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**Bully or Dupe?**  
**Governor Chris Christie's Image Repair on the Bridge Lane Closure Scandal**

William L. Benoit

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**ABSTRACT**

In 2013, two lanes leading to the George Washington Bridge – the busiest in the nation – in Fort Lee, NJ, were closed. In January of 2014, it emerged that Christie's Deputy Chief of Staff Kelley instigated this problem. Governor Christie was accused of retaliating against Fort Lee's Mayor Mark Sokolich, who had not endorsed Christie's re-election bid. Christie fired Kelley, held a press conference, and apologized to Sokolich and the people of Fort Lee. Christie's primary strategies were mortification and corrective action, but he also used denial, differentiation, minimization, and defeasibility to deal with this situation. Minimization was interesting as Christie attempted to lower expectations for his performance, reducing the offensiveness of his action.

*Keywords: Governor Chris Christie, George Washington Bridge, Image Repair, Mortification, Corrective Action; Denial, Minimization, Differentiation, Defeasibility*

**Introduction**

New Jersey Governor Chris Christie faced a serious threat to his image when a scandal concerning lane closings on the George Washington Bridge emerged in 2014. He was accused of being involved in the lane closure. Smith (2014) explained the genesis of the George Washington Bridge lane closure scandal.

In September... the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey closed two of the three lanes that lead to the George Washington Bridge in Fort Lee, across the Hudson from Manhattan. That caused days of massive traffic jams in Fort Lee... The closures were ordered by David Wildstein, a Christie confidante and the governor's appointee to the Port Authority, which operates the nation's busiest bridge.

The lane closures began on September 9, 2013 and lasted through September 13. Reports highlighted children in a school bus that was stuck in traffic, increasing the offensiveness of this

situation. Furthermore, “Emergency vehicles were delayed in responding to three people with heart problems and a missing toddler, and commuters were left fuming” (Zernikejan, 2014). Early reports blamed a traffic study for the lane closures and in December of 2013 “Mr. Christie mocked the idea that he might have been involved, joking, ‘I actually was the guy working the cones’” (Zernikejan, 2014). Christie dismissed the controversy as “not that big a deal” (Reilly, 2013).

However, these lane closures erupted into a very big deal on January 8, 2014, when it was revealed that “a top Christie aide [Bridget Kelley] had e-mailed David Wildstein at the Port Authority before the closures, telling him, ‘Time for some traffic problems in Fort Lee’” (Smith, 2014). Emails to and from Wildstein were revealed which appeared to gloat over the traffic snarls. Christie came under fire for the lane closings and the disruption that followed; he had, after all, appointed Wildstein to the Port Authority and Bridget Kelley was one of Christie’s top aides. This controversy had implications that extended far beyond the Governor of New Jersey. In 2014, Chris Christie was expected to be a top contender for the Republican presidential nomination, assuming his candidacy was not derailed by the scandal. Of course, it is still early days in the 2016 presidential campaign, but a CNN poll on presidential popularity conducted in December of 2013 found that Christie led Republican politicians and was in a statistical tie with Hillary Clinton (Steinhauser, 2013). Donald Trump captured attention in 2015, but Christie was still invited to participate in the August 8, 2015 Republican primary debate.

Christie held a press conference that lasted over one and three-quarters hours on January 9 to address this scandal. As a governor and a contender for the 2016 presidential election, Christie’s image repair discourse merits scholarly attention. This essay analyzes Christie’s defensive discourse utilizing Image Repair Theory (Benoit, 2015). First, the method is described. Then the criticisms leveled at Christie are identified. This essay works to implement Benoit’s incorporation of Fishbein and Ajzen’s (2010) Theory of Reasoned Action and the concepts of beliefs and values in the analysis (a threat to an image exists when the pertinent audience has a belief that the accused has committed an offensive act). Next, Image Repair Theory will be used to analyze the strategies employed his persuasive discourse. Finally, his defense will be evaluated and implications elucidated.

