

## Clinton's Rhetoric of Contrition

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On the evening of August 17, 1998, President Clinton, speaking from the historic White House Map Room, delivered one of the shortest, yet among the most memorable, addresses of his career. Before a national television audience, after months of silence, the president offered an explanation of his relationship with White House intern Monica Lewinsky and an account of the deceptions he had employed to cover-up the affair.

In the days that followed, the press framed this speech as a failure. This response prompted Clinton to deliver two additional speeches—the first on August 28 and the second on September 11. A progressive inventional pattern distinguishes this trilogy of presidential messages. Each successive speech embraced more fully the generic demands of religious confession. The president moved from characterizing his transgressions as mistakes to calling them sins; he moved from angrily blaming others for his troubles to asking forgiveness for his pride; and he moved from the liberal language of rights to the moral language of virtue.<sup>1</sup>

Although this rhetorical pattern may reflect Clinton's own spiritual journey, it also mirrored the reaction of the press. The secular media interpreted the August 17 address as a failed confession. Reporters, columnists, and editorialists consistently employed theological concepts in explaining Clinton's inadequate effort. When Clinton spoke on August 28 and then again on September 11, the press framed his rhetorical efforts as increasingly acceptable. In fact, the National Prayer Breakfast address on September 11 was widely hailed as a sincere and moving speech.

Typically, rhetorical scholars have classified discourses in which speakers account for their transgressions under the genre of *apologia*. Using this approach, critics employ taxonomies of situations and strategies in assessing the appropriateness of the speakers' responses. We argue that in the Clinton case the use of *apologia* would obscure more than it would reveal. Much of the discourse's meaning is lost if the religious ritual of confession is ignored. Neither Clinton's intentional choices nor the framing of these rhetorical events by the press can be adequately explained apart from American religious mythology.

When this trilogy of speeches is understood as a struggle to make a valid confession, Clinton's discourses take on a meaning beyond themselves. Their halting, reluctant quality fills them with a revealing irony. This irony is born of contrary rhetorical demands, for an effective public speech and a valid private confession are very different. We believe that this uncomfortable marriage of the instrumental and the noninstrumental, the pragmatic and the ritualistic, makes visible defining tensions in American political culture.

In carrying out our analysis, we look first at the limitations of *apologia* and the critical advantages of a speech-act analysis of confession. Second, we demonstrate that Clinton's three speeches progressively meet the demands of confession. Third, we document that the media framed the August 17 address as a failure and the August 28 and September 11 speeches as increasingly successful confessions. Finally, we characterize the uneasy transition of confession from the private domain of penitent and priest to the civic realm of leader and public.

## CULTURE, MYTH, AND THE LIMITS OF APOLOGIA

Rhetorical scholars have produced a sizable literature around theories of *apologia*. It has become the conventional approach to explaining speeches of apology and discourses of reputation restoration. In fact, *apologia* analyses of Clinton's Monica Lewinsky discourses have already appeared in print (Blaney & Benoit, 2001).<sup>2</sup> Yet, we contend that the Clinton case provides a telling example of the weaknesses of this critical perspective (see Barton, 2002).

*Apologia* is a discourse of "self-defense," which is employed by rhetors to combat external attacks on a person's character. Ware and Linkugel's (1973) work established this discursive pattern as "a distinct *form* of public address, a family of speeches with sufficient elements in common so as to warrant generic status" (p. 273, italics in original). In doing so, they identified basic strategies and various subgenres of self-defense.

Later, a second wave of apologia scholarship emerged under the title "image repair." Like apologia, this literature has an organizing typology that provides specific categories that may be used to divide and analyze various discourses. The theory of image restoration is based on two claims: "communication is best conceptualized as a goal-directed activity" and "maintaining a positive reputation is one of the central goals of communication" (Benoit, 1995, p. 63). For Benoit, an image is threatened when an act is considered "reprehensible" to a "salient audience" and "damage to one's face requires that the actor be held responsible for the occurrence of that reprehensible act by the relevant audience" (p. 72).

The strategies and categories that make up the apologia and image-repair literatures are technical in character. By technical, we mean that they were named by scholars. "Bolstering," "differentiation," and "transcendence" are not words that ordinary speakers invoke in defending themselves. The discipline has embraced these theories because they have generated highly descriptive taxonomies.

