

POWERFUL APPEAL: HOW BILL CLINTON OVERCAME THE LEWINSKY SCANDAL

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INTRODUCTION

Televisions are scattered throughout the White House. Constantly tuned into news stations and political talk shows, the televisions are a reminder that serving as president is as much a reactionary job to the events of the world as it is a proactive position. Televisions in Barack Obama's White House broadcast about the crisis in Benghazi. Televisions in George W. Bush's White House showed continuous coverage of the battles within America's war in Iraq. The aforementioned events were largely out of the control of either president. One can imagine the trepidation felt by former president Bill Clinton when the news networks began to report on an affair between the president and a former White House intern. Unlike the Benghazi incident and Iraq war, the Lewinsky scandal was brought on by Clinton himself. The year that followed the news of the Lewinsky scandal was both an example of strategic reaction and calculated aggression aimed at minimizing the negative effects of the alleged affair. I would posit that in the year following the announcement of the Lewinsky scandal, Bill Clinton and his strategists "wrote the book" on how to handle major scandal while in the executive office.

Since the Nixon administration, presidential scandals have had a direct result on a president's likability polling.¹ There has not always been a direct correlation to scandal and job approval rating. While there can certainly be a direct effect on both polling numbers, scandal that brings into question the character of the chief executive most directly affects the likability rating of the president. The case of Bill Clinton is unique because scandals plagued his presidency, and he left office impeached, yet he received widespread approval from the public.

Presidential scandals vary in scope, depth, and importance, so it is important to choose a working definition for presidential scandal so that scandal can be differentiated from smaller issues. Scandal can be defined with data. Data and polling give a statistical model to determine the duration of a scandal's effects. Brendan Nyhan, a professor of government at Dartmouth says a situation becomes a scandal at the following point: "My primary measure of scandal onset tracks when news reporting first describes a controversy involving the president or

¹ Berinsky, Adam J. *Silent Voices: Public Opinion and Political Participation in America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2004. Print.

executive branch as a 'scandal' in the reporter's voice."² In addition to Nyhan's definition, I will define scandal as the public disclosure of a perceived ethical transgression that dominates the news cycle for multiple days. Scandal often goes beyond just a violation of governing norms when a specific act is seen by voters as ethically or morally flawed. Many events that have scandal potential are covered up or never make the news media. As a result, it is impossible to study how politicians use the media to handle such scandals. Even though some transgressions never make the news they can often be more serious than lesser misdeeds that the media immediately deems a scandal. For that reason, I have chosen not to take a solely data-centric approach to defining scandal because often the media is able to define what will be a scandal. However, in using two definitions, I will allow the presence of either to serve as a marker of scandal (if one definition fits, the event qualifies as scandal). Allegations with varying degrees of validity can transform into a scandal, gaffe, or failure depending on how the media portrays the event.

During a normal "scandal," the transgressor often sees a drop in approval and likability rating, but statistical

² Nyhan, Brendan. "Scandal Potential: How political context and news congestion affect the president's vulnerability to media scandal." *British Journal of Political Science*. Pp. 1-48.

data shows that political opponents do not always see an equal and opposite reaction in their polling data.³ Changes in the polling of political opponents often lag well behind the changes in approval for the political actor involved in the scandal. As a result, the polling of political opponents is statistically insignificant in the immediate aftermath of the news breaking. Political actors that are able to control the effects of their own polling data will, in turn, minimize the positive effects on their rivals. Bill Clinton and his aides were able to not only minimize the effect on Clinton's polling data, but polling data also shows that Clinton's opponents experienced a negative reaction for appearing to overdo their own criticism of the president.

Bill Clinton provides a unique case study on political and personal scandals because of the frequency and bizarre nature of the scandals, coupled with his high approval ratings. Accusations of marital infidelity started in 1992 when adult model and actress Gennifer Flowers alleged that she had a relationship with the Arkansas governor and presidential candidate dating back over a decade to 1980.⁴ Frank Luntz is a political analyst and author who has done

³ Nyhan, "Scandal Potential: How political context and news congestion affect the president's vulnerability to media scandal."

⁴ Sabato, Larry. "Bill Clinton and Gennifer Flowers - 1992." *The Washington Post*. 1998.

extensive study on language, body cues, and human reaction to such. In a 1994 issue of *The Polling Report*, Luntz wrote that it was the Gennifer Flowers controversy that gave Clinton and his aides practice at how to handle personal scandals while reestablishing trust with the public.⁵ Luntz wrote, "No one in political history has had a greater commitment to focus group research than Bill Clinton. The strategies for dealing with Gennifer Flowers, the draft dodging charge, and the other moral challenges that faced his campaign in the primaries were developed through focus group research."⁶ The accusations of a lengthy affair from Flowers taught Clinton and his aides how every word, every non-verbal cue, and every media interview must be carefully planned based off of focus group research. Focus groups showed how those consuming the media reports would react to the words and mannerisms of Clinton or his aide who was speaking about the scandal. The former president was so reliant on polls and focus groups that even some of his aides believed he relied too heavily on statistical data.⁷ The Flowers debacle taught Clinton and his aides how to handle the scandal. It taught them how to minimize the movement of his likability polling, and it taught them how

⁵ Luntz, Frank. "Voices of Victory." *The Polling Report*. May 16-May 30, 1994.

⁶ Luntz, "Voices of Victory."