### **Method**

This essay reports a rhetorical criticism of Governor Chris Christie’s press conference using Image Repair Theory. This approach argues that image, face, or reputation is extremely important for individuals and organizations and discusses strategies for repairing damaged images (Benoit, 2015). Five general strategies of image repair discourse have been identified (Benoit, 2015), three with specific variants or tactics (see Table 1). Each will be discussed in this section.

Table 1. *Image Restoration Strategies*

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Strategy	Key Characteristic	Example
<i>Denial</i>		
Simple denial	did not perform act	Tonya Harding denied participating in attack on Nancy Kerrigan
Shift the blame	another performed act	someone else stole your CD, not me
<i>Evasion of Responsibility</i>		
Provocation	responded to act of another	I trashed your room because I was mad that you didn't pick me up after work
Defeasibility	lack of information or ability	late to meeting: wasn't told new time
Accident	mishap	icy road caused me to lose control of my car
Good Intentions	meant well	I meant to buy you a birthday present, but forgot
<i>Reducing Offensiveness of Event</i>		
Bolstering	stress good traits	Clinton boasted of first term successes
Minimization	act not serious	it's no big deal that I broke your Walkman; it was old and didn't play well
Differentiation	act less offensive than similar acts	I borrowed your car, I didn't steal it
Transcendence	more important values	I used up our savings to buy you a present
Attack Accuser	reduce credibility of accuser	Monica Lewinsky said she lied entire life
Compensation	reimburse victim	disabled movie-goers given free passes after denied admission to movie
<i>Corrective Action</i>	plan to solve/prevent recurrence of problem	offer to dry-clean sweater stained by spilled drink
<i>Mortification</i>	apologize	Hugh Grant apologized to E. Hurley
Source: Benoit (1995; 2015)		

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*Denial*

Simple denial can take three discrete but related forms. Those accused of wrong-doing may deny that the offensive act occurred, deny that they performed the objectionable act, or deny that the act is harmful. Any of these instantiations of denial, if accepted by the intended audience, can conceivably repair the rhetor's reputation. Furthermore, a rhetor may also try to

shift the blame. If another person (or group, or organization) actually committed the offensive act, the accused should not be held responsible for that offensive act.

### *Evade Responsibility*

This general image repair strategy has four versions or tactics. A rhetor may allege the offensive act was a reasonable response to someone else's offensive act (typically an act of the alleged victim), and that the rhetor's response was a reasonable reaction to that provocation. Defeasibility claims that the rhetor lacked the knowledge or ability to avoid committing the offensive act. A rhetor may also argue that the offense occurred by accident. Fourth, the rhetor can claim that the act was actually performed with good intentions.

### *Reduce Offensiveness*

There are six different forms of attempting to reduce the apparent offensiveness of the act. First, a rhetor can bolster his or her own image in an attempt to strengthen the audience's positive feelings toward him or her. Hopefully this will offset the negative feelings that arose from the offensive act. The tactic of minimization suggests that the act in question is not really as offensive as it seems. Differentiation tries to distinguish the act in question from other similar but more offensive actions. In comparison, the act performed by the rhetor may not appear so bad. Transcendence attempts to justify the act by placing it in a more favorable context. A rhetor can attempt to attack the accusers, so as to reduce the credibility of the accusations (or suggest that the victim deserved what happened). The tactic of compensation offers to give the victim money, goods, or services to help reduce the negative feelings toward the rhetor.

### *Corrective Action*

Corrective action is a commitment to repair the damage from the offensive act. This general strategy can take two forms. The rhetor can promise to restore the state of affairs before the offensive act or the rhetor can promise to prevent recurrence of the offensive act.

### *Mortification*

The last strategy is to admit committing the offensive act and to ask for forgiveness. It is possible that an apparently sincere apology would help restore the rhetor's image with the intended audience.

