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Sorry, Not Sorry - The (Domestic) Politics of State Apologies: Apology Backlash in Political Discourse During the Obama Administration

Lansel, Alina Gioanna

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Sorry, Not Sorry – The (Domestic) Politics of State Apologies

Apology Backlash in Political Discourse During the Obama Administration

Alina G. Lansel

a.g.lansel@umail.leidenuniv.nl

S3669238

Supervisor: Dr. A. J. Gawthorpe

Second Reader: Dr. J. Fynn-Paul

M.A. International Relations

Specialization: Global Political Economy

Leiden University

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Abstract

Although a burgeoning scholarship has studied the ‘age of apology’, the practice of state apologies is limited. Explanations for this remain elusive beyond standard IR theory citing geopolitical calculus, national interests or a perceived lack of necessity. Increasingly, academia is acknowledging apology backlash as a potential impediment, shifting focus to the analysis of domestic political conditions. This thesis seeks to contribute to the debate by studying the political discourse surrounding Obama’s alleged ‘apology tour’, which sparked domestic controversy, and by conceptualizing apologies as threats to ontological security. Specifically, it investigates how Obama’s ‘apologies’ were framed as a challenge to American exceptionalism and U.S. state identity, thereby motivating domestic backlash. This thesis combines Critical Political Discourse Analysis with the theoretical framework of Ontological Security Studies to analyze apology backlash during the Obama administration. The findings confirm that Obama’s ‘apologies’ were framed by conservatives as a challenge to American exceptionalism. His rhetoric was portrayed as signaling weakness, dismissing America’s ‘noble’ wars and past sacrifices, rejecting U.S. leadership, values and achievement, and undermining patriotism. Some backlash, however, extended beyond exceptionalist rhetoric, reflecting deeper political hostility that cast Obama as a threat to conservatism and the nation itself.

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1 Introduction

Apologies are a peculiar phenomenon and have, until recently, been a somewhat unusual approach to ‘doing politics’ (Celermajer, 2009, p.3). Political apologies can take different forms, but typically include (1) addressing an offense, (2) expressing regret, and (3) offering restitution or assurance that it will not be repeated (Eisinger, 2011, p.136). The Political Apology Database tracks apologies issued by states for human rights violations since 1947. With a total of 366 intra- and inter-state apologies from more than 70 states, most apologies can be attributed to the last 30 years (Schaafsma & Zoodsma, 2021). The rise of political apologies issued mostly by liberal democracies has been labeled the “age of apology” (Brooks, 1999, p.3).

Why do states apologize? In response to the apology trend, scholars across disciplines have increasingly examined their underlying rationales. Explanations range from growing international normative commitments, to reconciliation and restorative justice, public image repair, as well as geopolitical calculus and national interests (Hussain, 2022, pp.15-18; Bagdonas, 2018, pp.783-786). Far less has been theorized about why states refrain from apologizing, beyond standard IR explanations that cite the deterrent effects of political costs or a perceived lack of necessity or effectiveness (Lind, 2008, p.3; Dahl, 2013; pp.123-124). Scholars increasingly refer to the risk of political backlash from conservative domestic forces informed by ideology and patriotism (Lind, 2008, pp.4-6, 184; Lind, 2009, p.549). Bagdonas (2010) argues that state identity – defined as self-understanding, values, interests and orientations (Jackson & Hogg, 2010) – can influence a state’s rationale, as apologizing requires profound and critical self-reflection that may conflict with its self-perception (p.9). Drawing on the concept of ontological (in)security – understood as the maintenance or disruption of coherent autobiographical narratives – in the study of political resistance enables the conceptualization of state apologies not merely as ‘physical’ threats, but as challenges to state identity (Bagdonas, 2010, pp.70-71; Hagström, 2021, p.332).

With a total of 21 apologies, the United States is the most apologetic country – to its own citizens, that is (Schaafsma & Zoodsma, 2021). Inter-state apologies amount to four cases¹: President Truman to Mexico in 1947, President Clinton to South Korea in 2001, the Bush administration to Jordan and Iraq in 2004 and President Obama to Guatemala in 2010 (Schaafsma & Zoodsma, 2021).

