

# The Debate Confessional: Newt Gingrich, John King and Atoning for Past Sins

Joseph M. Valenzano, III\*

Jason A. Edwards\*\*

*Religious affiliation has always played a prominent role in the vetting of US presidential candidates, especially for those seeking the nomination of the Republican Party. Candidates within that party must appeal to fiscal, foreign policy and social conservatives, the last of which contain significant numbers of self-described evangelical Christians. During the 2012 Republican Presidential Primary appeals to these social conservatives became as significant a factor as any other with a Mormon candidate, a Catholic candidate who made his faith a centerpiece of his campaign, and a divorced former Speaker who recently converted to Catholicism. With the race still very much in the air, this former Speaker, Newt Gingrich, came under fire for his prior marriage and just a few days before a pivotal primary in South Carolina his ex-wife taped an interview about his marriage to her which was set to air immediately after the last debate before the election in South Carolina. At the beginning of the debate the moderator, John King of CNN, provided Gingrich an opportunity to discuss the pending interview. His response changed the scope of that primary election, helping vault Gingrich to a significant victory in South Carolina with significant support from formerly hesitant social conservatives. In this essay we examine his response to King's opening question at the debate through the lens of image restoration theory and argue Gingrich used specific strategies to appeal for support from the social conservatives in that state.*

**Keywords:** Apologia, Image Restoration, Newt Gingrich, News Media, 2012 Campaign

Since the founding of the United States religion has played an important role in the public and political life of its citizens. The preservation of an individual's right to his or her own faith was so important to the Founding Fathers it was enshrined in the First Amendment. Thomas Jefferson, Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, and many others have also invoked a perceived wall of separation between church and state informed by that amendment.<sup>1</sup> In fact, many Americans believe in a fundamental aspect of American exceptionalism whereby the United States, even in its imperfect form, represents a country chosen by God to be a beacon of light to the rest of the world.<sup>2</sup> Religious belief is inextricably linked to the fabric of American society.

---

\* Joseph M. Valenzano, III (Ph.D., Georgia State University) is Assistant Professor of Communication at the University of Dayton. He can be reached for comment on this essay at [jvalenzanoiii@dayton.edu](mailto:jvalenzanoiii@dayton.edu) or by phone at 937.229.2376.

\*\* Jason A. Edwards (Ph.D., Georgia State University) is Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Bridgewater State University. He can be reached for comment on this essay at [jasonedwards57@hotmail.com](mailto:jasonedwards57@hotmail.com) or by phone at 508.531.2791.

<sup>1</sup> Phillip Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> See Jason A. Edwards and David Weiss, eds., *The Rhetoric of American Exceptionalism: Critical Essays* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011).

Religion is so important to Americans that historically it has manifested as a litmus test for presidential candidates. On September 12, 1960, then presidential candidate, John F. Kennedy spoke to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association on the “Catholic question” because, if elected, he would be the first Catholic president. In fact, the only Catholic before Kennedy who ran for president, Al Smith in 1928, lost the election largely due to his reluctance to engage in discussions about his faith.<sup>3</sup> Even in 2008 religion played an important role in the presidential campaign. Then Senator Barack Obama defended himself first against accusations that he was a Muslim, and then from attacks regarding his spiritual mentor, controversial preacher Rev. Jeremiah Wright. On the Republican side in the same year, primary candidate and former governor of Massachusetts, Mitt Romney, came under fire for his Mormon faith. So much so that Romney had to deliver a Kennedyesque address where he discussed the role his faith would play during his presidency.<sup>4</sup>

The aspersions regarding Romney’s faith, and overall inquisitorial inspection of the religious affiliations and beliefs of candidates continued in the 2012 election cycle. Interestingly, the focus on the religious values of Republican primary candidates contributed to numerous shifts in the nomination landscape. These shifts were never more apparent than in the weeks between the Iowa caucuses on January 3, 2012, and the South Carolina primary on January 20. During this time the apparent front-runner Mitt Romney suffered a setback when he essentially tied Senator Rick Santorum in the Iowa caucuses thanks in large part to the latter’s appeal with self-described evangelical voters.<sup>5</sup> Although Romney proceeded to win, as expected, a week later in New Hampshire, he faced another tough contest in South Carolina when both Santorum and former House Speaker Newt Gingrich looked to make a strong showing with evangelical voters.

