

Throughout Donald Trump's career and time in office as the President of the United States, he has been the subject of multiple serious offenses to the public. From his degrading comments about women that were released into the public, to a trial in the Supreme Court concerning his tax returns, he has been in the position of needing to make necessary addresses and apologies to the public eye. The most serious of these cases occurred only exactly one week ago from the due date of this essay. On January sixth of 2021, during the certification of Joe Biden's elected win for the next President of the United States, a large group of rioters violently stormed the Capitol building raising Trump flags and signs that read "stop the steal". The majority of these Trump supporters that raided the Capitol had deliberately planned to come to Washington D. C.; they were not from the city. This event, described by some as an attempted coup and an act of domestic terrorism, has been documented by social media as an event that was encouraged by President Trump. In the days and hours leading up to the certification of Joe Biden's win, Trump made several tweets calling his supporters to "protest" and gather at the Capitol. The New York Times documents a list of these tweets including the following: "The BIG Protest Rally in Washington, D.C. will take place at 11:00 A.M. on January 6th. Locational details to follow. StopTheSteal!" (NYT, Feuer, Bennett, Begg, 2021) Since this national crisis, we have heard from a number of elected officials using strategies of apologia for supporting the current President and his Republican party, however, I will mostly be focusing on analyzing the statements Vice President Mike Pence and President Trump have made, and how their handling of this event will affect the future of politics in the United States: particularly the Republican party.

Although Trump is yet to do much in attempts to save his image, several different reports and social media platforms highlight his use of provocation, differentiation, attacking the

accuser, and denial. His communication through social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook exemplifies provocation, that the mob was right to storm the Capitol because their election was, as Trump put it, was “stolen from us” (CNN Brown, Mattingly, Diaz 2021). He attacks his many accusers with the short statement “We had an election that was stolen from us. It was a landslide election and everyone knows it. Especially the other side.” (CNN Brown, Mattingly, Diaz 2021) implying that Democrats evoked this event of violence by “stealing” the election. Arguably, this statement could be identified as differentiation to make the “protest” seem more validated. The most prominent strategy of image repair Trump has demonstrated is denial, by simply saying very little at all. For my arguments sake, I will read into this nonverbal communication choice as Trump being in denial that this event was wrong and harmful, and was a result of an election he incorrectly believes to be fraudulent. In addition, in the broadcasted “Let’s Get Back to Work” (PBS 2021) address that Pence made once the Capitol was secured demonstrated an evasion of responsibility that I will also go into depth to analyze.

In order to properly analyze the tactics used by Trump and Pence to repair their personal image as well as the image of the Republican party, it is essential to understand the five different typologies of image repair as defined by William Benoit. In the second edition of his book *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies* (2015) Benoit thoroughly defines the five broad categories of image repair as well as delving into the specific traits and tactics that fall underneath each one (Benoit, pg. 22-29, 2015). Benoit starts by introducing the tactic of denial. He describes the use of denial as claiming victimage; that when one uses denial to repair their image they shift the blame. Denial can be either honest or dishonest. The next category of image repair is evasion of responsibility. There are four different “subcategories” or variants of evasion of responsibility; provocation, defeasibility, accidents, and good intentions. Provocation is described as being

similar to a “scapegoat” (Benoit, pg. 23, 2015) and takes the claim that an action was done in response to another wrongful or offensive act. Therefore that act provoked the one at hand. Next, is defeasibility: the pleading that there was a lack of control or knowledge over the situation.

Third under the category of evasion of responsibility are accidents. When an accident is pleaded by a person, they are arguing information that reduces their level of responsibility for an action and a lack of control. Last, Benoit explains the variant of good intentions- when a person committed an act that they hoped would fix or contribute help to something (but the good intention failed). The third typology of image repair strategies is reducing offensiveness; there are six variants under this strategy. First there is bolstering, which is when the accused attempts to shift the weight of the negative effects of the act by strengthening their positive effects towards the audience. This can take the form of guilt tripping. Reminding the audience of all the positives the person has done is an essential part of bolstering. The second category of reducing offensiveness is minimization: when a person minimizes the amount of negativity associated with the offensive act. Then, differentiation uses comparison to appeal to the audience that the act was less offensive than it was, or that it could be more offensive. Transcendence is somewhat similar in the way that this tactic places the offensive act in a different context, therefore making it appear less offensive. It is strictly different from differentiation however in the way that it attempts to rise above the situation, the person to blame reminds the audience that there are more important things to focus on. The following variant that Benoit describes is attacking the accuser: this strategy is pretty straightforward, the accused tries to reduce their accuser's credibility by attacking them as a response. Lastly there is compensation; the accused offers to reimburse the victim(s) with the hopes that it will offset the negative feelings. Compensation can function as a bribe as well. After defining all the various ways one can use the strategy of reducing

