

# Easy as 1, 2, 3: Rick Perry and Self-Deprecation as Image Restoration

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*This paper argues that self-deprecation can be a strategy of image restoration. While image restoration is conceptualized as a goal-directed activity that seeks to maintain a favorable image, it would seem paradoxical that an individual would engage in a rhetorical practice directed at admonishing the self with humor. However, many politicians including Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and most recently, Rick Perry, have engaged in self-deprecation in response to their face. Consequently, it is imperative to recognize the rhetorical force of self-deprecation as an image restoration strategy.*

**Keywords:** Humor, Image, Rick Perry, Self-Depreciation

During the Republican primary debates for the 2012 presidential election, there were numerous opportunities for the candidates to present their agendas and policies alongside their criticisms of the Obama administration to increase their standing in the eyes of the voters. During these debates, some candidates display their public speaking prowess, while others display their lack thereof. Some even suffer from notable gaffes that often result in instances of *apologia*. For the public, these gaffes are perhaps just as important as the agendas and policies of the candidates. Not every voter has the expertise to understand the nuances of a candidate's foreign and domestic policy, but most have the ability to understand that when a candidate misstates a common fact or forgets their points, the candidate is not as strong as those who have a mastery of the facts and their own policies.<sup>1</sup> These gaffes therefore require image restoration, which is the focus of this essay. Using Rick Perry as an example, we claim that self-deprecating humor can be an effective strategy for image restoration. To make this argument we first review the generic approach to image restoration. Second, we provide an overview of Rick Perry's debate flub on November 9, 2011. Using the Perry example, we then argue that humor can be an image restoration strategy.

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<sup>1</sup> Jackie Kucinich, "Perry Debate Lapse Undermines Credibility," *USA Today*, November 11, 2011, 4A.

## **Apologia and Image Restoration**

It is virtually inevitable that an individual will confront accusatory discourse, *kategoria*. Consequently, the accused must respond with the rhetoric of self-defense, *apologia*. The reason for the necessity of self-defense is that the prospect of losing any value of one's image, which is important to one's identity and reputation, is extremely costly to an organization or individual.<sup>2</sup> Thus, to avoid any potential negative evaluation, one must engage in the rhetoric of defense or what Benoit calls image restoration.

*Apologia*, which later was subsumed under Benoit's theory of image restoration, has been studied in many ways, but the longest and most concentrated effort is on the generic study of *apologia* that is the most relevant to the purpose of this paper.<sup>3</sup> Although Aristotle did not articulate *apologia* as its own genre in *Rhetoric* where he delineated between forensic, epideictic, and deliberative genres, he did pay considerable attention to *kategoria* and *apologia* in *Topics*, and contemporary scholars have continued to explore and refine our understanding of *apologia*. For example, some scholars have identified specific strategies of *apologia*,<sup>4</sup> and other scholars have worked to define sub-genres of *apologia*.<sup>5</sup> However, Ware and Linkugel developed the first major typology identifying common "postures" of *apologia*.<sup>6</sup> Ware and Linkugel's typology consisted of four postures: denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence. Benoit later revised and expanded Ware and Linkugel's typology to develop a theory of image restoration based on rhetorical and social scientific scholarship. Benoit identified five major categories of image restoration.

The first major sub-genre addresses the strategy of denial. To deny is to simply claim that the subject of the allegations did not happen. For example, in responses to accusations of infidelity, President Bill Clinton stated, "I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky." Clinton simply denied having an affair.

The second major category is evading responsibility. To evade responsibility is to acknowledge that the subject of the accusatory discourse did, in fact, occur; however, the accused attempts to limit their accountability. There are several ways in which the accused can evade responsibility. One way is to respond by claiming that they were provoked into engaging in behavior that brought about the accusatory discourse. The accused can also evade responsibility by claiming that they had a lack of information or ability that led to the actions that brought about the *kategoria*. Another strategy is to

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<sup>2</sup> William Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: A Theory of Image Restoration Strategies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 67-69.