⁷ Berinsky, *Silent Voices: Public Opinion and Political Participation in America*.

to manipulate viewer reaction with the use of focus groups to test certain reactions. Ironically, polling and focus groups taught Clinton how to control his own polling numbers and the reaction of television focus groups. In many ways, a case-study of how Clinton handled the media is as much a case study on public opinion as it is on Clinton himself. Geordie Greig, author of *The Glasshours President*, put it that: further complicating the story of Clinton and his personal scandals is that there is “no one in Washington who does not believe the story of [Clinton’s] affairs.”⁸ Yet in 2013, 21 years after the Gennifer Flowers accusations hit the tabloids, Clinton is still revered. He remains a political force for the Democratic party. Americans flock to hear him speak. In many ways, the Bill Clinton that has endured the Lewinsky and Flowers scandals is more popular now than he was before either scandal. He has been called a genius, Bubba, “a good man done a bad thing,” a scumbag, and Mr. President. He wears all those hats. That is what makes the study of Clinton’s scandals such a fascinating undertaking.

Bill Clinton left office with a 65 percent approval rating which was higher than any other departing president

⁸ *The Glasshours President* by Geordie Greig

in United States history.⁹ Five years later Clinton was not only more popular than George W. Bush, the current president at the time, but he also polled as the more honest man.

APOLOGIA

The most relevant communication theory to the case study of Bill Clinton's handling of scandal is apologia as it refers to crisis management. Utilizing apologia does not necessarily mean that an individual or organization is apologizing for an action or group of actions.¹⁰ Rather the person may "deny, explain, or apologize for the action through communication discourse."¹¹ Clinton opted for the explanation posture that is contained within apologia. In the explanation posture, one assumes that if the audience understands his motives, actions, beliefs, or whatever, they will be unable to condemn him.¹² Clinton coupled his use of apologia with the use of priming, defined as "changes in the standards people use to make political evaluations. Priming occurs when news content suggests to news audiences that they ought to use specific issues as

⁹ Bauer, S. Wise. *The Art of the Public Grovel: Sexual Sin and Public Confession in America*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2008. Print.

¹⁰ Ware, B. L., & Linkugel, W. A. "They spoke in defense of themselves: On the generic criticism of apologia." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. 1973. pp. 273-283.

¹¹ Ware, "They spoke in defense of themselves: On the generic criticism of apologia."

¹² Ware, "They spoke in defense of themselves: On the generic criticism of apologia."

benchmarks for evaluating the performance of leaders and governments.¹³ Clinton and his aides controlled the message of how the public should judge their president, and in doing so, they successfully used priming to enable the president to overcome such potentially-crippling allegations.

Maxwell McCombs wrote that, "Mass communication is a social process in which the same message, either printed, audio, or audio/visual form, is disseminated to a vast population."¹⁴ In Clinton's case, his priming of the scandal dictated how the mass media would present the issue, thus he was able to control how the public would view him.

EVANGELICAL CONFESSION MODEL

Bill Clinton gave his confession to the Monica Lewinsky scandal in a distinctly evangelical way patterned after nineteenth century puritans who author Susan Bauer said paved the way for the era of public confession. The Protestant tradition, dating back to the era of Grover Cleveland, encouraged its followers to speak about their transgressions around others who have transgressed as well. This ideal was in direct contrast to the Catholic tradition where believers privately confessed their sins. Such confession was believed to bring benefit to more than the

¹³ McCombs, Maxwell. *Setting the Agenda*. Polity Press. Cambridge: 2004.

¹⁴ McCombs, *Setting the Agenda*.

soul.¹⁵ Bauer writes that “protestant revivalism had made the ritual of confession visible enough to be routine.”

Confessions became a way for public figures to reassure the public without facing a public trial questioning their character. For Bill Clinton, following this model meant that he was able to reassure the public while appearing to help his own soul by announcing his transgressions. Clinton approached Evangelical leaders before coming public with his own confession after the Lewinsky scandal, and in doing so, he earned public shows of support from ministers like Gordon MacDonald and Anthony Campolo.¹⁶ Following the Protestant model of confession, Campolo and MacDonald encouraged Clinton to publicly acknowledge his mistakes.

Clinton and his aides studied the public confessions of President Grover Cleveland, who despite living in an era without mass media that instantly disseminated information, executed a campaign that could be mirrored by Clinton to help restore his own name. Cleveland had seduced a woman in 1884 during his presidency, impregnated her, and subsequently forced her to place the child in an orphanage. Living in a less secular era, the Cleveland scandal could have been career-ending. Instead, Cleveland let it be known

¹⁵ Bauer, *The Art of the Public Grovel: Sexual Sin and Public Confession in America*.

¹⁶ Bauer, *The Art of the Public Grovel: Sexual Sin and Public Confession in America*.

that he had confessed to a minister,¹⁷ and his aides made his public appearances for him because there was never a public call for a confession from Cleveland himself. Cleveland's reaction to the scandal was calculated and successful in positioning him as a man of the people; a man who had made a very human mistake. However, the public did hear (through the minister) that Cleveland had acknowledged that he had sinned. As was the case with Clinton, the public needed to hear it from the man: "I have sinned."

