed to promote true deliberation in the legislature and impeded energy in the executive” (Tulis 120). Wilson

stressed the fact that he was an elected representative of the people and needed to maintain the “independence of the executive branch” as espoused in the Constitution (Tulis 123). Using the Constitution as his justification and shield against negative criticism, Wilson was careful in his first State of the Union address to announce that his “principal audience” was the community at large (Tulis 133). Tulis attributes this shift in presidential leadership to a desire to reassert the executive independence and influence in federal government. Tulis downplays the role of the mass media in contributing to the rise of the “rhetorical presidency.” For Tulis, the modern “rhetorical presidency” can be attributed to a traceable shift in executive leadership and communication with the public, instigated by Teddy Roosevelt and carried out by Woodrow Wilson on a larger scale (117). Tulis would point out that the print media was around at the time of our first President, George Washington, just on a smaller scale.

The development of a “rhetorical presidency” has far reaching impacts on our political system, our ideology, and on how presidents lead and are received by the general populace. Using this modern presidential philosophy of governing has allowed presidents to strengthen the role of the executive branch and to assert their independence as one of the three powers in American government. Furthermore, the rhetorical presidential leadership suggests a concerted effort to shape the way the electorate perceives political events and issues. As presidents seek to shape public opinion, they also have a tendency to lead by it. A classic example is with President Clinton who often is accused of leading through public opinion polls. The danger of this type of leadership is that it may potentially erode the deliberative process of legislation (Tulis 173). Rather

than debating pressing issues that need to be solved, politicians often have a tendency to pick popular bills such as tax cuts. In order to foster widespread support and win reelections, balanced budgets, deficits cuts, campaign finance reform, spiraling health care costs, and rising social security and Medicare costs may be temporarily postponed to address “pet” issues. While certainly this is not always the case, the tendency to focus on less serious or divisive issues as election day nears has become a common phenomenon in American politics. Scandals such as the Lewinsky matter further serve to complicate presidential leadership and distract presidents from the issues.

### **Narrowing the Gap**

The “rhetorical presidency” construct illustrates a tension between two paradigms of research, that of the political scientist with an institutional focus, and that of the rhetorical critic with an emphasis on presidential rhetoric and persuasion. When political scientists examine the “rhetorical presidency” they see the constitutional and institutional implications of presidential leadership through persuasion (Ceaser et al. 158; Tulis 4; Thurrow 15). As Martin Medhurst observes in *Beyond the Rhetorical Presidency*, the implications of rhetoric and persuasion for political scientists tend to be negative, focusing on how rhetorical leadership erodes the institutional checks and balances that our forefathers so carefully outlined (“Tale” xxi). Craig Allen Smith and Kathy B. Smith highlight the macroscopic focus of political scientists in the study of presidential leadership through persuasion (2). Traditional presidential studies, using a macroscopic

perspective, emphasize personal qualities or traits, such as presidential character, the ability to persuade, to bargain, to establish coalitions, and to capture public support, which globally impact communication. (Buchanan 29; Edwards 1; Neustadt 50; Barber 205; Seligman and Covington 3; Lowi xi; Smith and Smith 12). On the other hand, when communication scholars examine the “rhetorical presidency,” their research focuses on specific qualities of the rhetoric itself, such as compelling messages, themes, speaker positioning, communication strategies, situational contexts, and many other elements, that enable or hamper a president’s ability to effectively persuade the American people and Congress (Kernell 3; Campbell and Jamieson, *Deeds* 13; Hart and Kendall 77; Smith & Smith 34; Ivie 153).

Yet while political scientists and communication scholars have different goals, “the rhetorical presidency” construct has valuable applications in both fields. Indeed, the perception of many communication scholars that the “rhetorical presidency” construct is primarily within the purview of political science and government scholars limits our potential findings regarding presidential communication and persuasion (Medhurst, “Tale” xiv). A few studies of presidential rhetoric do illustrate the value of this construct; however, the majority of presidential communication scholars select more specific methodologies to analyze communication patterns and messages (Gronbeck, “Presidency” 30; Hart and Kendall 77; Ivie 153; Campbell and Jamieson, *Deeds* 13; Dorsey 447; Smith and Smith 1).

Herein lies a key problem with the focus of “rhetorical presidency” for communication scholars—while the term is highly suggestive of the rhetorical nature of

presidential leadership and persuasion, the construct emphasizes the leadership strategies and governing philosophy, but not the rhetoric resulting from this philosophy. As Robert Ivie observes, “Rhetoric, indeed, is a problematic, degraded form of communication within the theoretical context of the ‘rhetorical presidency’” (158). Yet, while the inventors of the “rhetorical presidency” bemoan the increased reliance on demagoguery and motivational rhetoric, the reality is that presidential power is developed in large part through the ability to persuade the public effectively (Ceaser et al. 164; Neustadt 4). However, this power does not solely rest in the office of the presidency; instead, Congress, the justice system and even independent prosecutors exert their power through persuasion. A more accurate term to describe the nature of modern political leadership is the notion of a “rhetorical republic” (Dolan and Dumm 6; Ivie 167). Such an important and driving force of power at all levels of government demands careful study and analysis.

The value of the “rhetorical presidency” construct for communication scholars is that it outlines specific communication themes, such as the tendency to continue the presidential campaign after elected, and to lead and bolster support in Congress through public opinion (Ceaser et al. 161, Tulis 4; Kernell 3). The construct illustrates the nature of presidential leadership and communication in the age of mass media. Moreover, when studying presidential rhetoric, the theoretical construct offers insight into presidential statements, campaigns, media coverage, and the political context on Capitol Hill. Finally, the construct illustrates the underlying leadership strategies of the President, Congress,

and other key political players in the “rhetorical republic,” each with their own agendas and need to capture public opinion.

This thesis presents an alternative theoretical approach for communication scholars by using the “rhetorical presidency” construct to examine both presidential rhetoric and the cultural implications of the rhetoric on the office of the presidency. As such, my approach seeks to combine traditional communication and political science perspectives to look at both the messages and implications of presidential responses and media coverage for the Clinton Administration during a scandal, as well as the more long-term implications for the institution of the presidency. My focus will not be on the danger of presidential demagoguery per se; instead, I will focus on the implications of the Lewinsky sex and perjury scandal in general, as well as the impact of Clinton’s responses on the prestige and honor of the presidency and on Clinton’s ability to effectively lead the nation.

Rather than simply focusing on the rhetoric itself, the “rhetorical presidency” construct illustrates the political backdrop and modern presidential leadership strategies instrumental to examining the motivation and the message. In the case of political scandals, the construct provides insights into presidential responses to allegations and the use of public relations campaigns to counterattack accusations. The “rhetorical presidency” presents a contemporary perspective to traditional *apologia*, acted out on the stage of mass media, and serves to compliment a descriptive, yet somewhat antiquated, theoretical methodology for the study of contemporary mass mediated scandals. Finally, the “rhetorical presidency” provides a natural link to examining

national identity, symbolism, mythology, and expectations of the office of the American presidency. Through rhetoric, presidents have the power to influence and shape our opinions of the presidency and our national identity (Campbell and Jamieson, *Deeds* 13; Ivie 161).

### **Expanding the Rhetorical Presidency**

Ceaser et al. assert that the three factors contributing to the rise of the “rhetorical presidency” are “a modern doctrine of presidential leadership, the modern mass media, and the modern presidential campaign” (161). The inventors of this construct contend that “doctrine” was the most significant factor contributing to this new phenomenon of modern presidency (Ceaser et al. 161; Tulis 16). Bruce Gronbeck later writes “what Jeffrey Tulis has designated ‘the rhetorical presidency’ has been in fact a change in kind in the executive branch of government brought about by the electronic revolution” (“Presidency” 30). The “electronic presidency,” Gronbeck continues, began in 1924 with the first radio coverage of the Democratic and Republican political conventions (“Presidency” 30).

Samuel Kernell also suggests that the rise of mass media may be the most important factor contributing to the modern “rhetorical presidency.” Kernell focuses on a modern presidential tactic based on the strategy described by Ceaser et al. and Tulis of going “to the people” and “over the heads of Congress” (159; 4). According to Kernell, the tactic of “going public [is] a strategic adaptation to the information age” (2). Unlike Ceaser et al.



and Tulis, Kernell asserts that “the ultimate object of the president’s designs is not the American voter, but fellow politicians in Washington” (Tulis 4; Kernell ix). The presidential leadership tactic of “going public” is perhaps the most important strategy employed in what Ceaser et al. refer to as the modern presidential campaign.

Once in office, presidents lead in a “perpetual campaign mode” to assert power, ensure political success and rally public support for their policies. It is not simply a campaign to win the next election, although this is part of the rationale; instead, the perpetual campaign allows presidents to bolster public opinion and to influence legislators in Washington who will support their agenda. The perpetual campaign is a never-ending public relations effort to win public approval, thereby strengthening one’s influence of public policy. Through effective “public posturing,” presidents operating in campaign mode are able to “undermine the legitimacy” of their opponents (Kernell 4). In most cases a presidential statement in the media dramatizing the urgent need to pass legislation does not cause much notice. However, when the Clinton Administration leads a successful public relations campaign to demean the credibility of Kenneth Starr, the independent prosecutor investigating the allegations of perjury and witness tampering in the Lewinsky scandal, it calls to attention the alarmingly effective use of spin-control tactics in the media. In essence, the mass media has become a forum to shape public opinion, gain support for political policies, and even to influence the investigation of potential “high crimes and misdemeanors” committed by the President of the United States.

While the “rhetorical presidency” may have begun with modern doctrine, soon the mass media brought about a contemporary philosophy of presidential governance that relied on radio, television and newspapers to mold public opinion and policies. Ceaser et al. accurately assert that “presidential speech and action increasingly reflect the opinion that speaking *is* governing” (159). Yet Medhurst suggests that while Ceaser et al. contend “rhetoric is a substitute for, or a false form of action, rhetoric is [actually] a type of action--symbolic action” (“Tale” xiv). In the information age, symbolic action may be the most powerful tool for presidential governance. Rhetoric is a persuasive tool that can force Congress to adopt policies because they reflect the will of the people, or undermine federal investigations of potentially impeachable offenses, by focusing on the unfairness of charges about Clinton’s private sex life. Clinton’s rhetoric on the Lewinsky matter suggests that even if the President lied about sex, it should not matter because it relates to his personal life, not public business. The President’s rhetoric portrays the charges to the American people as trivial, and directly challenges the validity of the federal investigation against him. If faced with widespread public support for the President, it may not matter whether Congress has lingering Constitutional concerns about Clinton’s actions. Indeed, in this information age perhaps the most important presidential leadership strategy is the ability to persuade the public and Congress through effective media and public relations campaigns. This is the age of the “rhetorical republic”--like it or not, all presidential action begins with rhetoric.

### **The Rhetorical Presidency and Scandals**

“Those who live by the word, [can also] die by the word,” assert Smith and Smith (225). In *The White House Speaks*, Smith and Smith examine two national scandals where presidential administrations faced allegations of potential wrong doing and federal investigations into their activities: Watergate and Iran-Contra. These scandals illustrate a potential risk of the rhetorical presidency, that too much rhetoric can actually be perilous to administrations (Smith and Smith 224). The authors observe that “The sheer quantity of talk virtually guarantees that the presidential foot will, sooner or later, find its way into the presidential mouth” (Smith and Smith 191). Roderick Hart warns that politicians and others within the public speaking profession have a natural tendency to focus too much on audience expectations and public opinion, and not enough on what one really thinks or what is the right thing to say (198). In a political context where the media scrutinize every word presidents say, editorialize on apparent hidden agendas, and assert editorial control over presidents’ cleverly packaged news stories by focusing on weaknesses and shortcomings, governance through symbolic action and persuasion indeed involves delicate maneuvering (Kernell 94).

Smith and Smith assert that in order to be successful, rhetorical presidents must carefully balance a perception of credibility, consistency and competence (191). In the Watergate crisis, President Richard Nixon sought to save his perception of managerial competence, at the expense of his rhetorical consistency and perception of

trustworthiness (Smith and Smith 209). During the Iran-Contra scandal, President Ronald Reagan defended his perceived trustworthiness, at the expense of a reputation for managerial competence (Smith and Smith 220). Nixon's handling of the Watergate scandal proved the most damaging. In the end, his own public statements and denial of a cover-up resulted in a charge as co-conspirator and ultimately developed into impeachment hearings. Reagan escaped criminal charges, but his reputation as a competent manager and leader was greatly tarnished (Smith and Smith 224). Smith and Smith illustrate how character and competence, two qualities often tested in audience polls, feed public opinion and expectations of presidential leadership. Presidents face a rhetorical crisis when one of these qualities is questioned. In these studies of presidential scandals, public trust proved the most important quality of presidential leadership.

Campbell and Jamieson, in *Deeds Done in Words*, illustrate how modern presidents govern through rhetorical genres and in the process shape our beliefs about government, our culture and the president (6). Of particular interest to this study is the genre of presidential rhetoric intended to thwart impeachment. Surprisingly, numerous presidents have faced the prospect of impeachment or allegations of "high crimes and misdemeanors." While Andrew Johnson was the only president to actually be impeached, other presidents besides Nixon have sought to defend themselves against serious charges. Presidents Reagan, Lincoln, Jackson, Tyler, and Buchanan have also made formal responses to scandalous accusations, thereby thwarting the possibility of impeachment (Smith and Smith 225). Generic presidential responses to scandals have employed either apologetic or forensic discourse (Campbell and Jamieson, *Deeds* 147).

Both types of discourse seek to strengthen character and credibility, either through a personal defense, as with apologetic statements, or through a constitutional and factual defense, as with a forensic response strategy (Campbell and Jamieson, *Deeds* 148).

Campbell and Jamieson illustrate how historically the genre to thwart impeachment has been incredibly successful. In addition to surviving scandalous allegations, presidents were able to bolster public support in Congress and in the general public, while in the process influence Americans' perception of their integrity and character.