Romney’s Mormonism at this point was well known, and still looked upon with suspicion by social conservatives, thus presenting an opening for Santorum and Gingrich. Santorum portrayed himself as a “consistent conservative” who provided strong social conservative positions on issues such as abortion and contraception. Gingrich, on the other hand, faced a significant hurdle with social values voters in the Republican Party. The former Speaker has been divorced twice, resigned from the House of Representatives due in large part to an affair with a staffer who became his third wife, and changed religion twice in his lifetime.<sup>6</sup> To win in South Carolina Gingrich needed to mend the damage his past indiscretions did to his connection with the evangelical voters who constituted a significant portion of the electorate in South Carolina, as well as appear as a better alternative than Santorum to that group.

---

<sup>3</sup> Michael J. Hostetler, “Gov. Al Smith Confronts the Catholic Question: The Rhetorical Legacy of the 1928 Campaign,” *Communication Quarterly* 46 (1998): 12-24.

<sup>4</sup> Mitt Romney, “Faith in America,” *The New York Times*, December 6, 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/06/us/politics/06text-romney.html?pagewanted=all>

<sup>5</sup> The results of the Iowa caucuses saw Mitt Romney declared the winner by eight votes, only to have the tally shift in favor of Rick Santorum weeks later. Nevertheless, Santorum’s support base in Iowa consisted of evangelical voters who distrusted Mitt Romney and connected with Santorum’s overt Catholicism. See Robert Costa, “The Rise of Rick,” *National Review* 64, January 23, 2012, 16-20.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed account of Gingrich’s faith history and personal past, see Dan Gilgoff, “Newt Gingrich’s Faith Journey: How a Thrice-Married Catholic Became an Evangelical Darling,” *CNN.com*, December 10, 2011, available at: <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2011/12/10/newt-gingrichs-faith-journey-how-a-thrice-married-catholic-became-an-evangelical-darling/>.

The challenge appeared even more daunting in the week leading up to the South Carolina Primary. Despite receiving a small endorsement from noted apocalyptic author Tim Lahaye on January 13, Gingrich failed to capture any large endorsements from influential social conservatives. The following day Tony Perkins, head of the influential Family Research Council, held a meeting of prominent evangelical leaders in Texas, announcing a group consensus to support Gingrich's rival, Rick Santorum. Two days later some evangelical leaders, supporting Gingrich, issued a rebuke of the "consensus," but the damage was done and social conservatives appeared, at best, split between Gingrich and Santorum.<sup>7</sup> Then, just days before the January 19 Republican primary debate, another apparent bombshell hit the Gingrich camp.

Just hours before the debate, word began to leak that Gingrich's second wife, Marianne, taped an interview with the ABC show, *Nightline*, in which she spoke at length about the former House Speaker's marital infidelity. The interview was set to air immediately following the debate. This line of attack could have significantly damaged Gingrich's appeal with evangelical voters by bringing up his failed attempts to adhere to his faith in the past. In retaliation, R.C. Hammond, Gingrich's press secretary, released a letter from the candidate's two daughters (from his first marriage) who had become his chief surrogates. The letter chastised ABC and defended their father.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, in the time leading up to the debate there was rampant speculation about whether the issue would be raised in the presidential debate with all the other candidates present.

John King, Senior Political Correspondent for CNN, moderated the debate and in fact opened the proceedings with a question to Gingrich regarding the accusations made by his ex-wife in the soon-to-air *Nightline* interview. Gingrich responded to the opening with an impassioned denial and attack on the national news media. His castigation of the media gave Gingrich instant momentum, driving his impressive victory that Saturday in the South Carolina primary where he won 44% of the voters who made their minds up in the final days of the campaign, 44% of those who decided on the day of the primary, and, most significantly, 44% of self-identified evangelical voters—more than double the next closest candidate.<sup>9</sup> All evidence indicates that Gingrich's response to the question posed by King vaulted him to victory in South Carolina the next day.

This essay explores the rhetorical dimensions of Gingrich's fervent defense embedded within his exchange with John King. We argue that Gingrich employed image restoration tactics in an effort to successfully atone for his past personal sins on the public stage. In doing so he minimized any potential damage from his ex-wife's interview and emphasized key dimensions of Christian faith that made it difficult for evangelicals to "cast the first stone" against him by voting for another candidate. To make this case we will first explain the elements of image restoration we used to analyze the exchange, then explain how it functioned in Gingrich's message. We conclude by offering some com-

---

<sup>7</sup> For a summary account of the furious series of endorsements and responses see: Elizabeth Dias, "Social Conservatives Splinter as Gingrich Backers Dispute Claims of Santorum Consensus," *Time 2012 Swamp-land*, January 16, 2012, available at: <http://swampland.time.com/2012/01/16/social-conservatives-splinter-as-gingrich-backers-dispute-claims-of-santorum-consensus/>.