¹ What constitutes a political apology is contested. The author relies on the designations of the Political Apology Database.

From the outset, President Obama faced accusations of undertaking what critics dubbed the ‘apology tour’, referring to a series of presidential foreign trips during which he critically addressed past American actions (PolitiFact, n.d.). The White House framed the presidential rhetoric as “reckoning with history” (Dovere, 2016). Fact-checking organizations agree that Obama’s actions and words never amounted to actual apologies (Kessler, 2012; Farley, 2012; PolitiFact, n.d.). Nevertheless, the president was accused of “confessional soul-searching abroad about America and its sins” (Krauthammer, 2016). Obama’s acknowledgment of U.S. failings and his cautious approach to exercising American power abroad were criticized by political opponents as lacking conviction in the idea of America as a ‘force for good’ – a nation that champions human rights, promotes democracy and acts with good intentions (Jaffe, 2015; Gerstbauer, 2016, p.2).

American exceptionalism refers to the belief that the United States – founded as a model democracy after liberal ideas and ideals – is a morally superior nation tasked with safeguarding peace and human rights and advancing democratization worldwide (Restad, 2019, p.66-75). As a so-called master narrative – defined as an enduring identity narrative of a state (Krebs, 2015, pp.2-4) – American exceptionalism has significantly shaped U.S. foreign policy throughout history and is closely tied to political identity (Restad, 2019, pp.63-64). Until the Trump administration, there has been a strong bi-partisan consensus on the U.S. role in world history “*because of what kind of nation the United States is believed to be*” (Restad, 2019, p.64, original emphasis).

Scholarship on political apologies suggests that, given its intellectual heritage and the normative commitments underpinning American exceptionalism, the United States should, in principle, be well-positioned to issue apologies. Yet, the self-declared exemplary liberal democracy has largely refrained from apologizing to other states. In light of the domestic political controversy surrounding Obama’s alleged ‘apology tour’, this thesis will explore the role of domestic political discourse to understand what may motivate apology backlash as a potential impediment to the United States issuing apologies. Public discourse, according to Krebs (2015), touches upon “the realm of narrative” (p.9) and cannot be reduced to rational geopolitical calculus or normative (legalistic) systems as existing scholarship about political apologies seem to suggest.

This thesis investigates the following research question: What does public discourse in U.S. politics, media, and expert circles reveal about the apology backlash during the Obama administration, and how does it relate to American exceptionalism and state identity? Drawing on Ontological Security Studies, this thesis will examine whether and in what ways Obama’s

‘apologetic’ rhetoric was framed in political discourse as a challenge to American exceptionalism and, by extension, to U.S. state identity, triggering domestic backlash.

A brief review of the existing scholarship on political apologies, followed by an overview of ontological security studies, will provide the analytical framework. A short introduction to American exceptionalism will serve to derive key narrative propositions likely to appear in public discourse. To address the research question, the methodological approach of Critical Political Discourse Analysis will be introduced and subsequently applied. The analysis will identify central discursive topics and core arguments directed at Obama’s alleged ‘apology tour’ within public discourse among Republican political elites, conservative media, and partisan think tanks during Obama’s presidency from 2009 to 2017. These arguments and underlying narrative strategies will then be assessed in relation to the previously defined key narrative propositions.

Recent research on apology backlash has largely centered on Japan’s apology to South Korea (Lind, 2009; Hong, 2016; Kitagawa & Chu, 2021). To better understand the phenomenon of apology backlash, Lind (2009) has called for further research on domestic and international conditions affecting the occurrence of backlash (p.548). This thesis follows Lind’s call by examining the United States as a case study, focusing on the political controversy surrounding Obama’s ‘apology tour’ to gain insights into the domestic political dynamics of apology backlash. Its contribution lies in offering a novel perspective grounded in Ontological Security Studies, placing perceived threats to state identity at the center of analysis. To the author’s knowledge, this thesis is the first to combine Critical Political Discourse Analysis with the theoretical framework of Ontological Security Studies to analyze apology backlash during the Obama administration.

