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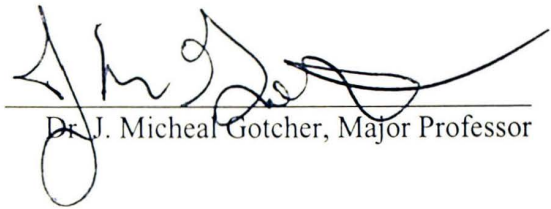
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VICTIM CRISIS COMMUNICATION

KELSEA E. ERBATU

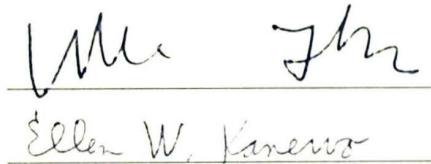
To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Kelsea E. Erbatu entitled Victim Crisis Communication. I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommended that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Communication Arts.



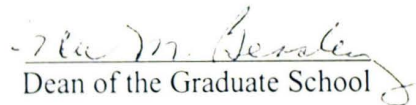
Dr. J. Micheal Gotcher, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:



Ellen W. Kanerva

Accepted for the Council:



Dean of the Graduate School

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my husband

Dursun Akin Erbatu

who always creates achievement out of adversity.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my major professor, Dr. Mike Gotcher, for his invaluable expertise and insight. I would also like to thank the other members of my committee, Drs. Ellen Kanervo and Weiwu Zhang, for their assistance and contributions. I thank my mom, Dr. Glenda F. Stockwell, for teaching me the value of perseverance and for always providing a constant source of inspiration and love. I thank my dad and stepmother, Drs. John C. Stockwell and Diane C. Vecchio for their love and support and for teaching me to expect more from myself. I would also like to thank my brothers, Benjamin Stockwell, and Adrien and Cory Wilson for their love and encouragement. I want to thank my friend Elizabeth Pugh for showing me the joy of laughter, especially during difficult moments and for her valuable editorial insight. I am indebted to Dr. Judith Prince, whose encouragement and support helped me through this process. I would like to thank Sarah Reed and Johnny Sparks for their friendship and support. I thank Kasim, Aynur, Okan and Volkan Erbatu for their sacrifice and love. Finally, I thank my grandparents; Chelsea and Ruth Stockwell, Alex and Marie Vecchio and the late Ernest and Ruby Welch, for bringing me to this day by teaching me the importance of education.

ABSTRACT

This work introduced victim crisis as an important subcategory of crisis communication. Victim crises are crisis events where (unlike traditional crisis communication events) the organization has not been accused of an offensive act. Through the expansion of Benoit's (1997) image restoration theory, this paper explores presidential victim crisis communication. It analyzes victim crisis response strategies including Benoit's (1997) *corrective action*. The present investigation extends Benoit's theory through introducing evidence of two additional victim crisis communication strategies: *call to action* and *acknowledging effectiveness*.

This paper examined victim crisis communication through a content analysis of one month of nationally broadcast presidential addresses immediately following five terrorist attacks. It was hypothesized that the magnitude of the crisis would positively correlate with the number of strategies the president would use, and that corrective action would be the only Benoit (1997) strategy employed in these scenarios. The intensity of the image restoration attempt increased with the magnitude of the terrorist attack in all victim crisis scenarios with the exception of attacks on military personnel suggesting a tendency for presidents to minimize these events due to potential public criticism.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Effective crisis communication is vital to the success and longevity of corporations and other organizations throughout the world. Crisis communication is persuasive in nature (Benoit, 1997). The art of image repair at times requires the accused to defend his reputation without appearing defensive, to deny without seeming deceitful and to confess while maintaining credibility. When accused of wrongdoing, an organization must “save face” in the eyes of the public (Benoit, 1997). Crisis communication experts help accomplish this through the development of image repair strategies.

The field of crisis communication commands much attention in this age of scandal and deception. Some have become experts in regaining public confidence after potentially devastating crises. For example, crisis communication scholars credit Queen Elizabeth with saving the public image of the monarchy after it was accused of gross insensitivity in the period following the death of Princess Diana (Benoit & Brinson, 1999). Alternatively, Bridgestone-Firestone and other companies have gained notoriety based on scandal and unsuccessful crisis communication strategies (Benoit, 1997).

Most of these crisis events are surrounded by skepticism and mistrust because the companies involved have typically been accused of some heinous act (Benoit, 1997). A major element of these scenarios involves companies' need to

convince the public that they can be trusted again. After Merrill Lynch analysts were accused of profiting by misleading investors, it became vital to the continued success of the company to convince the public that it was still trustworthy in spite of grievous oversights or lapses in judgment (Merrill, 2002). The success of an image restoration attempt depends on the ability of the public relations team to implement a convincing and powerful strategy based on the unique circumstances surrounding the events (Fearn-Banks, 1996). If artfully executed, this strategy can contribute to the restoration of public confidence in the organization.

This study identified a need for investigating a variation of traditional crisis communication the author termed *victim crisis communication*. The fundamental difference between *traditional crisis communication* and *victim crisis communication* is that in the latter, the organization has not been accused of any offensive act. Victim crisis communication is not concerned with organizational responses to criticism or accusation of wrongdoing, but with responses to attack.

Through the expansion of Benoit's (1997) image restoration theory, this paper explores presidential victim crisis communication. It analyzes victim crisis response strategies including Benoit's (1997) *corrective action*. The present investigation extends Benoit's theory through introducing evidence of two additional victim crisis communication strategies: *call to action* and *acknowledging effectiveness*.