In both *The White House Speaks* and *Deeds Done in Words*, the authors incorporate elements of the rhetorical presidency in times of crisis. Each study highlights the need to “go public” to rally citizen support and the importance of credibility and trustworthiness in presidential leadership. Smith and Smith illustrate the importance of balancing the public perception of consistency, credibility, and competence in presidential responses to allegations. Campbell and Jamieson highlight presidential responses of *apologia* and forensic argumentation to defend a president's honor and integrity as our national leader. These studies offer valuable insight into public expectations and the boundaries of presidential leadership and integrity. Whether presidents respond with *apologia* or forensic argumentation, to maintain public support they must effectively defend their character and integrity as a leader. The authors stop short, however, of providing a critical framework to analyze public opinion campaigns in the media to respond to allegations. The Clinton Administration's overtly aggressive spin campaign to exonerate the president and his staff of any criminal accusations, to tarnish their opponents' reputations, and to stonewall Starr's criminal investigation, demands a more elaborate and

detailed methodology—one that will examine a quintessential rhetorical president who has pressed the limits of rhetorical leadership to the extreme.

## **Critical Methodology**

### **Accounting for the Political Context**

My critical approach will combine aspects of the “rhetorical presidency,” with a hybrid form of *apologia*. Based on the research of Ceaser et al. and Tulis, the construct of the “rhetorical presidency” will serve as the overarching framework to analyze modern presidential leadership and communication strategies. The “rhetorical presidency” provides an important political context illustrating the nature of presidential leadership, and the communication strategies employed, as well as insight into the strategic motivation behind the actions. I will focus primarily on the mediated aspects of the “rhetorical presidency,” examining the influence of mass media on presidential responses and leadership, as well as the use of public relations campaigns to shape public perceptions. In this thesis, the term “media” is used primarily to describe the print and broadcast news sources, such as magazines, newspapers and television.

As modern rhetorical presidents lead, they seek to shape the way the electorate perceives public policy, current events, troublesome issues, a president’s own administration and political party, and the nation in general. Public expectations and opinions of the presidency in part are determined by a president’s “trustworthiness,” “managerial competence” and “consistency” as a leader, and in part by a president’s

ability to influence public opinion (Smith and Smith 191). Thus the construct reveals the battle for public opinion through strategies such as “going public” and media blitzes. The overarching critical framework illustrates the nature of modern presidential leadership, typical communication strategies, efforts to shape public opinion, and cultural expectations of presidency.

### **Politicians’ Responses to Scandals**

Politicians throughout centuries have faced allegations of wrongdoing and personal attacks on their character. However, the nature of responses to these scandals has changed dramatically (Downey 43). The media has played an important role in changing the nature of apologetic responses. *Apologia* is much more than a simple speech of apology or denial; instead, it comprises a variety of rhetorical strategies to address allegations. Responses of *apologia* also can include such tactics as avoidance, counterattacks, and the use of conspiracy theories. What remains the same is that apologetic responses address a “recurrent theme of accusation” (Ware and Linkugel 274). Given this recurring theme of accusation, speeches of *apologia* are classified as belonging to a specific genre or type of speech. However, while modern apologetic statements reflect some of the basic tenets of traditional speeches of *apologia*, they have taken on different forms in the media. Rather than give traditional speeches of *apologia*, speakers issue fragmented sound bites to address accusations. Most of the same strategies of *apologia* are employed, although for different reasons and motivations.

According to B. L. Ware and Wil A. Linkugel, responses to accusations involve one or more of the following strategies: denial, bolstering, differentiation, or transcendence (275). Denial is when a speaker rejects the allegations “or whatever it is that repels the audience” (275). “Bolstering refers to any rhetorical strategy which reinforces the existence of a fact, sentiment, object or relationship. When [a speaker] bolsters, he attempts to identify himself with something viewed favorably in the audience” (276). Speakers who differentiate seek to separate a “fact, sentiment, object, or relationship from some larger context within which the audience presently views that attribute” (278). On the other hand, the strategy of transcendence seeks to “cognitively join some fact, sentiment, object or relationship with some larger context within which the audience does *not* presently view that attribute” (280). Ware and Linkugel classify denial and bolstering as “reformative strategies” as they “do not attempt to change the audience’s meaning or affect whatever is in question, . . . [they only] revise or amend the cognitions of the audience” (276). In contrast, differentiation and transcendence are considered “transformative strategies” as they seek to change what the audience thinks (Ware and Linkugel 280).

Ware and Linkugel state that speakers can adopt four different “postures” during apologetic responses: absolution, vindication, explanation or justification (281). These four postures typically involve the use of both transformative and reformative tactics to defend a speaker. Each posture combines both divisive elements seeking to distance a speaker from the charges, either through denial or differentiation, and cognitive elements encouraging audience identification and agreement on concepts, through either bolstering



or transcendence (Ware and Linkugel 281). The authors observe that these categories are not always fixed and can involve a combination of these stances (Ware and Linkugel 282). With a response of absolution, a speaker's primary objective is to seek acquittal. With a response of vindication, the speaker attempts to transcend the particular allegations, and to preserve their reputation and "greater worth as a human being" (282). A speaker relying on an explanative response, "assumes that if the audience understands his motives, actions, beliefs, or whatever, they will be unable to condemn him" (282). Finally, speakers using a posture of justification, strive "not only for understanding, but also for approval" (282). Each of these postures combines particular apologetic strategies; for example, explanation incorporates the use of bolstering and differentiation, while justification incorporates bolstering and transcendence (Ware and Linkugel 282).

Brant Short presents a particularly insightful variation of *apologia* in the political arena, presenting what he calls a "paranoid style" of discourse or "paranoid *apologia*" (191). Using this adaptation of *apologia*, speakers employ the use of a conspiratorial strategy to deflect and distract critics. Short's study focuses on Idaho Congressman George Hansen's 1984 bid for reelection during which he was convicted of four felony charges for issuing false financial records and continued to campaign for office (189). His research is based on Richard Hofstadter's work, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, that describes "a recurrent mode of expression in our public life which has frequently been linked with movements of suspicious discontent" (Hofstadter 6).

Politicians employing the paranoid strategy tend to subscribe to "grandiose theories of conspiracy" (Hofstadter 3). According to the paranoid speaker, "the enemy is held to

possess some especially effective source of power: he [either] controls the press, . . . he has unlimited funds,” or exerts some other type of control (Hofstadter 32). When faced with scandalous accusations, paranoid *apologia* serves as a form of transcendence for speakers, rendering the “truth or falsity of an indictment irrelevant, in light of the ‘conspiracy’” (Short 199). Speakers typically “relate the facts in a case to a larger context,” suggesting images of “crusaders” battling mass “conspiracy” (Short 199). The use of paranoid *apologia* can be particularly effective as additional accusations or allegations surface. Short observes that “Continued attacks upon the character of the individual reinforce the perception that a conspiracy is at work” (199). Short states that speakers using paranoid *apologia* are successful when their perspective is consistent with their “worldview,” and when they can illustrate that they have been unfairly targeted or “singled out” (200). Both the traditional and contemporary forms of *apologia* illustrate rhetorical strategies that the Clinton Administration has employed in response to the allegations in the Scandal of the Decade. As I examine the use of a conspiratorial response to political allegations against President Clinton, Short’s discussions of the paranoid *apologia* strategy will be particularly germane.

The critical method employed also incorporates the use of political counter-attacks within apologetic discourse. Traditionally, *kategoria*, or accusations, and *apologia* are considered two separate forms of discourse. In classical settings, a group or individual used *kategoria* to publicly accuse someone of something, and the accused responded with *apologia* in self defense (Ryan 255). However, in political and mass-mediated settings, as part of an overall election campaign or public relations strategy, a variation of *kategoria* is

often employed to counter-attack the source of the allegations (Gold 306; Hearit 233).

Ellen Reid Gold has expanded traditional apologetic discourse to include the counterattack as part of an overall strategy of differentiation. Gold writes that “in political campaigns, the candidate may not only try to redefine the larger context for the audience, but to separate himself symbolically from the accusation by attacking the source” (Gold 308).

Keith Michael Hearit analyzes the use of *kategoria-based apologia* in public relations scandals and observes that the counterattack can represent a “heavy handed,” but often effective strategy (233). Following Gold and Hearit’s examples, the critical method will examine the use of counterattacks as part of an overall apologetic strategy to defend a speaker from charges.

This methodology incorporates three critical components, drawing from the constructs of the “rhetorical presidency,” traditional *apologia*, and non-traditional *apologia* incorporating the paranoid style and political counterattacks. The “rhetorical presidency” construct, developed by Ceaser et al., will provide a macroscopic political context, and reveal characteristics of the nature of modern presidential leadership and public expectations. Analysis drawing from the “rhetorical presidency” construct primarily will focus on elements of the mass media and election campaign communication techniques. Elements of *apologia* will supplement the larger contextual method, by providing a critical framework to analyze presidential responses to scandals. Apologetic strategies of discourse are based on studies by Ware and Linkugel, Short, Gold, and Hearit. Key terms highlighted in the *apologia* and the rhetorical presidency provide a

critical basis to analyze presidential responses to allegations and the subsequent media coverage of the Scandal of the Decade.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **ANALYSIS OF CLINTON'S SCANDAL DISCOURSE**

This chapter presents an analysis of responses to the allegations made against the President of the United States, focusing primarily on statements delivered to the general public from January 21, 1998, the date the initial allegations surfaced, to August 17, 1998, the date of Bill Clinton's Map Room speech. The analysis weaves together presidential responses to the allegations issued in interviews with the media and in press conferences, and later examines Clinton's formal address to the nation in August. The President's major responses during these seven months occurred in the first few days of the scandal and then again at the end of this time period; thus, these statements during the two time periods will constitute the focus of my analysis. Also included in the analysis is a key television interview in which the First Lady defends her husband that occurred during this time frame as well. Hillary Clinton's appearance on the NBC *Today* show, on January 27, 1998, further illustrates a significant apologetic strategy by the Clinton Administration.

Following in the footsteps of Jackson Harrell, B. L. Ware, and Wil A. Linkugel, in their analysis of Nixon's early Watergate apologies, I have selected the time frame before Congress reviewed the evidence and considered whether to impeach Clinton, because it

“presents the opportunity to study the strategies of political *apologia* in a relatively pure state” (246). After this initial time period in the Scandal of the Decade the primary opportunity for political *apologia* had passed. The fate of President Clinton after the first seven months was largely in the hands of Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr’s continuing investigation, Congress, and the American people. With the public release of Starr’s Report to Congress on September 11, 1998, Congress and the American public had the difficult task in the fall of 1998 to examine the prosecutor’s evidence and determine whether the President had, in fact, committed an impeachable offense.

This chapter first presents a background of the Independent Prosecutor’s investigation of President Clinton and the political climate before the Lewinsky scandal surfaced just days before the 1998 State of the Union Address. In stark contrast to the hopeful atmosphere in early January, I provide a brief overview of the allegations and Clinton’s preliminary statements of denial, which ultimately led to his address to the nation on August 17, 1998, from the White House Map Room. Similar to the findings in Harrell, Ware, and Linkugel’s study of President Richard Nixon’s preliminary Watergate discourse, statements in January by President Clinton and the First Lady helped create the political backdrop and context that would constrain all future presidential statements for the duration of the scandal (246). After reviewing the rhetorical situation in August 1998, my analysis will focus on Clinton’s Map Room speech, given seven months after his initial denial of the Lewinsky allegations. Finally, I analyze the use of modern presidential campaign tactics and legalistic language to address the allegations, and then examine the unique role of the media in contributing to the spectacle, the size of which has

not been witnessed since the O. J. Simpson trial. Concluding statements are presented at the end of the chapter.

### **Background: Investigating the Comeback Kid**

The results of the 1992 election were a surprise to many Republicans who were confident of President George Bush's reelection after record-high approval ratings following the Persian Gulf War in 1991. Ross Perot's entry in the 1992 election as an independent candidate had not helped matters for the Republicans. Still, Clinton had waged an extremely effective campaign with his war room tactics and his triangulation strategy. To attract mainstream voters, Clinton advocated moderately conservative policies while distancing himself from both liberal Democrats and moderate Republicans (Borger 33). Once in office, Clinton continued many of the same strategies that helped him get elected. However, Clinton's reliance on these tactics instigated an often tumultuous struggle between the President and fellow Democrats. Distanced from both Republican and Democratic Congressional leaders, Clinton's first presidential term began with a jumbled, yet promising start. During this turbulent period, political pundits observed that Clinton may have influenced the very nature of American politics by championing both conservative and liberal agendas (Brownstein 24).

In January 1994, just as the Clinton Administration was recovering from a precarious start, plagued with poor judgements, embarrassing cabinet choices, frequent shifts in policy, expensive haircuts, and general naivete and inexperience, suspicions surfaced of

potential financial improprieties by the Clintons in the Whitewater land deal some 20 years before (Johnston A18). Thus began the Office of Independent Counsel investigation of the Clintons and their friends, Susan and James McDougal, led by Kenneth Starr (York 30). While Starr later indicted James McDougal for his dealings at the Madison Savings & Loan Guarantee, the bank that financed the Whitewater land deal and later went bankrupt, he was unable to uncover any illegal activity by the Clintons themselves. Once his investigation was underway, Starr, a Republican Party loyalist, uncovered one alleged impropriety after another, but for four years was unable to uncover evidence of any illegal action by the Clintons. The Independent Counsel investigation of the President and First Lady became to many a witch hunt or conspiracy to bring down the Clintons. Then came the Scandal of the Decade. Rumors of adultery, perjury, suborning perjury, sexual harassment and even sexual assault by the President of the United States buzzed on the airwaves. Starr, it appeared, might have found Bill Clinton's Achilles' heel.

The allegations surfaced at a time when Clinton's approval ratings soared to an all-time high in poll after poll conducted by *NBC News*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *CNN*, the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and others. While the President continually scored low on questions regarding morals and character, he received high marks, upwards of 60 percent, for job performance and a strong economy ("The Peoples'" 32). In the last two years of his presidency, Clinton focused on establishing his legacy. Reports of his careful study of previous presidents' contributions were widely covered (Walsh 33). With the approaching 1998 State of the Union Address, Clinton had the opportunity to outline an



aggressive agenda for the rest of his presidency. Already, analysts were speculating about his contributions to the Democratic party as a whole and to the dynamics of American politics. Journalist Ronald Brownstein purported that “whatever else defines his legacy, Clinton has already changed American politics” (24). Brownstein highlighted what the President’s supporters called “Clintonism,” a philosophy that “defines a new center in American politics by fusing liberal and conservative ideas long considered incompatible--like launching new spending programs while balancing the budget” (Brownstein 24). A poll conducted by *US News and World Report* from January 8-11, 1998, supported Brownstein’s assertion of Clinton’s influence on American politics. In the poll, fifty-eight percent of registered voters believed Clinton had “modernized the policies and ideas of the Democratic party” and fifty-three percent said that the next Democratic candidate should follow “the same direction and tradition” of the President (24). These observations represented a promising start to a noteworthy presidential legacy.