offensiveness, Benoit moves on to describe the fourth approach to image repair- corrective action. When one uses corrective action to repair their image, they are making an obligation to change and mend their ways. In the case of the Tylenol poisoning that Benoit cites (Benoit, pg. 26, 2015) corrective action can be used without admitting guilt. The fifth and final approach Benoit defines is mortification, which is also arguably the most simple approach of them all. When one uses mortification, they admit to a wrongful act, apologize, and ask for forgiveness.

Once the different strategies of image repair are defined and clearly understood, it is simpler to identify the various tactics of image repair that we have seen unfold within the last week. I will begin with analyzing the few statements made by Trump. Although the statements he has made this week have been very limited, I believe there is still a lot to be said and unpacked by them in terms of his efforts to repair his image. To start with, his social media statements are indicative of provocation and scapegoating responsibility for his mob of supporters. A CNN article stated “...Trump justified the mob's actions and praised them” (CNN Brown, Mattingly, Diaz 2021) following a short video the White House privately filmed and released in which Trump told his supporters that this election was stolen from them and “viciously stripped away from great patriots who have been badly and unfairly treated for so long” (CNN Brown, Mattingly, Diaz 2021). The “great patriots” he refers to are the people of his party and his supporters. This is an instance of provocation; defending himself and his supporters by inferring that the mob and the violence was a response to the election that was “stolen from us” (CNN Brown, Mattingly, Diaz 2021). This tactic however, has not been very successful- with many politicians of both the Republican and Democratic party shamelessly calling out Trump to take responsibility for promoting his supporters and doing very little to calm them down or to apologize for the havoc wreaked. In an interview 60 minutes recorded for January 10th 2021

with Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, she described that Trump “went on with his lies, his misrepresentations, his delusion that he won in a landslide in this election.” (CBS News 2021) further describing that Trump’s response serves as his scapegoat for urging on his supporters and the damage they induced.

Provocation can be closely related to the tactic of attacking one's accuser. Provocation points blame to something else that was done in response to an action, it makes sense that where one of these strategies is found, the other can follow. Certainly this is the case for Trump. After telling his supporters through the recorded video that they “had an election that was stolen from us. It was a landslide election and everyone knows it. Especially the other side” (CNN Brown, Mattingly, Diaz 2021), Trump suddenly attempts to specifically target the Democrat party for a so called “fraudulent” election. Despite several recounts in states like Wisconsin and Georgia, the event that the riot disrupted was a recount to certify Joe Biden’s fair and just win. The Democratic party has expressed full dismay, frustration, and disappointment in Trump and his party leaders for events previous to the assault on the Capitol, and these expressions have only increased since the afternoon of the sixth. Nancy Pelosi stated in her interview with CBS’s 60 minutes “...the person that's running the Executive Branch is a deranged, unhinged, dangerous president of the United States”.

Another way to analyze this brief address is to point out that there is attempted differentiation at use here. It appears as if the statement Trump used for provocation is also attempting to compare the actions and behavior of the “protesters” to the “fault” Trump believes Democrats are at because he believes the election was a fraud. If this were true he might think that the measures the rioters took are no worse than a rigged election. However, since this is not the case I hesitate to analyze this statement as true differentiation. Trump may think of it this way

himself, however it is simply incorrect and therefore a failed effort to repair his image (especially considering the serious offenses of the attack that took place).