<sup>3</sup> Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies*.

<sup>4</sup> William T. Coombs, *Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999); Keith Michael Hearit, "Apologies and Public Relations Crises at Chrysler, Toshiba, and Volvo," *Public Relations Review* 20 (1994): 113-125; James H. Jackson, "Clarence Darrow's 'Plea in Defense of Himself,'" *Western Speech* 20 (1956): 185-195.

<sup>5</sup> Sherry D. Butler, "The *Apologia*, 1971 Genre," *Southern Speech Communications Journal* 36 (1972): 281-289; Sharon D. Downey, "The Evolution of the Rhetorical Genre of *Apologia*," *Western Journal of Communication* 57 (1993): 42-64; Keith Michael Hearit, "Corporate *Apologia*: When an Organization Speaks in Defense of Itself," in *Handbook of Public Relations*, ed. Robert L. Heath (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001), 501-511.

<sup>6</sup> B. L. Ware and Wil A. Linkugel, "They Spoke in Defense of Themselves: On the Generic Criticism of *Apologia*," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 59 (1973): 277.

claim that the accusations were the result of an accident or that the misdeed was done with good intentions.

The third major category is reducing offensiveness. Benoit identifies six strategies to reduce offensiveness. The accused can bolster their image by stressing good traits about themselves as well as linking themselves to popular abstract values such as liberty or the family. One can also engage in minimization by claiming that the subject of the accusations was not as egregious as they may seem. Another strategy is for the accused to differentiate the accusations from other less desirable acts. The accused can also transcend the accusations by putting the subject of the attacks in a different or broader context. One can also reduce the offensiveness of the *kategoria* by counter-attacking the accuser thereby discrediting the accusations. Lastly, the accused can compensate the victims of the alleged wrongdoing that lead to the accusatory discourse; this strategy reduces offensiveness by creating a stronger image to counterbalance the accusations.

The fourth major category of image restoration is corrective action. The accused can correct the subject of the *kategoria* by attempting to solve the problem or to take action so that the problem does not happen again. Corrective action differs from compensation in that compensation deals with creating a more favorable image to offset any negative attacks whereas corrective action deals with fixing the source of the harm that lead to the negative attacks.

The last major strategy is mortification. To mortify is to admit guilt for the wrongdoing and ask for forgiveness. Mortification is a strategy that may be coupled with other genres of *apologia*. For example, one may engage in mortification and also take corrective action to ensure the wrongdoing does not happen again. Consequently, mortification comes the closest to the popular notion of apology.

### **Rick Perry and the Republican Presidential Primary**

The November 9, 2011, Republican primary debate was called, “a cosmically awful debate.”<sup>7</sup> The biggest offender was Texas Governor Rick Perry, who committed the “worst gaffe in US debate history.”<sup>8</sup> The *New York Times* editorialist stated, “Nobody is ever going to recall anything else about Wednesday night’s debate” other than Perry’s flub.<sup>9</sup> The *Christian Science Monitor* called Perry’s gaffe the “most unbelievably painful moment.”<sup>10</sup> The *Washington Post* described the moment as “cringe-inducing amnesia.”<sup>11</sup> The Director of the Center for Politics at the University of Virginia and one of the fore-

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Adams, “GOP Debate in Michigan—As it Happened,” *The Guardian*, accessed December 25, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/nov/10/gop-debate-michigan-herman-cain>.

<sup>8</sup> Toby Harnden, “Rick Perry Vows to Fight on Despite the Worst Gaffe in US Debate History,” *The Telegraph*, accessed December 25, 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/us-election/8882251/Rick-Perry-vows-to-fight-on-despite-the-worst-gaffe-in-US-debate-history.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Gail Collins, “Wait! Don’t Tell Me!” *New York Times*, November 10, 2011, 35.