The findings of this research support the central hypothesis: Obama’s alleged ‘apology tour’ was framed as a challenge to American exceptionalism, and, by extension, U.S. identity. Political discourse among Republican elites, conservative media, and partisan think tanks largely echoed the core exceptionalist narratives, portraying Obama’s ‘apologetic’ rhetoric as signs of weakness incompatible with American supremacy and global leadership. Obama’s ‘apologies’ were seen as conflicting with notions of America’s ‘noble’ wars and as dismissive of past sacrifices made to secure international peace and prosperity, as well as revealing liberal Democrats’ unease with American power and patriotism. However, some backlash extended beyond exceptionalist rhetoric, reflecting political hostility toward Obama personally, casting him as a threat to American conservatism, and, in part, the nation itself.

2 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This chapter begins by reviewing existing research on political apologies, highlighting a significant gap in understanding why states sometimes refrain from issuing apologies. While current explanations offer partial insights, emphasizing the lack of necessity and strategic political calculus, they fall short of capturing the full picture. To better understand the relatively understudied phenomenon of apology backlash as an impeding factor, this thesis turns to Ontological Security Studies to examine the role of state identity.

The second part of this chapter outlines the core tenets of American exceptionalism as a defining feature of U.S. state identity. To better analyze the political controversy surrounding Obama's alleged 'apology tour', this section also briefly addresses his position on American exceptionalism. The review of American exceptionalism will serve to formulate key narrative propositions likely to emerge in political discourse and inform the subsequent analysis.

2.1 Why Do States (Not) Apologize?

There are four different approaches that offer arguments to explain why states apologize (Hussain, 2022, pp.15-18).

Norms-based approach

The growing practice of political apologies has run in parallel to the legal institutionalization of moral commitments to justice, human rights and liberal norms (Callahan, 2005, p.28). As the international community has increasingly embraced the post-WWII Western-centric normative legal order, political apologies have come to serve to restore and reaffirm shared norms (Bagdonas, 2010, p.11; Bagdonas, 2018, p.780). Additionally, the emergence of 'Holocaust consciousness' and a Western 'guilt culture' further contributed to the apology trend (Bagdonas, 2018, p.782; Hussain, 2022, p.10). Furthermore, some scholars argue that democratic institutions enable rights-conscious citizens to pressure elected officials to address past wrongs, thereby linking political and human rights accountability (Hussain, 2022, p.24).

Social-psychological approach

Lazare (1995) considers apologies increasingly important, suggesting they are vital to peaceful resolution of conflicts in an ever more interconnected world (as cited in Callahan, 2005, p.28). Apologies by leaders such as former U.S. President Bill Clinton for the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment and former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper were efforts rooted in acknowledging and moving beyond violent pasts (Edwards, 2010, pp.69-70). Similarly, Celermajer (2009) views Australia's collective apology to its indigenous population as a

political act “beyond the standard repertoire of legal and institutional interventions, into the realm of the repentant and the performative” (p.6). State apologies can demonstrate atonement and have a reparative moral quality, enabling healing, reconciliation, and complementing restorative justice (Bagdonas, 2010, pp.43-45).

Post-colonial approach

Postcolonial theories are skeptical of public apologies, etymologically rooted in the Greek word *apologia*, which refers to rhetorical self-defense (Edwards, 2010, p.63). Accordingly, their primary function is seen as repairing and defending a state’s image and ethos, rather than addressing underlying structural injustices (Winter, 2015, p.279). Bentley (2015) argues that state apologies reaffirm liberal credentials and international law, while sanitizing the violent colonial past and evading public scrutiny (p.623). Apologies, furthermore, facilitate the resumption of cordial relations between colonial powers and former colonies, serving the former’s strategic interests (Bentley, 2015, p.635).