The researcher performed a content analysis of one month of nationally broadcast presidential addresses immediately following five terrorist attacks. These included the 1983 Beirut embassy bombing, the 1983 attack on Marine barracks in Lebanon, the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, the 1998 embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania and the September 11th, 2001, terrorist attack on New York and Washington, D.C. These events were chosen because the crises surrounding them met two criteria: the perpetrators were unknown (though suspected) and they could not be easily captured. These conditions contributed to the fear of repeated attack, which necessitated an image restoration response by the president.

A scholarly treatment of victim crisis communication holds profound practical implications for public relations practitioners and government officials. Patterns identified through victim crisis communication research will guide public relations practitioners in constructing effective strategic plans. This research will illustrate the need for different approaches to crisis events where organizations involved are not accused of wrongdoing. Studies will identify how formulas for effective victim crisis communication differ from traditional formulas. Quantitative research in the field of victim crisis communication will contribute concretely to the practice of public relations.

Studies exploring victim crisis communication are also important to government officials. Research in this field is expected to suggest that quality of crisis response shapes entire presidencies and other political offices. Leaders at the national, state and local levels will benefit from studies identifying effective

strategies for victim crisis response. Furthermore, victim crisis communication research will contribute to our theoretical understanding of the dynamics of public opinion. Victim crisis communication strategies may represent powerful predictors of public opinion. Research in this field may uncover correlations between use of strategies and approval ratings that will contribute to our understanding of the development of public opinion.

The following review highlights research regarding traditional crisis communication and image repair strategies.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

A crisis is “a specific, unexpected and nonroutine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and threaten or are perceived to threaten an organization’s high-priority goals” (Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 1998, p. 233). Examples of organizational crises include bribery, contamination, embezzlement, product failure and terrorism (Fearn-Banks, 1996).

Scholars agree that there are between three and five stages of crisis (Adams, 2000; Fearn-Banks, 1996; Fink, 1996). Fink’s (1986) approach to crisis management includes four stages. Stage one is the prodromal stage. During this early phase of crisis, organizations should examine warning signs that crisis is inevitable and take action immediately. Fink’s second stage of crisis management is the acute stage (1986). This is the catastrophic event itself. Fink’s third crisis management stage is the chronic crisis stage, or the clean-up phase (1986). Crisis resolution is Fink’s last stage of crisis management (1986). This is the point that corporations highly anticipate when the event is a distant memory in the public mind.

Crisis communication is “the communication between the organization and its publics prior to, during and after the negative occurrence” (Fearn-Banks, 1996, p. 2). Fearn-Banks asserts that “the communications are designed to minimize the damage to the image of the organization” (1996, p. 2). Crises are inevitable, therefore effective crisis communication techniques are vital to

organizational success (Fearn-Banks, 1996). Crisis communication includes public addresses, letters of apology or regret, promises of corrective action and combinations of these and other strategies (Fearn-Banks, 1996).

For the purposes of this paper, “traditional crisis communication” refers to responses to crisis events where the organization was suspected of either perpetrating some heinous act or contributing (through negligence or otherwise) to the circumstances that led to the crisis. The 2002 Enron scandal was a highly publicized example of a traditional crisis where company executives were accused of corruption (Zellner & Anderson, 2001). A desire to save face typically motivates practitioners of traditional crisis communication (Benoit, 1997).

Conversely, the present study defines “victim crisis communication” as a response to a crisis event where the organization could neither reasonably be expected to anticipate nor prevent the event, and where the public does not believe that the organization contributed in a meaningful way to its occurrence. Corporations are often victims of crisis. For example, McNeil Pharmaceuticals could not have predicted the deaths resulting from consumption of Tylenol that had been tampered with, nor was it accused of contributing to this crisis (Benoit, 1997). Similarly, the U.S. government did not anticipate or contribute to the deaths resulting from the 2001 anthrax letter attacks, therefore the public did not hold its leaders responsible.

Frequently, one stage in the unfolding of victim crises involves assigning blame. Naturally, the public assesses whether or not the organizations themselves are at fault. Even in the cases previously cited, there was at least some question

of how these events could have been prevented. However, a public determination that the companies are free from blame does not preclude the organization from responding to the crisis.

In order to approach this topic with clarity, it is necessary to establish a working definition of “terrorism.” In clear and concise terms, Cooper’s (2001) definition outlines the components of terrorism. “Terrorism is the intentional generation of massive fear by human beings for the purpose of securing or maintaining control over other human beings” (Cooper, 2001, p. 2). This definition is broader than many because it does not require that death or injuries result nor does it distinguish between civilian and military casualties. It requires that we evaluate intent and meaning and assumes that terrorism is inherently bad. Cooper explains that “Terrorism should be defined solely by the nature and quality of what is done” (2001, p.3). This approach implies that regardless of who commits the act, the act itself is bad. This important subtlety negates the adage, “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter.” Cooper unequivocally asserts that regardless of justification, the acts that compose terrorism are inherently bad (2001).

Terrorism is the ultimate victim crisis. In the vast majority of terrorist acts, the leaders of victim countries could neither reasonably be expected to anticipate nor prevent the events, and the publics do not believe that the leaders contributed in meaningful ways to their occurrence. Therefore, terrorism is a clear example of a victim crisis. When terrorists attack, leaders must respond with effective methods of crisis communication. While the leaders themselves

may not have been accused of heinous acts, the terrorist attacks represent challenges to governmental authority and therefore merit image repair responses. It is imperative for leaders to restore public confidence in governments' ability to protect them.