Ironically, this scholarship's strength is also its major weakness. The ordinary language of confession is associated with such highly evocative terms as "sin," "forgiveness," "penance," and "contrition." "We often forget," Lee (1988) writes, "that people use words without regard for privileged vocabularies." It is important to understand "when and to what purpose" society labels an utterance in a given way (p. 292). Ordinary language is filled with the inflections of culture. So, if ordinary speakers interpret Clinton's speeches as confessions, this tells the critic a great deal. To dismiss this evocative religious vocabulary for technical exactness is to run the risk of overlooking the most important elements of meaning.

These literatures have a second shortcoming. Again, a perceived strength is also a serious weakness. Apologia and image-repair have an overarching emphasis on strategy. They are the progeny of Lloyd Bitzer's (1968) situational criticism. The focus is on exigent states of affairs (loss of reputation, personal attack), particular audiences, and the invention of instrumental messages that will improve the situation. Typically, critics working in these traditions are interested in making judgments of effectiveness based on the match among exigencies, audiences, and messages. They draw conclusions about the soundness of the speaker's rhetorical choices given the circumstances.

The difficulty is that many such speeches are better understood as enactments of rituals rather than the employment of strategies. Of course, this distinction is probably more analytic than empirical, for faithfully enacting a ritual may prove to be persuasive to a particular audience. Yet, Bennett (1977) has demonstrated in his study of campaign rituals that they

are not synonymous. For instance, the hallmark of image-repair discourse is to put the speaker's transgressions in the most favorable possible light. Yet, the ritualistic requirements of confession demand an unvarnished recitation of the penitent's sins. The purpose of apologia is to persuade; the purpose of confession is to humble oneself before God. A sincere act of confession may find public favor, but it does so because the public understands the ritual and not because the rhetor used strategies of bolstering or differentiation. Put differently, the apologia and image-repair literatures take insufficient account of the cultural mythology that governs requests for forgiveness.

### **SPEECH ACT OF CONFESSION**

Speech act theory is an account of ordinary language. J.L. Austin (1975) claimed that the complex act of uttering words involves various simple component acts, and he suggested that by understanding the nature of these acts problems of meaning could be clarified. He took ordinary spoken words as his data. Such prosaic terms as "promise," "state," and "bet" drew Austin's attention.

Illocutionary acts are one type of speech act. These are acts performed in uttering words. For a speaker to say, "I bet five dollars" is to perform the act of betting. Likewise, to say, "I promise to repay you on Tuesday" is to complete an act of promising. We are interested in understanding the nature of the illocutionary act "to confess."

The illocutionary act of confessing is complex. In order to clarify its dimensions, we turn to John Searle's (1975) five categories of illocutionary acts. In explaining these categories, we offer the constitutive rules that define them and examples that illustrate them.

#### **Representatives**

The illocutionary point of representatives is to commit the speaker to something being the case, to the truth of the expressed proposition. The simplest test of a representative is whether you can literally characterize it as true or false. The direction of fit is words-to-world.<sup>3</sup> The sincerity condition is belief. Verbs denoting members of this class include describe, state, hypothesize, conclude, boast, and complain.

#### **Directives**

The illocutionary point of directives consists in the fact that they are attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something. The direction

of fit is world-to-words. The sincerity condition is want, wish, or desire. Verbs denoting members of this class of utterances include order, command, request, ask, question, beg, plead, pray, entreat, invite, permit, advise, defy, and challenge.

### Commissives

The illocutionary point of commissives is to commit the speaker to some future course of action. The direction of fit is world-to-words. The sincerity condition is intention. Verbs denoting members of this class are promise, vow, pledge, covenant, contract, guarantee, embrace, and swear.

### Expressives

The illocutionary point of this class is to express the sincerity condition (psychological state) about the state of affairs in the propositional content. There is no direction of fit because the existence of fit is presupposed. The sincerity condition may consist of various psychological states. The paradigms of expressive verbs include thank, congratulate, apologize, condole, deplore, and welcome.