Political-strategical approach

Finally, political calculus significantly shapes governments’ rationale for issuing apologies. (Structural) realism views state apologies as geopolitical calculations devoid of redemptive intentions and driven solely by political pragmatism (Dahl, 2013, pp.123-124). Factors such as public image can also influence these decisions, as issuing an apology may serve to enhance a state’s international standing and reputation (Bagdonas, 2018, p.784; Hussain, 2022, p.77).

In *Sorry States – Apologies in International Politics*, Lind (2008) argues that although apologies can improve bilateral relations, they are not essential, as demonstrated by the solid security alliance and good diplomatic relations between Japan and the United States (p.3). Arguments against apologies include potential economic and political costs, as well as setting future liability precedents (Dahl, 2013, p.123). While positive cases of apologies are increasingly studied, there is little theoretical exploration of why states do *not* apologize beyond standard explanations from realist IR theories which fail to account for apology backlash. Notably, states occasionally issue apologies despite potential costs and withhold them even when clear benefits appear to exist.

2.2 Ontological Security Studies, State Identity, and Apologies

In response to the puzzle of why states sometimes act contrary to the expectations of realist IR theories, Ontological Security Studies [OSS] emerged within constructivist IR: States do not

care only about physical threats, but also about identity threats (Hagström, 2021, p.333). Scholars such as Hagström (2021) apply the idea of ontological security to state identity in explaining state behavior. State identity can be understood as the “body of interests, values, self-understandings and orientations”, rooted in a state’s history and culture, human and physical geography, and economy, and shaped by international interaction over time (Jackson & Hogg, 2010, p.783). According to Hagström (2021), state identity is forged through the construction and dissemination of narratives that seek to achieve stability, consistency and coherence (p.332). Ontological security in this context refers to “biographical continuity” (Giddens, 1991, p.53, as cited in Hagström, 2021, p.333) and is largely narrative-driven. Even great powers, despite their economic and military might, seek ontological security by maintaining relatively consistent and coherent autobiographical narratives of greatness to reinforce state identity (Hagström, 2021, p.331). However, these narratives often intersect with narratives of impending decline or weakness in public discourse (Hagström, 2021, p.332). Hagström (2021) argues that ontological security and insecurity should not be treated as dichotomous categories, where the latter defines a rupture in the (continuity of a) narrative resulting from ‘critical situations’ – “circumstances of radical disjuncture of an unpredictable kind” (p.333). Rather, ontological insecurity has a more permanent character in narrative identity-seeking, simultaneously challenging and reinforcing ontological security: the former both threatens and motivates the continuous pursuit of the latter (Hagström, 2021, p.333).

Bagdonas (2010) considers state identity a pivotal factor in states’ rationale for issuing public apologies, since they require profound and critical self-reflection (p.9). State apologies can challenge historical narratives central to a state’s identity, rendering it ontologically insecure domestically and internationally (Bagdonas, 2010, pp.70-71, 204-205; Bagdonas, 2018, p.788). The concept of self-reflexivity is central to theories of ontological security (Hagström, 2021, p.334). States often view critical self-reflection as a sign of weakness, rendering self-interrogation politically unattractive (Hagström, 2021, p.334). Bagdonas (2010) studies the example of Türkiye’s refusal to recognize and apologize for the Armenian genocide because it challenges the heroic Independence war narrative central to national identity (p.205). Zoodsma, Schaafsma, Sagherian-Dickey and Friedrich (2021) similarly argue that political apologies can constitute ‘face-threatening’ acts for states with traditions of high self-regard, risking national controversy (pp.2-3). Revisiting stories central to national identity may thus seem politically costly for political leaders (Bagdonas, 2010, p.70). Lind (2008) argues that conservatives believe that acknowledging past failings – particularly through apologies – can undermine patriotic sentiments considered vital to national stability (p.184). Lind (2008) also describes the

phenomenon of ‘apology backlash’, triggered by nationalist and conservative forces that prefer to glorify the past rather than critically engage with it (pp.4-6, 184). Political backlash can stem from ideological convictions and efforts to appeal to conservative constituents or motivated by political opportunism, such as to catalyze opposition against unpopular incumbent governments (Lind, 2008, p.184).