When terrorists attack countries, government leaders must characterize the attacks as terrorism and their subsequent responses as just. Retaliation must appear strong, calculated and forceful without seeming excessive. Leaders must devise appropriate responses to terrorist attacks in order to avoid criticism that they were too harsh or too weak. Achieving this balance appears to be an important component of successful victim crisis communication.

In recent decades, communication scholars have applied theories of crisis communication and crisis management in both individual and organizational contexts. Benoit (1995b) analyzed Sears Robuck's response to accusations of their automotive department performing unnecessary repairs on the cars of unsuspecting customers. Benoit & Hanczor (1994) analyzed the image repair strategies used in the aftermath of Tonya Harding's planned attack on competitor Nancy Kerrigan. Fishman (1999) identified and evaluated the crisis communication approaches ValuJet employed in response to the 1996 crash of flight 592 into the Florida Everglades that killed all 109 on board.

Previous research in crisis communication has examined the strategies corporations use in response to accusations of wrongdoing (Benoit, 1995a; Benoit, 1995b; Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997). Other studies investigated government response to crises of a similar nature (Benoit, Gullifor & Panici,

1991). Still other investigations explored individual crisis communication responses (Benoit & Hanczor, 1994; Benoit & McHale, 1999; Benoit & Brinson, 1999).

The field of image repair is not reserved only for corporate crisis events. Researchers also apply it to political contexts. Benoit et al. (1991) examined President Reagan's defensive discourse on the Iran-Contra affair. Benoit et al. (1991) applied image restoration theory to Richard Nixon's 1970 "Cambodia" address. They approached this crucial speech as an "anticipatory image restoration effort" (143). Clearly, the field of crisis communication is ripe for exploration.

Benoit's image restoration theory

Benoit's (1997) image restoration theory is the gold standard in crisis communication research. In order to warrant an image repair response, Benoit asserts that the organization or individual must be accused of being responsible for an offensive act (Benoit, 1995a). However, the present crisis communication study asserts that a lack of culpability does not negate the need for an image repair response. This condition of Benoit's theory prevents the use of all but one of his image repair strategies by victims of crisis: corrective action. Nonetheless, it is important to become familiar with all of Benoit's strategies in order to evaluate the ways victim crisis communication differs from traditional victim crisis communication.

Five categories compose Benoit's image restoration strategies: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action and

mortification (1997). In some instances, the accused denies that the offensive act took place. President Reagan initially denied that an exchange of arms for hostages took place in the Iran-Contra affair (Benoit et al., 1991). Other times, the accused shifts blame to another person or group, as did U.S. officials in the China spy plane incident (U.S., 2001). The goal of *denial* is to absolve oneself of culpability through claiming the act did not occur, providing an alibi, shifting blame or otherwise establishing one's innocence (Benoit, 1997).

Benoit's (1997) second strategy, *evasion of responsibility*, is accomplished in three major ways. First, the group may claim that the action was a reasonable reaction provoked by another more offensive act. This strategy is often employed by governments in order to justify acts of war. Second, the group may achieve "defeasibility" by evading responsibility through claiming ignorance. By establishing that they had no knowledge that the act in question was wrong due to impaired judgment or a lack of information or ability, the defensive party can be absolved of blame. Tobacco companies employed defeasibility as an image repair strategy in the 1990s claiming they had no knowledge that cigarettes were harmful (Glantz, 1996). Third, a group may claim that the offensive action was an accident, as did the U.S. Navy in 2001 when one of its submarines collided with a Japanese fishing boat (Most, 2001). Strategies designed to evade responsibility may or may not accurately represent reality.

Reducing offensiveness is another image repair strategy commonly used by corporations and other groups. This strategy is composed of five categories. First, bolstering is an attempt at improving a group's image by reminding the

public of positive acts they have previously performed (Benoit, 1997). The intention is that relating positive attributes will limit the negative impact of the offensive act. During the chronic crisis phase of the 1998 Clinton-Lewinsky sex scandal, his administration struggled to refocus public attention on Clinton's record as president in order to divert attention from the scandal (Quirk, 1998).

A second method of reducing offensiveness involves groups attempting to minimize the audience's negative feelings by downplaying the extent of the damage (Benoit, 1997). Frequently, governments minimize the extent of destruction caused by war in order to maintain public support for the action.

Third, groups attempt to achieve transcendence by placing the act in a more favorable context (Benoit, 1997). Governments accomplish this during wartime through reports of "friendly fire" and "acceptable loss." It is expected that using euphemisms to report these events may buffer the negative feelings about them.

Fourth, the group may reduce the offensiveness of the act by attacking the accuser (Benoit, 1997). This was a major element of Thomas' crisis communication strategy during the 1993 Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas Senate Judiciary Committee hearings (Benoit & Nill, 1998). This tactic can be effective because it may divert attention from the questionable behavior.

Finally, the accused may reduce offensiveness through compensation (Benoit, 1997). In a corporate context, this often manifests itself as out-of-court settlements with consumers. While presidents may offer compensation to victims of crisis, this is not a major element of victim crisis response. Rather, when it

does occur, it appears to represent a larger movement to encourage public giving and plays a minor role in the overall image repair attempt.