### Declarations

The illocutionary point of this class is to realize or bring into existence the state of affairs represented in the proposition. This is a case where "saying makes it so." The direction of fit is both words-to-world and world-to-words. The successful performance of a declaration brings about a fit. The declaration neither attempts to get a fit by describing a state of affairs nor by trying to get someone to bring about a future state of affairs. There is no sincerity condition. Examples of declarational verbs are appoint, excommunicate, fire, christen, define, and dub.

A confession in the wholly secular sense is an illocutionary act of representation. When criminals confess to a crime, they state what they did. Other matters—expressing regret, promising to change future conduct, humility—are not constitutive parts of this act. The confession is a pure example of a representative. It is not, however, this secular sense of confession that concerns us here. We are interested in the ritual of sacramental confession and the intersection of the speech act with sacred myth.<sup>4</sup>

A valid sacramental confession is a representative-commissive-expressive. First, it is a representative because penitents must explicitly name their sins. This representation can be literally judged true or false. Second, confession is a commissive because penitents must sincerely promise to try to overcome their sins. This commits the penitent to a future

course of action. Third, confession is an expressive in that the penitent must manifest the sincerity condition. The penitent must evoke a contrite heart. In the sacramental ritual of confession, the priest engages in both directives—assigning penance—and declarations—offering absolution. In the public ritual of confession, the audience stands in for the priest.

### CLINTON'S FIRST CONFESSION, AUGUST 17, 1998

On the evening of August 17, in a speech of slightly over five hundred words, Clinton took responsibility for engaging in an inappropriate relationship with Monica Lewinsky and for having misled people, but he maintained that he had been legally accurate in his Paula Jones case deposition and that he had not asked anyone to lie, destroy evidence, or take any unlawful action. While admitting that his actions were wrong and represented a critical lapse in judgment, he nonetheless offered a mitigating account of his motives. These motives included a desire to shield himself and his family from embarrassment and his serious misgivings about the politically inspired Paula Jones lawsuit. In the final third of the speech, he criticized the Independent Counsel for carrying on an investigation that had started with twenty-year-old allegations about Arkansas business dealings and had moved into an unrelated examination of his private life. Clinton insisted that his misconduct was between him, his family, and their God. He concluded by asking the audience to turn its attention away from these matters and concentrate on the important national challenges that face the country.

#### Representative

In the third paragraph of the August 17 address, Clinton (2000a) describes his transgressions. "As you know," he says, "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." He continues, "Indeed, I did have a relationship with Ms. Lewinsky that was not appropriate. In fact, it was wrong. It constituted a critical lapse in judgment and a personal failure on my part for which I am solely and completely responsible" (p. 1457). Several sentences later, in paragraph five, Clinton admits, "I misled people, including even my wife" (p. 1457).

The key phrases of representation were a "relationship . . . that was not appropriate" and "misled people." To put this kindly, these are ambiguous descriptions of conduct. They use language that is far less negatively evoc-

ative than the more emotively loaded terms "adultery" and "lied." Clinton chose terms that lightened the weight of his transgressions.

Using the Roman Catholic sacrament as a paradigm, Clinton's detailing of his sins is an invalid confession. Penitents must detail their transgressions in their own words, and these accounts are to be explicit. A confession must use language that reveals rather than conceals the true nature of the sin. Any confession that hides a mortal sin is invalid. The inventional considerations of selection—what to include and what to leave out—and the strategic choice of language—phrasing that puts the speaker in the best light—are hostile to the purpose of the sacrament. A "good" confession requires a thorough examination of conscience, a full account of sins, and a contrite heart. "Through such an admission [of sins]," the *Catechism* reads, "man looks squarely at the sins he is guilty of, takes responsibility for them, and thereby opens himself again to God and to the communion of the Church in order to make a new future possible" (sec. 1455).