<sup>8</sup> For a transcript of this letter and brief discussion of the accusations made by Marianne Gingrich ahead of her interview, see: David Taintor, "ABC to Air Ex-Gingrich Wife's Interview Thursday," *Talking Points Memo*, January 18, 2012, available at: <http://2012.talkingpointsmemo.com/2012/01/report-abc-news-weighs-airing-ex-gingrich-wife-interview-ahead-of-sc-primary.php>.

<sup>9</sup> "CNN Exit Polls," available at: <http://www.cnn.com/election/2012/primaries/epolls/sc>.

ments and speculation on the role of religion in the 2012 presidential campaign, and also offer potential explanations for why this rhetorical strategy offered Gingrich a short-term success.

### Image Repair Strategies

The idea that government officials or famous personalities need to publicly apologize for personal or professional failings is not new. President Clinton has apologized regarding the Monica Lewinsky affair,<sup>10</sup> New York Governor Eliot Spitzer apologized for cheating on his wife,<sup>11</sup> and actors Mel Gibson<sup>12</sup> and Christian Bale<sup>13</sup> apologized for tirades that made their way onto the public airwaves. A characteristic of these apologies is they often invoke the religious and moral value of forgiveness in asking the public to see beyond the failures of the individual. Given the importance and prevalence of public apologies it should come as no surprise that communication scholars have paid significant attention to the rhetorical dimensions of image repair speeches made by such individuals.<sup>14</sup> In this section of our essay, we will briefly review pertinent aspects of this research and explain how we use it to explain Newt Gingrich's response during the South Carolina debate.

The apologia genre is one of the foundational aspects of image repair theory. Ware and Linkugel argue that apologia is a speech of self-defense, typically because someone has accused another of various acts of wrongdoing. When confronted with an attack upon one's character and/or policy Ware and Linkugel argued that rhetors could use four strategies to repair their damaged ethos: denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence.<sup>15</sup>

Since Ware and Linkugel's published work, their ideas have largely been subsumed into image repair research. William Benoit argues that creating and maintaining one's image is a primary communicative activity. Moreover, if that image has been damaged in

---

<sup>10</sup> Joseph R. Blaney and William Benoit, *The Clinton Scandals and the Politics of Image Restoration* (Westport: Praeger, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> Justin Eckstein, "Client 9: Spitzer and Hipocrisy," *Relevant Rhetoric* 3 (2012). <http://relevantrhetoric.com/wp-content/uploads/Client-9-Spitzer-and-Hypocrisy.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Kevin A. Stein, "Jewish Antapologia in Response to Mel Gibson's Multiple Attempts at Absolution," *Relevant Rhetoric* 1 (2010). <http://relevantrhetoric.com/wp-content/uploads/Jewish-Antapologia-in-Response-to-MelGibson.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Nancy Johnson, "Christian Bale's Account of a Profane Tirade: Salvation or Bale-out?" *Relevant Rhetoric* 2 (2011). <http://relevantrhetoric.com/wp-content/uploads/Christian-Bales-Account-of-a-Profane-Tirade.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> William Benoit and his colleagues are the primary progenitors of this research. Dozens of studies have been published examining how political, corporate, entertainment, and religious actors all have attempted to repair their damaged images in some capacity. For example, see William L. Benoit, "Hugh Grant's Image Restoration Discourse: An Actor Apologizes," *Communication Quarterly* 45 (1997): 251-267; William L. Benoit, "Sears' Repair of its Auto Service Image: Image Restoration Discourse in the Corporate Sector," *Communication Studies* 46 (1995): 89-106; William L. Benoit & John L. McHale, "Kenneth Starr's Image Repair Discourse Viewed in 20/20," *Communication Quarterly* 47 (1999): 265-280; David R. Dewberry & Rebekah Fox, "Easy as 1, 2, 3: Rick Perry and Self-Deprecation as Image Restoration," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 2 (2012): 1-10. [http://contemporaryrhetoric.com/articles/dewberryfox3\\_1.pdf](http://contemporaryrhetoric.com/articles/dewberryfox3_1.pdf).

<sup>15</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): 273-283.

some way then a response, an attempt at image repair, is essential to a rhetor.<sup>16</sup> In composing his theory, Benoit offers a typology of five general approaches, with multiple sub-strategies, rhetors might choose to employ to rebuild their image.