Corrective action is Benoit's fifth image repair strategy (1997). While the four previous strategies cannot reasonably be employed in response to victim crises, corrective action is quite effective and commonly used. Benoit & Czerwinski (1997) explain that "unlike compensation, which seeks to pay for a problem, corrective action seeks to prevent or correct it" (45). So while the American public may not hold their government responsible for the terrorist attacks of September 11th, they are certainly interested in the prevention of future attacks and corrective action in the form of justice. Sellnow, Ulmer & Snider (1998) claim that corrective action can be taken even when the organization is not blamed for the crisis. While it was not blamed for the deaths associated with its product, Tylenol voluntarily changed its packaging in an effort to prevent further tampering. This corrective act resulted in higher levels of consumer confidence (Sellnow et al. 1998).

Benoit's final image repair strategy is *mortification*. This tactic is typically reserved for extreme cases where no other tactic has proved effective because it involves confessing to the public that the group is responsible for the offensive act and requires the group to beg for forgiveness (Benoit, 1997). Before turning to this strategy, the group usually attempts one of the others or some combination of them. Prior to his nationally televised admission of guilt and apology, President Clinton employed denial and reducing offensiveness in

response to accusations of an affair with Monica Lewinsky (Benoit & McHale, 1999).

Benoit asserts that ultimately, image restoration is motivated by a desire to save face (1997). While the motivation for victim crisis communication may differ from traditional image restoration attempts, it is nevertheless a necessary component of the healing process as well as governmental face-saving, or the reclaiming of government authority.

Victim crisis communication fundamentally differs from traditional crisis communication. Culpability can determine the effectiveness of crisis response strategies. This distinction necessitates scholarly research in order to identify additional strategies that can help leaders successfully cope with these unique crisis events. Benoit's image restoration theory provides deep insight into traditional crisis response. Benoit clearly explains that his is a general theory (and not comprehensive) of image restoration and maintains that his scope is broad (1995). This study purported to expand Benoit's theoretical framework to include victim crisis communication.

Benoit's image restoration strategies are insufficient in relation to victim crises for a variety of reasons. In situations such as terrorist attacks, the public does not expect the government to provide many of the traditional crisis management responses. Denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness and mortification are largely inappropriate responses to attack. The public does not expect or want excuses or apologies. They look for guidance, leadership and retribution rendering corrective action useful. However, the author's previous

research revealed two strategies frequently used in victim crisis management but not included in Benoit's paradigm or otherwise outlined in crisis communication research (2001). They will be referred to in this paper as "call to action" and "acknowledging effectiveness."

Call to action is defined as explicitly requesting action and includes concrete assistance such as money, as well as other forms of assistance including time, strength and prayers. Introduced by Alan Monroe in the 1930s, call to action is the final stage of the motivated sequence (McKerrow et. al, 2000).

Acknowledging effectiveness is an additional image restoration strategy commonly used in victim crisis communication. Acknowledging effectiveness is akin to patting oneself (or others) on the back for heeding calls to action or taking steps toward correcting injustices. Presidents acknowledge the effectiveness of corrective action taken by outlining military and other victories in speeches made to the public. Furthermore, they praise the public for heeding their calls to action, yielding important results. Table 1 provides explanations and examples of the three crisis communication strategies previously discussed.

Table 1 Crisis Communication Strategies		
Strategy	Explanation	Example
Corrective Action	Plan to solve/prevent problem May be specific or general.	"The United States of America will use all our resources to conquer this enemy" (<i>Remarks</i> , 2001d, p.1)
Call to Action	Rally public support. May be concrete or abstract.	"I ask you to continue to support the victims of this tragedy with your contributions" (<i>Address</i> , 2001, p. 4)
Acknowledging Effectiveness	Pat on the back to government and the people.	"Thus far, we've frozen \$6 million in bank accounts linked to terrorist activity" (<i>President</i> , 2001l, p. 2).

April 18, 1983

At approximately 1 p.m. on April 18, 1983, a suicide bomber drove a van loaded with 2000 pounds of explosives into the United States Embassy in Beirut, Lebanon, killing 63, including 17 Americans. The van used in the attack was reportedly stolen from the U.S. Embassy in June 1982. Many of the victims were eating lunch in the cafeteria and were crushed by the collapsing building (*Remembering*, 2000). This attack took place on foreign soil and was perpetrated against military and diplomatic personnel. These variables contributed to a unique climate surrounding the attack.

October 23, 1983

At 6:30 a.m. on October 23, 1983, a young man drove a truck through the front entrance of the Battalion Landing Team Headquarters building at Beirut International Airport, which housed nearly 1,000 Marines. The vehicle was loaded with 2,000 pounds of dynamite and compressed gas and the driver detonated the explosives inside of the building, killing himself and 241 Marines (*Remembering*, 2000). Again, the location of this attack and the fact that all of the victims were soldiers created a unique set of crisis communication challenges. Furthermore, the fact that this represented the second attack on American soldiers in Beirut in 1983 probably contributed to widespread public criticism of U.S. foreign policy. This criticism may have forced President Reagan to take on a defensive posture in response to this terrorist attack.

April 19, 1995

On April 19, 1995, at 9:03 a.m., a bomb exploded inside of a rental truck parked outside of the Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City. The truck was packed with two and a half tons of ammonium nitrate. The blast crushed the building's front support columns, blew up nearly half of the nine-story building and killed 168 people. This death toll made it the "worst terrorist attack on U.S. soil" to date (*President's*, 1995b, ¶ 3). Ninety minutes after the attack, an Oklahoma highway patrolman pulled over Timothy McVeigh for driving without a license plate. McVeigh was subsequently executed for this crime. Clearly the impact of this terrorist attack was monumental because it represented the deadliest terrorist attack on American soil to date (Gorov, 1998). It would command a massive presidential crisis response.