<sup>10</sup> Liz Marlantes and David Grant, “Five Key Awards in the GOP ‘Oops’ Debate,” *Christian Science Monitor*, <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Elections/From-the-Wires/2011/1110/Five-key-awards-in-the-GOP-Oops-debate> (accessed 25 Dec. 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Kathleen Parker, “Too Nice To Be Elected?” *Washington Post*, November 11, 2011, A27.

most experts on U.S. presidential campaigns, Larry Sabato said, “To my memory, Perry’s forgetfulness is the most devastating moment of any modern primary debate.”<sup>12</sup>

Rather than describe the astonishing and excruciating gaffe, the *Washington Post* let Perry’s words speak for themselves and simply printed the transcript of Perry’s blunder.<sup>13</sup> Perry began, “And I will tell you, it is three agencies of government when I get there that are gone. Commerce, Education and the... what’s the third one there? Let’s see.” Fellow Republican primary candidate Perry turned to Ron Paul who said, “You need five.” Perry then continued, “Oh, five, okay. So Commerce, Education and the...” Perry hesitated. An unknown voice suggested, “EPA?” to which Perry agreed to by saying, “EPA, there you go.” The response elicited laughter and applause. The debate moderator followed up asking, “Seriously, is the EPA the one you were talking about?” Perry answered, “No, sir. No, sir. We were talking about the agencies of government - the EPA needs to be rebuilt. There’s no doubt about that.” The moderator then asked, “But you can’t - but you can’t name the third one?” Perry replied, “The third agency of government I would - I would do away with, Education, the...” Perry had now forgotten the second agency he suggested a minute before. Then an unknown voice reminded Perry, “Commerce.” Perry continued and finally conceded, “Commerce and, let’s see. I can’t. The third one, I can’t. Sorry. Oops.”

The *New York Times* compared the exchange between Perry and Paul to a third grader looking for the answer on his classmate’s paper. The humorous comparison was subverted by the fact that this was not the third grade—it was a presidential campaign. Due to this fact, the clip of Perry’s flub was played over and over again. Perry’s performance did not help his already low poll numbers, which some credited to the perception that Perry was intellectually ill-prepared for the presidency.<sup>14</sup> It is difficult to imagine a more pressing need for image restoration during a political campaign.

### **Rick Perry’s Image Restoration**

Perry’s image repair began in earnest. Perry appeared on numerous major television stations including CNN, ABC, CNN, FOX, and NBC. He repeated the same message in each forum with a constant smile. He admitted the mistake by stating, “I don’t mind saying clearly that I stepped in it last night.”<sup>15</sup> He reduced the offensiveness of the flub by claiming, “We all make mistakes” and “I’m human like everyone else.” In this line, Perry shows there was a mistake that is not unlike those we all, as humans, make. Perry also stated that he is not the “slickest debater or smoothest politician.” Here Perry bolsters his image as the antithesis of the smooth, fast talking Washington insider. Next, Perry attempts to transcend the meaning of “forget” that was applied to his memory lapse; Perry stated, “There’s a lot of agencies of the federal government we’d like to forget.” In this, Perry redefines the situation to explain that there are too many agencies of government. Lastly, during the interviews he was asked if his monumental blunder was reason to leave the race; each time he responded, “Today is the 236<sup>th</sup> birthday of the United States Ma-

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<sup>12</sup> Sheldon Alberts, “‘Oops,’ Perry Crashes His Campaign; Pledges to Stay on,” *National Post*, November 11, 2011, A10.

<sup>13</sup> *Washington Post*, “‘What’s the Third One There?’” November 10, 2011, A10.

<sup>14</sup> Jackie Kucinich, “Perry Debate Lapse Undermines Credibility,” *USA Today*, November 11, 2011, 4A.

<sup>15</sup> “Interview with Rick Perry,” *Today Show*, NBC, New York, November 11, 2011.

rine Corps, if there was a day to stay in a fight, this is it.” Here, Perry attempted to bolster his image by identifying with the U.S. military.