On January 21, 1998, potentially damaging allegations surfaced that the President of the United States had sexual relations with a 24 year-old intern, Monica Lewinsky, and encouraged her to lie about it in a deposition for the Paula Jones sexual harassment lawsuit. The charges alleged that Clinton recruited his friend Vernon Jordan, a highly successful Washington lawyer, to persuade Lewinsky to lie about the affair in exchange for a job in New York. Media reports also indicated that the President may have made unsolicited sexual advances to a White House staff person, 51-year-old Kathleen Willey, a long time Clinton ally and Democratic fundraiser, and tried to sway her testimony in the Paula Jones case. Allegations of perjury, suborning perjury, obstruction of justice, abuse

of power, and sexual harassment began to cloud the Clinton Administration. These allegations surfaced as a result of the continuing depositions and leaks from the Paula Jones civil lawsuit that sought reparations for alleged sexual harassment by then Governor Bill Clinton in 1991. When the Jones lawsuit began in 1994, at the time few people took Jones' accusations about the former governor seriously.

However, as the Jones legal team sought to uncover examples of sexual improprieties in the President's past to illustrate a pattern of sexual harassment, Independent Prosecutor Starr took note. Evidence related to the Lewinsky and Willey allegations uncovered by the Jones team in early 1998 finally impelled Starr to examine a possible abuse of power by the President while in the White House. These allegations represented the first tangible evidence of possible criminal behavior by the President of the United States since the initiation of the Starr's 1994 Whitewater investigation. Although the Independent Counsel Investigator was originally appointed to look at the Clintons' Whitewater financial dealings, he sought permission in January 1998 to expand the scope of his investigation. Attorney General, Janet Reno, granted Starr permission to examine allegations of perjury and suborning perjury associated with Jones' civil case against the President. Starr's landmark investigation would explore the President's sexual conduct, or alleged misconduct, as well as the possibility that the President lied under oath in a civil deposition on a case that was later dismissed for lack of evidence. Prosecution of perjury in civil cases was infrequent, and even more infrequent were prosecutions for perjury in dismissed lawsuits (Blank and Blank).

Before the allegations became public, Starr received the evidence suggesting the President might be guilty of lying about a sexual affair under oath and trying to hide it. Linda Tripp, a former White House staff person and coworker and confidante of Lewinsky, provided Starr with twenty hours of taped conversations with Lewinsky and a list of “talking points” apparently intended to coach Tripp in answering an affidavit in the Jones case. The talking points addressed how responses should be made in an affidavit when asked about the incident between Kathleen Willey and the President (Isikoff and Thomas, “Clinton” 37). Starr also placed a surveillance device on Tripp for a meeting with Lewinsky and acquired taped evidence that Lewinsky had met with Vernon Jordan, the lawyer alleged to have secured a job for Lewinsky in exchange for a denial of a sexual affair with Clinton (Isikoff and Thomas, “Clinton” 37). With evidence in hand and permission to expand the investigation of Clinton, Starr was ready to examine the allegations of perjury and obstruction of justice by the President of the United States.

Just days before the allegations of perjury and sexual misconduct became public, Lewinsky submitted a sworn affidavit on January 7, 1998, to the Jones legal team denying a sexual relationship with Clinton. On January 17, 1998, the President also testified under oath in the civil case that he did not have sexual relations with Lewinsky, effectively falling into a potential perjury trap. With Clinton’s statements in the Jones deposition, Starr was able to develop strong accusations that potentially could constitute high crimes and misdemeanors. The Independent Prosecutor’s legal charges against Clinton included potential evidence of perjury under oath, suborning perjury of Lewinsky and Tripp, obstruction of justice for allegedly seeking to silence Lewinsky with a job, and

witness tampering provided the President or staff contributed to the talking points intended to influence Tripp's testimony (Fineman and Breslau, "Sex, Lies" 28). Starr's case would also include abuse of power if he could prove Clinton used the office of the presidency for personal gain, to disguise the fact he had an affair with a White House intern. While abuse of power would be difficult to prosecute in a court of law, constitutionally it could constitute grounds for impeachment. Amidst the shocking allegations against the President and the lurid details from twenty hours of taped conversation between Lewinsky and her "friend" Tripp, Clinton made his first statement to the American people.

### **Part 1: The Fateful Decision to Deny**

In one of the most significant interviews given the day the allegations surfaced, on January 21, 1998, to Jim Lehrer of the PBS *News Hour*, the President sought to give the impression that he was being candid with Lehrer and telling readers everything he knew about the matter. The novelty of an up-close interview with the President of the United States helped to reinforce this impression to viewers. It is important to note that the interview with Jim Lehrer, as well as others with Mara Liason of National Public Radio and the news organization Roll Call, were most likely scheduled before the allegations surfaced to promote the upcoming State of the Union Address. However, in choosing to honor these interviews, the Clinton Administration signaled a strong response to the allegations.

Given the President's omissions and ambiguous language in his interview with Lehrer, it is not surprising that questions still remained after Clinton's radio, television, and telephone interviews on January 21, 1998. In an effort to respond to these requests for clarification, the President and the First Lady made subsequent statements from January 22 to 27, 1998, presenting emphatic denials of the allegations against the President. After making these preliminary statements, the Clinton Administration refused to provide any additional information in response to the Lewinsky allegations, and instead opted to repeat the President's earlier denials (Begala). This evasive, non-responsive strategy became a core element of President Clinton's *apologia* to address the allegations. Ellen Reid Gold reminds scholars that examining how politicians address questions, as well as what they say, are both important elements within a strategy of denial (308). For the next seven months the Clinton Administration continued to dismiss requests for additional clarification relying on the President's carefully worded statements, until finally he chose to confess on August 17, 1998, that he had misled the nation about his relationship with Lewinsky.

President Clinton's preliminary *apologia* in January 1998 primarily involved the use of a vindictive posture to defend his reputation and Administration from the charges. Typically a posture of vindication is characterized by the primary use of transcendence and denial to counter allegations. In "vindictive apologies" the speaker seeks to maintain his/her reputation and to gain "recognition of his greater worth as a human being relative to the worth of his accusers" (Ware and Linkugel 282). Thus, the President's first vindictive strategy, which he maintained from January 21 to August 16, 1998, involved a

decision to deny that he had sexual relations with Monica Lewinsky and to deny also that he had asked her or others to lie about their sexual affair.

President Clinton's second vindictive strategy was to transcend the allegations by changing the subject and by focusing on more abstract issues such as Starr's politically motivated investigation of his personal life. Using what Brant Short refers to as the paranoid style of *apologia*, the President and the First Lady attempted to transcend the allegations by portraying the President as a victim of an unfair investigation of his private life and by attacking the Independent Prosecutor and other Republican adversaries. In using the conspiracy theory the audience is led to see the charges differently, and, because of the source of the allegations, to give them less credence. The President and the First Lady effectively sought to shift emphasis away from questions of Clinton's guilt or innocence to the unfair Republican conspiracy against the President. Short observes that "by invoking the encompassing vision of a conspiracy versus a crusader, the advocate redefines the indictment placing it in a larger context" (199). Clinton sought to reinforce this image of himself as a crusader for the American people through his constant appeals to return to the business of the country. Clinton's bolstering efforts to portray himself as a devoted public servant--suggesting honor and dedication--also served to transcend the allegations by reminding the public of what was keeping him from doing his job. Using paranoid *apologia*, speakers not only influence how the audience sees them, but also impact how the accuser is seen. Inherent in the paranoid style of *apologia* is the counterattack, something Keith Michael Hearit refers to as a heavy-handed *kategoria*-

*based apologia* (233). Using paranoid *apologia*, The President's second primary response strategy is both to transcend the allegations and to counterattack their source.

In his January 21, 1998, television interview with Lehrer, the President responded to the allegations of sexual misconduct, perjury, obstruction of justice and suborning perjury which had surfaced that day. Clinton's denials incorporated carefully worded legalistic responses, which, after closer examination, did not actually constitute strong denials of the allegations. The President adamantly denied that he had encouraged Lewinsky to lie under oath in the Jones civil deposition, "That is not true. . . . I did not ask anyone to tell anything other than the truth. There is no improper relationship." When asked to clarify the nature of the relationship with Lewinsky, Clinton stated "There is not a sexual relationship" ("Interview with President"). While Lehrer tried to clarify whether there ever had been a relationship, Clinton would only answer in the present tense, leaving lingering questions about whether there had been a sexual relationship in the past. The President denied that he asked Jordan to encourage Lewinsky to lie under oath, "I absolutely did not do that. I can tell you I did not do that. . . . He is in no way involved in trying to get anybody to say anything that's not true *at my request*" ("Interview with President"). Here Clinton left the unanswered question of whether someone else on his staff asked Jordan to work with Lewinsky. On the surface the President denied every single allegation; however, in each instance his legalistic language and limited statements of denial indicated that he clearly was not telling the full story. Thus began Clinton's perilous journey of legalistic denial to the American public.

Clinton's denials left many questions unanswered as to his precise relationship with Lewinsky and whether the President had ever had a sexual affair with her. Because of the sensitive and sexually explicit nature of the allegations against the President, anything beyond a simple denial of the charges would serve to tarnish his reputation in the process, whether he were guilty or innocent of the accusations. Therefore, after initially denying that he had sexual relations with Lewinsky, Clinton focused primarily on trying to move beyond the charges and to project himself as a capable and faithful leader of the United States. The President's apologetic responses used bolstering to reinforce his strong work ethic and devotion to public service. This vision of him was important to reinforce his efforts to transcend the scandal. It was also essential to portray himself as the crusader, striving for what is best for Americans, and to portray the source of the allegations, his political adversaries, as not having the public's best interests at heart. From a practical standpoint, the Clinton's bolstering efforts were also important to maintain his job approval ratings by reassuring the public that he would not let the scandal interfere with his daily responsibilities and with the oath he took when he became President.

Using bolstering in his interview with Lehrer, the President stressed his ability to compartmentalize the allegations against him and to remain focused on the work of the country. The President reminded Lehrer, "I've been living with this sort of thing for a long time. And my experience has been, unfortunately, sometimes when one charge dies another one just lifts up to take its place" ("Interview of President"). Despite this climate of accusation, the President assured the public, "I owe it to the American people to put it in a little box and keep working for them. . . . You don't get a vacation from your



obligations to the whole country” (“Interview of President”). During this interview and afterwards the President continued to repeat his need to go back to “work for the American people” in an effort to move beyond the allegations and to change the subject (“Interview of President”). In fact, throughout the entire period of the Lewinsky scandal, Clinton consistently illustrated how he was focusing on the business of the country by providing photo opportunities and public speeches on policy matters and important programs (McGrory A8). The President continued his scheduled events and press conferences, even when faced with difficult questions from reporters while in the presence of key world leaders such as Palestinian President Arafat, in January, Britain Prime Minister Tony Blair, in February, and Soviet President Boris Yeltsin in August 1998 (Deans, “Deposition” A13; Deans, “Clinton” A12; Clines and Gerth A13). One of the more effective visual images of the President back at work soon after the allegations surfaced was the media coverage of Clinton’s preparation and delivery of the State of the Union Address on January 27, 1998 (Harlan A7). These images of the faithful public servant helped portray the President as always keeping Americans’ best interests in the forefront of his mind. His constant pleas to return to his duties would also feed public frustration as the allegations persisted, and insinuate that those focusing on the scandal were not doing what was best for the country.

Having reinforced his image as a crusader for the American people, and a devoted public servant, the President then turned to his core strategy of transcendence. To do this, Clinton employed a paranoid style of *apologia* steering his audience away from the allegations against him and seeking to influence their perception of the charges.

Attempting to move beyond the particular charges, Clinton sought to place the blame on his political enemies and to create the perception that he was the victim of political foul play. In his interview with Lehrer the President subtly began to suggest the larger contentious political arena, effectively insinuating that there was a conspiracy against the Clintons. For example, when pressed by Lehrer to say something more conclusive about the nature of his relationship with Lewinsky or about encouraging others to lie, Clinton would make statements such as “We are doing our best to cooperate here, but we don’t know much yet. . . . All I know is what I have read here” (“Interview of President”). The President’s demeanor in the interview suggested that he was shocked about the accusations and was completely taken by surprise. Biting on the insinuation of a conspiracy, Lehrer asked the President, “What’s going on? If it’s not true, that means somebody made this up.” The President responded only by saying, “Look you know as much about this as I do right now.” Later in the interview, the President presented his strongest case for a conspiracy against him by reminding Lehrer that “it made a lot of people mad when I got elected President. And the better the country does, it seems like the madder some of them get” (“Interview of President”). Clinton continued:

You know, whatever people say about me, whatever happens to me, I can’t say that people didn’t tell me they were going to go after me because they thought I represented a new direction in American politics and they thought we could make things better. And I can’t say that they haven’t been as good as their word—every day, you know, just a whole bunch of

them trying to make sure that gets done. But I just have to keep working at it. (“Interview of President”)

Through paranoid *apologia* the President employed a multi-layered transcendence strategy, positioning himself as a troubled crusader, hampered by the “conspiracy,” desperately trying to focus on the work of the country. Clinton’s interview with Lehrer on January 21, 1998, allowed him to plant the seeds of a conspiracy against him, thereby transcending focus from the allegations to questions of political foul play. In the process, his rhetoric suggested that the charges against him represented nothing more than the continued attempts by his political adversaries to keep him from doing what he set out to do when he became President.