Benoit (2015) linked Image Repair Theory with Fishbein and Ajzen's (2010) Theory of Reasoned Action. According to the Theory of Reasoned Action, attitudes are comprised of beliefs and values. For example, suspicions about Christie were constituted from a belief (that he was involved in the lane closure) and a value (that the disruption from such lane closures is offensive). Image repair discourse is best understood by considering the defense in the context of the accusations. Accusations consist of beliefs and values (the components of an attitude), labeled, respectively, blame and offensiveness by Pomerantz (1978). One who seeks to repair an

image must identify the relevant audience's attitudes and then attempt to change unfavorable attitudes by changing an unfavorable belief or value or by adding a new and favorable belief or value.

Research has applied Image Repair Theory to discourse in a variety of contexts. Studies have investigated corporate image repair, including rhetorical criticism of defensive messages by Sears (Benoit, 1995b), AT&T (Benoit & Brinson, 1994), USAir (Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997), Firestone (Blaney, Benoit, & Brazeal, 2002), Dow Corning (Brinson & Benoit, 1998), and Texaco (Brinson & Benoit, 1999). Other studies have examined image repair in sports and entertainment, including Hugh Grant (Benoit, 1997), Tiger Woods (Benoit, 2013), Murphy Brown (Benoit & Anderson, 1996), Tanya Harding (Benoit & Hanczor, 1994), Oliver Stone (Benoit & Nill, 1998b), Terrell Owens (Brinson, 2008), and Floyd Landis (Glantz, 2009). Research has examined international image repair, including the U.S. and Japan (Drumheller & Benoit, 2004), Saudi Arabia and the U.S. (Zhang & Benoit, 2009), and China and SARS (Zhang & Benoit, 2009). Political image repair is another topic of interest, with research focusing on President Bush (Benoit & Henson, 2009), President Reagan (Benoit, Gullifor, & Panici, 1991), Clarence Thomas (Benoit & Nill, 1998b), or President Bill Clinton (Blaney & Benoit, 2001). Two studies (Benoit, 2006a, 2006b) examined image repair in press conferences and news interviews. For a more detailed review of these topics, see Benoit (2015). This essay employs the strategies postulated by Image Repair Theory as a critical lens to analyze this discourse. Then Christie's defense will be critically evaluated.

### **Critical Analysis of Christie's Image Repair Discourse**

The unfavorable attitude toward Governor Christie largely stemmed from the accusation that he was responsible for the bridge lane closure. In this case the belief was that Christie was to blame for this event; the value was that the lane closure had negative consequences for those using the bridge. This accusation was supported by two minor additional charges: Christie was a bully and David Wildstein (who actually closed the lanes) was one of Christie's cronies. Christie's image repair effort responded to these accusations with six strategies: mortification, corrective action, simple denial, differentiation, minimization, and defeasibility. Each of these strategies will be examined here in turn.

#### *Mortification*

Benoit (2015) explains that people tend to avoid apologizing for their actions. However, Christie used this strategy in his press conference. Although the simple numbers are less important than the discourse, Christie used the word "apology" or one of its related forms 29 times in this press conference. He said he was "sorry" three times. Christie was attempting to create a new belief here, that he was embarrassed, apologetic, remorseful. He began his statement by saying that:

I've come out here today to apologize to the people of New Jersey. I apologize to the people of Fort Lee and I apologize to the members of the state legislature. I am embarrassed and humiliated by the conduct of some of the people on my team. There's no doubt in my mind that the conduct that they exhibited is completely unacceptable and showed a lack of respect for the appropriate role of government and for the people that were trusted to serve. (All quotations of this image repair taken from Christie, 2014)

Notice that he apologizes for what "come of the people on my team" did, not for what he personally had done; this is important because he denies knowledge of the act.

Christie also addresses those who were directly affected by the lane closing in his discourse:

I believe that all of the people who were affected by this conduct deserve this apology and that's why I'm giving it to them. I also need to apologize to them for my failure as the governor of this state to understand the true nature of this problem sooner than I did.

Notice again that Christie apologizes for his "failure... to understand the true nature of this problem sooner than I did," not for the lane closures themselves. He follows this apology up by declaring that he will go to Fort Lee that day to apologize to Mayor Sokolich and the people of Fort Lee:

Later today I'm going to be going to Fort Lee, asked to meet with the mayor to apologize to him personally, face to face, and also to apologize to the people of Fort Lee in their town. I think they need to see me do that personally, and I intend to do that later on today. People of those communities for four days were impacted in a completely callous and indifferent way, and I'm going to go and apologize for that.