The Clinton administration knew that more detailed metrics besides job approval were needed to understand the scope of how a scandal affected the public's view of a politician. In a study of Spanish national elections, McCombs and Rey found that personal characteristics affected voters more heavily than either candidate's qualifications or positions on issues.¹⁸ Integrity and honesty are two of the crucial characteristics that voters evaluate in a politician. Therefore, it was crucial that Clinton's handling of his scandal did not emulate those of Ted Kennedy or Jim Bakker who had scandals greatly diminish

¹⁷ Bauer, *The Art of the Public Grovel: Sexual Sin and Public Confession in America*.

¹⁸ McCombs, M., Llamas, J.P., Lopez-Escobar, E., & Rey, F. (1997) Candidate Images in Spanish Elections: Second-level agenda-setting effects. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*. 703-714.

the potential of their political careers.¹⁹ However, through the first eight months of 1998, Clinton's repeated denials were very similar to those of Kennedy and Bakker. On August 17, after Clinton was summoned to testify before a federal grand jury, Clinton's modus operandi changed. What had been a pattern of denials became patterned after the evangelical and Puritan model of accountability.

First confession

On August 17 (two months before the House of Representatives voted to impeach him), Clinton took to the television to speak directly to the American people. "As you know," Clinton spoke, "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." Classic Clinton. In the model set forth by protestant reformers, Clinton offered not an apology, but a confession. Bauer writes that a confession is not an expression of regret but rather an admission of fault: "*I am sorry because I did wrong. I sinned.*"²⁰ Public figures are now apologizing with increasing frequency, but they often serve only as momentary distractions from the fact that

¹⁹ Bauer, *The Art of the Public Grovel: Sexual Sin and Public Confession in America*.

²⁰ Bauer, *The Art of the Public Grovel: Sexual Sin and Public Confession in America*.

they are not confessing.²¹ For example, comedian Michael Richards said in 2006 after his racial tirade in which he screamed the “n word” repeatedly that he was “deeply, deeply sorry,” but Richards stopped short of any admission of wrongdoing. Clinton continued his August 17 speech to the American public: “Indeed, I did have a relationship with Miss Lewinsky that was not appropriate. In fact, it was wrong.” Clinton’s confession was able to frame him not only as a person worthy of forgiveness, but it also struck the American people that Clinton, like everyone, was a flawed individual. He was not perfect. (Of note: Clinton finished that statement by saying, “It is time to stop the politics of personal destruction and the prying into private lives and get on with our national life.” Later, I will analyze how Clinton’s political opponents were overly critical of Clinton’s personal life which ruined their own credibility instead of Clinton’s.

Clinton’s August 17th statement changed the course of his handling of the scandal, but in many ways, the statement was criticized as inadequate.²² He had fallen short of full confession with words like “misled” and “lapse

²¹ Bauer, *The Art of the Public Grovel: Sexual Sin and Public Confession in America*.

²² Bauer, *The Art of the Public Grovel: Sexual Sin and Public Confession in America*.

in judgement.” An editorial pointed out that Washington residents wanted nothing less than a complete confession.²³ Clinton and his advisors quickly realized the criticism of his statement and waited just 11 days to offer another (at least perceived as such) confession.

Second confession

While speaking at a church on the 35th anniversary of the March on Washington, Clinton said, “All of you know, I’m having to become quite an expert in this business of asking for forgiveness...It is important that we are able to forgive those whom we believe have wronged us, even as we ask for forgiveness from people we have wronged.” The word Lewinsky was never uttered in Clinton’s speech. He never used the phrase “relationship.” Instead, Clinton spoke in a uniquely Clinton way. He spoke through the television to viewers. He was speaking to a congregation of African Americans, and he connected his request for forgiveness to the Civil Rights Movement. Despite never directly acknowledging the scandal, Clinton “was widely seen as having apologized for it²⁴” because of his use of the aforementioned explanation position contained within apologia.

²³ Lee, Ronald and Barton, Matthew H. “Clinton’s Rhetoric of Contrition,” pg. 225-227.

²⁴ Bauer, *The Art of the Public Grovel: Sexual Sin and Public Confession in America*.

And finally, Clinton's embrace of the protestant model of confession continued when he gave his complete confession. On September 11 at the Washington prayer breakfast, a group of ministers gathering in the East Room of the White House heard Clinton say the words that the public most needed to hear: "I have sinned."

Clinton said, "I don't think there is a fancy way to say that I have sinned. It is important to me that everybody who has been hurt know that the sorrow I feel is genuine." It took Bill Clinton over over eight months to move toward confession, but he showed enormous skill at achieving the desired results to both salvage his presidency and his reputation. Susan Bauer describes the results of Clinton's three confessions in this way:

"Against all odds, his confessions managed to convince a significant segment of the American public that he was neither a predator nor an evildoer, and that he was fighting the good fight against evil. Most amazing, this white, male, lawyer, this Rhodes Scholar, who held the highest elected office in the land, persuaded his followers that he was just like the country's poorest most oppressed citizens.²⁵"

²⁵ Bauer, *The Art of the Public Grovel: Sexual Sin and Public Confession in America*.

Clinton successfully married his populist voice and pathos with a Protestant-centric ethos that mirrored the successful confessions of scandal-survivors dating back to the era of Grover Cleveland. Growing up Southern Baptist, Clinton knew well the practice of repentance, and he merely adopted that strategy to work in front of a large national audience.