Hagström (2021) examines how great powers manage their identities and ontological (in)securities through four narrative strategies (pp.336-337). ‘Narratives of shame’ acknowledge perceived weaknesses or failures, promoting self-improvement or restoration. ‘Narratives of pride’ celebrate national achievements, reinforcing positive self-images by emphasizing strength and concealing underlying insecurities. ‘Narratives of denial’ involve rejection or downplaying of weaknesses and failures, dismissing criticism as a defense mechanism to maintain ontological security. Finally, ‘narratives of insult’ frame criticism as attacks on national identity, prompting defensive or aggressive responses to reassert national pride and deter future challenges.

2.3 American Exceptionalism: Master Narrative in U.S. Foreign Policy

This thesis investigates the political opposition to Obama’s alleged ‘apology tour’, arguing that that the narrative negotiation of US. state identity affects apology backlash . Given that American Exceptionalism is a defining feature of U.S. state identity, the following section presents its core tenets to provide socio-political and historical context, as well as the foundation for the key propositions tested in the political discourse analysis.

In *Narrative and the Making of US National Security*, Krebs (2015) explores how enduring identity narratives of states – so-called ‘master narratives’ – provide the discursive framework through which political leaders and policymakers debate and legitimize more specific narratives, such as national security (pp.2-4). Seemingly brute facts of (international) politics acquire meaning within the social world as they become embedded in broader narrative structures (Krebs, 2015, pp.4-5).

American exceptionalism is the ideational master narrative that shapes how political leaders have been able to tell the story of the United States (Restad, 2019, pp.64,66). It determines the framing and scope of U.S. foreign policy, although its precise content and aims have been the subject of heated political debate (Restad, 2019, p.63-69). Political contestation takes place within this narrative (Krebs, 2015, p.5). American exceptionalism is said to be a blend of myth and actual social experience (Tyrrell, 2022, p.17). Today, American exceptionalism tells the

story of an ethnically and religiously diverse nation united in its allegiance to upholding liberal ideals at home and abroad (Restad, 2019, p.65).

Three main premises span the idea of U.S. exceptionalism: (1) U.S. (moral) superiority, (2) the moral mission abroad, and (3) the ability to sustain as a superpower (Restad, 2019, p.67).

(1) U.S. (Moral) Superiority

American exceptionalism is the idea of the United States as an exemplary brainchild of the Enlightenment, rooted in liberal ideas and ideals (Restad, 2019, p.67). The United States was ‘born’ in a republican revolution that paved the way for an exceptional liberal democracy, making it the ‘model republic’ (Tyrrell, 2022, pp.4,30). U.S. moral superiority is rooted in its founding history and cultural heritage (Restad, 2019, p.69). It is not only the richest most powerful country of the world today, but superior in terms of ideas and institutions, whereby no other nation has contributed more to the evolution of the rule of law, democracy, and social progress (Hodgson, 2009, pp.10-11; Restad, 2019, p.67). This narrative appears in popular characterizations of the United States as “the (shining) city upon a hill” or “the beacon to the world” (Restad, 2019, p.64,73; Hodgson, 2009, pp.1-2).

(2) The Indispensable Nation – Global Leadership and Mission Abroad

Because of its superiority, the United States plays a special role in world history, manifested in a moral mission abroad (Restad, 2019, pp.66-69). This mission broadly centers on promoting liberal internationalism through the advancement of democratization, human rights, and free market capitalism (Restad, 2019, p.65). U.S. presidents have justified America’s active role in international affairs by arguing that ‘what was right for America was right for the world’ (Restad, 2019, p.73). America fights benevolent and ‘noble’ wars, standing apart as the “noble bearer of ideals above the grubby jockeying of geopolitics and militarism” (Tyrrell, 2022, p.2), thus, earning its status as the “indispensable nation” (Grandin, 2016, p.25; Tyrrell, 2022, pp.190-191).