One reporter noted, “The moment caused some to write off his candidacy, and from the moment the debate ended, Perry has sought to defuse the uproar by using self-deprecation and humor”<sup>16</sup> Not long after the debate, a game appeared on Rick Perry’s campaign website. In the game, people could pick the part of the federal government they’d like to forget; if they had other suggestions not listed, people could email those to [forgetmenot@rickperry.org](mailto:forgetmenot@rickperry.org).<sup>17</sup>

Perry engaged in self-deprecation later in the night appearing on *The Late Show with David Letterman*. Perry delivered the “The Top 10 Rick Perry Excuses” for forgetting the name of the Department of Energy.

10. “Actually there were three reasons I messed up last night. One was the nerves, two was the headache and three was, and three, uh, uh. Oops.”
9. “I don't know what you're talking about. I think things went well.”
8. “Hey, I was up late last night watching *Dancing With the Stars*.”
7. “I thought the debate was tonight.”
6. “Hey, listen. You try concentrating with Mitt Romney smiling at you. That is one handsome dude.”
5. “Uh, El Niño?”
4. “I had a five-hour energy drink six hours before the debate.”
3. “I really hoped to get on my favorite talk show, but instead I ended up here.”
2. “Hey, I wanted to help take the heat off my buddy Herman Cain.”
1. “I just learned Justin Bieber is my father.”

Perry received the best responses after delivering number six and number two, which referenced then rival candidate Herman Cain’s alleged sexual harassment.

Perry’s poking fun at his absentmindedness gave him a “bit of redemption.”<sup>18</sup> Perry’s appearance was replayed extensively the next morning and helped move Perry from national punch-line to late night comedian.<sup>19</sup> One editorialist noted that Perry exhibited “fine comic timing.”<sup>20</sup> A blogger claimed that Perry “perfectly delivered” the list.<sup>21</sup> Yet another believed Perry “should quit debating and go into stand-up.”<sup>22</sup>

Perry continued his strategy of humor and self-deprecation in the next debate. The debate moderator began a question about Perry’s plan to eliminate the Department of Energy, which was the agency Perry forgot on the November 9th debate. Perry interrupted

<sup>16</sup> Seema Mehta, “Trying to Get Back on Track,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 16, 2011, A8.

<sup>17</sup> Michael D. Shear, “Perry Tries to Recover From His 'Oops' Moment,” *New York Times Blogs*, accessed December 25, 2011, <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/10/does-perrys-meltdown-finally-clear-path-for-romney/>.

<sup>18</sup> Bill Carter, “The ‘Top 10 Rick Perry Excuses’ on Letterman,” *New York Times Blogs*, accessed December 25, 2011, <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/10/a-preview-of-the-top-10-rick-perry-excuses/>.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Hamden, “Rick Perry Vows to Fight On.”

<sup>21</sup> Joe Gandelman, “Rick Perry Does a Top 10 List on David Letterman,” *The Moderate Voice*, accessed December 25, 2011, <http://themoderatevoice.com/128364/rick-perry-does-a-top-10-list-on-david-letterman-video/>.

<sup>22</sup> S. Miller, “Perry Uses Debate Gaffe for Letterman Laughs,” *New York Post*, accessed December 25, 2011, [http://www.nypost.com/p/news/local/manhattan/perry\\_better\\_late\\_than\\_never\\_vhhfaBOfSeCmSfZs48XCaN#ixzz1j6lUEILH](http://www.nypost.com/p/news/local/manhattan/perry_better_late_than_never_vhhfaBOfSeCmSfZs48XCaN#ixzz1j6lUEILH).

the question and said, “Glad you remembered it.” The moderator quickly replied, “I’ve had some time to think about it, sir,” To which Perry shot back, “Me too.”<sup>23</sup>