The last type of image repair that I will analyze Trump making use of is denial. From his lack of thorough public address, it comes across that President Trump is in denial that any of this was his fault, or even that there is any fault at all. Nonverbal communication plays a significant role in our daily cycle of communication, and I believe that this is unwavering when it comes to crisis communication as well. By refusing to make public statements- especially considering Trump cannot avoid seeing media or outside influences making it clear that they expect some sort of address from him whether that be an apology or resigning from his Presidency- it is certain he can not steer clear of the fact that much of the U.S. demands further action and communication from him. His choice to ignore these demands can be analyzed as an incomplete way of shifting the blame. He refuses to step up and claim it as his own, therefore leaving the rest of the country and it's government branches grasping at straws for how to continue moving forward from this national crisis. Denial has been a very ineffective strategy for Trump to choose. It has only brought more scrutiny and ill feelings upon him, and not only him, but the political party that he represents. This unique fact is part of why I believe this particular national crisis in communication is so incredibly significant, because it so greatly affects the future of politics in this country and makes the near future in particular so unknown. The next Presidential election might look very different as far as the relationship between the two political parties and even their beliefs to a certain extent depending on how the rest of this post-crisis develops.

One person in particular this incomplete shift of blame has significantly affected is Trump's presidential partner, Vice President Mike Pence. Pence has been yet another elected official at the forefront of the spotlight since January sixth. The people and media have been

urging and pushing for him to invoke the 25th amendment upon his partner in office. The media reported a lack of communication between Pence and Trump after the riot on the sixth, the two did not talk to each other in the days following the crisis, however the silence was broken between the two on Monday the 11th (Samuels, 2021). Pence did address the event in his “Back to Work” speech he made to commence the resuming of the House counting the night of the sixth. In his speech, Pence addressed the rioters saying “To those who wreaked havoc in our Capitol today, you did not win. Violence never wins. Freedom wins. And this is still the people’s house” (PBS, 2021). He goes on to describe the violence and damage committed upon the Capitol and the American people, describing this type of behavior as “condemned” by him and the House of Representatives. Throughout the duration of his whole address, Pence fails to explicitly recognize the connection he has to the Trump party supporters who led the riot and broke into the Capitol building. He evades the responsibility of acknowledging his position in relation to the Trump party, keeping his speech short and hitting on points that elaborate that the events were unacceptable while thanking those who defended the Capitol. “For those who wreaked havoc in our Capitol today, you did not win.” (PBS 2021) By continuously addressing the physical assaulters who broke into the Capitol, Pence’s address seems to imply an accident; that these people should not have been able to breach the historic building and inflict the damage that they did. Pence also makes use of defeasibility by pleading a lack of control over the Trump supporters. By lacking acceptance of his relation to the Trump party, Pence almost seems to communicate nonverbally that these rioters were specifically rioting for Trump himself and not Pence. He could therefore think he had a lack of control in this crisis because although he is associated with the party, he was not the person the mob was rioting for and was not the person egging them on through Twitter posts. Although the address Pence made was more than what the

American people have heard from Trump, I would argue his strategy for image repair would have been stronger if he had addressed further his relation to the party in the days following the crisis. Tactics such as mortification and corrective action (specifically through communication with Trump and the Republican party) would have improved his image repair. With the amount of both Democrats and Republicans urging him to speak with the President and invoke the 25th amendment, I think he could have done a lot more to save his image by addressing these possibilities.

To conclude, I think there is a lot of work to be done yet for President Trump and Vice President Pence if they want to repair their image. Trump's use of provocation, attacking the accuser, attempted differentiation, and denial have not done much to help his image, especially considering many members of his own political party are expressing their disappointment and frustration with him as well as voting for his second impeachment. My guess is that this is not what he was aiming for when trying to repair his image. Although the tactics Pence has used to repair his image are slightly more successful than Trump's, this is no big feat. By demonstrating a gap between the outrageous events of January sixth and his direct role in it through evasion of responsibility, Pence might have saved his image a tiny bit. He explicitly states how unacceptable the crisis was, but in order for him to escape the stigma that he carries being so closely associated with Trump, I think Pence will have to come out further with a form of corrective action and mortification if he wants to better repair his image. What is most important about analyzing this crisis in U.S. History is evaluating how this extreme situation can affect the future of politics in this country and the divide between the two political parties. It will be interesting to see how future image repair efforts in politics will evolve after this horrific date in United States history.



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