In interpreting the president's performance, the press framed the speech as an invalid confession, in part, because Clinton failed to name his acts of transgression. The *New York Times* termed Clinton's admissions "reluctant," "partial," "short of explicitly acknowledging a sexual relationship," and a product of a "compromise between Mr. Clinton's lawyers, who wanted him to say as little as possible about his relationship, and his political advisers, who felt that only a full confession would allow him to put the matter behind him" (Broder, 1998; James, 1998). In a *New York Times* editorial, Clinton's discourse was represented as a "grudging admission," a "minimal confession," a "cryptic speech," and an "opportunity . . . wasted" ("Bill Clinton speaks," 1998). David Mann (1998) wrote, "The reality is that he failed to tell the whole truth . . . crafting truthful words so as to leave a false impression is not the same as telling the truth. The American people gave Mr. Clinton one last chance to speak openly and honestly with us, using language in the same way we do. He wasted that chance" (p. A30). This harsh critical tone was also struck in the paper's summary of ordinary citizen reaction. Janice Scallon of Chicago is quoted as saying, "It wasn't even a full apology. Instead, he said it was inappropriate. If he had just said, hey, he had sex with her, then it would be over." Andrea Wagner, a Seattle arts administrator, wished "he had said, 'Yes, I did it'" (Verhovek, 1998, p. A16).

R.W. Apple (1998) wrote that he saw parallels between Nixon's Checkers speech from 1952 and Clinton's speech about Lewinsky with one important difference. "Nixon's speech was detailed, comprehensive and self-revelatory. Mr. Clinton's was none of those things" (p. A13). Apple

contends that Clinton's failure to be specific "rasped against national myth," explaining that "truth-telling" is a salient feature of the American presidency and the national mythos.

Mary McGrory (1998) of the *Washington Post* described Clinton's discourse as "clinging to split hairs, telling the country that his sworn denial of having sex with Monica Lewinsky in the Paula Jones case was 'legally accurate,' the kind of dodge not permitted in true confession" (p. A3). David Montgomery (1998) reports the "man on the street reaction" for the *Post*. He wrote that bar patrons "made it clear they wanted nothing less than a full confession" (p. A7).

### Commissive

The commissive section of the address appears in the final paragraph. Clinton (2000a) makes a promise of reparation—"I must put it right, and I am prepared to do whatever it takes to do so" (p. 1457). Clinton neither discusses his apparently lifelong struggle with sexual infidelity nor does he promise to overcome this sin. Rather, he commits himself to doing whatever is necessary to repair his broken family relationships. Listeners may well have assumed that such efforts would include a pledge to control his lust.

### Expressive

The commissive and expressive elements are so closely tied to one another that it is difficult to separate them for the purpose of analysis. Penitents' genuine sorrow for having offended God and their determination to return to His favor are signs of their sincere commitment to turn away from sin. In this sense, the commissive and the expressive elements become virtually one.

Penitents must humble themselves when asking for God's mercy. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector captures this expressive dimension of confession:

Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, "God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get." But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted. (Luke 18:9-14)



The Pharisee exalted himself above other men rather than humble himself before God. Such a minimization of his sinfulness could only be motivated by his concern for worldly status. Jesus condemns this selfish motivation as a sin of pride. The tax collector, by contrast, is humbled by the Lord's mercy and makes no pretension to his own worth. When he prays, he is concerned with his relationship with God and not posturing for the other worshippers at the temple.

Roberts (1993) writes that contrition is different from fear because "the concern characteristic of contrition is not aversion to punishment (indeed, the contrite person may welcome punishment), but aversion to turpitude" (p. 195). He posits that to regret an action is "to see it as a mistake . . . because of its untoward consequences" (p. 195), while contrition "requires seeing one's action as a culpable offense" (pp. 195-196). Contrition is different from embarrassment because embarrassment wants to avoid being seen in an uncomplimentary light. Contrition is concerned with being righteous and having a clean heart (p. 197). Finally, contrition differs from guilt because it gives the penitent a way out, "thus, encouraging in him the formation of an intention to amend his life" (p. 201). In summary, the logic of contrition involves the steps of sincerity, confession, restitution, and turning away from sin, which becomes the centerpiece and moving force in the repentance process.

