8 Clinton and the Rhetoric of Image Restoration

8.1 Background

Bill Clinton’s presidency is perhaps best characterised by the contrast between the high-minded ideals and personal charm of the President and a series of increasingly severe scandals that culminated in his impeachment. These reflected on various dimensions of his ethical behaviour, ranging from his financial integrity (the Whitewater affair), personal habits (e.g. marijuana smoking), sexual integrity (the Paula Jones and Monica Lewinsky affairs) and his personal courage (the issue of draft dodging). Earlier presidents had been destroyed by political scandal but none had been threatened with impeachment for lying while under oath. Given the impact of these scandals on the American political scene of the 1990s, it was vital that Clinton was able to rely on techniques of image creation to maintain his stature as President. Accusations went far beyond policy criticisms and focused on his personal morality and therefore attacked the ethos at the bedrock of his rhetorical powers.

This chapter addresses the question: what communication skills did Clinton employ to restore his image as President? In answering this question I will argue that Clinton communicated that he was a leader who had the right intentions and that this was essential because the scandals had jeopardised this perception. I will also argue that his personality and appearance ‘looked right’ and that his use of metaphor contributed to his ability to ‘sound right’ as well as to ‘tell the right story’.
8.2 The rhetoric of Bill Clinton: metaphor and image presentation

A very important strategy of persuasion employed by Clinton is to present himself as a potent symbol of regenerative nature – as he puts it in his first Inaugural address:

My fellow citizens, today we celebrate the mystery of American renewal. (20 January 1993)

The idea of ‘renewal’ was essential to the development of Clinton’s leadership image because it implied a recreation of the vitality associated with earlier periods of American history. Clinton’s appeal to images of renewal and rebirth activates creation myths in which a God recurrently returns to bring about a cyclical regeneration; in Clinton’s case he appealed to the restorative myth of J.F. Kennedy. The success of this myth accounts for his ability to survive the extensive investigations and eventual impeachment for lying under oath. Although the American public and media claimed to be scandalised by the revelations about his sexual relations with Monica Lewinsky, these were tolerated because they did not contradict this myth of renewal and regeneration. Sexual peccadilloes would have been much less acceptable from a politician who was less dependent on his virility as a symbol of national vitality – a politician such as his main rival in the 1992 election – George Bush. Images of renewal and rebirth are also associated with both the democratic process and the Democratic Party:

This year, we must also do more to support democratic renewal and human rights and sustainable development all around the world. (25 January 1994)

So let’s set our own deadline. Let’s work together to write bipartisan campaign finance reform into law and pass McCain–Feingold by the day we celebrate the birth of our democracy, July the 4th. (27 January 1997)

Here the rhetorical purpose is to create a subliminal association between the Democratic Party, patriotism and the positive connotations of birth and renewal. Clinton’s rhetoric aimed to satisfy an American cultural yearning for a returning hero and the lost hope that had died with JFK. John Hellmann calls this search for the new hero a ‘dream of resurrection’, which was evident in the ceaseless attempts to place Kennedy once