(3) Defying the Laws of History

The United States’ superiority in values and institutions allows it to defy world history, which has seen empires rise and, inevitably, fall (Restad, 2019, p.72). The history of the United States shows that it has always risen to the challenge, conquering the Americas and international seas, defeating fascist Germany, thereby saving the Old Continent, and finally defying Soviet Communism (Restad, 2019, p.72). Each historical victory is seen as reaffirmation of American exceptionalism (Restad, 2019, p.75).

U.S. Exceptionalism in Presidential Discourse

American exceptionalism is deeply ingrained in U.S. society, with patriotism often equated to the belief in this idea (Tyrrell, 2022, p.3). Exceptionalist rhetoric has been ubiquitous in modern presidential political discourse across the political spectrum (Restad, 2019, p.74). However, American exceptionalism remains a somewhat malleable and historically contingent concept open to interpretation and legitimizing almost opposite foreign policy strategies over time and across parties (Restad 2019, p.67; Tyrrell, 2022, p.4).

Until recently, U.S. foreign policy has rested on a strong bi-partisan belief in U.S. leadership of the liberal world since World War II (Restad, 2019, p.64, 75). However, President Donald Trump has recently given American exceptionalism a “strange turn” in presidential discourse, declaring its end, rejecting its basic claims of moral superiority and international leadership, and instead advancing an ‘America First’ agenda marked by strong ethnonational patriotism (Tyrrell, 2022, p.2). Grandin (2016) suggest that American exceptionalism has become “a quintessential crisis term,” referring not to the epitome of U.S. superpower but to the fear of its decline (p.23). Similarly, Hodgson (2009) describes the paradox of U.S. exceptionalism: it is most often invoked during times of insecurity, doubt, and vulnerability (p.29).

2.4 Barack Obama and American Exceptionalism

No U.S. president before Obama invoked American exceptionalism as frequently in public speeches (Jaffe, 2015). The term’s popularity rose in American media in 2007 after Obama’s election, peaking in 2011–12 (Tyrrell, 2022, p.1). This increase was due not only to Obama’s frequent references but also to the Republican Party’s designation of Obama as its enemy (Tyrrell, 2022, p.1). In Republican circles, loyalty to the American exceptionalism narrative increasingly became a key measure of patriotism (Tyrrell, 2022, p.2)

Obama came to office during a profound ‘social crisis,’ marked by low public confidence in markets and foreign military interventions (Grandin, 2016, p.26). Seeking to reclaim the term from Republicans, Obama offered a progressive and inclusive alternative grounded in constitutional principles and core U.S. values (Grandin, 2016, p.23, 26; Restad, 2019, p.72). By taking his own biographical success, Obama publicly celebrated American exceptionalism showcasing the merits of U.S. meritocracy and the ability to overcome racial division (Grandin, 2016, p.23). At the 2004 Democratic National Convention, Obama declared: “I stand here knowing that my story is part of the larger American story (...) and in no other country on earth, is my story even possible” (Obama, 2004). Embracing the tradition of American exceptionalism

so prominently, Obama intended to signal to critics that political challenges would be addressed not through radical change, but on familiar terms (Grandin, 2016, p.23).

President Obama, however, allowed for some qualification. In a speech delivered in Selma commemorating the 50th anniversary of the bloody Sunday march, he declared: “what greater form of patriotism is there than to believe that America is *not yet finished*; that it’s strong enough to be *self-critical*; that each generation can look upon its *imperfections* and say *we can do better*” (Obama, 2015, as cited in Jaffe, 2015, emphasis added).

Obama’s nuanced stance drew considerable critique from right-wing and Republican camps (Tyrrell, 2022, p.1). Conservative commentators interpreted Obama’s presidency as “contemporary liberalism’s discomfort with American exceptionalism” (Ponnuru & Lowry, 2010). The growing political discourse over the fate of American power during Obama’s presidency helped exceptionalism become the guiding notion for U.S. nationalism after 2009 (Tyrrell, 2022, p.19).

