

THE REVEREND, THE TERRORIST, AND A WEB OF RUMORS:  
THE IMAGE REPAIR DISCOURSE OF BARACK OBAMA

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ABSTRACT

During the 2008 presidential campaign, Barack Obama faced numerous attacks on his character, and on his associations. He was attacked most prominently for his associations with Reverend Jeremiah Wright and William Ayers. Obama's faith, citizenship, and patriotism were also challenged. This study employs image repair theory to analyze Obama's image repair discourse in a variety of messages. Notably, Obama's internet-based image repair discourse in response to faith, citizenship, and patriotism attacks received unique analysis in this study. Through rhetorical analysis, this study found that Obama used the strategies of simple denial, shifting the blame, defeasibility, bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attack accuser, and corrective action to respond to the Wright attacks. To respond to the Ayers attacks, Obama used simple denial, defeasibility, bolstering, differentiation, transcendence, and attack accuser. Obama used simple denial, accident, bolstering, attack accuser, differentiation, minimization, and transcendence in his various internet defenses. An important theoretical contribution of this study is the idea that *kairos*, or opportune timing of messages with respect to the rhetorical situation, should be an important consideration in the analysis *apologia*. Generally, Obama's image repair efforts were found to be *kairotically* effective. Assessment of overall effectiveness was confirmed using the criteria of media coverage, surveys, and internal consistency.