On January 22, 1998, in a photo opportunity at the White House with Palestinian Leader Yasir Arafat, the President reiterated his denial, saying that the “allegations are false” (qtd. in “Roll Tape” 25). The President continued, “Let’s get to the big issues, there--about the nature of the relationship, and about whether I suggested anybody not tell the truth--That is false” (“Photo”). Clinton promised to cooperate with the investigation and remarked, “I’d like you to have more rather than less, sooner rather than later” (“Photo”). This last phrase would plague the President who later, under the advice of his lawyers, took a wait and see approach to find out what evidence of wrongdoing the Independent Prosecutor would uncover.

A few days later, on January 26, 1998, at a White House Education News Conference, the President was again asked by the media to clarify the nature of his relationship with Lewinsky (“Roll Tape” 25). Using denial and bolstering, the President

made his strongest statement to the American public, “I want you to listen to me. I am going to say this again. I-did-not-have-sexual relations-with-that-woman, Ms. Lewinsky. I never told anybody to lie, *not a single time*, never. These allegations are false and I need to go back to work for the American people” (Clinton, “Child care”). Supporting his efforts to transcend the scandal, his statements again reinforced his image as the ever-alert public servant and served to contrast his focus with that of his adversaries, bent on distracting him from his presidential duties.

With this short statement, the President attempted to address any lingering doubt about the allegations against him. His statements from January 21 to 26, 1998, illustrated his attempt to vindicate himself from the charges by defending his reputation as a capable leader and by portraying his strong work ethic and dedication to the American people. The image of the crusader had been effective in bolstering his image, but even his strongest denial issued on January 26, 1998, soon generated more questions. Leaks in the news media soon suggested that the President was using a different definition of sexual relations than the average American, and thus he may have had sexual encounters which he did not consider sex with Lewinsky. The President, it was believed, made a distinction between oral sex and sexual intercourse. Kenneth Woodward attributes this distinction in definitions to his Baptist faith (37). According to Steve Marini, a Wellesley College religion professor, Baptists define sex as having sexual intercourse (Woodward 37). Clinton incorporated this distinction into his legal defense when he denied having sexual relations with Lewinsky in the Jones deposition on January 17, 1998 (Kirn 30). The President’s linguistic maneuvering was unpopular with the American people and

Congress. While his careful semantics possibly could forestall a perjury charge, they represented a historic first for public discussion about detailed private activities of the President in the White House.

The public did not believe Clinton's denials of a relationship with Lewinsky, but was not inclined to judge him for it. According to a *Newsweek* poll taken after the allegations surfaced in late January, forty-eight percent of the American public did not accept the President's denial "when he [said] he never had a sexual relationship with Monica Lewinsky" (Fineman, "Counterattack" 28). In the same poll, Clinton's job approval rating dropped to fifty-four percent, from his all-time high of sixty-one percent just weeks before. While the President's *apologia* strategy of vindication was not a complete success in the days after the allegations surfaced, it was not a complete failure either. A job approval rating of fifty-four percent was still respectable for any president. On the surface, Clinton's approach did allow him to deny the allegations and at least symbolically defend his reputation as a law-abiding citizen who would not use the office of the presidency improperly. He also was successful in his interview with Lehrer in appearing presidential; the setting in the Roosevelt Room of the White House certainly bolstered his credibility. The President's continual pleas to "go back to work for the American people" portrayed him as capable of rising above the media frenzy and the political circus in Washington ("Interview of President"). Clinton depicted himself as the ever-faithful public servant, always keeping the people's wishes above his own. Regardless of what occurred in his personal life, he claimed he was able to put it aside and

return to the more pressing issues affecting the nation as a whole (“Interview of President”).

Ultimately, Clinton’s denials issued on January 21, 22, and 26, 1998, would not replace the need for a more sincere explanation or apology. The media had widely reported Lewinsky’s taped confession to Linda Tripp of an affair with the President (Gibbs 21; Cloud 42; Isikoff and Thomas, “Clinton” 34; Brownstein and Walsh 23). Rumors also circulated of a navy blue dress that Lewinsky refused to launder after a sexual encounter with Clinton (Fineman, “Counterattack” 31). With each statement Clinton appeared to be sinking deeper into a dangerous strategy of denial, something very difficult to reverse after the fact. While it might be legally arguable that he did not have sexual relations with Lewinsky, as defined by the Jones legal team, politically this blanket denial would be very damaging for Clinton and would constrain all future statements about the relationship. If proven false, it would mean that the President of the United States looked Americans in the eyes and blatantly lied. Perhaps more damaging, if Clinton’s denial under oath of having sexual relations with Lewinsky in the civil deposition for the Jones case were false, it would constitute perjury. Thus, the President’s decision to deny the allegations locked him into a narrow response strategy that ultimately would prove politically ineffective and legally perilous. Clinton’s statements illustrate an important distinction between language that is appropriate in a legal setting and the language required from the President in a public setting. His legalese might save him in the end from a perjury charge, but it clearly did not eliminate the need for a public explanation of his behavior and January denials. His statements also illustrate

a reliance on forensic components to counter allegations. Given the public nature of this spectacle, the President's forensic argumentation was not as effective. A stronger reliance on *apologia* would prove more successful.

The use of paranoid *apologia* to transcend and deflect the allegations was far more effective than the strategy of denial in enhancing Clinton's public perception. In an effort to counterattack the allegations against the President, First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton also adopted the conspiratorial theme that the President subtly had implied in his interview with Lehrer. Soon after the scandal surfaced, *Newsweek* published an article about the First Lady's war against the Independent Prosecutor, reporting that she believed Starr had a "'mission' to destroy her and her husband" (Cooper 24). As a seasoned political veteran, the First Lady declared she was not surprised "That the Lewinsky scandal emerged when the president was over sixty percent in the polls and about to launch an aggressive and progressive second-term" (Cooper 24). While the public certainly was hesitant to believe her husband, they also were becoming increasingly impatient with the Starr investigation that had gone on for four years and cost approximately forty million dollars in taxpayer money. A *Time/CNN* poll taken on January 22, 1998, the day after the allegations surfaced, was indicative of the public impatience with the investigation. According to the poll, fifty-one percent thought the Independent Prosecutor went "too far in investigating Clinton's sexual behavior." Likewise, sixty percent of respondents believed that a president's private life, "including extramarital affairs, should remain private" (Gibbs 32). Many in the public had grown impatient with the Starr investigation of the President even before the Lewinsky

allegations surfaced, and these latest charges only seemed to strengthen their impatience. Even colleagues, such as Cass Sunstein, a well-known constitutional law professor at the University of Chicago, began to doubt the Independent Prosecutor, “Starr is someone I know and respect and like. But I think he’s been so obsessively fixated on this ongoing investigation that he’s lost a sense of perspective” (qtd. in Brownstein and Walsh 28). As the First Lady launched her counterattack efforts, she used paranoid *apologia* in attempts to defer public attention away from her husband, and to discredit the accuser and the allegations themselves.

On the morning of Clinton’s sixth State of the Union address, January 27, 1998, Hillary Clinton appeared on the NBC *Today* show in an interview with news anchor Matt Lauer where she aggressively asserted that there was a “vast right-wing conspiracy against her husband” (“Interview First”; “First” A1). Assuming the role of both the supportive wife and the political aggressor, Hillary Clinton presented a strong defense of her husband and attack on her husband’s enemies. She began her interview using the same go-slow approach that her husband adopted in response to the investigation, reportedly at her insistence (Cooper 24). The First Lady started by saying that she had discussed the allegations with her husband at length and cautioned:

As the matter unfolds the entire country will have more information. . . .

But we are in the middle of a rather vigorous feeding frenzy right now, and people are saying all kinds of things, and putting out rumor and innuendo. .

. . And I have learned. . . that the best thing to do in these cases, is just to be patient, and take a deep breath, and the truth will come out. But there



is nothing we can do to fight this firestorm of allegations that are out there.

. . . (“Interview First”)

Her statements describe the atmosphere of political life, wherein accusations and innuendo take on a life of their own in the media. Hillary Clinton portrayed her family as subjected to a “firestorm of allegations,” suggesting that the myriad of allegations against her husband’s administration were not true. The First Lady went on to defend her husband saying, “the President has denied these allegations on all accounts, unequivocally.” She then sought to transcend discussion of the allegations, reminding Lauer, “Bill and I have been accused of everything, including murder, by the same people who are behind these allegations. So from my perspective, this is part of a continuing political campaign against my husband” (“Interview First”). In this last statement, Hillary Clinton presented her most compelling argument that a conspiracy was at work.

The Clintons’ paranoid *apologia* was quite effective in countering the Starr allegations of perjury, obstruction of justice and abuse of power in the first seven months of the scandal. After an initial drop in the polls, the President’s job approval rating surprisingly surged to a new all-time high of seventy-three percent, according to a poll cited by *US News & World Report* and seventy percent in a similar *Newsweek* survey (Walsh and Lavelle 22; Fineman, “Counterattack” 25). The print media was fascinated with the unexpected upswing of public support for the President and wrote about the counterattack extensively in the subsequent news cycle. Articles focusing on Clinton’s most recent “comeback strategy,” his ability to “defy gravity,” the “right-wing conspiracy,” and Starr as a grand “inquisitor” appeared in the next issue of *US News &*

*World Report* (Walsh and Lavelle 22; Easterbrook 30; Shenk and Cohen 28). Journalists Kenneth Walsh and Marriane Lavelle remarked, “The President’s latest sex scandal could have made last week the worst of his career. Instead, he was flying high--and Kenneth Starr’s investigation was struggling” (21). Similarly, nine out of eleven stories in *Newsweek*, the magazine responsible for breaking the story initially, discussed some element of the White House counterattack against the allegations or the public’s response to the allegations. The magazine detailed the First Lady’s leadership in the counterattack campaign; explored the accusation of a right wing conspiracy; examined the alleged effort to discredit the Independent Prosecutor and witnesses in the case; and analyzed “Clinton’s Houdini Act” (Fineman, “Counterattack” 22; Klaidman 27; “Conspiracy” 28; Taylor, “Explaining” 30; Turque 34; Isikoff and Thomas, “Secret” 36; Turner 48; Adler 50; Atler, “Clinton’s” 52). In the first seven months of the scandal, the conspiracy and counterattack strategy against the allegations appeared effective both in influencing public opinion and in generating subsequent favorable print media coverage.

The surge in the President’s approval rating after the initial period of responses may have been due to a variety of contextual factors in addition to use of the conspiracy theory, including the recent State of the Union Address, counterattacks on other figures such as Lewinsky, and her confidante Linda Tripp, and a general public backlash and disinterest in the scandal. White House staff hypothesized, however, that the “his-and-her denials by Bill and Hillary Clinton had a real effect in the country” (Walsh and Lavelle 22). Contrary to the climate on Capitol Hill, the American public appeared to have “a high tolerance for almost anything” in the White House as long as people felt they were

prosperous (Walsh and Lavelle 28). Two citizens from Janesville, Illinois, voiced their opinions on the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. Their statements capture much of the public disinterest in hearing about the President's private sexual life and shed light on why his job approval ratings remained high. Paula Stanton said, "I'm so tired of hearing about it. The economy is great, all is going well, it's not compromising the country, so who cares?" Mildred Powers asserted, "With the job he's doing in the White House, if he's lying, I'd just as soon see him lie again" (Walsh and Lavelle 28). These statements from Janesville capture sentiments of a prevalent cross-section of Americans reflected in the polls. The President's *apologia* strategy of denial and transcendence clearly catered to these opinion polls and to a public sentiment much more interested in the issues affecting their daily lives, rather than hypothetical and constitutional implications impacting the office of the presidency.

### **Months of Public Turmoil**

Once the President made his statements denying the allegations within the first week and the First Lady came to his defense, the Clinton Administration maintained its go slow legal strategy to wait and see the evidence Starr had of Clinton's affair with Lewinsky and a possible cover-up. After the initial shock of the allegations, the Clinton administration sought to prevent aides and secret service members from testifying in the case. The long legal battle between Clinton and Starr lasted over seven months. The Independent Prosecutor sought to gather evidence such as corroborating testimony, phone logs, gifts

the President allegedly gave to Lewinsky, and the navy blue dress with alleged stains from the President's semen (Isikoff and Thomas, "Clinton" 41; "Monica's" 31). Similar to President Richard Nixon, when his close advisers and chief of staff were asked to testify, Clinton invoked executive privilege. In a historic move, Starr challenged a variety of traditional presidential privileges that had rarely been tested in a court of law, requesting that White House lawyers and secret service personnel also appear before the grand jury. In response, Clinton invoked attorney-client and secret service protection privileges, but ultimately lost his appeals in the Supreme Court ("Detailed"). As a result of the legal battles between Starr and Clinton, future presidents would have fewer executive privileges and rights than they had historically enjoyed (Taylor and Klaidman 25).

During this time, the Jones civil lawsuit against the President still was calling witnesses and preparing for an upcoming court date in the spring. Meanwhile Starr was calling witnesses before the grand jury such as Marcia Lewis, Lewinsky's mother, Betty Currie, the President's secretary, Sidney Blumenthal, Senior White House Advisor, and Linda Tripp, ex-friend of Lewinsky who had tape-recorded their conversations (Isikoff and Thomas, "Secret" 43). Leaks about the President's testimony in a sworn deposition in the Jones case, as well as Starr's sealed grand jury testimony surfaced on virtually a daily basis in the news media. In the midst of this frenzy, the Clinton legal team won two major victories. The first victory was the dismissal of the Jones case against the President, after Judge Susan Wright agreed that there was insufficient evidence of sexual harassment ("Detailed"). The second legal victory for the Clinton team was against the Office of Independent Counsel for illegally leaking secret grand jury testimony to the

press. However, the damage had already been done; the President's character and reputation was tarnished.

In August, after months of negotiation and a new set of lawyers, Lewinsky was given "transactional immunity" by the Independent Counsel in exchange for her full and truthful testimony about her affair with the President (Isikoff and Thomas, "The Deal" 26).

Securing Lewinsky's testimony had become a critical component to gathering evidence against the President, as Starr was unable to get any corroborating sources who saw her and the President in any compromising situation. The future of the Clinton presidency appeared to rest on the testimony of a former White House intern, now 24 years old, who promised to tell all about her secret sexual encounters with the "leader of the free world" in the Oval Office (Klaidman, Breslau and Isikoff 31). In an effort to put this seven-month ordeal to rest, the President's lawyers soon began to negotiate the terms of the President's testimony with Starr (Fineman and Breslau, "What" 22). For months, Clinton had ignored requests for him to testify before the grand jury. Starr decided to force the issue, bolstered by a few legal victories on executive and secret service privilege, and issued a subpoena for the President of the United States to appear before the federal grand jury (Fineman and Breslau, "What" 22). While this act was constitutionally disputable, as it challenged the separation of powers of the Judicial and Executive branches of government, the President had the option to comply voluntarily.