In Benoit's first general strategy is denial.<sup>17</sup> Denial can come in two forms. Simple denial is where the speaker clearly states they did not commit the act they were accused of committing. The second form, *shifting the blame* (also known as victimage), concedes the action occurred but moves the responsibility for its occurrence to another party. Both of these strategies allow a speaker to deny wrongdoing.

The second broad category supplied by Benoit is evading responsibility, which contains four specific rhetorical postures.<sup>18</sup> *Provocation* occurs when the speaker claims the offensive action was the result of responding to the negative actions of another; in essence, they were provoked, and therefore responsibility does not lie with them, but with the person who invited their response. A second strategy for evading responsibility is *de-feasibility*, which happens when the person argues that events outside of their control caused the action. In attempts to evade responsibility speakers also might argue that the wrongful act was *accidental*, and thus not their fault. Finally, sometimes speakers will claim they had *good intentions* when they committed the act in an attempt to evade responsibility. Ultimately, all four of these strategies represent attempts to avoid taking responsibility for an offensive act, thus repairing, at least in part, the damage done to an image.

Benoit's third category, reducing offensiveness, contains the most sub-strategies for image repair: six.<sup>19</sup> The first of these, *bolstering*, takes place when the speaker extols virtuous and good qualities they possess in an attempt to engender positive feelings toward them while simultaneously making the action they committed seem less offensive. Secondly, an accused person or group can argue the offense was not as offensive as it is made out to be, thus *minimizing* its damage. Speakers can also *differentiate* the offensiveness of an act by comparing it to other, far more aberrant and distasteful actions. Rhetors can also attempt *transcendence* by placing the action in a broader more positive light. Fifth, the accused can turn the tables and *attack the accuser's* credibility and motives, thus making their offense even more vile than the one committed by the speaker. The final method of reducing offensiveness is *compensation*, because it attempts to reimburse the victims of the offense, although this does not necessarily come with an admission of guilt.

The fourth category of image repair strategies available to speakers is *corrective action*, and like denial it comes in two forms.<sup>20</sup> In the first form the accused offers to repair any damage that resulted from the offending action. Sometimes this involves charitable giving, volunteering, or even seeking professional assistance. In the event that the action's damage cannot be reversed, speakers can take a second form of corrective action whereby they enumerate plans to prevent the recurrence of the offending act. Both of the-

---

<sup>16</sup> William L. Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: A Theory of Image Restoration* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

<sup>17</sup> Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies*, 75.

<sup>18</sup> Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies*, 76.

<sup>19</sup> Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies*, 77.

<sup>20</sup> Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies*, 79.

se strategies show a willingness to materially participate in the repair of an image, but again, neither necessarily accompanies an admission of guilt.

The admission of guilt, or *mortification*, is the final image restoration category explicated by Benoit.<sup>21</sup> This is when a speaker takes full responsibility for their actions and apologizes to those damaged by the offense. Often, admissions of guilt are accompanied by other strategies from the other categories, and when done well by a speaker an image can be quickly repaired. In the case of Newt Gingrich's exchange in the South Carolina debate, we argue he skillfully employed several of these strategies in a short span of time, thus allowing him to temporarily allay fears of his past and unite a significant portion of the evangelical base of voters in the South Carolina primary. In the next section, we explain which strategies he employed.

### **The Debate Confessional: Repairing Newt's Image**

CNN's John King, moderator of the South Carolina debate provided Gingrich his opportunity to repair his image with the evangelical social conservatives of the Republican Party, specifically those who were set to vote in a few days in South Carolina. King did so by making the imminent airing of a controversial interview on ABC's *Nightline* with his ex-wife where she reportedly made serious accusations about the candidate's conduct during their marriage the lead topic of the debate. In this section of the essay we explain how Gingrich deftly employed the image restoration strategies of *attacking the accuser*, *minimization* and *denial* to use King's opening discussion to thwart any potential damage from the interview and allay concerns regarding his past transgressions.

#### *Attacking the Accuser*

On January 19, 2012, John King began the Republican primary presidential debate with this query

And just as Speaker Gingrich surged into contention here in South Carolina, a direct fresh attack upon the Speaker. And Mr. Speaker I would like to start with you this evening. As you know, your ex-wife gave an interview with ABC News another interview with the Washington Post. And now this story has gone viral on the Internet. In it, she says that you came to her in 1999, at a time when you were having an affair. She says you asked her, sir, to enter into an open marriage. Would you like to some time to respond to that.<sup>22</sup>

Gingrich responded by saying "No, but I will," and proceeded to receive thunderous applause from the South Carolina crowd.<sup>23</sup> Then the former Speaker responded to King's question by attacking the news media for what he claimed were practices that damaged the country as a whole. Initially, Gingrich did not claim these behaviors were based on partisanship, but rather that they kept good people from seeking elected positions. He stated: "I think the destructive, vicious, negative nature of much of the news media makes it harder to govern this country, harder to attract decent people to run for political of-

<sup>21</sup> Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies*, 79.