August 7, 1998

On the morning of August 7, 1998, a suicide bomber drove a truck loaded with explosives up to the gates of the United States Embassy in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania. Unable to penetrate the gates, the driver detonated the bomb about 35 feet from the embassy. The attack killed eight people, none of whom were American (*Report*, 1998).

Also on the morning of August 7, 1998, terrorists drove a truck filled with explosives through the rear parking area of the American Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya. After a guard refused to allow the men passage, they began throwing grenades and firing at the embassy. They then detonated the bomb. The attack killed 213 people, including 12 Americans (*Report*, 1998). The 1998 embassy

bombings garnered little public attention in the U.S. probably because they occurred on foreign soil and the majority of the victims were not American. Furthermore, limited media access may have contributed to a lack of public attention focused on these tragic events.

September 11, 2001

At 8:45 a.m. Eastern Time on September 11, 2001, hijacked passenger jet American Airlines flight 11 crashed into the north tower of the World Trade Center in Manhattan. Eighteen minutes later, United Airlines flight 175 crashed into the south tower (*Chronology*, 2001).

At 9:17 a.m., the Federal Aviation Administration shut down New York City airports. Four minutes later all bridges and tunnels in the New York area were closed. At 9:30 a.m., President George W. Bush claimed that the United States had been the victim of “an apparent terrorist attack” (*Chronology*, 2001, ¶ 1), and the FAA made the unprecedented decision to ground all flights in U.S. airspace.

At 9:43 a.m., American Airlines flight 77 tore into the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., prompting the evacuation of the White House at 9:45 a.m. Then, United Airlines flight 93, apparently headed for the White House, plunged into the ground in rural Pennsylvania. By 10:30 a.m., both World Trade Center towers had collapsed releasing billowing clouds of smoke and debris.

At approximately 11 a.m., CNN reported that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) began preparing emergency-response teams as a precautionary measure. At 12:04 p.m., Los Angeles International Airport was

evacuated closely followed by the evacuation of San Francisco International Airport. The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) announced that U.S. borders were on the highest state of alert. At 1 p.m., President Bush told Americans to "Make no mistake, the United States will hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts" (*Chronology*, 2001, ¶ 2).

In the next few hours, dozens of government buildings were evacuated across the country, the military was on high alert and the Navy had deployed five warships and two aircraft carriers to protect the East Coast. President Bush warned that the U.S. government would make no distinction between the terrorists responsible for the attacks and the governments who harbored them (*Chronology*, 2001).

The American public fixated on these heinous attacks for many reasons. First, similar to the Oklahoma City Bombings several years earlier, the September 11th attacks represented the deadliest terrorist attack ever on American soil. Second, these attacks were clearly highly coordinated which contributed to intense public fear and confusion. Third, thousands of victims translated to hundreds of thousands of Americans personally touched by these events. Finally, because these attacks occurred on American soil, media coverage immediately and constantly saturated the airways in the moments, days and months following the attacks.

This work explored how governments attempt to restore confidence and save face after attacks for which they are not responsible. Specifically, this research examined presidential responses to terrorist attacks. It examined the

crises surrounding five terrorist attacks and the crisis communication methods employed by the U.S. government in response to them.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

This study analyzed nationally broadcast presidential speeches to investigate how responses to victim crisis events differ from responses to traditional crises where respondents have been accused of offensive acts. This study examined speeches made within one month of five separate terrorist attacks.

The sample consisted of 44 speeches from the Public Papers of the President and the Website of the White House (for speeches made during the current administration). Table 2 displays the presidents and crisis events examined.

Table 2 Presidents and Attacks	
George W. Bush	September 11, 2001 terrorist attack
William J. Clinton	1995 Oklahoma City Bombing 1998 Embassy Bombings, Kenya & Tanzania
Ronald Reagan	1983 Embassy Bombing, Lebanon 1983 Marine Barracks attack, Lebanon

The speeches analyzed represented several formats ranging from radio addresses to remarks at memorial services. However, all speeches were prepared (not impromptu) because these were thought to best represent the calculated or intended strategy of the president. In cases where the addresses began as prepared speeches but were followed by questions from the press, the question-answer portion was discarded.

The speeches represented a convenience sample. Four criteria were considered in selecting the five victim crisis events: presidency, military versus civilian victims, magnitude and location. The researcher chose terrorist attacks committed during three different presidential administrations in an effort to represent a variety of personal crisis communication styles. The study examined attacks on both military and civilian victims in order to explore how this variable may have contributed to crisis responses. Attacks of differing magnitudes were also included. Finally, the sample consisted of attacks on both foreign and domestic soil because it was thought that location of attack would impact presidential response.

The unit of analysis was the individual sentence. To determine how victim crisis response differs from traditional crisis response, the researcher used content analytic procedures to investigate the speeches. According to Berelson, content analysis "is a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication" (1952, p.18).

The coding schema utilized categories designed to describe the image repair content of the speech. These categories included corrective action, the call to action and acknowledging effectiveness as well as Benoit's other image repair strategies previously discussed (See Appendix). The categories were designed to be exhaustive and mutually exclusive and to measure variables identified in the hypotheses. The coders classified every sentence. When sentences did not represent one of the crisis communication strategies identified, they were coded as "other." Each sentence could represent only one category. Therefore, when two

strategies were used in one sentence, the coders were instructed to count only the first strategy.

One graduate student coded the 44 speeches. An additional coder spot-coded in order to measure reliability. Scott's (1955) formula was used to obtain an index of reliability. Overall the coders achieved 89% intercoder reliability with coding reliability ranging from (71)% to (100)% on individual items.