Augustinian confessions

Clinton was effective at offering “Augustinian confessions,” defined by Susan Bauer as “confession undertaken by the will, apart from the pressures of the external law system.” Such an apology shows the individual as free in will. Despite Clinton’s early denials, Clinton’s later confessions appeared voluntary to the American public which was an important display of self-control and will. Forced confessions are normally both unaccepted and show that the confessing individual has lost control of his actions and their subsequent consequences.²⁶

The effective aspects of Clinton’s Protestant-centric confession were as follows:

1. Clinton was able to position himself as a sinner for the Christian community. He spoke of the matter being between himself and God, and as Bauer notes, within the

²⁶ Bauer, *The Art of the Public Grovel: Sexual Sin and Public Confession in America*.

secular community he showed that he was legally blameless. In fact, Clinton turned the tables on his opponents by not only saying that he was legally blameless, but by saying “I’m going to follow the law...Somebody in this case ought to follow the law.” Such a statement was particularly effective in persuading the public to question the tactics and motives of Clinton’s political opponents.

2. Clinton also positioned himself as a victim of severe privacy invasion. He consistently noted that even presidents have private lives. His words about stopping the pursuit of “personal destruction” evoked a skepticism of the motives of Clinton’s political opponents.
3. Clinton effectively created a division that enabled him to separate moral wrongdoings from “secular political behavior.”²⁷ His religious standard of personal behavior was separated from his secular political behavior which he convinced the public was completely ethical. His moral shortcomings (sexual immorality) became nothing more than a personal failure. It was not a political or public failure, so he was able to maintain a high job approval rating and maintain a high level of political capital and leverage.

²⁷ Bauer, *The Art of the Public Grovel: Sexual Sin and Public Confession in America*.

While evangelicals struggled to accept the validity of such a division,²⁰ Clinton's scandal altered the standard of behavior for the neoevangelical community (a protestant branch of the church that believe evangelicals are too accepting of humanistic values). The neoevangelicals became invested in seeing a new set of moral ideals upheld even inside secular society. Such began the blending of secular ethical ideals with evangelical moral beliefs. In effect, Clinton had left both secular society and evangelical voters feeling as if Clinton identified most closely with them.

TRANSCENDING MORAL DISCREPANCIES

Clinton's ability to transcend the moral discrepancies about which the American public often bickers was perhaps his most prudent move. Clinton's apologies took place in a variety of forums that included one gathering of ministers from all denominations and faiths.²⁸ Few people dispute that Clinton had a truly rare gift of gab. Few people have the ability to connect to people with whom they converse. It was Clinton's convincing of Reverend Anthony Campolo that helped him remain someone considered religious, righteous but also liberal. Susan Bauer calls Campolo the leader of

²⁰ Noll, Mark A. *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1992.

²⁸ Bauer, *The Art of the Public Grovel: Sexual Sin and Public Confession in America*.

the “Evangelical left,” and she writes that Clinton’s bond with Campolo showed “it was possible to use neoevangelical rhetoric and still remain committed to liberal political ideals.”²⁹ The righteous majority forgave Clinton as he appeased their demand for repentance, and in doing so, Clinton undermined the attempt of his rivals to gain the moral high ground. As the conservative right sought political gain from the scandal, they had hoped Clinton would come off as a dishonest predator. Instead, Clinton delivered himself to the public as someone on the right side of evil. James Carville was a close political ally of Clinton who served on Clinton’s campaign in 1991 and in his White House. Carville’s now famous words ultimately perfectly describe how Clinton framed himself: “A good man who did a bad thing.”

Speaking of Lewinsky

In his efforts to avoid the label of predator, Clinton made one tactful decision that was ultimately the most effective strategy in avoiding such a label. Clinton never spoke negatively about the character of Monica Lewinsky.³⁰ He never focused on her life or motivations, but his allies were instrumental in creating the following results in a

²⁹ Bauer, *The Art of the Public Grovel: Sexual Sin and Public Confession in America*, 168

³⁰ Bauer, *The Art of the Public Grovel: Sexual Sin and Public Confession in America*, 168

Washington Post poll from February of 1998: 58 percent of people polled viewed Lewinsky “unfavorably” while only seven percent viewed her favorably.³¹ Clinton actually turned himself into the victim as his friends and aides told reporters that the President and Lewinsky bonded because “Lewinsky is the child of divorced parents, and Clinton grew up with an adoptive father who was an alcoholic and sometimes physically abusive.”³² The media played an important role in creating the dynamic of Clinton as a victim because in talking about the character of Lewinsky without quoting Clinton, doubt was put into the minds of the public about how culpable Clinton was in the affair. Furthermore, the *Washington Post* received scoops that Lewinsky “read sexual meaning into the merest chance encounter.”³³ Clinton’s strategy was very passive but nonetheless more persuasive than any other strategy he adopted to paint himself as a sexual victim.

While Clinton sought and gained the moral high ground over even his staunchest critics, he never became a moral elite. He avoided such a term because as a moral elitist, he would lose the confidence of his constituents. Those

³¹ “President’s Popularity Hits New High.” *Washington Post*. February 1, 1998.

³² Harris, John F. “Aide, Clinton were close, Friends told.” *Washington Post*. January 25, 1998.