<sup>22</sup> "Newt Gingrich and John King Marriage Exchange—The Full Transcript," *The Guardian*, January 19, 2012. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jan/20/newt-gingrich-marriage-exchange-transcript>.

<sup>23</sup> "Newt Gingrich and John King."

face.”<sup>24</sup> This statement both shifted attention from the issue of his ex-wife’s allegations to what he deemed as the inappropriate behavior and influence of “much of the news media.” He used inflammatory descriptors of the news media such as “destructive, vicious and negative,” and blamed them for negatively impacting the ability of government to function and good people to run for office. In arguing that they “make it harder to attract decent people to run for office,” an activity he was currently undertaking, Gingrich implied he was a decent person under attack from villainous news agency. In short, in this line he both changed the subject and cast himself as a victim of process by attacking the news media.

Gingrich also launched an attack against ABC, the station who planned to broadcast the interview with his ex-wife Marianne. After he informed the audience that he volunteered friends to ABC in an effort to illustrate the claims made by Marianne were, in fact, wrong, he specifically attacked the network: “They weren’t interested, because they would like to attack any Republican. They’re attacking the governor, they’re attacking me. I’m sure they’ll probably get around to Senator Santorum and Congressman Paul.”<sup>25</sup> Here, Gingrich attacks the motives of ABC in airing the accusations against him by his ex-wife, and pushes it even further by claiming the network is also attacking the other Republican presidential candidates. He also argues those actions will not only continue, but expand. In doing this he again paints himself as a victim of a nefarious news organization with impure motives. This implicitly argues that the real concern should be the impure motives of ABC, and not the seemingly questionable allegations they planned to air.

ABC was not the only news entity to incur the wrath of Gingrich, as John King and CNN also found themselves on the receiving end of his attack. After castigating the news media in his initial comment, Gingrich declared he was “appalled that you [King] would begin a presidential debate on a topic like that.” A few moments later when King attempted to explain a different media outlet was responsible for the story, Gingrich fired back, “John, John, it was repeated by your network. You chose to start the debate with it. Don’t try and blame somebody else. You and your staff chose to start this debate with that.”<sup>26</sup> Both of these statements accused King and CNN of, at best, poorly chosen questions and, at worst, contributing to spreading what Gingrich claimed were defamatory lies. These accusations clearly put the news media on the defensive and served to make Gingrich look like the victim of sensationalist journalism promoting lies from an angry ex-wife, ultimately changing the focus of the issue from his past indiscretions to the role of journalists in politics.

### *Minimization*

In addition to his brusque attacks on the news media, ABC and CNN, Gingrich also attempted to minimize the offensiveness of his personal failings. Interestingly, he did this with only a vague passing reference to the specific allegations regarding his prior indiscretions. After his initial assault on the news media, King asked if that was all the former

---

<sup>24</sup> “Newt Gingrich and John King.”

<sup>25</sup> “Newt Gingrich and John King.”

<sup>26</sup> “Newt Gingrich and John King.”

Speaker wished to say about the subject. Gingrich responded that he had more to say, and it was in this part of the exchange when he employed minimization to repair his image.

Gingrich sought to compare what happened in his life to the personal tribulations everyone encounters in theirs. He began the second part of the exchange by saying, “Every person in here knows personal pain. Every person in here has had someone close to them go through painful things. To take an ex-wife and make it two days before the primary a significant question in a presidential campaign is as close to despicable as anything I can imagine.”<sup>27</sup> Here Gingrich makes vague references to the pain he both caused and felt from his past behaviors, but does so in a way that subtly invokes the Biblical maxim “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone”<sup>28</sup> by equating his personal pain with that experienced by everyone in the room. In doing so, the people in the room also become a synecdoche for the rest of the country, and Gingrich made his personal failings and the damage they created no more or less offensive than anything anyone else has done.