The researcher performed a content analysis of one month of nationally broadcast presidential addresses immediately following five terrorist attacks. These included the 1983 Beirut embassy bombing, the 1983 attack on Marine barracks in Lebanon, the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, the 1998 embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania and the September 11th, 2001, terrorist attack. Incidents were combined as one attack when they occurred on the same day and were treated as such in the speeches. For example, the embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania were treated as one attack because they occurred on the same day and President Clinton responded to them as a single assault. These events were chosen because the crises surrounding them met two criteria: the perpetrators were unknown (though suspected) and they could not be easily captured. These conditions contributed to the fear of repeated attack, which necessitated an image restoration response by the president.

Circumstances surrounding the five attacks varied greatly. Some occurred on foreign soil while some occurred in the United States. Some attacks claimed thousands of victims while some claimed only a few. Some attacks claimed only civilian victims while others claimed only military and diplomatic personnel.

Some attacks were virtually ignored by the media while others drew worldwide coverage. These circumstances undoubtedly elicited differences in intensity and quality of presidential responses to the events. In spite of the differences in circumstances surrounding these events, they were all expected to inspire the use of the victim crisis communication strategies outlined in the following hypotheses.

Hypotheses and rationale

H1: The magnitude of the victim crisis will positively correlate with the number of times the president addresses the public.

When a victim crisis of a high magnitude occurs, presidents will address the public more frequently than during lower magnitude crises. They will attempt to reassure the public with greater zeal than during lower magnitude crises.

H2: The magnitude of the victim crisis will positively correlate with the number of image repair attempts the president will make.

An image repair attempt is defined as any statement not coded "other." In the case of September 11th, magnitude of attack could not be ascertained for some time, but the assumption was that the total number of deaths would be in the thousands.

H3: In response to victim crisis events, presidents will use corrective action more often than any of Benoit's other image repair strategies.

As explained previously, four out of five of Benoit's image repair strategies require at least some admission of guilt on the part of the organization,

rendering the strategies inappropriate in relation to victim crises. However, presidents will frequently use corrective action in response to victim crisis events.

H4: Presidents will use the call to action in response to victim crisis events.

The call to action is an appropriate response to victim crisis events because the public often seeks guidance and leadership. The call to action represents a way for the public to feel that they can contribute. Therefore, this tactic will be commonly used by presidents in response to victim crisis events.

H5: Presidents will acknowledge the effectiveness of corrective action and calls to action.

Acknowledging effectiveness is an additional image restoration strategy commonly used in victim crisis communication. Presidents will acknowledge the effectiveness of the corrective action taken by outlining military and other victories in speeches made to the public. Furthermore, they will praise the public for heeding their calls to action, yielding important results.

Specification of variables

The independent variables were the occurrence of a victim crisis event and the magnitude of the crisis, measured by the number of resulting deaths. The dependent variable was the image restoration strategy used by the president. Magnitude I is characterized by 0-49 deaths, magnitude II is characterized by 50-499 deaths and magnitude III is characterized by 500 or more deaths. The author identified a need to categorize for purposes of comparison and constructed these logical categories. The ranges are reasonable because 0-49 deaths would include attacks on individuals, 50-499 deaths would include hijackings where all aboard

were killed as well as bombings carried out by individuals and 500 or more deaths would include only grand-scale, highly coordinated attacks. It seemed that magnitude III attacks impacted the public far more than magnitude II attacks which impacted the public more than magnitude I attacks. This condition contributed to the need for presidents to tailor their crisis responses to magnitude. "Magnitude" was designed as a method of simplifying and clarifying the results of the study. Though these categories may be somewhat problematic, they afforded the author the important ability to delineate between attacks of differing value.

The individual sentence within the presidential address was the unit of analysis. The researcher coded national broadcasts of presidential speeches using the Public Papers of the Presidents and documents retrieved from the official White House Website. The Public Papers of the President provide a record of all major presidential speeches since the Franklin Roosevelt Administration. Because each strategy is used for a desired specific purpose, it is expected that each address may include a combination of the strategies described.

A speech was coded 0 if it contained none of the strategies and it accumulated one point for each strategy used, each call to action and each time the president acknowledged effectiveness. The logic behind this design is that the more strategies and acknowledgements included in an address, the more intensive the attempt at image restoration.

Operationalizing the dependent variables

“Corrective action:” An address received one point for each time the president outlined planned or executed corrective action. Corrective action is defined as a promise to correct a current problem and/or prevent future problems. This includes explicit promises, steps already taken and steps that will be taken.

“Call to action”: An address received one point for each call to action. A call is defined as explicitly requesting action, stating that one “should” or “must” take action, stating that an action is “needed,” “necessary,” or “vital”; and /or stating that the administration “urges” or “encourages” the action. It can also include helping or assisting, giving strength or encouraging, joining together with or coming together in alliance or giving time, money, resources or prayers.