³³ Goldstein, Amy & Claiborne, William. “Aide’s interest in Clinton was well-known.” *Washington Post*. January 29, 1998.

voters who had sent him to Washington would have worried if he would now use that power to bully justice. His constituents were not consumed with worry that Clinton would somehow use executive power to “circumvent justice.”³⁴

Blamed but supported

The crux of Clinton’s genius evangelical approach to apologizing was, as Bauer puts it, Clinton had no desire to lord his power and privilege over his constituents because “he lived, as they did, in the glass house of moral failure.”³⁵ So exceptional was Clinton’s skill in this area that his opponents began to blame the American people for his popularity. His opponents began to suggest that the leniency (itself a moral shortcoming in that it did not hold others to an appropriate level of moral standards) of the American people was the explanation for Bill Clinton’s popularity. The overreaches of Clinton’s political opponents will be a key point of examination later in this case study.

The Washington Post summed up Clinton’s use of the media during the scandal in an article from 1999 entitled “Public Gives Clinton Blame, Record Support:”

³⁴ Bauer, *The Art of the Public Grovel: Sexual Sin and Public Confession in America*.

³⁵ Bauer, *The Art of the Public Grovel: Sexual Sin and Public Confession in America*, 179

"Today his job approval rating stands at 68 percent, up eight percentage points from a *Post* survey taken immediately before the scandal broke in mid-January 1998. Three in four currently approve of the way Clinton is handling the economy, up 11 percentage points from the January 1998 pre-scandal poll. Two in three say they like the way Clinton is managing foreign affairs, another double-digit increase from pre-scandal surveys.³⁶"

In summary, Clinton's protestant-revivalist and Augustinian confession reassured the American public of a good number of things. Most important among them was that Clinton's power over them was not so strong that they could not support him. Rather, they held the power, and as a leader, Clinton adapted to what *they* wanted, not what he wanted. He possessed a vital political gift: the ability to lead while giving others the impression that you are doing what they want you to do.

OPPONENT OVERREACH

Perhaps Bill Clinton's opponents should have known that getting in a war of words with one of America's most eloquent politicians was a bad idea. Clinton was a mastermind at changing his words to fit a very fluid

³⁶ Morin, Richard, and Dean, Claudia. "Public Gives Clinton Blame, Record Support." *Washington Post*. February 15, 1999.

situation. Clinton's public persona was malleable to fit the tone of the day and was also a mastermind at using his words to manipulate media headlines.

Clinton's first confession was widely criticized as inadequate, ambiguous, and an attempt to side step an issue. Clinton's second apology at the prayer breakfast focused not on his relationship with Lewinsky, but instead, it focused on his first apology. Clinton told the collection of ministers, "I have sinned." Not once did he mention Lewinsky by name, and he never admitted to sex at that prayer breakfast. The phrase "I have sinned" could have meant that his first confession was contrite, and it could also have meant that he had sinned with Monica Lewinsky. It was effective because he used words that satisfy that which others sought from him and words that did not further implicate him of any wrongdoing. The media's story after the confession at the prayer breakfast centered largely on Clinton's redemption and admission of imperfection. It did not focus on the details of any improper relationship with Monica Lewinsky. For his political opponents that sought to pillory his character, what should have been a political home run became a political nightmare.

To Clinton's opponents, it seemed as if the public was taking a collective yawn at the allegations of sexual

misconduct, perjury and lying.³⁷ However, when Clinton's opponents overstepped tasteful bounds in their condemnations of Clinton's character, they created a situation in which the public was unsure if Clinton was to blame or if the attacking right wing was to blame.

Scandal Fatigue

In February of 1998, Susan Baer of the *Baltimore Sun* wrote an article entitled, "Scandal fatigue: Sex, lies, so what! Apathy: Republicans may have demonized Bill Clinton too many times."³⁸ Within the article, Baer cites several political analysts as they discuss the reason behind the public's "scandal fatigue." Alan Lichtman is a professor at American University who said Clinton's Republican opponents overplayed their hand since the first sign of smoke. "They've cried wolf too many times," Lichtman says. "Now nobody believes the wolf of scandal is at the door."³⁹ If politics was a board game, the GOP moved three spots forward with the announcement of the Lewinsky affair, but Clinton moved five spots forward in the scandal's aftermath due to a GOP overplay.

³⁷ Nyhan, "Scandal Potential: How political context and news congestion affect the president's vulnerability to media scandal."

³⁸ Baer, Susan. "Scandal fatigue: Sex, lies, so what! Apathy: Republicans may have demonized Bill Clinton too many times." *Baltimore Sun*. February 11, 1998.

³⁹ Berke, Richard L. "The President Under Fire: The Public View." *The New York Times*. January 27, 1998.

A 1998 New York Times/CBS News Poll found that a large section of the American population blamed Clinton's political opponents.⁴⁰ Fifty percent of respondents in the poll said that Mr. Clinton's political "enemies" were more responsible for the crisis than he. Meanwhile, only 40 percent blamed the president. On a separate question, nearly 50 percent said that Kenneth Starr, the independent counsel investigating the Lewinsky affair, was leading a partisan investigation meant to damage the president; just 30 percent thought he was impartial and fair. Clinton benefited from a political environment where partisanship was on the rise and public expectations for morality were on the decline. Brian Newman from the Political Research quarterly wrote, "Clinton's approval remained high because most people maintained a sharp public/private distinction."⁴¹ Instead of evaluating Clinton with an eye on both his public and private life, the public opted to view Clinton more in the context of his public political efforts. The move from speaker Tip O'Neill to Newt Gingrich increased partisan sentiment in Congress and among the American public. "Gingrich was a new kind of speaker: deeply partisan and startlingly power-hungry," Joe Nocera wrote in the New

⁴⁰ Berke, "The President Under Fire: The Public View."