While Perry’s brain freeze will undoubtedly be replayed for years to come alongside other memorable debate performances such as Lloyd Bentsen’s “You’re no Kennedy” and Ronald Reagan’s “There you go again,” it is questionable that Perry’s humor and self-deprecation successfully restored his image. First of all, a Quinnipiac University poll reported that Perry has single-digit support following the flub.<sup>24</sup> While poking fun at oneself may alleviate some damage, it is important to note that Perry’s support was dwindling months before the flub. A bit of humor might restore one’s image in response to a specific misstep, but it is difficult to conceptualize humor as curative to many ills over a long period of time. Furthermore, while humor may have eased tensions, it did not completely remove the stain of the flub. What turned attention away from Perry was when Herman Cain was attacked for a “stumbling response to a question on Libya” that was posted on the internet.<sup>25</sup>

While the humor and self-deprecation did not improve his standing in the polls, we can still examine the use of humor as image restoration even if the humor is not successful. That is, *apologia*, which is subsumed by Benoit’s image restoration theory, is the rhetoric of defense whether that defense is successful or not. For example, Bill Clinton’s, Ronald Reagan’s, and Richard Nixon’s infamous denials of scandalous accusations, although unsuccessful, were still part of the rhetoric of defense.

### Humor as Image Restoration

Emphasizing the importance of humor in public life, former cabinet secretary Dan Glickman lectured to the National Press Club in Washington, D. C. He argued that self-deprecating humor was a “strategic tool of the political trade, a means of puncturing pomposity, defusing tense situations, attracting allies, and even getting people to focus on serious policy issues.”<sup>26</sup> Glickman also went on to argue that if a politician does not poke fun at him or herself there is no shortage of others who will take the opportunity. Glickman specifically named Jay Leno and David Letterman as two who would happily take such an opportunity. It is from this observation that we can begin to conceptualize humor as a means of image restoration.

Benoit argues that there are two assumptions of image restoration theory.<sup>27</sup> The first is that communication is a goal-directed activity. Those who study humor, such as Michael Apter, suggest that some forms of communication – namely, humor – does not have a major goal or purpose. Apter conceptualizes humor as “paratelic,” which is a jocular, playful state of being.<sup>28</sup> He differentiates the paratelic state from a telic state, which is

<sup>23</sup> Todd J. Gillman, “Perry Avoids the ‘Oops,’ Steps Up at GOP Debate,” *The Dallas Morning News*, November 13, 2011, A1.

<sup>24</sup> Toby Harnden, “‘I Thought it Went Well.’ Perry, the TV Joker,” *Daily Telegraph*, November 12, 2011, 24.

<sup>25</sup> Catherine Philp, “Cain Dismisses ‘Silly’ Criticism After Error,” *The Times*, accessed December 25, 2011, [www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/americas/article3227661.ece](http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/americas/article3227661.ece).

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Alleen P. Nilsen, “Newsletter,” *Humor 14* (2001): 213.

<sup>27</sup> Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies*, 52-71.

<sup>28</sup> Michael J. Apter, “A Structural-Phenomenology of Play,” in *Adult Play: A Reversal Theory Approach*, eds. J.H. Kerr and M. J. Apter (Amsterdam: Swets & Zeitlinger), 13-29.

characterized by being more serious and goal-oriented. Apter argues that people switch back and forth throughout the day between paratelic and telic states. However, to conceptualize humor as a form of image restoration, we must recognize that there often is a serious, goal-oriented purpose for whimsicality. While Perry's use of humor may or may not have been effective, it is clear from his campaign's perspective that humor was employed to combat the images of him forgetting his policies. In short, for Perry, humor had a serious goal.

Humor is used rhetorically for serious strategic purposes to achieve some ends, or *telos*, in a number of ways. First, the ambiguity and polysemy of humorous messages can serve a very serious purpose in that humor can be used to communicate messages about issues in an indirect way when the more direct way could be characterized as embarrassing or confrontational for the speaker and/or audience.<sup>29</sup> A speaker in need of image restoration, such as Perry, might find it too embarrassing to admit that he forgot his own policies; therefore, using humor might alleviate that discomfort.