Christie quite clearly implemented the image repair strategy of mortification in his press conference. He even apologized for making a joke about the lane closures during his December press conference: "I said I'm sorry for that, and I would have never made that joke if I knew the facts that have come forward to me today." This use of mortification is consistent with his use of denial later (he did not deny the offensive act occurred but he denied that he had instigated it or was aware of it before today).

Note that Christie acknowledged that closing the lanes was an offensive act: "It was an awful, callous, indifferent thing to do." Four times he declared, "Ultimately I am responsible for what happens under my watch." He also observed that the gloating emails revealed a "kind of callous indifference" that he did not support. This image repair effort did not attempt to alter the audience's values (that the act was offensive); the first strategy attempted to create a new belief that he was genuinely sorry for this event (carried out by his underling).

*Corrective Action*

The second component of Christie's image repair effort was corrective action. He began by creating a new belief, announcing that: "This morning I've terminated the employment of Bridget Kelly, effective immediately. I've terminated her employment because she lied to me." He also reported that he had begun the process of questioning his staff about whether other potential problems existed, promising that "if there is additional information that needs to be disclosed, I will do so. If there's additional actions that need to be taken with my senior staff, I will do so." He explained, "I believe what they expect of me as the chief executive of this state is when that information comes into my possession, that I consider it and then act as swiftly as possible to remediate whatever ill occurred. That's what I've done today." So, he fired the staff member who initiated the lane closures and promised to discover whether other abuses occurred and, if so, to correct those as well.

### *Denial*

Christie did not deny that the offensive act, George Washington Bridge lane closures, had occurred. However, faced with these suspicions, he worked to change several beliefs associated with this accusation. Christie denied that he was personally responsible for the lane closures: "I had no knowledge or involvement in this issue, in its planning or its execution." He repeated this denial, saying that "I had no knowledge of this – of the planning, the execution or anything about it – and I first found out about it after it was over." He also declared that, "I would never have come out here four or five weeks ago and made a joke about these lane closures if I had ever had an inkling that anyone on my staff would have been so stupid but to be involved." When asked if he had "authorize[d] this kind of retribution," he said: "Oh, absolutely not. No. And I knew nothing about this. And until it started to be reported in the papers about the closure, but even then I was told this was a traffic study." Christie denied that he had instigated the offensive act and he denied that he had known about it before the revelations in January. The Governor had to walk a fine line here. He wanted to change the belief that he had sanctioned (or known about) the lane closure.

In this press conference, he also denied that he was a close friend to David Wildstein, who actually ordered the lane closings:

Well, let me just clear something up about my childhood friend David Wildstein.... I knew who David Wildstein was. I met David on the Tom Kean for governor campaign in 1977. He was a youth volunteer, and so was I. Really, after that time, I completely lost touch with David. We didn't travel in the same circles in high school.... So we went 23 years without seeing each other, and in the years we did see each other, we passed in the hallways. So I want to clear that up. It doesn't make a difference except that I think some of the stories (that've been written implied) like an emotional relationship and closeness between me and David that doesn't exist.



This denial reinforces his overall denial of blame, attempting to change the belief that Christie used a crony to retaliate against the mayor of Fort Lee.

Christie was confronted with the allegation that he was a bully: “Your critics say this reveals that you are a political bully, that your style is payback.” This accusation was relatively minor, but if true it would be consistent with the main accusation that the bridge lanes were closed in an act of retribution. Christie directly denied this accusation, saying “No, I’m not,” and “I am not a bully.” His demeanor throughout the press conference, patient and apologetic, further supported this denial.