⁴¹ Newman, Brian. "Bill Clinton's Approval Ratings: The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same." *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (Dec., 2002), pp. 781-804

York Times in 2011.⁴² After Newt Gingrich took over as speaker of the house in 1995, partisanship increased especially between Clinton and his counterparts in the House of Representatives. Furthermore, the public was accustomed to perceived immorality or dishonesty from the executive office dating back to the days of Eisenhower and after the Watergate scandal and the Iran-Contra affair, Newman explained.⁴³

Joe Starr, a respondent in the New York Times/CBS News poll, said that given Clinton's accomplishments on the country's issues, it was imprudent to dwell on his personal shortcomings. "A person like the president...still has their own life, and what goes on behind closed doors is their own business," Starr told the New York Times.⁴⁴

"I don't feel that this womanizing issue is corruption on the level of Watergate," another respondent said.

"I believe he is doing right by the country right now. I feel that he's done a good job in pulling the country together," another person opined. Of the 41 percent of respondents who said the issue was potentially crippling for the president, even those respondents overwhelmingly agreed that the issue was not equivalent to Watergate.

⁴² Nocera, Joe. "The Last Moderate." *The New York Times*. September 5, 2011.

⁴³ Newman, Brian. "Bill Clinton's Approval Ratings: The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same."

⁴⁴ Berke, "The President Under Fire: The Public View."

Clinton benefited from the political climate in Washington at the time that left Americans feeling like D.C. had become more toxic and bitter. In January of 1998, Gingrich's popularity rating stood at twenty-three percent while thirty-nine percent of Americans disapproved of the speaker.⁴⁵ Gingrich's predecessor, Tip O'Neill, had a reputation as more of a moderate that allowed both parties to work together as opposed to working against one another. When the Clinton scandal dragged on into the late months of 1998, Americans started to believe that Clinton's political opponents were exacerbating the problem and seeking their own political gain. In the same *New York Times* article mentioned above, sixty-two percent of respondents said that they were sick of the coverage of the presidential scandal.⁴⁶

In the eyes of women

Of all respondents, women were the most forgiving of the president because he carefully avoided being labeled a predator. As mentioned in the preceding pages, he sought the label of victim, not one of malicious predator. Women were cautious in judging the president's culpability while men were more judgmental. Forty-five percent of women said

⁴⁵ Berke, "The President Under Fire: The Public View."

⁴⁶ Berke, "The President Under Fire: The Public View."

they did not know if Clinton encouraged Lewinsky to lie while only thirty-five percent of males felt the same way.⁴⁷

For the president, one number mattered the most. How many people thought the allegations against him were true? Again, women were more lenient. Only twenty-eight percent of women thought the allegations against Bill Clinton were "probably true" (36 percent of men thought the allegations were "probably true").⁴⁸

While the number of people who blamed the president remained low, a high number of people also blamed the media for saturating the news cycles with too much coverage of the scandal; sixty-five percent said the Lewinsky scandal received too much news coverage, Berke reported.⁴⁹

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

On January 21, 1998, Bill Clinton sat down with Jim Lehrer, the host of *NewsHour* to discuss the serious allegations with which Clinton was charged. Lehrer, a respected journalist, could not have known what Clinton was going to say in that interview. Looking back, Clinton was less than forthright during the interview, and his responses drew sharp criticism from his critics. However,

⁴⁷ Berke, "The President Under Fire: The Public View."

⁴⁸ Berke, "The President Under Fire: The Public View."

⁴⁹ Berke, "The President Under Fire: The Public View."

the interview set the standard for communication that Clinton would use with the media throughout the process.

Blessed with the gift of gab, Clinton spoke words that were unique to Clinton-speak. Could other presidents have used the same words so effectively? History shall judge that.

During the interview on *NewsHour*, Lehrer asked Clinton if he understood the gravitas of his situation. The response from Clinton was vintage Bill.

"Well, I've got to do my best," Clinton said. "You know, I'd be--I'd be less than candid if I said it was, you know, just hunky dory. You know, these--but I've been living with this sort of thing for a long time, and my experience has been unfortunately, sometimes, you know, when one charge dies, another one just lifts up to take its place."

Within the answer Clinton noted that he has been "living with this sort of thing for a long time." He had not been living with allegations of cheating on a White House intern for a long time, but Clinton meant something else. That something else is what connected him to the viewer and engendered a feeling of pity for the president. Words like these prove that Clinton possessed emotional intelligence. That emotional intelligence was his most important asset in dealing with the scandals.

Greenstein's definition

Fred Greenstein defined emotional intelligence in the *Presidential Studies Quarterly*. He wrote, "the extent to which the president is able to manage his emotions and turn them to constructive purposes rather than be dominated by them and allow them to undermine his public performance."⁵⁰ Franklin Roosevelt, Kennedy, and Clinton were all masters at utilizing their own emotional intelligence to convey their messages to voters.