Clinton's pride infected the tenor and tone of the August 17 address. First, he conveys resentment at having been forced to account for his actions. He says that he "answered . . . questions" before the Grand Jury that "no American citizen would ever want to answer" (Clinton, 2000a, p. 1457). He argues that "this matter is between me, the two people I love most, my wife and our daughter, and our God." He claims that "it is private" and that he intends "to reclaim my family life for my family." Putting it even more bluntly, Clinton says, "It's nobody's business but ours. Even Presidents have private lives." In the latter third of the address, Clinton's discourse becomes more combative, as he declares, "It is time to stop the pursuit of personal destruction and the prying into private lives and get on with our national life" (p. 1457). All of this indicates that the president believes that he should not have been called to account for his private behavior.

Second, Clinton blames others for his present circumstances. Although he says, "I am solely and completely responsible" for the Lewinsky relationship, a sizable portion of the address finds fault with others. He tells the audience that "these questions were being asked in a politically inspired lawsuit" (p. 1457). He devotes the entire sixth paragraph to a negative characterization of the Independent Counsel. "I had," Clinton says,

“real and serious concerns about an Independent Counsel investigation that began with private business dealings 20 years ago, dealings, I might add, about which an independent Federal agency found no evidence of any wrongdoing by me or my wife over 2 years ago.” He continues, “The Independent Counsel investigation moved on to my staff and friends, then into my private life.” He concludes by adding ironically, “And now the investigation itself is under investigation” (p. 1457).

Third, Clinton claims that he ought to be forgiven on pragmatic grounds. The country should put this episode to one side because it “has gone on too long” and “cost too much money.” He argues that this scandal has distracted him from the important obligations of his office. “We have,” the president maintains, “important work to do, real opportunities to seize, real problems to solve, real security matters to face” (p. 1457).

The press coverage focused on Clinton’s apparent lack of contrition. The *New York Times* described the President’s tone as “defiant,” “testy,” “curt,” “unrepentant,” “reluctant,” and “bitter” (Broder, 1998; James, 1998). “If anyone thought Bill Clinton would come away deeply humbled,” James Broder (1998) wrote, “they were wrong.”

The *New York Times* coverage also captured the inappropriateness of the president’s appeal to public self-interest. A Bellingham, Washington, nursing student was described as “livid after the speech.” She was quoted as saying, “It really burned me up when he said we should turn to the nation’s problems.” Broder (1998) characterized Clinton’s urging the nation to put the scandal behind it as a plea for “instant redemption” (p. A1).

Mary McGrory in the *Washington Post* characterized Clinton’s lack of contrition in quite colorful terms: “There was contrition . . . precariously picking her way along the road of presidential oratory. ‘In fact it was wrong.’ Then, all of a sudden out of nowhere a huge truck came roaring by, flattening contrition and leaving her dead. The blast at independent counsel Kenneth Starr was astonishing” (p. A3). “Our Bill,” Michael Kelly (1998) writes, “has never really apologized for anything in his life, and he didn’t now. He never used the words, ‘I’m sorry,’ and he acknowledged ‘regret’ only glancingly and euphemistically. Indeed, as he made quite clear, he wasn’t sorry, except, as all adolescents are, for getting caught” (p. A21). Kelly also points out that his actual words of apology “lasted for all of one sentence. By contrast, he devoted nearly nine full paragraphs to offering excuses for his actions, to once again attacking Ken Starr and to urging that the mess he had created be put aside—without, of course, any punishment for himself” (p. A21).

Likewise, the *Los Angeles Times* wrote of a “terse confession” that was “surprisingly combative” at a time when “he was expected to sue for

peace, Clinton came closer to declaring war" (Brownstein, 1998, p. A1). They also reported on reaction from Democratic Party politicians and fundraisers. These political insiders reportedly found the speech disappointing because Clinton failed to appear contrite.

### CLINTON'S SECOND CONFESSION, AUGUST 28, 1998

The president delivered the second speech in his confessional trilogy on the afternoon of August 28, 1998. He spoke before an audience of distinguished African-American guests and others at the Union Chapel in Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts (Martha's Vineyard). The occasion marked the thirty-fifth anniversary of the March on Washington and Martin Luther King's delivery of "I Have a Dream."

In the speech's first twenty-six paragraphs, Clinton (2000b) discusses his friendship with Congressman John Lewis (who introduced him on this occasion), his personal memories of the March on Washington, and the "three things" he "thinks" the March on Washington "means to us today" (pp. 1472-73). The first lesson is that we are "all bound together in a web of mutuality"; the second lesson is that "whenever possible, peace and nonviolence is always the right thing to do"; and the third lesson is that "we cannot build a world of peace . . . unless you're willing to forgive your enemies" (p. 1473).