After much negotiation, the President agreed to testify before the grand jury about his relationship with Lewinsky and the allegations that he asked others to lie to hide his affair. An agreement was reached under the terms that the Office of Independent Counsel

would withdraw his subpoena to Clinton. As with all grand jury testimony, the President's appearance would not be open to the public. David Kendall, the President's lead lawyer, also negotiated for Clinton to testify from the Map Room in the White House via videotape to the grand jury, and arranged for lawyers to be present in the testimony, something normally prohibited for everyday citizens. The date of Clinton's testimony before the grand jury was set for August 17, 1998. The President would testify and then immediately go on vacation with his family to Martha's Vineyard. Just days after the President agreed to testify, reports leaked in the news media that Starr had recovered and was testing the stained navy blue dress to see if it contained the President's DNA (Klaidman, Breslau and Isikoff 31). Clinton's careful timing of the announcement that he would testify before the grand jury appears to be a proactive attempt to put a "positive spin" on the physical evidence against him. Just over two months before the mid-term Congressional elections, the President address would also represent an attempt to bring the scandal to an end.

In the next two weeks the press, political pundits, and the public debated the President's decision to testify, as well as the fate of the Clinton Presidency (Fineman and Breslau, "What" 22). The President's voluntary agreement to testify was unprecedented. Legal experts debated whether Clinton should have agreed to testify since he technically was not required to do so (Isikoff and Thomas, "Deal" 26). Many feared Clinton was opening himself up to more serious legal consequences. Lawyers speculated that the most serious and potentially impeachable offenses were that of perjury, subornation of perjury, and obstruction of justice (Taylor, "Lowdown" 48). Allegedly denying that he

had sexual relations with Lewinsky in a civil deposition in the Paula Jones case was serious, but perhaps not as grave as lying to a federal grand jury. Legal experts concurred that perjury in a federal grand jury would be without a doubt evidence of a high crime and misdemeanor as stated in the Constitution of the United States. Even absent specific evidence of perjury in the Independent Prosecutor's report, Congress might decide Clinton had committed other impeachable offenses, such as abuse of power, which while not criminal, might constitute grounds for removal of office. Lawyer Stuart Taylor Jr. noted, "legalities like whether the alleged lies were 'material' may count for less than whether voters consider the matter serious enough" ("Explaining" 30).

As leaks of Lewinsky's testimony surfaced in the press, members of Congress called for a personal apology to the public and for Clinton to tell the full truth in his testimony to the grand jury. Republican Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah gave the impression that the President's political future would be in much better standing if he candidly testified to the grand jury (Hatch, "Interview"). Yet with other more conservative Republicans calling for the President to resign, Hatch's reassuring message seemed more like a political trap. Democratic Congressional leaders also expressed the need for a presidential apology and for the President to take responsibility for his actions. Democrats facing tight reelection races openly questioned the President's truthfulness in the Jones civil deposition and to the American public last January, and called for full disclosure of the facts in the upcoming grand jury testimony. As Clinton's grand jury testimony neared, he faced the difficult task of accommodating political needs, while staying out of legal jeopardy. Legally, an admission of perjury in his civil deposition would be a dangerous move;

however, so would a charge of perjury before a federal grand jury if the President made the same mistake (Stephanopoulos 33). As the President prepared for his testimony, his public relations team tested public opinion to gauge how an apology would be received.

### **Part II-Clinton's Map Room Speech**

On August 17, 1998, the day of President Clinton's testimony to the federal grand jury, his staff announced that he would address the nation that evening. Speaking from the White House Map Room, where former President Franklin Delanor Roosevelt once consulted with advisers and world leaders during World War II, the President symbolically sat in the same chair in that he had testified to the grand jury hours earlier. The symbolism of this gesture gave the impression that the President was about to fully disclose his grand jury testimony and helped foster audience understanding and empathy for the ordeal he had just experienced. Holding his speech and grand jury testimony in this historic setting also helped enhance his credibility and ethos by reminding viewers of the important tasks that presidents face, and the triviality of an investigation about a president's personal sex life.

The President's address to the nation used a decisively explanative tone as he relayed details of his testimony to the American people. Clinton's approach was consistent with traditional explanative *apologia* that seeks to present one's "motives, actions, and beliefs," hoping viewers will not judge a speaker if they understand the situation better (Ware and Linkugel 282). Similar to Ware and Linkugel's observations of speeches



employing explanative *apologia*, the President used differentiation and bolstering strategies to state his case to the public (282). When employing differentiation, a speaker seeks to change the way an audience sees something by separating a fact from the present context (Ware and Linkugel 278). Differentiation, in essence, is an attempt to transform the audience's thoughts by clarifying the facts of a case (Ware and Linkugel 277).

Bolstering describes an attempt to reinforce existing views or perceptions of a rhetor or some idea, and ultimately to foster audience identification (Ware and Linkugel 276).

Finally to forestall impeachment, Clinton was impelled to continue his strategy of denial of the more serious charges of perjury, obstruction of justice and abuse of power.

Constrained by his previous denials under oath and to the American public, the President first sought to explain his behavior and his silence about the specifics of the charges against him. His strategy was first to deny that he had lied or asked others to do so. Clinton's denials illustrated an attempt to reinforce his personal character and ethos, by admitting to having misled the American public about his private life. As David Maraniss observed, Clinton's defense of his character in his August 1998 Map Room speech resembled Richard Nixon's famous statement during the Watergate scandal, "I am not a crook" (62). Using a strategy of differentiation, Clinton argued that while his statements may have been misleading, they did not constitute perjury. His only wrongdoing was having an adulterous affair, not committing a crime such as perjury or obstruction of justice. Clinton also used differentiation to redefine the political context by attacking the validity of the Starr investigation of his private life. Ellen Reid Gold observes that in political *apologia*, speakers may employ differentiation not only to

“separate a fact . . . from larger context” as Ware and Linkugel write, but may also use differentiation “to separate [oneself] symbolically from the accusation by attacking the source” (308). The President used differentiation to distance himself from the particulars of the charges by focusing on Starr’s questionable motives and unfair investigation of him. Clinton’s strategy of differentiation attempted to give new meaning to both the charges against him and to the legitimacy of an investigation about a private sexual affair.

As Clinton explained his version of the events, he employed a strategy of bolstering, using extensive emotional appeals or pathos, to solicit audience empathy and understanding, and emphasize the fairness of the investigation. He also sought to generate audience agreement about the lines between the public and private life of presidents. After establishing audience understanding and defending his personal character, Clinton attempted to transcend the allegations against him by calling for an end to the investigation and by portraying it as a political conspiracy against the First Family and friends. The President evoked the Republican conspiracy theory once again, to influence how the audience viewed the charges against him, as well as Starr’s investigation. Clinton sought to invalidate the charges by reminding his audience who was fueling the inquiry.

The President began his Map Room speech using a strategy of denial to counter charges that he had lied under oath. Clinton affirmed that he answered the questions in his grand jury “truthfully, including questions about my private life, questions no American citizen would ever want to answer” (“Text”). With this statement the President turned to bolstering with an emotional appeal to remind viewers that he, just as any other “citizen,” should not be subject to such personally intrusive questions

("Text"). Here Clinton touched upon the theme of privacy and private life, that would continue throughout the rest of his speech. Acknowledging his own personal role in the scandal and the existence of higher public expectations for Presidents, Clinton continued, "Still I must take responsibility for all my actions, both public and private. And that is why I am speaking to you tonight" ("Text"). Key Congressional Republican and Democratic leaders had made it clear that the mention of responsibility and remorse was a critical element in any apology or public statement Clinton would make to the American public.

Having made his initial denials and attempts to connect with the audience, the President then switched to a strategy of differentiation to make his case with the television viewers, "As you know, in a deposition in January, I was asked questions about my relationship with Monica Lewinsky. While my answers were legally accurate, I did not volunteer information. Indeed, I did have a relationship with Ms. Lewinsky that was not appropriate" (Clinton, "Text"). Seeking to differentiate between perjury and legalese, Clinton attempted to change the audience's perception of his January statements. Ware and Linkugel observe that if a speaker puts "whatever it is about him that repels the audience into a new perspective [it] can often benefit him in his self-defense" (277). Clinton sought to set the record straight about the most upsetting element in the scandal, the belief that the President allegedly lied under oath, and then looked the American people in the eye, and lied again. Here Clinton argued using an enthymeme to make his case. The President implied that because he was "legally accurate" in a deposition on January 17, 1998, and to the American people a few days

later, he did not lie or commit perjury then, or in his grand jury testimony on August 17, 1998 ("Text"). To believe this argument, his audience also had to believe the suppressed premise in his discourse that if statements were legally accurate, they could not constitute perjury. While the President may have made legally accurate statements under oath, they also led listeners and justice officials to believe something other than the truth in the Jones civil deposition and his federal grand jury testimony. Knowing this represented dangerous territory, Clinton did not ask the audience to assume that his "legally accurate" statements fulfilled the oath he took to the nation in 1992 and again in 1996 to uphold the laws of the land ("Text"). Instead he admitted that his "public comments and silence . . . gave a false impression" and were in fact misleading (Clinton, "Text"). However, Clinton's underlying message was a clear attempt illustrate the difference between ambiguous language and perjury under oath.

Continuing with his strategy of differentiation, the President explained that his affair occurred in a moment of temporary insanity or lack of judgement, similar to Ware and Linkugel's observation of Edward Kennedy in his "Chappaquiddick" speech (278). Clinton discussed his relationship with Lewinsky, admitting, "it was wrong" and "constituted a critical lapse in judgement and a personal failure on my part." He further conceded, "I am solely and completely responsible" (Clinton, "Text"). Representing perhaps his most mature and forthcoming statements, the President sought to reassure the American voters that he understood the difference between appropriate and inappropriate behavior in office, and that his actions in the Lewinsky matter did not live up to our expectations of how a president should behave. By omitting reference to Lewinsky, the

President admitted that as the elder party, he should have known better and that he was the one to blame. After repeating his previous denials in January of 1998 that he never asked others to “lie, to hide evidence, or destroy evidence or to take any other unlawful action” to conceal his relationship with Lewinsky, the President moved on to his personal apology (Clinton, “Text”). Clinton said, “I know that my public comments and my silence about this matter gave a false impression. I misled people, including even my wife. I deeply regret that” (“Text”). Admitting that his legalistic language could produce the opposite interpretation, the President provided another essential statement which both the American people and Congress were waiting to hear. While many in Washington asserted Clinton was not as contrite or candid as he should have been, in his current legal situation, it was perhaps as far as he could go (Hatch, “Interview”; Feinstein “Taking”; Russert, “Interview”). As part of his confession and his apology Clinton used the strategy of differentiation to illustrate his understanding that his behavior had been wrong, but that he was now taking responsibility for and trying to rectify his mistakes.

A major component of Clinton’s speech was devoted to persuading the audience to see the Office of Independent Counsel investigation as an unjust pursuit of his private life for political gain, not a legitimate investigation of his public actions while in office. Clinton relied on a *kategoria-based apologia* using aggressive counterattacks and differentiation to address the allegations. In attacking Starr, the President employed a strategy of differentiation to portray his own actions in a more favorable light, and to distance himself symbolically from the accusations. The President’s strategy of differentiation sought to challenge Starr’s impartiality and judgement, thereby bringing

into question both the charges against him and the legitimacy of his charges. It represented an attempt to redefine the larger context and the purpose of the inquiry into his alleged improprieties. As he attacked Starr, the President continued to use emotional appeals to express his concerns about the validity of the investigation. In the second half of the speech, Clinton described his motivations for misleading the public for seven months:

I had real and serious concerns about the independent counsel investigation that began with my private business dealings 20 years ago. . . . The independent counsel investigation moved on to my staff and friends, then into my private life. And now the investigation itself is under investigation. This has gone on too long, cost too much, and hurt too many innocent people. . . . It is time to stop the pursuit of personal destruction and the prying into personal lives. (Clinton, "Text")

Reverting to a conspiratorial tone, the President characterized the investigation as an unjust witch hunt against himself, and his family and friends.

The suggestion that the President was fighting a politically-motivated conspiracy served to challenge the charges against him, effectively giving his misleading statements in January 1998 new meaning. Using the conspiracy theory, Clinton employed a strategy of differentiation to taint the charges and illustrate why he behaved the way he did. He was careful to leave out direct mention of whom he held responsible, although he never tried to hide that he believed the Starr investigation was a politically motivated strategy by Republicans from the start. Starr's numerous consultations with Jones at the beginning of

her lawsuit, his apparent failure to disclose these facts to Attorney General Janet Reno, and his strong Republican ties, only reinforced the President's suspicions (Easterbrook 30; Rivera, *Live*). In attempts to distance himself symbolically from the charges, the President attacked the legitimacy of the Independent Counsel's investigation, that spent too much, and still could not seem to find any substantial allegations, except perhaps Clinton's sexual peccadilloes. Clinton concluded his attack on Starr by focusing on the gross fiscal mismanagement by the Office of Independent Counsel and the serious injustice to all the "innocent" people who were subjected to his investigation ("Text"). The implication was that the Office of Independent Counsel is out of control and should stop its investigations of the President's private life. Clinton's strategy of differentiation represented a divisive attempt to redefine and distance himself from the charges, while damaging Starr's reputation in the process.