Greenstein wrote that Clinton's emotional intelligence was unique because he was a more synthetic thinker. "Clinton possesses a formidable ability to absorb and process ideas and information, but his mind is more synthetic than analytic," Greenstein wrote.⁵¹ The curiousness of Clinton's emotional intelligence was that he lacked the self-discipline to keep himself out of situations that would inevitably lead to his needing to wiggle out of impeachment. Clinton possessed lofty aspirations, made possible by his emotional intelligence, but what he possessed in emotional intelligence, he lacked in self-control.

⁵⁰ Greenstein, Fred. "The Qualities of Effective Presidents": An Overview from FDR to Bill Clinton. *Presidential Studies Quarterly* , Vol. 30, No. 1 (Mar., 2000), pp. 178-185

⁵¹Greenstein, Fred. "The Qualities of Effective Presidents: An Overview from FDR to Bill Clinton."

Clinton finished the previously mentioned Lehrer interview with the following:

“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.”

Again Clinton uses words to evoke a response from viewers that would associate him with a victim role. People were coming after him, he said, and he claimed he had been dealing with it his whole life. By using such language, Clinton likened himself to millions of Americans who try to make a difference, but like him, are fallible, not perfect, and prone to very human mistakes. Clinton was careful to show that he was not a powerful politician who would use his power to acquit himself of any wrongdoing. Instead, he was just a man who had come to Washington to “do my job.”

“I came here to spend my time, do my job, and get back to my life,” Clinton said. “That’s all I want to do, and that’s what I’m trying to do, for the best interests of America.”

Just a man trying to do his job, Clinton likened himself to the plight of millions of Americans, just humble people trying to do their job.

Psychology behind emotional intelligence

Stanley Renshon wrote an article in the *Political Science Quarterly* about the psychology behind Clinton's emotional intelligence. He writes, "Clinton's interpersonal style reflects movement toward people." Renshon says Clinton possessed both "natural friendliness" and "empathy" but also possessed an insatiable desire to be liked. Such a desire allowed him to connect with others but also led to an inability to say no to others.⁵² The combination of Clinton's two psychological traits created the communication style that Clinton adapted effectively to help his presidency. Locked into a view of himself, Clinton subconsciously sought to communicate that view to others.

Emotional intelligence is an effective political tool, but the psychological factors that contribute to such intelligence are not always enviable characteristics to have. In Clinton's case, the insatiable need to be liked and an inflated sense of self often helped Clinton emotionally connect with others.

Brummett and Kelly on Clinton

In November of 1992, Michael Kelly of the *New York Times* described Clinton as follows:

⁵² Renshon, Stanley A. "After the Fall: The Clinton Presidency in Psychological Perspective." *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 115, No. 1 (Spring, 2000), pp. 41-65.

"...he also won a reputation in some circles as a man who, in his desire to not offend -- to be liked, and re-elected -- was far too willing to tell people what they wanted to hear, at the expense of the truth.⁵³"

Years earlier, John Brummett, a journalist from Arkansas, wrote, "I think he's the best politician I've ever seen. I just don't know if there is much in terms of abiding principle."⁵⁴

Brummett and Kelly both espouse obeisance to Clinton's political astuteness and umbrage to Clinton's guiding principles. While Clinton's political career rarely went according to Hoyle, his emotional intelligence was the most important tool he had to overcome deficits in other areas. Ambition combined with self-confidence and self-regard directed Clinton to seek lofty goals for achievement in policy. Clinton sought to pass a grandiose health care plan and sought to clear his name in the Lewinsky scandal to a point that Americans could identify with his plight. By analyzing Clinton's psychology (included in such is emotional intelligence) combined with his constant political calculations/considerations, one is able to understand his behavior. Intelligent, empathetic,

⁵³ Kelly, Michael. "William Jefferson Blythe Clinton; A Man Who Wants to Be Liked, and Is." *The New York Times*. November 4, 1992.

⁵⁴ Kelly, "William Jefferson Blythe Clinton; A Man Who Wants to Be Liked, and Is."

political, leery, friendly, calculating--for the better or worse connotations of the words, Bill Clinton was all of them.

Public & media react to prayer breakfast

Clinton's speech at the National Prayer Breakfast of September 1998 was analyzed above as it showed Clinton's commitment to the protestant style of confession. The speech and the media's subsequent reaction also serve as a prime example of Clinton's emotional intelligence. Clinton spoke of the word "repentance" and continually used the word "wrong" to describe his actions.

Like any good speaker, Clinton knew his audience. Furthermore, the delivery of his speech was adapted for the situation. Speaking slower and attempting to ditch the label of great orator, Clinton read part of his remarks. He wore his glasses. He was just another American. Longtime Clinton aid, George Stephanopoulos once said, "When he was 'on' before a live audience, Clinton was like a jazz genius jamming with his pals. He poured his whole body into the speech, swaying to the rhythms of his words...If he sensed a pocket of resistance in the crowd, he led its way,

determined to move them with raw will if sweet reason didn't work.⁵⁵"

In the speech at the prayer breakfast, Clinton dropped the normal performance for a more subdued speech. He did not let ambition mask the realpolitik.

"I will continue on the path of repentance," Clinton said, emphasizing 'repentance' to the audience of ministers. "Seeking pastoral support and that of other caring people so that they can hold me accountable for my own commitment."