“Acknowledging effectiveness”: An address received one point for each time a president acknowledged the effectiveness of his corrective action or call to action. “Acknowledging effectiveness” is defined as claiming success of corrective action, expressing gratitude, thanking or expressing pride in a job well done. This research examined five presidential responses to one magnitude I terrorist attack, three magnitude II terrorist attacks and one magnitude III terrorist attack.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The initial hypothesis predicted that the magnitude of the victim crisis would positively correlate with the number of times the president addressed the public. This hypothesis was supported. Presidents addressed magnitude III attacks seven times more frequently than magnitude two attacks and 11 times more often than magnitude I attacks. The results are illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3 Relationship between magnitude and intensity of image repair attempt	# of deaths	Magnitude	# of addresses	# image repair attempts
September 11 th attacks, 2001	Approx. 3,000	III	22	329
Kenya & Tanzania bombing, 1998	224	II	8	81
Oklahoma City bombing, 1995	167	II	10	32
Marine barracks bombing- Beirut, 1983	241	II	4	8
Beirut embassy Bombing, 1983	16	I	2	5

The second hypothesis proposed that the magnitude of the terrorist attack would positively correlate with the number of image repair attempts made by the president. An image repair attempt was defined as any sentence not coded “other.” This hypothesis was supported. The analysis revealed that speeches responding to magnitude III attacks contained nearly seven times as many image repair attempts as magnitude II attacks and 65 times as many attempts as magnitude I attacks. Table 3 illustrates the findings.

The third hypothesis held that corrective action would be used more often than any of Benoit's other image repair strategies. The data indicated that presidents were significantly more likely to use corrective action than any of Benoit's other techniques. Table 4 illustrates presidential use of Benoit's image repair strategies.

Table 4 Event	corrective action- occurrences	other Benoit strategies- occurrences
September 11 th	227	2
Kenya & Tanzania	27	0
Oklahoma City	37	0
Marine barracks	8	0
Beirut embassy	3	0

The fourth hypothesis predicted that presidents would use the call to action in response to victim crisis events. This hypothesis was also supported. The frequency of use also may be positively correlated to the magnitude of the attack.

Table 5 Event	Call to action- occurrences	Acknowledging effectiveness- occurrences
September 11 th	40	62
Kenya & Tanzania	2	3
Oklahoma City	27	17
Marine barracks	0	0
Beirut embassy	2	0

The final hypothesis predicted that presidents would acknowledge the effectiveness of corrective action and calls to action in addresses following terrorist attacks. This hypothesis was also supported as evidenced by the results shown in Table 5.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This study examined presidential crisis communication response to terrorist attacks and established the existence of (and necessity for) a modified set of image repair strategies in response to victim crisis events. To date, research has not differentiated between organizational crises where organizations are blamed for offensive acts and ones where offensive acts have been committed against organizations. This study hoped to make that distinction.

This research concluded that magnitude of victim crisis events positively correlated with the intensity of the image repair attempt, measured by number of speeches and strategies used. Furthermore, the study established that victim crisis communication is characterized by heavy use of only one of Benoit's image repair strategies: corrective action. Thus, a clear need for further development of crisis communication theory became evident.

This examination of presidential response to terrorist attacks on America revealed a cyclical pattern. The cycle begins with "justice-talk," in which the president outlines a plan for corrective action. Here, he assures the public that there will be a decisive response to the attack and that justice will be done. In response to the 2001 attacks, President Bush assured the country that "we're going to shine the light of justice on [terrorists]" (*President*, 2001j, ¶ 2).

The second phase of this cycle is the *call to action*. After the president explains his plan for corrective action to the people, he typically asks them for their support and assistance in response to the attack. In the aftermath of the September 11th attacks, President Bush called Americans to “continue to support the victims of this tragedy with your contributions” (*Address*, 2001, ¶ 41).

The final phase of this cycle of terrorism response is *acknowledging effectiveness*. This is a subcategory of the previous two stages. After announcing corrective action plans and calling the public to action, the president often assures the public that these measures have been successful. President Bush assured the people that “we’ve collectively rounded up 150 terrorists” after the September 11th Attacks (*President*, 2001b, ¶13).

Acknowledging effectiveness serves to comfort the public by convincing them that both governmental action and the contributions of the people have been successful. This may contribute to longevity of popular support for corrective action such as military operations and inconveniences like increased security at airports. Furthermore, it may prolong public willingness to remain civically engaged. This study found that presidents often rotate through this three-phase cycle of victim crisis response numerous times in response to an individual crisis event.

Execution of the study revealed weaknesses. The content analysis was performed on a convenience sample. Clearly, the results cannot be generalized. Weaknesses in the definitions of variables and hypothesis construction became evident during coding.

H1: While the data seemed to support this hypothesis, it is unclear whether the relationship between the independent and dependent variables was spurious. While it seemed that the magnitude of the victim crisis positively correlated with the intensity of the presidential image repair attempt as measured by the number of presidential addresses, it is possible that other contributing variables were present. For example, the data seem to support the notion that attacks on American soil receive more presidential attention than attacks on foreign soil, regardless of magnitude.

H3: The data indicated that the magnitude of the attack positively correlated with the number of times image repair strategies appeared in presidential speeches. However, this study did not take into account the location of the attack. It is likely that this variable strongly impacted the intensity of the image repair attempt.

H4: The data clearly indicated that corrective action was used more than any of Benoit's other image repair strategies. As explained in the literature review, the condition of culpability inherent in Benoit's (1997) other strategies renders them inappropriate for victim crisis communication. Therefore, it is not surprising that this hypothesis was strongly supported.

H5 and H6: This study introduced *call to action* and *acknowledging effectiveness* as victim crisis communication strategies. The data confirmed the use of these strategies by presidents in victim crisis responses. President Clinton called Americans to "continue praying for victims of terror and their families, for those in uniform, and for our great country" (Address, 2001). He acknowledged

the efforts of Americans by explaining that “In the week since the attack, our compassion and generous citizens have led the first phase in the war on terrorism” (President, 2001d). While it is clear that *call to action* and *acknowledging effectiveness* are widely used victim crisis communication strategies, the relationship between these dependent variables and location of attack and targets of attack must be explored in future research.