While the President attempted to defend his character and credibility, he also employed a bolstering strategy to elicit public support and understanding through the use of emotional appeals or pathos. Clinton's statements evoked public support and sympathy for his handling of the Lewinsky matter and for his desire to keep his personal life private. The polls indicated that the public typically responded favorably to Clinton's national leadership and were impatient with the Starr investigation (Walsh and Lavelle 25; Fineman, "Counterattack" 25). Maintaining and reinforcing this overall public support was important. Focusing on a value of personal privacy, the President sought to attract viewer empathy and encourage outrage at being asked "questions no American citizen would ever want to answer" (Clinton, "Text"). The President outlined a variety of

factors that influenced his motivations to “not volunteer information” and in general to mislead the public and the Jones legal team (Clinton, “Text”). Hoping to elicit understanding for his personal shame, Clinton confessed he misled the public “to protect [himself] from the embarrassment of [his] own conduct” (“Text”). Admitting this natural human reaction and concern added a personal touch to his explanation and apology. Clinton further explained he “was also very concerned about protecting [his family]” (“Text”). Protecting his daughter Chelsea and his wife Hillary was a legitimate concern Americans would easily understand. During both presidential terms, the Clintons’ desire to protect their daughter from intense public scrutiny and publicity was widely admired and surprisingly respected by journalists. The President’s bolstering efforts evoked human themes of understanding, shame, outrage, as well as a desire to protect one’s personal privacy and to preserve one’s family life.

Finally, the President also sought public understanding for his unwillingness to be helpful to the Jones lawsuit because he felt it was “politically inspired” (Clinton, “Text”). When Clinton testified on January 17, 1998, he knew that the Jones legal team, funded by the Rutherford Institute, a right-wing organization, was in the process of searching for more evidence from Clinton’s past in hopes of illustrating a pattern of sexual misconduct and harassment by the President (Isikoff and Thomas, “Secret” 44). Clinton’s description of his motivations to avoid public embarrassment, protect his family, and hamper a politically inspired lawsuit all illustrate genuine human desires he experienced as he sought to keep his affair with a 24-year-old intern quiet. In telling his story, the viewer was able to imagine how it might feel to be the focus of Starr’s investigation. The



President's statements elicited public support, not only for his policies and leadership of the country, but also for his disapproval of the Office of the Independent Counsel of investigation. Clinton's edge on Starr was his strength in the public polls. If Clinton's approval ratings were to drop, and if Starr's popularity were to rise, it would put his presidency in jeopardy.

In the concluding section of the President's August 17, 1998, address to the nation, he tried to move his audience away from the allegations and the entire Lewinsky affair, presenting a plea to end the investigation and to "get on with our national life" (Clinton, "Text"). Using a strategy of transcendence, the President portrayed the scandal as a private and personal event in the Clintons' life, not a public matter to be investigated. Seeking to draw the investigation to a close, Clinton said "Now this is a matter between me, the two people I love most--my wife and our daughter--and our God. . . . Nothing is more important to me personally. But it is private. . . . Even Presidents have private lives" ("Text"). Clinton statements implied that God, not government, should judge his actions. Clinton also signaled an important shift in our public expectations, by demanding that presidents "have private lives" too. While there once was an unspoken pact that the media would look the other way when exposed to presidents' private affairs, they no longer followed this pact. Clinton's statements about the need to respect a president's privacy echoed a long American tradition of not persecuting presidents for indiscretions in their private life (Collins 42). The President then issued a call for everyone to take responsibility for their actions and to bring the investigation to a close, "Our country has been distracted for too long, and I take my responsibility for my part in all of this. That

is all I can do. Now it is time--in fact, it is past time--to move on" (Clinton, "Text").

Clinton admitted that he was not forthcoming to the American public and said he was prepared "to do whatever it takes to do so" ("Text"). But government did not have a role in helping him repair his family life; it was a private matter. Given that the President's testimony was "legally accurate," and that he denied any wrong doing, Starr should end his investigation (Clinton, "Text"). In addition to the President, it was time for Republicans, Democrats, the Office of Independent Counsel, the media, and the public to do their parts to bring an end to the scandal. With these statements, Clinton sought to direct the audience's attention to the nature of the investigation itself, rather than the specific charges against him.

Continuing his focus on the investigation itself and on its impact on American politics, the President concluded his speech saying, "We have important work to do--real opportunities to seize, real problems to solve, real security matters to face. And so tonight I ask you to turn away from the spectacle of the past seven months, to repair the fabric of our national discourse, and to return our attention to all the challenges and all the promise of the next American century" (Clinton, "Text"). In his closing plea, the President alluded to the damage of the scandal on "our national discourse" and said it was time to repair it. The President's final statement seemed particularly poignant and genuine in a political atmosphere plagued with partisan politics, focused on a public investigation of his private sex life, distracted from the business of the country, and seemingly out of touch with the American people.

The President's final statements represented a call for action, something commonly exhibited in traditional persuasive speeches. Incorporating both apologies and counterattacks, the President's map room discourse represented a hybrid speech blending together traditional strategies to defend one's reputation and with classic election campaign tactics to undermine one's opponent. At times Clinton's White House Map Room address resembled persuasive speech with a motivated sequence. Consistent with traditional persuasive discourse, the President described the problem (Starr); suggested a solution (ending the investigation); and helped viewers visualize the end result by suggesting a focus actually on the real issues for a change (Monroe 1). At other times, his discourse demonstrated traditional apologetic strategies of self-defense.

The public response to Clinton's address to the nation on August 17, 1998, was overall much more favorable than that of Congress. Republicans called for the President's resignation and for impeachment hearings, while staunch Democratic supporters of the President were deeply offended that the President also had lied to them behind closed doors. Clearly the President's speech was primarily intended to target the American people and was highly poll-driven. Mystifying both Republicans in Congress and the media, Clinton's job approval rating increased in a *CBS/New York Times* poll to sixty-eight percent two days after his speech ("Taking"). In separate *ABC News* and *CBS News* polls, the public consistently supported the President, with figures such as, sixty-six percent claiming he should not be impeached, sixty-eight percent that he should not resign, and sixty-eight saying "Starr should drop his investigation" ("Taking"). Yet these surveys also illustrated the importance of asking questions in just the right way. The

evening after the address, a *USA Today/CNN/Gallup* poll accidentally asked viewers to rate the President's favorability as a person instead of as a leader, and Clinton's rating dropped twenty points to forty percent. However, when asked the same question posed in the last survey, his favorability rating remained steady at fifty-five percent ("Taking"). These strong approval ratings did not necessarily mean that the public thought Clinton had been truthful about his affair with Lewinsky, in fact "nearly two thirds did not believe Clinton's past denials," but "they also didn't think he should be punished for it" ("A President" 19). The President's strategies to bolster public support and understanding, to defend his reputation, and to attack Starr's investigation were, at least for the moment, a great success. If the polls held steady in favor of Clinton, then Congress would be leery to call for his resignation, or instigate impeachment hearings. As time went on, the public seemed to demonstrate a consistent split on their beliefs of the personal and professional qualities of the President. While fifty-five percent of Americans in a *Newsweek* poll believed "Bill Clinton [did not] have the honesty and integrity they expect in a President," fifty-three percent said that "the President's effectiveness in carrying out policies beneficial to the country [mattered] more than high personal character" (Atler, "The Two" 22). Much to the ire of his Republican and conservative critics, the polls demonstrated a steady separation between moral integrity of a president and the ability to lead a nation effectively. Whether right or wrong, the majority of Americans polled by CBS, ABC, CNN, Gallup, NBC after Clinton's Map Room speech illustrated their support to put an end to the "spectacle of the past seven months" (Clinton, "Text"; "Taking").

Clinton's critics were disappointed by what the President omitted in his August 17, 1998, address and by his attack on the Office of Independent Counsel. Republican Chairman of the Judiciary Committee, Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah, was deeply offended by the President's criticism of Starr and accused the President of stonewalling and dragging out the investigation for seven months ("Special"). Off camera he was reported to have remarked after Clinton's address, "Wasn't that pathetic. I tell you what a jerk" (qtd. in "Taking"). Critics also were disappointed that the President did not actually admit that he lied or utter the words "I am sorry" ("Special"). Republican Representative Lamar Smith expressed concern that Clinton had failed to address key details of his testimony related to abuse of power and obstruction of justice, such as his conversations with Vernon Jordan or Betty Currie ("Taking"). New Jersey Republican Governor Christine Todd Whitman remarked, "We can only hope that this most recent display of our president's moral compass gone haywire has now come to a close. Thus far his actions have left us with a presidency that is both demeaned and demoralized" ("Taking"). Republican National Committee Chairman Jim Nicholson expressed sadness for "this entire sad saga" pointing out that the President could have avoided this by telling the truth in January. He accused Clinton of wasting taxpayer money with an investigation, debilitating the office of the presidency, and maligning "a lot of innocent people" ("Taking").

Many of the President's strongest supporters also were disappointed by his actions. Democratic Senator Diane Feinstein of California expressed a feeling of sorrow and a lack of personal trust in Clinton's character ("Taking"). Representative Richard Gephardt,

Democrat from Missouri, admitted “I am very disappointed in his personal conduct” (“Taking”). Many Republicans and a few Democrats called for his resignation. Overall there was a deep sadness due to the long investigation and the belief that the President lied to the American people, as well as twice broke the law, when he failed to tell the whole truth under oath on January 17 and August 17, 1998. The decision of whether Clinton’s personal conduct and omissions were serious enough for impeachment would rest in the hands of Congress. While Congress considered whether to call for impeachment hearings, the President implored all other responsible parties to accept their role in “the spectacle of the last seven months . . . and to move on” (Clinton, “Text”).

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Analysis of the President’s initial statements issued on January 21, 22, and 26, 1988, reveals the use of a vindictive posture of *apologia* employing the strategies of denial and transcendence to counter the allegations and to change the subject. In the initial period of responses, Clinton relied on a generally evasive, non-responsive denial strategy to address the charges of having a sexual relationship with Lewinsky, and of committing perjury and obstruction of justice to hide it. This denial strategy would constrain the President’s future responses to the allegations, and would undermine his already questionable personal credibility plagued with rumors of sexual indiscretions dating back to his 1991 presidential election campaign. Clinton’s reliance on transcendent *apologia* proved far more effective in influencing public opinion and in encouraging more favorable media

coverage about the unfair investigation of the President's personal sex life. Without a doubt, the President and the First Lady's use of paranoid *apologia* to respond to the allegations was the most influential tactic in contributing to the discussion of the Lewinsky matter on the public airwaves. This strategy was strengthened by the President's earlier bolstering efforts to remind the public of his hard work ethic. Clinton portrayed himself as the "crusader" for the American people, fighting his "right-wing conspirators" to stay focused on his work at hand. As excerpts from Tripp's taped conversations with Lewinsky leaked to the media, as well news of potential physical evidence of a sexual encounter with the President on one of Lewinsky's dresses, the Clintons' conspiracy theory was effective by reinforcing the unfairness of the Starr investigation and strengthening his job performance ratings.

However, the decision to deny a sexual relationship with Lewinsky would ultimately confine Clinton to a narrow response strategy that would prove politically ineffective and legally perilous. Politically the situation would demand a more detailed explanation. On August 17, 1998, the President was forced to adopt a more explanative tone to address these lingering questions about the Lewinsky matter and to account for his misleading statements in the past seven months. Knowing that he could not change his January denials to the American people, the President adopted an awkward strategy attempting to defend and explain his actions. Clinton first denied that he had lied and argued instead that his statements had simply been misleading. To reinforce his denial and defend his personal integrity, Clinton then turned to what he felt most conformable with--arguing the facts of the case. Using the strategy of differentiation, the President sought to make a

distinction between legalese and perjury. As political commentator Tim Russert explained, the President's argument strategy could be characterized as a "desperate attempt to try to avoid a formal perjury charge" ("Interview"). The President's statements in his Map Room speech also used differentiation to try to draw a line between behavior to hide a personal affair versus witness tampering and obstruction of justice. Likewise, Clinton sought to explain his involvement with Lewinsky as an isolated lapse of judgement or form of temporary insanity that he now understood was wrong. The President's legal and public and private distinctions in his map room address often exhibited more of a forensic and persuasive defense to forestall impeachment, rather than a traditional mea culpa or apologetic discourse. Moreover, the President employed a form of *kategoria-based apologia*, using both differentiation to invalidate the charges against him and counterattacks against Starr to redefine the inquiry as a partisan tactic to damage him politically. Clinton's efforts to undermine the legitimacy of the Starr investigation also served to transcend the allegations by focusing his audience's attention on the nature of the investigation itself and characterizing it as a private, not public matter. Similar to his initial statements in January 1998, the President also used bolstering to foster public support and understanding and enhance his overall image to the American people.

What is most striking about the President and the First Lady's response strategy during the first seven months of the scandal is that they employed perhaps the one strategy with the most potential to defend the President and foster widespread approval for his performance in office--the conspiracy theory. Faced with tape recordings and DNA evidence alleging that the President had in fact engaged in a sexual relationship with



Lewinsky, a strategy of denial would only go so far. As Halford Ross Ryan observes, when a speaker is faced with the need to transcend allegations after one has already denied them, one cannot “logically explain, justify or vindicate” oneself (257). So the Clintons turned to an extraordinary explanation to change the subject and transcend the allegations. Presenting their case of a right-wing conspiracy against the President, the Clintons attempted to explain the President’s misleading behavior, his initial denial in public, and redefine the very charges against him, in lieu of the unfair politically motivated investigation of his private life. Putting Starr on the stand to face the court of public opinion, the Clinton Administration was able to defend the President plausibly, using a defense largely based on extenuating circumstances that were out of their control. This was indeed the most noteworthy and effective element of Clinton’s rhetoric in response to the Scandal of the Decade. It provided an evil conspirator to distract attention away from the President’s own behavior and presented an acceptable context to engage in counterattacks without appearing too heavy handed and un-presidential.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

#### **Going Public in the Media Spectacle**

During the Scandal of the Decade, Clinton's responses to the Lewinsky allegations attempted to shape public discourse about the scandal in the media by using modern campaign tactics and careful semantics. As the media reported the allegations, and Clinton in turn sought to influence public debate about legitimacy of the charges, the Lewinsky allegations soon developed into a full-blown media scandal reminiscent of the O. J. Simpson murder trial. Consistent with the modern presidential campaign theme outlined within the rhetorical presidency construct, Clinton's leadership strategy and rhetoric demonstrate the use of "going public" through the media to address the charges against him and shape public opinion. The phrase "going public" originated as a term describing a leadership and a communication strategy where presidents go "over the heads of Congress" to directly influence public opinion (Tulis 4; Kernell 2; Ceaser et al. 159). "Going public" strongly relies on common election campaign tactics seeking to shape electorate perceptions of events, gauge public opinion, and attack political opponents.