Toward the end of his talk Clinton speaks directly about his personal and political difficulties (p. 1475). He places his remarks within the broader context of the role he believes forgiveness plays in bringing about a peaceful and just society (pp. 1474-75). Here Clinton speaks admiringly of Nelson Mandela's willingness to forgive his captors and to endure his imprisonment without becoming embittered. The president contrasts Mandela's merciful heart with his own "anger," "resentment," "bitterness," and "desire for recrimination against people you believe have wronged you" (p. 1475). At the end of the speech, Clinton ties all of these thematic threads together in a reference to Martin Luther King's concept of the "beloved community" (p. 1475).

Clinton's forgiveness theme is a restatement of the plea to the Father in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." In the president's words, "it is important that we are able to forgive those we believe have wronged us, even as we ask for forgiveness from the people we have wronged" (p. 1475).

In this short section, placed within a larger address, the representative, commissive, and expressive elements are present in a new way. Clinton is not seeking forgiveness for his original misbehavior—lying and adul-

tery—but for his performance of August 17. Here the sin is the hardened heart of pride and the angry spirit of resentment. Before the president can humbly ask for forgiveness for his own transgressions, he must forgive those who he believes have wronged him. Nothing in the speech is explicit. No one is named, no incident is specified, and no grant of forgiveness is offered. Yet, in the context of this occasion, everyone surely understood the president's meaning. This halting, rather indeterminate discourse adopted a light, but far more contrite tone. The focus had now turned to Clinton's own heart. In this address, the president does not mention the law or his right to privacy. His whole focus is on reconciliation.

The press again framed this speech using the religious language of confession. Reporters, columnists, and editorialists viewed this effort as a step toward reconciliation, but still quite a distance from satisfactory. Because this speech was not delivered on national television, there was less reaction. Nevertheless, the country's elite newspapers gave the address considerable copy.

Katherine Seelye (1998), writing in the *New York Times*, remarked that the president had spoken in front of four hundred people in a "simple wood-shingled chapel here on Martha's Vineyard" (p. A1). Her evaluation captures Clinton's sense of movement toward reconciliation. "If today's words," Seelye writes, "did not constitute the outright apology that some critics have demanded, they reflected a man still navigating the self-imposed crisis that has tested his marriage and threatened his presidency" (p. A1). She continues, "Although he seemed to be taking the extraordinary step of expressing magnanimity toward Mr. Starr, there was a residue of defiance toward the prosecutor, whom he has made no secret of loathing" (p. A1).

The *Los Angeles Times* reacted in much the same way. "President Clinton," Art Pine reported, ". . . appeared to ask for forgiveness for the angry, defiant words he directed at independent counsel Kenneth W. Starr during a nationally televised speech last week" (p. A1). He also noted that the speech was "vaguely worded" and that his references were indirect (p. A1).

Ceci Connolly of the *Washington Post* writes that King's message to "love one's enemies" was advice the president was trying to adopt "in his own season of personal pain" (1998, p. A1). She also mentions that "Clinton made no direct mention of his affair . . . and the investigation by independent counsel Kenneth W. Starr" (p. A1). In this story, Clinton's remarks are, "however indirect," interpreted as his "acknowledging the criticism [from the August 17 speech] and telling the nation he had taken it to heart" (p. A1).

In summary, the press framed Clinton's August 28 address as a speech in which Clinton sought forgiveness for his angry performance of August 17. A more contrite president was interpreted as embarking on a spiritual journey that finds him now putting his transgressions into a more religious framework. Yet, this speech is still seen as marked by hesitancy and indirectness because Clinton is still not ready to confess and humbly ask for forgiveness for the sins of adultery and lying.

### CLINTON'S THIRD CONFESSION, SEPTEMBER 11, 1998

On September 11, 1998, President Clinton was the final speaker at the nation's annual prayer breakfast. This occasion, inaugurated in 1953 by Dwight Eisenhower, brings the religious and political worlds together. Attended by government officials, religious leaders, and diplomats from around the world, the prayer breakfast has become "one of the centerpieces of civil religion" (Pierard & Linder, 1988, p. 204).

