When the President Apologizes: Toward an Understanding of Political Power

Kimberly Maslin, Hendrix College

Presidential apologies have become so common that they are considered and studied as a form of political rhetoric. As a genre, however, presidential apologies typically owe more to the Greek *apologia*, meaning “to speak in one’s own defense” than they do the concept as articulated by Emmanuel Levinas. In this paper I explore the value of including a conception of apology that focuses less on the Speaker and more on the act of forgiveness. In order to illustrate the value of Levinas’ approach, I will examine in particular Bill Clinton’s attempts to apologize for the Monica Lewinsky scandal. He delivered two formal speeches and declined to deliver an address proposed to him by his friend and long-time advisor, Dick Morris. In a formal and nationally televised address, Clinton delivered the first apology in the evening of August 17, 1988. He apologized twice because the first apology was not successful; he was viewed as “not contrite enough”. The second apology came nearly a month later at a National Prayer Breakfast. The text, the tone, as well as Clinton’s body language are dramatically different in the second speech as he shifts from a defense of his actions to the pursuit of forgiveness, even offering his understanding of what forgiveness requires of him. It is Morris’ text, however, which comes the closest to meeting the objectives of a Levinasian apology in that Morris proposes concluding by leaving the question of his continued tenure before the American people. It is my contention that our understanding of the success and failure of presidential apologies, as well as our understanding of political power, could be enhanced by introducing a Levinasian analytical perspective.