Commitment to what? Clinton did not specify, but he told the ministers he was committed to some unnamed ideal. Unsurprisingly, many were committed to believing him.⁵⁶ The President told the ministers that he had sinned and that like many Americans, he was seeking guidance. As a lost soul seeking repentance, Clinton again found an audience that identified with his words.

He finished by saying:

"I ask once again to be able to love my neighbor--all my neighbors--as myself, to be an instrument of God's peace; to let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart, and in the end, the work of

⁵⁵ Wayne, Stephen J. "Clinton's Legacy: The Clinton Persona." *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (Sep., 1999), pp. 558-561

⁵⁶ Wayne, "Clinton's Legacy: The Clinton Persona."

my hands, be pleasing. This is what I wanted to say to you today.”

The Reverend Dr. Anthony Campolo who attended the breakfast wrote about Clinton’s speech, saying he was encouraged that the President had used Psalm 51 as the basis for his speech.⁵⁷ In Psalm 51, King David asks God to “cleanse” him, thus purifying his heart. “President Clinton told the American people that he would be asking God to ‘cleanse’ him and make him into a ‘new’ person,” Campolo wrote. “What he had to say...moved him well beyond referring to what he had done as ‘inappropriate behavior’.⁵⁸” Like Campolo, many ministers at the prayer breakfast were persuaded by Clinton’s words. Wisely, Clinton knew that if he could persuade religious figures to forgive him, perhaps the public would follow.

Conscious cognitive process

Clinton’s expression of contrition is another example of his ability to capture another’s emotion through conscious cognitive processes. Kristi Lewis wrote that “conscious cognitive processing occurs when individuals empathize with someone who is expressing an emotion” by

⁵⁷ Campolo, Tony. “Errant Evangelical? A Presidential Counselor in the Line of Fire.” *The Brookings Review*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Spring, 1999), pp. 32-35

⁵⁸ Campolo, “Errant Evangelical? A Presidential Counselor in the Line of Fire.”

attempting to feel the emotion expressed.⁵⁹ Conscious cognitive processing is the crux of Bill Clinton's emotional intelligence. When he spoke with someone, that person felt as if Clinton understood their emotion. When Clinton spoke about his own transgressions regarding marital infidelity, his audience subsequently felt his emotion as well. As president, Bill Clinton lacked certain important skills, but his emotional intelligence was able to mask those deficiencies because the "experience of followers--emotional and otherwise--as they observe emotional expression in leaders is proposed to have a direct effect on their perception of the leader's effectiveness."⁶⁰ Lewis' research on emotional reactions affecting one's perception of effectiveness is significant evidence supporting the hypothesis that Clinton utilized the media better than other presidents to handle scandal. The emotional tones that are most often associated with positive perceptions of effectiveness are positive emotions representing confidence and frankness.⁶¹ As previously ascertained, Clinton never lacked confidence, and his apology to the ministers at the

⁵⁹ Lewis, Kristi M. "When Leaders Display Emotion: How Followers Respond to Negative Emotional Expression of Male and Female Leaders." *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 21, No. 2, Special Issue: Emotions in Organization (Mar., 2000), pp. 221-234

⁶⁰ Lewis, "When Leaders Display Emotion: How Followers Respond to Negative Emotional Expression of Male and Female Leaders."

⁶¹ Lewis, "When Leaders Display Emotion: How Followers Respond to Negative Emotional Expression of Male and Female Leaders."

prayer breakfast came off as frank while avoiding coming off as angry or sad.⁶² Therefore, Clinton's emotional intelligence enabled him to cultivate the appropriate emotional response by followers so that his effectiveness as a leader would be confirmed by their subconscious emotional response to his words.

CONCLUSION

Bill Clinton followed history's most effective model of confession, the protestant-evangelical model. Apologizing while appearing to save his own soul, Clinton's use of the word "sinned" enabled followers to forgive him for his transgressions as they realized he possessed the same human qualities they did. Despite only vaguely acknowledging for what he was apologizing, Clinton gave a complete confession in the eyes of many people. Despite initial hesitancy to completely confess by asking for repentance, Clinton pivoted back to the protestant model in order to humanize himself to the public. Bill Clinton's political opponents overshot their own hand in seeking political gain from the president's transgressions. So far was their overreach that the American public got scandal fatigue which Clinton responded to by calling for a return to normalcy, a return

⁶² Renshon, "After the Fall: The Clinton Presidency in Psychological Perspective."

to work. Lastly, Clinton's emotional intelligence was his greatest asset in reassuring followers that he was still an effective leader.

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ABSTRACT

Few United States presidents have spent as much time dealing with personal scandals and character questions as President Bill Clinton. However, when Clinton left office, he left with a high approval rating, a high likability rating, and he has stayed politically relevant through 2013 (via the Clinton Global Initiative).

Clinton accomplished such a feat by how he communicated. When Clinton gave a keynote speech at the Democratic National Convention in 2012, many were reminded of what made Clinton an effective president: his communication skills. In terms of overcoming scandal, Clinton used those communication skills to withstand the negative publicity. By using the evangelical confession model that dates back to the days of Grover Cleveland, Clinton successfully asked for forgiveness. Because his opponents overreached in their criticism he was able to survive politically. Lastly, because of his emotional intelligence, Clinton still endeared himself to voters and followers to an extent that many could still identify with him.

In a case study on the aftermath of the Lewinsky scandal, this research examines how Clinton overcame scandal and used the media in doing so.