In minimizing the offensiveness of his treatment of his ex-wife, whatever that treatment entailed, he made his accusations against the news media, ABC, and CNN all the more powerful. He enhanced the perception of his own victimage at their hands by implicitly arguing the news organizations singled him out for an action to which any American could relate, despite its less than positive connotations. In short, minimization enhanced his victim role by making the news media look like bullies.

### *Denial*

The third, and final, image restoration strategy employed by Gingrich in his exchange with John King at the South Carolina debate was that of denial. This denial was as important, if not more so, than the attacks and effort to minimize the offensiveness of his past behaviors. By emphatically, and clearly, denying the stories his ex-wife was set to promulgate on *Nightline*, the former Speaker concluded his image repair and emerged, at least in the short-term, stronger than he had looked at any point earlier in the week.

After specifically attacking John King and his staff for their choice of including this issue as the topic to open the debate, Gingrich returned to the as yet unstated allegations his ex-wife was set to make. Gingrich said, “Now let me be quite clear. Let me be quite clear. The story is false. Every personal friend I have who knew us in that period says the story was false. We offered several of them to ABC to prove it was false.”<sup>29</sup> Obviously, in this statement Gingrich declares the accusations set to be made by Marianne false, even without reference to what specifically was false about them. Additionally, he professes to have offered witnesses as proof, but it is curious to note he called them “personal friends” of his, and not of the couple. This implies a sense of bias on the part of the witnesses as they are his friends and not necessarily friends of Marianne. Nevertheless, the strong rebuke and inclusion of potential eyewitness testimony only added veracity to his position that he was being unduly attacked by media organizations with an anti-Republican agenda.

---

<sup>27</sup> “Newt Gingrich and John King.”

<sup>28</sup> John 8:7.

<sup>29</sup> “Newt Gingrich and John King.”

## Conclusions

The South Carolina primary represented a pivotal moment for the Gingrich campaign. Leading up to the primary the evangelical base of the Republican Party, which constituted a significant portion of the South Carolinian electorate, had splintered between Gingrich and Santorum. The news that his ex-wife was set to air an interview where she would cast major aspersions regarding the former Speaker's behavior during his marriage to her only exacerbated problems Gingrich had with this core constituency. Heading into the January 19 debate Gingrich looked like a candidate on the precipice of disaster, but his deft handling of the issue when CNN's John King raised the topic to lead off the event significantly contributed to his ability to reverse the tide and win the state's primary just days later.

Gingrich combined three strategies of image repair rhetoric to deflect attention from his own personal failings, encourage forgiveness for his transgressions, and shift the focus of the issue from him to the conduct of national news organizations. He vaguely admitted faults in his past relationships, but made them appear as nothing more offensive than what other Americans may be guilty of doing. Additionally, he denied the specific comments his ex-wife was set to make before she even made them, and attacked the news media for focusing on his marriage to Marianne in the midst of a presidential election cycle. Interestingly, he did not directly invoke the Clintonian assertion that "even presidents have private lives," which made headlines when Gingrich was leading the effort to impeach President Clinton for lying about his marital infidelity.<sup>30</sup> A key difference, however, is that Gingrich claimed not to lie; he simply changed the topic.

The exchange between King and Gingrich further underscored the seeming splintering of the Republican Party. Social conservatives, for a variety of reasons which included reservations about Romney's Mormon faith, seemed divided between supporting Santorum or Gingrich. This issue just highlighted that divide and helped once again bring the religious base of the Republican Party into prominence during the election cycle. As a core constituency of that party they would now play a key role in determining if an alternative candidate to Romney stood a chance at winning the nomination. Politically, this issue brought social issues to the fore of the campaign for a time, and in allowing Gingrich an opening through which he charged to win South Carolina, extended a multi-candidate field in the Republican nominating process.

In terms of some larger issues, Gingrich's experience in this debate illustrates the sheer power held by a candidate who can deftly deploy image restoration rhetoric when confronted with accusations about their behavior, conduct and even positions. Successful use can not only generate a stronger image, but can also be used to unite a seemingly disparate audience through an emphasis on the notion of forgiveness and the presentation of a common enemy who is portrayed as a bully. Gingrich's image restoration efforts helped him gain the support of evangelical Christians who previously had concerns regarding his divorces and marital infidelity. His use of denial and minimization in describing these activities, combined with his fervent assault on a perceived bully only helped endear him to that group of people. In effect, he used image restoration to transcend any religious or moral questions about his candidacy in the short-term. Gingrich demonstrated one truly can emerge from the political confessional forgiven in the eyes of the electorate God.

---

<sup>30</sup> Blaney & Benoit, *The Clinton Scandals*.