Second, a speaker's humor has also been found to increase the audience's affect and mood.<sup>30</sup> Here, a speaker engaging in image restoration via self-deprecation attempts to get the audience to "laugh with" the speaker rather than "laugh at" the speaker.<sup>31</sup> By using humor, the speaker allows the audience to associate feelings of levity with the speaker rather than focus on the exigence that called forth the need for image repair. For Perry, his use of humor allowed for the audience to focus on his character (i.e., one who presents himself as a humble, non-elitist politician, a man of the people) rather than his forgotten policies. Moreover, one can enhance the self-concept of the audience by using self-deprecation; that is, the audience may feel informed, smart, or sly because they get the joke.

Third, audiences have rated speakers who have used humor as having a higher character than those who did not use humor.<sup>32</sup> Humorousness is not one of the major presidential characteristics voters look for in a candidate but character is. For example, George W. Bush was routinely praised for his "guy you'd like to have a beer with" persona despite the fact that Bush gave up drinking in 1986—14 years before his presidential election.<sup>33</sup> For Perry, his use of humor as a personal characteristic was the means by which one can acknowledge his or her mistakes, thereby showing one's character, which anyone, regardless of political knowledge, can judge.

Just from these three examples, we can see that humor often has a serious purpose in that it has the ability to positively affect the speaker, the audience, and the relationships between the two. To claim that humor has no serious goal is to, at best, underestimate humor or, at worst, to ignore the rhetorical force of humor.

Understanding that humor can be goal-directed, we must now consider whether humor can be used as a means of restoring one's image. Psychologists have considered hu-

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<sup>29</sup> Michael Mulkay, *On Humor: Its Nature and Its Place in Modern Society* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 17.

<sup>30</sup> Attila Szabo, "The Acute Effects of Humor and Exercise on Mood and Anxiety," *Journal of Leisure Research* 18 (2003): 152-162.

<sup>31</sup> Rod A. Martin, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* (Amsterdam: Elsevier Academic Press, 2007), 10.

<sup>32</sup> Charles R. Gruner, "The Effect of Humor in Dull and Interesting Informative Speeches," *Central States Speech Journal* 21 (1970): 160-166.

<sup>33</sup> Dave Boyer, "Bush Sees Reagan Traits in Self," *Washington Times*, November 1, 2000, A1.

mor as a defense mechanism.<sup>34</sup> The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM IV)* lists humor, which emphasizes the amusing or ironic aspects of the conflict or stressor, as a high adaptive level defense mechanism. This high adaptive “level of defensive functioning results in the optimal adaptation in handling stressors.”<sup>35</sup> With humor’s powerful ability to alleviate tension, humor would seem ideal for dealing with numerous types of stress, tension, and harm that can befall one’s image.

The *DSM IV* also lists other levels of defense that are worthy of note. One technique people use as a defense is denial, which is a major sub-genre in both Ware and Linkugel’s *apologia* and Benoit’s image restoration typologies. This technique attempts, as in the *apologia*/image repair scholarship, to refuse “to acknowledge some painful aspect or external reality or subjective experience that would be apparent to others.”<sup>36</sup> There is analogous value in recognizing that denial is listed as a psychological defense and as a means of *apologia*/image restoration. That is, if there is overlap between psychology and communication/rhetoric in terms of one type of defense, there is the possibility that two disciplines can overlap in other forms of defense such as humor.

Returning to the example of Rick Perry, it must be noted that he is using a specific type of humor: self-deprecation. Self-deprecation is a “type of self-effacing modest behavior [that] presents the self in a likable way.”<sup>37</sup> Patently, it would seem counterproductive that individuals would present themselves in an unfavorable or less than optimum manner when one’s image is threatened.<sup>38</sup> After all, one of the key goals of image repair is to maintain a favorable reputation.<sup>39</sup> However, “humorous remarks targeting oneself as the object of humor . . . may be done to demonstrate modesty, to put the listener at ease, or to ingratiate oneself with the listener.”<sup>40</sup>

While self-deprecating humor may appear to be an image repair strategy, some may argue that humor is conceptually similar to mortification. Burke’s notion of mortification has been described as the “self-inflicted punishment for one’s sins.”<sup>41</sup> Certainly, mortification and self-deprecation are similar in that both originate from the self and are directed to the self, but the purposes between the two are very different. Mortification is “sacrificial in attitude.”<sup>42</sup> However, self-deprecation is not necessarily about self-punishment. Self-deprecation does not necessarily seek to dismiss guilt in order to achieve redemption

<sup>34</sup> American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-IV-TR* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 808.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 811.