### *Differentiation*

Christie worked to support his denial of the charge that he was a bully by differentiating his character: “I have very heated discussions and arguments with people in my own party and on the other side of the aisle. I feel passionately about issues. And I don’t hide my emotions from people. I am not a focus-group tested, blow-dried candidate or governor.” He said he was “passionate,” not a bully. Later, he explained that, “I have a very direct, blunt personality. And I understand why some people would then characterize that, especially people who don’t like you, as bullying, but it’s not that.” Here he said I am blunt but not a bully. Here, he tried to undermine the belief that he was a bully by the way he characterized his personality.

### *Minimization*

This strategy was implemented in two ways. First, Christie argued that this offensive act was “the exception, it is not the rule, of what’s happened over the last four years in this administration.” He developed this line of defense further when he explained:

I... want the people of New Jersey to know is that this is the exception, not the rule. And they’ve seen that over the last four years with the way I’ve worked and what I’ve done. So I don’t want to fall into the trap of saying, well, this one incident happened, therefore the one incident defines the whole – it does not, just like one employee who’s lied doesn’t determine the character of all the other employees around you.

He minimized the offensive act by arguing that it did not characterize his administration generally.

He also worked to minimize the offensive act by lowering his audience’s expectations. For example, if you think someone promised to loan you \$10,000, breaking that promise would appear more offensive than if you thought he or she had promised to loan you \$100. Christie explained that “I have repeatedly said to them that while I promise them the best governor’s office I could give them, I could never promise them a perfect governor’s office.” If we expect that people are not perfect and mistakes occur, a mistake might be less offensive: “People, I

think, all across this state understand that human beings are not perfect and mistakes are made” (of course, a pattern of mistakes, or a horrible mistake, could still be seen as offensive). Christie also explained:

This is my job and there are going to be mistakes and there are going to be disappointments. I don't think there's a perfect government anywhere in the country, and I certainly never claimed to have one. I claimed to have the best government I could possibly make, but sometimes there are going to be mistakes, and when there are, I have to own up to them and take responsibility and act, and that's what I've done today.

So, the Governor attempted to reduce offensiveness through minimization, reducing his audience's expectations regarding his performance.

### *Defeasibility*

The final strategy is consistent with his attempt to lower expectations for the audience. Christie observed that “I have 65,000 people working for me every day. And I cannot know what each one of them is doing at every minute.” He elaborated this idea when he argued that “There's no way that anybody would think that I know about everything that's going on, not only in every agency of government at all times, but also every independent authority that New Jersey either has on its own or by state – both with New York, with Pennsylvania and with Delaware.” If the Governor cannot know of the acts of 65,000 people, he can hardly be held responsible for those actions. This strategy works well with his attempt to minimize the offensive act, arguing that it was an exception.

### **Evaluation**

The lane closures sounded almost like a schoolboy prank that went very, very wrong. These accusations – that Christie ordered the lane closing, that he was a bully, that he was a crony of Wildstein – constituted a serious threat to his image, both as Governor and as a possible presidential candidate. Given the situation he faced, Christie's image repair effort was generally well-designed. His mortification appeared genuine; his use of corrective action appropriate, his denial suitable and the strategies of differentiation, minimization, and defeasibility supported his denial. However, the fact that Christie's hand-picked, key advisor instigated the lane closings is a serious problem. The best story he could hope for was to argue (basically) that he was an unwitting dupe: His advisor went behind his back to play a political dirty trick – but now that the truth was out, Christie fired the responsible party and vowed to do his best to never be duped again. His popularity took a hit but it did rebound to some extent, indirect evidence of the effectiveness of his defense. In December of 2013, key donors for the GOP considered Christie (along with Jeb Bush and Mitt Romney) to be one of the three potential candidates with the “largest existing base of major contributors” (Confessore, 2014, p. A1). The facts, as perceived by the relevant audience, are vital to the success of image repair (Benoit, 2015).