Clinton delivered his address from the East Room of the White House. The fifteen-paragraph speech was more religious in content, turning blame inward rather than outward, and acknowledging the need for God's help. Clinton (2000c) opens the speech by explaining his preparation for this important occasion. He talks about his journey to the "rock bottom truth of where I am" (p. 1565). In this discussion, he makes reference to contrition and forgiveness. In the middle portion of the address, Clinton speaks of his need to repent and rid himself of destructive anger. He also talks about continuing to mount a vigorous legal defense against Starr's investigation (p. 1565). In the latter portion of the speech, Clinton discusses the Yom Kippur liturgy (p. 1565). He then reads an extended passage from this text, which highlights both the difficulty and the rewards of seeking forgiveness (pp. 1565-66). Finally, he asks for the audience's prayers and concludes by saying "God bless you" (p. 1566).

From the beginning, this speech focuses more definitively on accepting responsibility through clear language, more closely resembling the requirements of the representative and expressive elements of the speech act. Clinton (2000c), for example, talks about the process of forgiveness and makes reference to his state of sorrow. "It is important to me," he says, "that everybody who has been hurt know that the sorrow I feel is genuine: first and most important, my family, also my friends, my staff, my Cabinet, Monica Lewinsky and her family, and the American people" (p. 1565). This better satisfies the expressive element of confession as an illocutionary act. Further, Clinton acknowledges that he needs God's help

to be forgiven, to change and seek renunciation from the "pride and anger which cloud judgment" (p. 1565). His contrition is manifest through the recognition not only that he needs help, but that this experience will serve as a "caution light" in his life. In the final paragraphs, Clinton says, "I ask that God give me a clean heart, let me walk by faith and not sight" (p. 1566).

Despite this dramatic change in tone and the adoption of religious language, Clinton does not name the "sin." He never utters the words "adultery" or "lie." By this time, of course, the audience would have been so familiar with the president's transgressions that his "sin" would have been clearly understood. Clinton perhaps felt legally constrained from naming the sin for fear of prosecution for perjury.

The expressive element of confession is powerfully performed in this address. Unlike the August 17 speech, Clinton places blame on internal sources, namely his own moral weakness. He identifies "pride" as a specific internal issue that contributed to his questionable conduct. He says that pride clouds the judgment and leads people (presumably himself in particular) to "excuse and compare and to blame and complain" (p. 1565).

The commissive element of the confession is far more explicit in this address. Clinton says that he will "continue on the path to repentance, seeking pastoral support and that of other caring people so that they can hold me accountable for my own commitment" (p. 1565). In describing his future course of action, Clinton states, "the children of this country can learn in a profound way that integrity is important and selfishness is wrong. . . . I want to embody those lessons for the children of this country" (p. 1565).

Clinton's continuing legal battle complicates all of the elements of confession, but especially the commissive. He notes that he will instruct his lawyers to "mount a vigorous defense, using all appropriate available arguments," presumably against Kenneth Starr (p. 1565). While Clinton confesses his sins, he simultaneously defends himself against charges he views as unfounded. This move disrupts the tone of the confession in three different ways. First, it makes his representative work more ambiguous. He admits having sinned, but he denies the legal charges. Second, the expressive element is compromised. He does not blame others, but he is continuing to defend himself against his persecutors. Third, the commissive element is undermined because Clinton does not accept the consequences of his acts. Doing penance means accepting just punishment. The president is fighting a legal battle to avoid sanctions.

The confession and the legal defense, of course, are not *logically* inconsistent. Clinton's sins—adultery and public lying—may constitute nei-

ther "high crimes and misdemeanors" nor a violation of statutory law. His sins may be private and personal rather than legal. Nevertheless, the positioning of public confession and legal defense are rhetorically dissonant.