A corollary benefit of this research included the observation of the following characteristic structure of victim crisis communication:

- a. Identify those responsible or prove to the public that every effort is being made to identify them. This is a crucial element of the acute stage of a crisis.
- b. Outline a plan to bring the perpetrators to justice. This occurs during the chronic crisis stage.
- c. Implement the plan. This is also typical of the chronic crisis stage.
- d. Create a plan to prevent the recurrence of that event or one of a similar nature. This occurs during the chronic crisis stage.
- e. Restore a sense of confidence and create a climate that is free from fear. This is an important element of the crisis resolution phase of a victim crisis event.

Further empirical research could solidify and develop this finding.

This study yielded interesting serendipitous findings. Location of the attack appears to impact the intensity of the image repair attempt. The data indicate that attacks on American soil inspire a much stronger response than those

on foreign soil, regardless of the magnitude of the attack. For example, 241 Marines were killed in the 1983 attack in Beirut; substantially more than the 167 killed in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. However, the Oklahoma City bombing received a much stronger image repair attempt than the attack on the Marine barracks. Following the 1983 Beirut Marine barracks bombing, President Reagan made three speeches devoted to explaining the need for continued military presence in Lebanon and only one devoted to the memory of those killed (*Remarks*, 1983a; *Remarks*, 1983b; *Remarks*, 1983c; *Address*, 1983). Attacks on civilians received an average of 16 presidential responses while attacks on military and diplomatic personnel received only five.

It became clear in the coding of President Reagan's speeches responding to the 1983 Marine barracks bombing that it is common for presidents to minimize military casualties in order to protect foreign policy interests. Many of Reagan's speeches focused not on justice in the name of those killed, but on justifying the need for a continued United States military presence in Beirut in the aftermath of a devastating attack that took the lives of over 200 soldiers. Reagan justified American military presence by explaining that "The struggle for peace is indivisible. We cannot pick and choose where we will support freedom; we can only determine how. If it's lost in one place, all of us lose. If others feel confident that they can intimidate us and our allies in Lebanon, they will become more bold elsewhere" (*Remarks*, 1983a).

Often, military casualties inspire public outcry and questioning about the validity of the reason for the continued military presence. This may explain why

attacks on military and diplomatic personnel inspire less intense crisis communication responses than attacks on civilians. A formal investigation of this phenomenon would be useful in establishing the validity of this observation.

Stephen Fink's (1986) theory of crisis management identified the goal of crisis communication practitioners as "capitalizing on crises and creating achievement out of adversity, inspiration out of humiliation, opportunity out of danger" (1986, p.1). This provided interesting groundwork for victim crisis communication research because achievement, inspiration and opportunity are often exactly what the public needs in the aftermath of an attack. Fink's (1986) formula frequently appears in presidential responses to terrorist attacks. For example, the U.S. government attempted to create achievement out of adversity in the wake of the September 11th terrorist attacks. The U.S. military led the campaign to dismantle the Taliban in an effort to liberate the Afghan people from the oppression and violence of a regime that supported terrorism. While the tragedy of September 11th was devastating, the American government was determined to "create achievement out of adversity" through the liberation of an oppressed people (Fink, 1986 p.1).

Furthermore, the U.S. government sought to create inspiration out of the September 11th terrorist attacks. Tales of heroism inspired Americans in the aftermath of the attacks. "New York's Bravest and Finest" held a new and honored place in the hearts of many. Americans were flying flags in record numbers (*Address*, 2001, September 20). The country witnessed a resurgence of patriotism which helped to replace humiliation with inspiration. Finally, the U.S.

government found opportunity out of danger as the victim of this crisis. United States leaders viewed that historical moment as the time for American troops to lead the effort to rescue the world from international terrorism. The apparent tendency for presidents to employ Fink's formula warrants future empirical testing of victim crisis response.

A particularly compelling area for further research is an examination of victim crisis communication through the lens of symbolic convergence theory (Littlejohn, 1992). Specifically, research could explore how victim crisis communication in response to the September 11th terrorist attacks generated the iconic image of the good cop and the brave firefighter. These new American icons emerged from a media culture critical of police. Images of corrupt cops saturated news reports in the 1990s. Police brutality seemed rampant. However, in post-September 11th reports, police became models of heroism and justice. An examination of the media transformation of cops from evil to good would be especially interesting and could reveal important answers regarding the role of the media in shaping public opinion.

Clearly, further research examining victim crisis communication could provide valuable insight into this important and compelling field. Results of future studies could profoundly impact our understanding of the process of public opinion formation, and hold important practical implications for public relations practitioners, politicians and organizational leaders worldwide.

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Coding Form

Instructions for coding crisis communication strategies used in political speeches. Complete one form for each time a strategy is used. Keep these separated by speech. In other words, when the speech has been reviewed, you should be able to count the incidents of victim crisis communication strategies used in that speech.

Coder name: _____

President: _____

Speech name: _____

Date aired: _____

Corrective action: _____

Denial: _____

Evasion of responsibility: _____

Mortification: _____

Reducing Offensiveness: _____

Compensation: _____

Call to action: _____

Acknowledging effectiveness: _____

Other: _____

VITA

Kelsea Erbatu obtained her bachelor's degree in history from Indiana University in 1995 and her master's degree in communication arts from Austin Peay State University in 2002. She spent the intervening years traveling in Europe and living in the Syria, Turkey and across the United States. Erbatu developed an interest in political communication and foreign policy in her years at Indiana University which flowed naturally into the topic of this thesis.