What I want to discuss further is the strategy of minimization through lowering expectations. To date, research on Image Repair Theory (2015) has not addressed this approach. However, it is not a new idea. On the original Star Trek TV show “chief engineer Montgomery ‘Scotty’ Scott... had a reputation as being a miracle worker. As time passes in the series, it comes out that as well as being brilliant, he routinely pads his estimates” (Mr. Cheap, 2014). Peters (1987) articulated this idea as a principle for success: “Under promise, over deliver.” This idea can be found in sports as well. For example, North Carolina State was 5-11 in the Atlantic Coast Conference and hired Mark Gottfried as head coach. In the summer of 2011, before the season began, Gottfried held a press conference. News coverage of this event quoted Gottfried.:

“There are a lot of questions about whether or not this returning group can learn how to win and how much can a couple of the freshmen contribute, so I think we’re an unknown, really,” Gottfried said, “If you were trying to handicap the league, I don’t know where to put us. I have no idea... I think that we should be viewed – in my opinion, as honestly as I can – as a team that’s up in the air. Who knows what we can do? I don’t think this team should be bad. We shouldn’t be a terrible team – I do know that – but I don’t know that we can get real good that quick” (“N.C. State coach lowering,” 2011).

Given a specific level of performance in the coming season – say a 10 and 6 performance in conference games – that record looks better if people were expecting less (e.g., 5-11) than if they were expecting more (say, 13-3).

Political candidates usually have only good things to say about themselves (self-deprecating humor occurs, but is used in moderation). However, politicians routinely downplay their ability in one situation, the run up to a debate. During the 2012 presidential campaign, for example, *USA Today* commented on the way candidates manage expectations before election debates: “In what has become a quadrennial ritual, President Obama’s and Mitt Romney’s aides are doing their best to lower expectations for their bosses’ performances at next week’s scheduled debate in Denver” (2012). The thinking here is that post-debate perceptions matter more than pre-debate expectations – and it is far better to exceed expectations than to fall short of them. Political candidates usually attempt to reduce expectations for themselves and raise them for opponents just before they debate. Hopefully, after the debate they will look better, having lowered expectations for themselves, while their opponents will look worse.

Of course, one must be very careful when tinkering with expectations. Gottfried made it clear that “We shouldn’t be a terrible team – I do know that.” He did not want his boss, athletes, or fans to come away with the impression that he was a lousy coach; he just wanted to moderate their expectations for him. Similarly, presidential candidates must be careful to lower expectations about their *performance in upcoming debates* and not about their *ability to govern if elected*. If Scotty consistently failed to meet his lowered expectations Captain Kirk might start looking for a new chief engineer. In the lane closure scandal Christie wanted to lower

expectations about his administration's performance from perfection to really good, but not to create expectations that its performance would be bad. These expectations were important to his ability to govern in his second term as well as to keep his presidential ambitions alive. This argument contributed to a well-designed image repair effort.

### **Conclusion**

In September of 2013 two lanes of the busiest bridge in the country were closed. In January, revelations indicated that this action was instigated by a member of Governor Chris Christie's staff, Bridget Kelley. Christie was accused of engaging in political retribution and of being a bully. On January 9 – the day Christie said he learned the truth – he fired Kelley and held a news conference. His image repair effort used well-chosen and well-implemented strategies: mortification, corrective action, denial, differentiation, minimization, and defeasibility. His strategies worked well together: for example, differentiation (I am passionate and blunt, but not a bully) supported his denial (I am not a bully). Defeasibility (I cannot be aware of everything that 65,000 state employees do) was consistent with one aspect of minimization (this is an exception, not a widespread practice of abuse). A particularly interesting image repair strategy was minimization through lowering expectations. Christie argued that he had never promised, and could not be expected to have, a perfect government. Lowering expectations can reduce the offensiveness of a violation of those expectations. This strategy works well with the argument that this abuse was an exception. As long as additional damaging evidence does not emerge, his image could improve after an initial decline. However, the downside of this approach is that Christie's defense basically admitted that he had been duped; this admission might have the effect of shifting from one accusation (that he was a bully, ordering the bridge closing) to another (that he had been duped by his aide). His less favorable ratings among Republican voters in 2015 suggest that his defense had only a limited effect. This analysis of Christie's image repair discourse also illustrates the idea that image repair can work through addressing the belief and/or value component of an attitude (Benoit, 2015).

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