Using the office of the presidency as a bully pulpit, presidents often employ the strategy to seek public support for their personal performance and for their public policies.

“Going public” traditionally is thought of as a way to gain cooperation and compliance in Congress by trying to influence constituents back home. Samuel Kernell writes that “Going public draws heavily upon techniques developed over years of election campaigning; but in going public, the ultimate object of the president’s designs is not the American voter, but fellow politicians in Washington” (Kernell ix). While this statement is in part true, it discounts the impact and importance of focusing on the American public, rather than Congress, and of the modern tendency to lead by public opinion. In this modern information age, where a strong, rapid-media-response staff person arguably has become as important to the vitality and sustainability of a presidential administration as the Secretary of State or Defense, the rhetorical strategy of “going public” may be the most important source of power for a president. The ability to capture public support and shape public opinion is important not only to influence Congress on policy matters, but is also essential in reelection campaigns, foreign policy matters, acts of aggression, and all other matters that merit public support, but do not require direct Congressional approval. The American Presidency is more than simply an institutional branch of government intended to propose and guide public policy; it also encompasses symbolic, social and cultural leadership of the nation. By employing the strategy of “going public” to respond to the Lewinsky allegations in his statements in January and August, the President was able to strengthen his job approval ratings and foster widespread anti-investigation sentiment.

Following in the footsteps of his skillful predecessor Ronald Reagan, Clinton has consistently employed the strategy of “going public” to manage political discord and crisis. Clinton’s use of pollsters to generate policy and lead the nation is a publicly recognized fact. Just before the allegations surfaced in January 1998, a *U.S. News* survey reported that fifty-eight percent of Americans polled believed Clinton was “driven by polls and politics of the moment” (Brownstein 23). In the processing of monitoring polls and influencing public opinion to bolster approval ratings and policies in Congress, some would argue that Clinton has indeed perfected the art of “going public.” Howard Kurtz, the author of *Spin Cycle*, writes, “Bill Clinton’s performance as president has helped create the sense that he and the country were doing just fine. But it was a carefully honed media strategy--alternatively seducing, misleading, and sometimes intimidating the press--that maintained the aura of success” (xvii). While members of the media predicted within the first few weeks of the scandal that the President would soon resign, Clinton’s strong job approval rating and public support on January 22, 1998, and January 27, 1998, after the State of the Union address, provided a powerful message to Congress and the media that the Clinton presidency remained strong (Walsh and Lavelle 22; Fineman, “Counterattack” 25). Kurtz projected that “not even a spinmeister” such as White House spokesman Mike McCurry would be able to put a positive spin on the Lewinsky scandal (xvi). However, the Clinton Administration, led by the President and his wife, was able to do just that, weaving traditional apologetic strategies of denial and transcendence with paranoid and *kategoria-based apologia* to attack the allegations against Clinton. Instead of widespread calls for resignation or impeachment, coverage of the allegations against the

President after his initial statements in January produced a backlash against the media for its apparent “rush to judgement” (Turner 48). Cautious of a similar backlash in the November 1998 Congressional elections, many House Republicans, led by Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, patiently waited for eight months before publicly supporting impeachment hearings, confident that eventually he would fall into the “trap of his own making” (Brooks 32). The President’s efforts to present his case to the American people and to attack his accusers had served temporarily to quiet many Clinton critics and illustrate that calls for resignation or impeachment in the first few weeks of the scandal were premature.

Many months later when the President addressed the nation, he once again used the strategy of “going public” to foster audience understanding, sympathy and to maintain his solid job approval ratings. Using emotional appeals that he knew the polls reinforced, the President focused on the unjust investigation of his private life, and the need to put an end to the Starr investigation (Clinton, “Text”). The President’s Map Room speech had in essence served as yet another attempt to present his case to the public in hopes of strengthening his broad-based support, protecting the future of his presidency and bolstering his support with Congressional Democrats. For the time being, until Starr submitted his report to Congress, Clinton’s strategy of “going public” had once again mitigated the political damage of the scandal and strengthened his position with the American people.

“Going public” to respond to the charges against him illustrates the effectiveness of transformative *apologia*, or transcendence and bolstering, in public campaigns intended to

influence the reporting of mega-scandals in the media. The goal of “going public,” just as of transformative *apologia* in political settings, is to shape public opinion and change perceptions of certain events or issues. Examination of the President’s tactic of “going public” in response to allegations also reveals how both Clinton and the media contributed to the nature of how the Scandal of the Decade developed and to its ultimate achievement of mega-scandal status.

The concept of the rhetorical presidency also highlights another striking element in Clinton’s responses to the Lewinsky allegations, the careful use of semantics. Throughout both presidential terms, Clinton has consistently used cautious language to counter the numerous allegations against him and to maintain public support for his presidency. Responding more like a lawyer than a president at times, Clinton was able to escape allegation after allegation against him. What tense one used and what definition or interpretation of sexual relations one used were critical aspects. Indeed, Clinton was not the only one to make such a distinction between what constituted sex, and after all, he had used the very definition given to him by Jones’ lawyers when he denied his acts in the civil deposition and later to the American public. In 1994, Senator Charles Robb of Virginia responded in a similar vein during his reelection campaign to allegations of an adulterous affair involving oral sex: “I haven’t done anything *I regard as unfaithful* to my wife, and she’s been the only woman I’ve loved, slept with or had coital relations since marriage” (qtd. in Kirn 31). A former romantic partner of the Republican Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich, also remarked in a 1995 *Vanity Fair* article, “We had oral sex. He prefers that *modus operandi* because then he can say I never slept with her” (qtd. in Kirn

331). The use of creative semantics has been a staple in politics for some time; however, it has not been employed as openly before, especially by the President of the United States.

Clinton biographer David Maraniss commented that the President's use of semantics is a characteristic trait of Bill Clinton ("Interview," *Today*). The President's "wordsmithing" has indeed caused reporters a great deal of grief, forcing them to ask a question in just the right way ("Clinton," *Dateline*). During the 1992 presidential election campaign, with his wife by his side, Bill Clinton admitted that he had "caused pain in [his marriage]" but denied a 12-year affair with Gennifer Flowers in a famous interview on *60 Minutes* (qtd. in Gronbeck, "Character" 128). In his January 17, 1998, civil deposition for the Jones case, the President would later admit to an affair with Gennifer Flowers. When asked by the media why the President had lied to the American public in 1992, Clinton was later reported to have said he did not lie because, while he did have an affair it was actually not a 12-year affair, but much shorter ("White House Response"). It was not that the President had lied, *Dateline* reported on January 21, 1998, it was just that the reporter had failed to ask the right follow-up questions ("Clinton"), such as, "did you have any kind of affair with Ms. Flowers?" Another classic incident of Clinton's wordsmithing was the admission in his presidential campaign that he had smoked marijuana while studying at Oxford. When pressed by reporters and George Bush, Clinton countered that he did not break the laws of the United States by smoking marijuana, because he didn't inhale and, at the time of the incident, was out of the country in Oxford, England. Through clever wording, as well as aggressive response tactics and a

little luck, Clinton has made a name for himself as the quintessential “Comeback Kid” (Brownstein and Walsh 14).

Up until the Lewinsky allegations, Clinton had survived without giving a straightforward response on these private issues to the American people. The attitude of the general populace thus far has been to ignore his private behavior and to disregard Clinton’s legalistic language, so long as he does a good job in office. Faced with allegation after allegation, the President has been able to escape charges and to present his administration in a positive light. Clinton has strengthened his position in this modern rhetorical republic through the effective use of “going public” as well as a mastery of political rhetoric. While the President certainly must have more grandiose visions for his presidential legacy, he will certainly be remembered in history for his careful use of semantics that time after time have rescued his administration from peril, positioned himself as a moderate, and, that might keep him from the ultimate danger of all, impeachment.

No analysis of the Scandal of the Decade would be complete without examining the media frenzy that soon developed. While Clinton presented his case to the American people, the media also reported new developments in the scandal day after day. Just as the President contributed to the development of the scandal through his attempts to influence public opinion, so too did the media have an important role in creating the spectacle witnessed on the public airwaves. Providing viewers with around-the-clock updates of the latest developments and the most recent allegations against the President, the hourly access to breaking scandal news served to heighten the audience’s sense of



urgency and interest in this national occupation. Indeed, the spectacle witnessed on cable television shows in particular such as those on CNN, Fox, and MSNBC, created a media frenzy similar to that during the O. J. Simpson murder trial. For many viewers, it seemed as though the Clinton-Lewinsky matter became a media obsession.

In relaying the Lewinsky matter to the American public, news reports of the lurid details of the President's alleged behavior served to titillate the public and eventually evolved into a media spectacle with far-reaching implications for the office of the presidency and for our national discourse. The media helped drive the development of the Scandal of the Decade through investigative reporting and by indirectly seeking to incite a "moral panic" among the general populace (Lull and Hinerman 4). The Lewinsky matter had the making of a mega-scandal for the reporter eager to become another Woodward or Bernstein, of proportions viewers had rarely if ever experienced. The scandal involved lurid allegations of adultery by the President of the United States, alleged sexual relations with a young woman his daughter's age, alleged attempts to persuade witnesses to cover up the affair, and apparent improper use of government employee time and public offices. In fact, the story was so good that if the media could just keep the story alive and continue to obtain more leaks from anonymous sources close to Starr or the President, it had the potential to inflame the public and increase ratings and readership. Delving into the details of the President's sexual encounters with Monica Lewinsky, and reporting leak after leak that surfaced from the Paula Jones lawsuit and the Starr investigation, the scandal was used day after day to entertain audiences (Lull and Hinerman 26; Brownstein and Walsh 14; Gibbs 18; Fineman and Breslau, "Sex, Lies" 20;

Klaidman, Breslau and Isikoff 30; Isikoff and Thomas, "Clinton" 30; Hedges and Walsh, 30; Lavelle, Barnes and Walsh 24; Lavelle 22). All the while, each news affiliate, represented by CBS, NBC, ABC, Fox, and CNN, sought to outdo the other, by uncovering more torrid details and reporting them first in their affiliate newspapers, magazines and on the television news shows. Determined not to miss out as many had during the Watergate scandal, many reporters engaged in aggressive investigative journalism to one up their competitors (Stevenson 49). Throughout most of 1998, the scandal remained in the national spotlight, with media analysts constantly debating, recycling, re-hashing, and questioning the President over and over again. Similar to Ellen Reid Gold's observation of the relentless, investigative reporting behavior exhibited after the Watergate scandal, the media during the Lewinsky matter did not allow a "single explanation [by the President] to stand" (311). While the media could have put an end to the spectacle by choosing to focus on other important national topics or questioning the validity of the investigation, instead day after day, night after night, they recycled the day's developments and debated them on the public airwaves.

The media had effectively fostered a mega-scandal and sought to inflame public sentiments, playing upon shock of the President's alleged immoral behavior and our desire to resolve the scandal and to return to normalcy. What started as yet additional allegations from Starr's then three-year investigation, which at that time had not uncovered any wrongdoing by the President, became a national obsession in the media. However, what is perhaps most interesting about the role of the mass media in the Scandal of the Decade is that the attempt to incite a "moral panic" actually had quite an

opposite effect. The media spectacle served to produce a backlash against the media itself (Turner 48). In addition, rather than inflaming public outrage at the President's behavior, the media frenzy actually helped the President by enhancing public apathy and disinterest toward the Starr investigation. By fall of 1998, public apathy and impatience had grown so much that public opinion polls revealed seventy-one percent of Americans were against impeachment, and forty-three percent of Americans thought that Congress should simply "drop the matter" (Russert, "WSJ"; "Taking"). Regardless of the outcome for President Clinton, the spectacle had already impacted the office of the presidency and our national discourse about presidential behavior. It would take some time to sort out our differences and to repair the impact of the Scandal of the Decade on the office of the presidency.

### **Rhetorical Presidency, *Apologia*, and Communication Research**

Analysis of the Clinton Administration's responses to the Lewinsky matter reveal changing presidential leadership strategies, ones increasingly reliant on public relations campaigns in the media or "going public" to address controversy and rally public support for an issue. Clinton's responses to the scandal demonstrate the use of legendary war room tactics, outlined in books such as Primary Colors by Anonymous (Joe Klein) and Spin Cycle by Howard Kurtz, intended to deflect virtually any potential problem or controversy that might arise. Having mastered the art of influencing media coverage and public opinion through the use of public relations campaigns, Clinton adapted the *modus*

*operandi* of the rhetorical presidency to address an increasingly entertainment-oriented media, in addition to the American public. The potent tool of “going public” also reveals the inherent dangers of rhetorical leadership relying on carefully worded statements to evade difficult situations. As illustrated in the case of the Scandal of the Decade, there are inherent drawbacks of “going public”. One drawback is a tendency to rely too heavily on public opinion polls to lead the nation rather than presidential leadership and initiative. Another is the dangerous belief that the best way out of a scandal is to “spin one’s way out,” rather than to simply admit wrongdoing.

Following the research of political *apologia* during election campaigns conducted by Ellen Reid Gold, this thesis presents an important theoretical link between modern presidential campaign tactics and political *apologia* to address allegations and influence public support (306). The method employed presents an effective addition to traditional political *apologia*, with the use of the conspiracy theory or paranoid *apologia* to deflect criticism and *kategoria* to point the blame on others. Brant Short’s paranoid *apologia*, based on the “paranoid style” by Richard Hofstadter, presents a highly effective rhetorical tool to counter allegations or charges during election campaigns or media scandals, especially when information is leaked to the press little by little (189). Application of the paranoid *apologia* in this thesis reveals that the conspiracy theory acts as a shield to deflect new allegations and to reinforce the perception that a conspiracy is at work each time additional evidence and allegations surface. Analysis of the President’s responses to the Lewinsky matter also reveals that the transformative strategies of bolstering and transcendence, when used in concert with the counterattack, are most

effective in campaigns to foster public support and to change the subject. Additional research on the link between election campaign tactics, and political, paranoid and *kategoria-based apologia* is warranted to further explore these observations. Likewise, a more detailed study examining how to apply paranoid *apologia* to a text is merited to realize the full potential of this potent form of self-defense.

