

Political apology strategy: Barack Obama faces the Hiroshima bombing

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Abstract. Barack Obama, the 44th president of the U.S., has made a lot of political apologies. People all around the world had different comments on his apologies, because he represented the whole country of the U.S. Many would say that his apologies improved the relationships between the U.S. and other foreign countries on the global stage. This paper analyzed Barack Obama's 'apology' to Japan in events, especially the Hiroshima bombing, through his public speeches, the words he used, the actions he did, people's response to and interaction with him. His good and useful strategies of apologies, which made journalists and governors confused, are analyzed, and several approaches were introduced which were helpful to make apologies, especially for public figures. He rarely used the word 'sorry', but apologized in other ways. It was proved that how he made a good apology as a public character. He was a model for making the political apologies the right way, so learning those strategies would make public relations much easier.

1. Introduction

Apologies are hard to define and evaluate. Some apologies are considered to be intentional. Politicians usually hire PR consultants to prepare statements of apologies in case of further criticisms. Thus, most political apologies are deemed manipulative. Political apologies are made to change the results of one decision or to improve the relationships among countries rather than foist beliefs on the audience. Psychological techniques are used behind apologies to make the public forgive the leader with the least effort.

Political apologies have several purposes and results. Firstly, an apology can minimize one's responsibility. Apologetic words, as excuses to gloss over faults, do not occur intentionally. Secondly, an apology helps express one's pity or sympathy by lowering one's status. Empathy, the ability to understand and share others' feelings, promotes transposition thinking. Moreover, an apology rebuilds trust. Trust is easily broken when one fail to meet others' expectations, which is hard to observe.

For Barack Obama, he thought only apologies can atone for the sins the country had committed before. The country "is a flawed nation which must seek redemption by apologizing for its past sins" [8]. Obama always apologized for wrong political decisions or policies, a way to express regret and ask for understanding of his responsibilities as a president. Nile Gardiner and Morgan Lorraine Roach Barack [8] said Obama's apologies covered "3 billion people across Europe, the Muslim world, and the Americas". They thought this strategy of communicating with enemies weakened the power of U.S. in the world instead of strengthening it. Obama's visits to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iraq [5] showed his strong personal support from around the world, rather than from his home country. Foreign countries saw the U.S not as an aggressive country, which may lead other countries to push their policies forward to threat the U.S. The president's job was not only to secure its own country but also to keep a good relationship with countries in trading and corporation. Barack Obama started his apologies from the beginning of his presidency. Nevertheless, without saying any words like 'sorry or apologize', Barack Obama showed his pity and transfer information that people always debate whether he was apologizing or not.

The success or failure of PR events has been determined by many factors. Apologies would not be avoided in the process of public relations. This study focused on the aspects of public apology based on Barack Obama's attitudes towards the Hiroshima bombing through his speeches. Apologies were influenced by many factors as well. This paper focused on analyzing the influence

of time, apology attitudes and other factors that determined the success or failure of an apology. Besides, some advices would be given when one encountered the situation of political apology.

2. Review of the case

During the World War II, the U.S. decided to join the war and used the atomic bomb the first time in the world. The bombing on Hiroshima caused thousands of death. Peace Memorial Park was set up for the purpose of commemorating this historical events and soldiers who died during the atomic bomb. The bombing of Hiroshima was decided by former president Harry S. Truman.

In 2016, Barack Obama had an emotional and historical visit to Peace Memorial Park, Hiroshima amid his presidency, which was the first time for American presidents to visit this location with historical meaning. At that meeting, Barack Obama made a speech that everyone should remember the huge and unlimited power atomic bombs had, and said it would be better for every country to end the use and invention of nuclear weapons. He had no word on apologizing for the decision of dropping the atomic bomb in Hiroshima during war. However, he hugged the Japanese soldier who survived from that bombing. The main purpose for an American president to visit Japan was to achieve reconciliation, rather than querying whose fault it was in the past nor apologizing for either side. It was said that “An estimated 140,000 people—including a dozen captured American airmen and thousands of forced laborers from Korea—were killed in the world’s first atomic bombing at Hiroshima [6].” For survivors, they wanted to have apologies from the U.S., because they thought it was brutal and anti-human to kill a great number of people by using the atomic bomb. However, American veterans refused to apologize, due to the reason that they thought the Hiroshima bombing accelerated the progress of war which decreased the number of potential casualties, which meant Barack Obama had no needs to apologize to Japanese soldiers.

The spotlight was his debatable speech on peace and war. People criticized that his speech was a way to make excuses for Americans’ killing of the Japanese during the Second World War. Others thought he was not apologizing but only calling for peace and wanted to keep a harmonious relationship with Japan.

3. Analysis from several aspects

3.1 Responsibility

The ultimate aim of apology was not to get forgiveness, but to shoulder responsibility. The least effective way of apologizing was to ask for forgiveness. According to Kirk [6], he thought the speech was not an apology: “He did not, however, apologize for the decision to drop the bomb.” Obama “appeared carefully and crafted to focus on reconciliation, rather than troubling questions of wartime blame or responsibility.” They regarded the purpose as reconciliation rather than an apology because the purpose was not to apologize and ask for forgiveness. The first step to apologize was to know ones’ purposes or motivations. Thus, ones’ expectations and responsibilities would be cleared. Barack Obama did not point out the purpose of the air attack by using the nuclear weapons which had strong force to kill people. He emphasized people should take responsibility for knowing and memorizing history, also preventing the war from happening again. This kind of showing sorrow mood because the war was also a way to apologize but escaped the responsibility.