The press reaction in the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Washington Post* framed Clinton's performance as a more acceptable confession. As such, contrition became the key point for interpreting the meaning of Clinton's address. James Bennett (1998), writing in the *New York Times*, argues that Clinton made his most "abject confession of personal failure . . . and for the first time . . . asked for forgiveness" (p. A1). "Clerics who attended the breakfast," he continues, "said they were moved by Mr. Clinton's words of contrition, in language that drew on both Christian and Jewish traditions" (p. A1). One rabbi in attendance is noted as saying that "he was impressed that Mr. Clinton's remarks had followed the basic steps required for repentance on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement: a candid admission of wrongdoing, an apology to those wronged, and a plea for forgiveness and a pledge to avoid such behavior in the future" (p. A1).

Also writing in the *New York Times*, Gustav Niebuhr (1998) points to Clinton's "remarkable fluency with religious language" (p. A12). The president, he states, offered a "frank admission" of his sins in his relationship with Lewinsky, "but the most resonant moment for clergy members may have come when Mr. Clinton said the process of forgiveness demands 'what my Bible calls a broken spirit'" (p. A12). Niebuhr explains that both "Jewish and Christian tradition" considers this psalm as evidence of the "appeal David makes to God after God has sent the prophet Nathan to rebuke the king for having committed adultery with Bathsheba, and for sending Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, into battle to be killed" (p. A12). David is later told that his offering to God should not be a literal sacrifice, but "a broken and contrite heart" (p. A12).

Laura Goodstein (1998), also of the *New York Times*, notes that the "Roman Catholic lectionary for yesterday took up the story of the wayward Prodigal Son who spends his inheritance on prostitutes and yet is forgiven. Jews on Saturday night celebrated the Selichot service, a midnight ceremony marking the beginning of the High Holiday season of introspection, self-examination and repentance" (p. A25). Reinforcing this confessional frame, the editorial pages of the *Times* characterized Clinton's performance as a "most aggressive speech of contrition. With its unmitigated confession, its declaration of repentance, its forthright apology to Ms. Lewinsky, this was a striking speech" (Shame, 1998, p. A18). Clinton's claim that he had achieved the broken spirit described in Psalm

51 helps demonstrate that he has worked through the "prerequisite of redemption" (p. A18).

The *Los Angeles Times* coverage framed the address in much the same fashion. "The president's remarks," Elizabeth Shogren and James Gerstenzang (1998) write, "were his most thorough admission of guilt and responsibility after several attempts at apologies that failed to satisfy his critics and supporters" (p. A1). "With each apology for his sex scandal becoming ever more specific and profuse," Teresa Watanabe (1998) argues, "Clinton is moving closer to satisfying the requirements of penitence upheld by Jewish and Christian faiths" (p. A15). The paper quotes the reaction of Pastor Phillip Wogamon of the Foundry Methodist United Church in Washington, D.C., where Clinton often attends when he is in town, on the tenor and tone of the address: "The president spoke words of deep repentance and contrition, and I feel I know the man well enough to know it came from the heart . . . because there were no excuses and he committed himself to the hard work of repentance, knowing . . . that it is sometimes the work of a lifetime" (p. A19).

The *Washington Post* likewise framed the speech as a moving confession. Hannah Rosin (1998) mentions that Clinton "named all those he had wronged—his staff, his family and especially Monica Lewinsky—a crucial step . . . on the road to healing" (p. A10). "A man," John Harris (1998) observes, "who a few weeks ago would not utter the words 'I am sorry' stood before men and women of the cloth and vaulted the history of presidential apologies into a new realm" (p. A10).

In addition to the discussion of form, the *Post* also wrote of Clinton's tone. Rosin (1998) reports that the president's demeanor matched the words of his speech, noting that he had "tearing eyes and a trembling voice" (p. A10). She writes that "one after another, ministers, rabbis and imams left the White House prayer breakfast saying they were moved the sight of the most powerful man in the world humbling himself so thoroughly before them" (p. A10).

In summary, the press framed this speech as a valid confession. Using their own cultural judgment coupled with responses from the attending clergy, reporters and commentators described a contrite Clinton who had humbled himself and admitted his sin. Moreover, they conveyed a president who had struggled to reach this point and was now prepared to seek God's help in changing his life. The press saw each successive Clinton speech as coming closer to fulfilling the requirements of confession. The secular press repeatedly returned to the sacred ritual and its accompanying religious language to find the appropriate standards of judgment.