<sup>37</sup> Randall A. Gordon, “Impact of Ingratiation on Judgments and Evaluations: A Meta-Analytic Investigation.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 71 (1996): 54-70; Astrid Schuetz, “Self-Presentational Tactics of Talk-Show Guests: A Comparison of Politicians, Experts, and Entertainers.” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 27 (1997): 1941-52.

<sup>38</sup> Anat Zajdman, “Humorous Face-Threatening Acts: Humor as Strategy.” *Journal of Pragmatics* 23 (1995): 325-339.

<sup>39</sup> Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies*, 67.

<sup>40</sup> Rod A. Martin, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* (Amsterdam: Elsevier Academic Press, 2007), 10.

<sup>41</sup> William H. Rueckert, *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963), 146. See also, Kenneth Burke, “Postscripts on the Negative,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 39 (1953): 209-216. Kenneth Burke, “A Dramatistic View of the Origins of Language: Part One,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 38 (1952): 251-264.

<sup>42</sup> Hugh Dalziel Duncan, *Communication and Social Order* (New York: Bedminster Press, 1962), 130.



as mortification does.<sup>43</sup> While mortification is “to make ourselves suffer for our own sins,” and to promote purification, self-deprecation allows for a person to capitalize on, rather than suffer from, the exigence that necessitated image restoration.<sup>44</sup>

To better understand how self-deprecation allows one to capitalize on threats to their image, we can turn to two of the major, long-standing theories of humor: superiority theory and psychoanalytic theory. Thomas Hobbes succinctly describes the superiority theory of humor as the finding of mirth in the defeat of another; hence laughter and humor is the symbol of conquering—being superior to—the defeated.<sup>45</sup>

While the superiority theory might not appear to be applicable to self-deprecating humor, Gruner claims that the conqueror and the conquered can be the same individual. One can conquer (i.e., self-deprecate) the person they were in the past, another role they hold, or certain personality characteristics. Conquering of the self allows for “feeling superiority over the person we once were in the past.”<sup>46</sup> In this sense, Perry was able to point out his mistakes from the previous night’s debate and move forward. If image restoration is based on the assumption that we value our image and thereby engage in a handful of rhetorical strategies to hide our misdeeds, it would seem ridiculous to point out those flubs in public. Ironically, pointing out the errors is the strength of self-deprecating humor. That is, if you can point out your mistakes and make fun of them, you are showing that the misdeeds are worthy of note. Perry could not ignore his memory lapse. An individual also shows that the gaffes are not to be taken seriously; they are, quite literally, a joke. Thus, self-deprecating humor allowed Perry to show that the post-debate Perry was superior to the forgetful Perry. Moreover, Perry’s self-deprecation allowed him to become superior to the flub, which was constantly replayed and quickly became what Perry was known for. That is, humor allowed Perry to be in more control of his gaffe rather than address it in a very serious, straightforward manner that proved ineffective for Howard Dean’s response to the infamous Dean scream of 2004.

Superiority theory also suggests that self-deprecation makes refutation or attacks difficult. That is, once Perry self-deprecated, it would be difficult for another to seriously challenge or admonish Perry for his forgetfulness. To do so would characterize the serious attacker as someone who did not get the joke. Moreover, if the self-deprecator was able to increase the audience’s affect and mood with humor, then the serious attacker risks alienating the audience, who is enjoying a mirthful moment.