At a press conference, when they talked about whether the U.S had lost or gained the international power during the past decades, Barack Obama mentioned: “that wasn’t simply my opinion; that was, it turned out, the opinion of many people around the world [2].” Barack Obama “blurs the offense [7]” in this apology. He confirmed the opinion-apology was not only his idea but many people’s all over the world. In this way, he blurred the responsibility, so people would not consider his speech as an apology.

3.2 Responsibility

The New York Times [3] had posted the speech transcript online. From his speech, the words “mistake, forgive...” showed the way of his apology. Those words would not take the president of

the country into any responsibilities. He did not apologize directly by saying ‘sorry’ but euphemistically expressed his feeling of guilt and regret. He said “Mere words cannot give voice to such suffering,” which expressed his shame and guilt for the country’s history of the killing of Japanese during the Second World War. In this way, Obama confirmed that killing people was an unjust and unfair thing which he called “suffering”.

Audiences could see these sentences as apologizing. However, for Barack Obama, the president of a country, it was not easy to say the word ‘sorry’ in the political apology. He may bring the country with a soft image by apologizing which was the sign of lowering the country’s status. Meanwhile, if he did not express his feeling of sorrow, conflicts may occur between the U.S and other European countries. Using the rhetorical question can expose part of the reality, which was also a good way to pose the question to the audience and emphasized on people who needed apologies.

3.3 Expression of emotions

To cater to the Japanese’s thoughts, Barack Obama’s speech transferred the negative emotion and achieved Japanese’s expectations, which Americans felt bad about it but led the Japanese to feel better. Obama’s purpose was to have a harmonious relationship with Japan. If he did not make such a confusing and debatable speech, Japan might keep the distance from the U.S. His speech was to rebuild the integrity of America in the global stage. The pity tone in the speech showed how the U.S defined justice and how the U.S faced the war and a peaceful world.

When they apologized, people who presented sad were more easily to be accepted than people who looked neutral or happy. People who sought for apologies wanted to see apologies from one who sincerely and profoundly recognized their wrong actions. It was useless if someone was still mad in the mood but apologized just for keeping harmonious relationships. The tone of voice will violate the context of an apology. An effective and sincere apology would help one to recover trust and integrity.

4. The essence of seeking for apology

The essence of apology is not to say ‘sorry’ for others’ bad feelings, but for full responsibilities of one’s actions. For people who suffer from the war, “the woman who forgave a pilot who flew the plane that dropped the atomic bomb because she recognized that what she hated was war itself [2].” He analogized the woman who forgave the U.S pilot, as they realized that they should hate the war itself instead of soldiers behind it. Barack Obama had no choice but to do this speech to show Americans’ regret to obey “international expectation and to display appropriate feelings after such a grave offense [7].” In the later part of this speech, he admitted that the U.S. sometimes had negative attitudes but the country also did positive impacts on global. By showing the positive aspect, the apology would be ignored, and audiences may shift their attention to what the country had done well.

5. Suggestions on analysis

Different opinions towards the same events occur from various points of view. Presidents or representatives from different countries would hold different important opinions based on current situations and history of their own. Attempting to feel what others felt and delivering what they wanted to hear would not lose benefits of their own nation, but can make the apology easier to accept. In Hiroshima bombing, Obama might think that Japanese consider the fault in the history was U.S.’s. Scientists had discovered the six elements of an effective apology [4]:

1. Expression of regret
2. Explanation of what went wrong
3. Acknowledgment of responsibility
4. Declaration of repentance
5. Offer of repair

6. Request for forgiveness

Barack Obama had achieved the above requirements. His speech was important because he had to avoid lowering the status of the country. In addition, if he apologized in public but made no changes in actions, Japan may feel even worse. Public apologies, particularly, needed to arouse sympathetic response from citizens. The public voice had so much power to cover the faith because people felt sensitive to hear governors or politicians to apologize. The reason why was that people were afraid of being misled by national governors who determined the country's necessary issues related to human safety and living quality. Public apologies might start with sincerity. Learned from Barack Obama, a good political apology could without saying 'sorry', but using the words such as 'forgive, feel guilty' to express the meaning of apology in an implicit way. By stating the responsibility was not on oneself, the apology should be given by someone who had the responsibility but nonobservant it. Knowing the responsibility would be helpful to rebuilt faith and integrity.

6. Conclusion

Overall, Barack Obama never said the word 'sorry' to apologize formally. The Merriam-Webster [1] defines apology as 'an admission of error or discourtesy accompanied by an expression of regret', and define sorry as 'feeling sorrow, regret, or penitence'. Obama always made a detour to avoid using debatable words advisably. He used fancy diction and tongue to express the mood of pity and blurred the responsibility to other sides. His purpose was to comfort people who felt hurt without offending other countries, in a way maintaining the high global evaluation of America. He helped to reestablish strong trust and integrity among the U.S and foreign countries. Successful global decisions made by America gave the credit to Barack Obama's political apology strategies. This paper only analyzed Barack Obama's political apology strategy based on events that happened between the U.S and Japan, without saying other strategies using by other politicians. Further study will be focused on the comparisons and contrasts of apologies made by Barack Obama and other presidents or politicians.

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