### **Implications of Clinton's Rhetoric and the Scandal**

Following the President's Map Room speech in August 1998, the Scandal of the Decade developed at a rapid pace. In a move that sent shock waves through the nation and caught many lawmakers by surprise, on September 9, 1998, two weeks after the President's federal grand jury testimony and address to the nation, the Office of Independent Counsel delivered a 445-page report to Congress with boxes of prosecutorial evidence against the President ("The Starr" 46). The report contained thousands of pages of supporting material, including Lewinsky's detailed testimony about her sexual encounters with the President, as well as the testimony of Bettie Curie, Clinton's secretary, and Vernon Jordan, the high-powered Washington lawyer accused of allegedly securing a job for Lewinsky in exchange for a signed affidavit in the Jones case denying a sexual relationship with Clinton.

Partisan bickering soon ensued as the House Judiciary Committee debated how much of Starr's "sexually explicit" report and supporting material should be released to the American public ("Detailed"). On September 11, 1998, the House voted to make public

the Starr report, denying a Clinton legal team request to receive the report 24 hours before the general populace. Excerpts from the report detail Lewinsky's ten sexual encounters with the President, fifteen phone-sex conversations, and lurid details of Lewinsky performing oral sex on the President while he lobbied to Congress for aid in the Balkans, and other similar encounters (Fineman, "Judgement" 29). Starr's rationale for including details of each encounter reportedly was an effort to counter the President's denial that he lied in the January 17, 1998, Jones deposition when he said that he did not have sexual relations with Lewinsky (Thomas and Isikoff, "The Prosecutor" 38). Democrats strongly objected to releasing the details of these sexual encounters, while Republicans argued that it was essential to disclose the report to let Americans judge the President's guilt for themselves. A week later, in the midst of tumultuous partisan differences, the House Judiciary Committee voted to release 2,800 pages of sexually explicit testimony, followed by the release of Clinton's videotaped testimony before the grand jury the next day ("Detailed"). Despite, or perhaps because of, the substantial news coverage and speculation about the damaging impact of the President's videotaped testimony, the polls remained in Clinton's favor even after the tape was released (Klaidman and Hossenball 28; Fineman, "Judgement" 31). The public did think the President should be punished somehow for his dishonest behavior, but they also believed he should remain in office. Fifty-four percent of those polled thought that the President should be censured and fifty-eight percent believed he should not resign over the scandal (Thomas and Isikoff, "The Prosecutor" 40).

The Committee later released transcripts from the Tripp tapes and eventually held hearings to decide whether to proceed with impeachment inquiries. On October 8, 1998, the House of Representatives voted 258 to 176 along party lines to begin formal impeachment hearings against the President after the November 1998 elections (“Detailed”; “The Long” 38). Against Democrats’ wishes, Republicans passed a resolution authorizing an open-ended impeachment inquiry into the Lewinsky matter and any other allegations such as charges of campaign fundraising abuses, misuse of FBI files and improper financial dealings in Whitewater. While Congress was about to begin investigating a variety of charges against the President, Starr continued his investigation, delving into yet more evidence of obstruction of justice, this time allegations that a private investigator sought to intimidate Kathleen Willey to refrain from testifying about unwanted sexual advances from the President. With each new development in Washington D.C., the Clintons’ charge of a right-wing conspiracy against the President became more and more convincing.

As the November elections approached, speculation increased about how the Democrats would do in the election and whether there would be a backlash against the Republican-controlled Congress. Capitol Hill awaited the election to see which side would have the upper hand in on the impeachment hearings. The Republican majority would likely remain in the House and Senate, barring a boomerang effect at the polls; the issue was how many seats the Republicans would gain and how many seats the Democrats could maintain in their power. While impeachment was a strong possibility in

the House, it would be difficult to secure the required 67 votes in the Senate to impeach the President, unless Republicans could win a few more seats (Epstein H1).

While the future of the Clinton presidency is unknown at this time, there is little doubt that the 1998 Scandal of the Decade will have lasting implications on the office of the presidency, on our expectations of the president, our perception of politics, Clinton's presidential legacy, and on future presidential administrations. Regardless of whether the scandal developed out of a right-wing conspiracy against the President, Clinton was clearly responsible for the spectacle that followed. Starr does appear to have set a perjury trap for the President when he testified in his January 17, 1998, deposition that he did not have sexual relations with Lewinsky. Likewise, the partisan bickering in the House Judiciary Committee and the vote along party lines to hold an open-ended impeachment inquiry into the Lewinsky allegations, and other charges that are not addressed within the Starr report, does appear to be a politically motivated attempt by the Republicans to gain leverage in the 1998 November mid-term elections and the 2000 presidential election. However, this does not change the fact that the President chose to deny his affair under oath, effectively breaking the very laws he swore to uphold. Similar to Watergate, what most upset Congress and the American public were the lies and attempts to cover-up wrongdoing. Based on the President's admission on August 17, 1998, of having an inappropriate relationship with Lewinsky, it is apparent that the President lied under oath in his January 17 deposition and chose to lie to the nation for the next seven months. Instead of lying, the President could have pleaded the 5<sup>th</sup> Amendment and refused to comment on questions about his personal life. While it



remains to be seen whether the President is legally guilty of perjury, his ability to command public trust and his hopes for his presidential legacy are forever changed.

To many Americans, Clinton's decision to lie in the January deposition and later to the public represents a character flaw and an act of cowardice in a time of institutional crisis. Yet to others, Clinton's attempt to deflect criticism and to conceal any additional evidence of sexual indiscretions from the Jones legal team represents the ability to survive in a difficult situation. Indeed, according to Ellen Reid Gold, "a candidate's ability to free himself from political nettles is often seen as analogous to his ability to lead the country out of dark forests of domestic and foreign crisis" (315). Regardless of which doctrine one subscribes to, it is evident that Clinton's responses to the allegations and the resulting media spectacle already have inspired a difficult debate about the personal qualities we expect from the President of the United States and politicians in general.

For some time, the media has reported more about politicians' personal and public activities, and has increased the level of scrutiny of their personal lives. While this has enabled Americans to learn more about the people they elect to office, the increased amount of news broadcasts and programs, along with greater familiarity of politicians' personal activities, have contributed to a decreased mystique of the office politicians hold. This increased familiarity and decreased mystique is particularly true of the Presidency. In addition to news about the Clintons' new dog Buddy and his family vacation to Martha's Vineyard, Americans now know lurid details of the President's intimate sex life and his apparent sexually compulsive behavior. However, media coverage of the scandal is not the only factor that served to decrease the mystique and esteem of the highest

office of the country. Clinton's irresponsible, un-presidential and immature behavior in the Lewinsky matter has further demeaned the prestige and honor of the institution of presidency. While privately he may do whatever he wishes, publicly his efforts to disguise an embarrassing affair have ultimately served to undermine the authority of the executive branch, future presidents' privileges, and the respect and honor we associate with the highest office of the nation.

The President's responses to the allegations also have served to inflame the debate about character and ethics in politics. Politicians traditionally have not represented the pinnacle of honesty and integrity. During the Lewinsky scandal, some members of Congress feared that Clinton's behavior would increase feelings of alienation with politicians, similar to the Watergate scandal, and might also discourage many from a life of public service ("Taking"). However, others countered that the fear of public scrutiny in the media and of intrusive investigations represented stronger detractors from politics, than the lack of moral leadership. As Americans considered the potential implications of the Lewinsky matter, most agreed that Clinton's misleading responses to the allegations in some way challenged the integrity and honor traditionally associated with the institution of the presidency. Historian Forrest McDonald examined the cultural role that the American President has traditionally reflected in our society. McDonald observed that, "the presidency has been responsible for less harm and more good, in the nation and in the world, than perhaps any other secular institution in history" (qtd. in Gergen 88). Serving as "the one man distillation of the American people," the President's responses to

the Lewinsky allegations dishonored not only him, but also the dignity and honor of the institution and the people he represented (Rossiter 8).

Clinton's responses to the Lewinsky matter and the public reaction to his strategy of self-defense brought into the forefront a recurring debate about the importance of personal character and integrity in the Presidency, specifically. Clinton was not the first president to have been suspected of improper or scandalous personal behavior while in office. DNA evidence now definitively supports the rumor that Thomas Jefferson was alleged to have fathered at least one of his young slaves (Ellis, "Today"). This introduces a variety of questions about Thomas Jefferson's public versus private behavior, and contradictions about his personal integrity given his public statements about the need to separate the races in society (Ellis, "Today"). Other Presidents also have exhibited behavior that was historically perceived as scandalous. Andrew Jackson led the public to believe he was married to the First Lady, while she was actually married to someone else. Ulysses Grant was suspected of having a drinking problem as president. Woodrow Wilson was rumored to have had premarital sex with his fiancée and to have plotted with his future wife to murder his first wife. Stories of Grover Cleveland's illegitimate child, his philandering, and his drunken disturbances were widely reported (Collins 42). The list of suspected presidential improprieties in their personal lives is actually quite extensive and includes many more Presidents. Despite the scandalous rumors, these Presidents still got elected and maintained their role in office. Gail Collins, the author of *Scorpion Tongues: Gossip, Celebrity, and American Politics*, writes that while the public was concerned about these

presidential indiscretions, “they [voted], as usual, for what was going to be the lesser of two evils” (42).

To date, this paradox still exists. In reaction to Clinton’s statements denying the allegations, the public opinion polls illustrated a tendency to focus on the President’s ability to lead the nation and to ignore his personal indiscretions, even though poll responses consistently exhibited a lack of respect for his personal character. The President’s handling of the Lewinsky matter illustrates this internal struggle within the American culture, that traditionally values character and integrity in politics, but is constantly impelled to vote for the lesser of two evils. Clinton’s continued reliance on rhetorical leadership through public opinion, and the resulting polls, illustrates a persistent cultural trend to separate morals and integrity from politics and public policy. While many conservative politicians and organizations are attempting to reverse this cultural trend, they have been so far ineffective in bringing a change in the operation of everyday politics. For a while after the Watergate scandal, public distrust and alienation dominated our national debates. Capitalizing on a need to return ethics to politics, Jimmy Carter was elected to office largely on a platform of integrity and honesty. Currently, citizens are sharply divided on this issue. While conservatives contend that character is the most important quality of a president, liberals have a tendency to take a more utilitarian approach to politics (Bennett 38). As the impeachment inquiry in the House Judiciary Committee advances, this cultural debate about ethics in politics will certainly continue.

Clinton's handling of the Scandal of the Decade already has had an impact on our perception of politics on Capitol Hill, the institution of the presidency, and on our American ideals. The President's responses to the allegations revealed the darker side of Washington, a side where politicians' sole aim is to survive, not necessarily to do what was best for the country. Instead of being courageous, and admitting his inappropriate relationship, or adamantly defending his right to protect his private life, Clinton chose to lie to the nation and contributed to months of inaction on Capitol Hill. As Congress switched from important legislation for their constituents to partisan battles and political games, the public witnessed an example of politics at its worst. This behavior by Congress and the President of the United States served to undermine public faith in their elected officials and tarnished the image of the institution of the presidency. Furthermore, the President's ambiguous language sent dangerous cultural messages suggesting it was acceptable in some cases to avoid full disclosure while under oath, and, perhaps even to break the laws of our Constitution. William Bennett, a former Democrat of twenty years who is now a Republican, writes about character, ethics, job performance, and basic moral standards in politics in *The Death of Outrage*, his book on the Lewinsky scandal:

It is said that private character has virtually no impact on governing character; that what matters above all is a healthy economy; that moral authority is defined solely by how well a president deals with public policy matters; that America needs to become more European (read: more sophisticated) in its attitude toward sex; that lies about sex, even under oath, don't really matter. . . . These arguments define us down, they

assume a lower common denominator of behavior and leadership than we Americans ought to accept. (8)

Bennett's statement touches upon current cultural debates about personal and professional expectations of our presidents, and criteria by which we judge our president's performance, namely, whether the economy is strong or not. His comments get to the heart of a dilemma illustrated by both the President's handling of the Lewinsky matter and the subsequent opinion polls. While Americans widely express the importance of integrity and honor in politics, they do not demand it of politicians. It is this acceptance of a lower moral standard that perpetuates a lack of public accountability, and responsibility in public service. This acceptance holds dangerous implications as both Watergate and the Scandal of the Decade revealed. As with Watergate, it is most likely a sign that the pendulum of public expectations will swing toward the right demanding stronger ethics in public life.

While Starr's investigation of the President at times resembled the Spanish Inquisition, in its relentless pursuit of the intimate sexual details of Clinton's relationship with Lewinsky, as well as attempts to recover physical DNA evidence of a sexual encounter and a book allegedly purchased about phone sex, it also served an important role--to preserve the sanctity of the Constitution, and the idea that no one, not even the President of the United States, is above the law. Critics of the investigation did have persuasive arguments. Starr's inquiry into the President's private life was certainly unfair. Similarly, the Independent Counsel law clearly was flawed. Giving an investigator an endless budget and a limitless time period to uncover wrongdoing by a President was

misguided. Likewise, it was clear that if Clinton were a regular citizen, he would not face the charge of perjury for allegedly lying in a civil deposition on a lawsuit which the judge decided did not merit a case. However, life, especially in politics, is not always fair. The President of the United States, as the symbolic leader of our nation and the national embodiment of American culture, should be held to a higher standard. Instead of inheriting a noteworthy presidential legacy of valued accomplishments, Clinton's successor will receive an institution with fewer executive privileges, less power and public respect, and an American public increasingly impatient with Washington politics as usual.

From the perspective of Ceaser et al., the institutional implications of Clinton's behavior and of the Lewinsky scandal inherently are negative. However, similar to the outcome of the Watergate scandal, fewer presidential privileges, increased public scrutiny, and enhanced control of our national leader will be viewed by many as a benefit of the scandal, and a sign of reform. Indeed, the tendency to focus on the negative implications to the institution of the presidency illustrates the inherent inclination of the rhetorical presidency construct to emphasize the dangers of rhetorical leadership, rather than the benefits. This thesis has demonstrated the value of presidential rhetoric in capturing public support and in countering political charges. Additional research is warranted to explore the inherent negative implications of the rhetorical presidency construct with respect to presidential rhetoric.

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