Similarly, the psychoanalytic theory of humor is also beneficial in understanding self-deprecation as a means of image restoration that is conceptually distinct from mortification. Freud claimed that jokes and humor allowed for the safe expression of the unconscious (i.e., obscene or hostile).<sup>47</sup> Freud also believed that humor has a “liberating element. But it also has *something fine and elevating* [emphasis added].”<sup>48</sup> Freud clarifies that what makes humor elevating is that it allows for the “triumph of narcissism, the ego’s victorious assertion of its own invulnerability. It refuses to be hurt by the arrows of reality or to be compelled to suffer. It insists that it is impervious to wounds dealt by the

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<sup>43</sup> Rueckert, *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations*, 131.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>45</sup> R. E. Ewin, “Hobbes on Laughter,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 29 (2001): 29-40.

<sup>46</sup> Martin, *The Psychology of Humor*, 47.

<sup>47</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (New York: Norton, 1960).

<sup>48</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Humour,” *Journal of Psychoanalysis* 9 (1928): 2.

outside world, in fact, that these are merely occasions for affording it pleasure.”<sup>49</sup> Thus, like superiority theory, the psychoanalytic theory allows us to see that humor does more than restore one’s image, it allows for elevation—even over one’s self. Humor allows for one not only to respond to damage done to one’s image, it allows one to overcome rather than “suffer” as one does in mortification.

Consequently, self-deprecation differs from mortification in that the former allows for growth and progression, the development of a new, superior identity rather than restoring the image one once had. In this light, humor is a “way of *refusing to be overcome* by the people and situations, large and small, which threaten our well-being [emphasis added]”<sup>50</sup> rather than “the deliberate slaying of appetites and ambitions” that result in purification and redemption.<sup>51</sup>

## Conclusion

In private and public life our image is routinely threatened. Scholars have long classified various approaches individuals have undertaken to defend themselves and restore their image. The fundamental belief is that our image is of value and we will strive to ensure that our image is the best it possibly can be. However, some, when their image is threatened, will do what seems to be the exact opposite. They will appear to acknowledge the threat and make fun of themselves. This seems counterintuitive to many of the identified means of *apologia* and image repair. Yet, this paper argues that self-deprecating humor is a means of image restoration. Furthermore, self-deprecating humor allows individuals to capitalize upon their mistakes in order to show their superiority and invulnerability rather than purification of guilt.

While not always successful, self-deprecating humor is an image restoration strategy that has been used by previous presidents.<sup>52</sup> President George W. Bush engaged in self-deprecation about his communication style. Bush would repeatedly tell the same joke that when leaving Laura Bush would advise him, “Whatever you do, don’t try to be charming, witty or debonair . . . Just be yourself.”<sup>53</sup> President Clinton also poked fun at himself. Clinton reflected on his lame duck status by showing a video of him watching the laundry spin and making lunch for Hillary Clinton. Clinton was also criticized for “renting out” the Lincoln bedroom at the White House; he responded, in part, by saying that since his daughter Chelsea was leaving for college, he could now rent out another bedroom.<sup>54</sup> Reagan also self-deprecated in response to accusations about his memory. During the 1984 campaign, Walter Mondale attacked Reagan for running a “government by amnesia.” Reagan responded, “I thought that remark accusing me of having amnesia was uncalled for. I just wish I could remember who said it.”<sup>55</sup> In all these face-threatening situations, self-deprecation was used to respond and overcome the accusations; consequently, it is imperative to recognize the rhetorical force of self-deprecation as an image restoration strategy.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Martin, *The Psychology of Humor*.

<sup>51</sup> Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1970), 135.

<sup>52</sup> Nilsen, “Newsletter.”

<sup>53</sup> AnnMarie Bonardi, “So The Little Lady Turns To Me...,” *Time*, May 21, 2001, 23.

<sup>54</sup> Nilsen, “Newsletter,” 214.

<sup>55</sup> “Writer Puts Words in Reagan’s Mouth,” *Houston Chronicle*, March 12, 1985, 6.