Conclusion

Existing scholarship on political apologies offers valuable insights into why states issue them, including (1) normative commitments under international law, (2) promoting healing, reconciliation, and reparative justice, (3) restoring public image, or (4) advancing national interests and geopolitical calculus. However, they fail to fully explain a state’s rationale for not apologizing, beyond assuming it is either unnecessary for restoring bilateral relations or involves political and economic costs. None of the four explanatory approaches can adequately accommodate the phenomenon of apology backlash observed in response to Obama’s alleged ‘apology tour’.

Ontological Security Studies offer a promising lens to understand apology backlash and how it factors into states’ rationale. Viewed through this perspective, political backlash can be interpreted as a response to perceived threats to a state’s narrative identity and ontological security. Apologies may thus prompt forceful efforts to defend and reinforce state identity and manage ontological insecurity through narrative strategies of ‘pride’, ‘shame’, ‘denial’, and ‘insult’.

American exceptionalism is central to U.S. state identity, and rests on three premises: (1) U.S. (moral) superiority, (2) leadership of the liberal world order, and (3) the ability to sustain superpower status. As master narrative shaping much of U.S. politics, it likely frames the public discourse of political opposition towards Obama’s ‘apology tour’. While Obama publicly

affirmed American exceptionalism, his nuanced interpretation stirred political controversy and criticism, especially among Republicans. Viewing Obama's alleged apologies as a challenge to American exceptionalism – and U.S. state identity – may provide insights into what motivates policy backlash and how it shapes a state's rationale for issuing apologies

This thesis examines political backlash against Obama's alleged foreign 'apology tour' through the theoretical lens of Ontological Security Studies on state identity, offering a new perspective on political apology discourse and a state's rationale to refrain from apologizing. The next chapter introduces the methodological approach of Critical Political Discourse Analysis and develops three key propositions derived from the review of American exceptionalism, which are predicted to shape public discourse of the political opposiiton.

3 Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological approach of Critical Political Discourse Analysis [CPDA] and illustrates how it will be applied throughout this thesis. CPDA is particularly well-suited to the research question, which investigates the discursive practices in apology backlash to Obama's alleged 'apology tour' in relation to U.S. state identity and American exceptionalism.

3.1 Macro-Analytic Critical Political Discourse Analysis

“Who controls public discourse, at least partly controls the public mind, so that discourse analysis of such control is at the same time inherently a form of political analysis (van Dijk, 1999, p.44). CPDA offers a methodological lens that views discourse as a subjective, socially embedded and constitutive practice that is neither neutral nor fully transparent (McEntee-Atalianis, 2021, p.312). It enables a nuanced analysis of how the discourse of politicians, journalists, and the public influences political action (van Dijk, 1999, pp. 41–44). CPDA moves beyond a narrow focus on socio-economic interests and geopolitical calculations to examine perceptions, representations and prejudices (van Dijk, 1999, p.43). Lastly, it deconstructs how linguistic representations interact with power structures in institutions like government, media, and academia, revealing how ideologies are forged and propagated (McEntee-Atalianis, 2021, p.312).

This thesis adopts a macro-analytic approach to CPDA, as it focuses on political discourse about public apologies in U.S. foreign policy in the connection to the discursive (re)construction of dominant state identity narratives (McEntee-Atalianis, 2021, p.312).

By extending the analysis to include discursive practices of actors beyond politicians or political institutions, such as the opiated media and partisan think tanks involved in the political process, this thesis adopts a broader definition of 'doing politics'. (Opiated) media – often called the fourth estate – and partisan think tanks increasingly shape policy and narratives (Fagan, 2024; Grossmann, 2024). In this thesis, they are understood to co-constitute the relevant political discourse.

3.2 Tools of Macro-Analytic Critical-Political Discourse Analysis

Key topics in political discourse

CPDA will be employed to identify the main themes and topics found in political discourse among the U.S. political elite, opiated media and partisan think tanks regarding the question

of public apologies in the context of U.S. foreign policy of the Obama administration between 2009 and 2017.

Socio-political and historical context

Beyond the mere identification of ‘hot topics’, CPDA looks at the sociopolitical and historical context of discursive practices as well as examines the prevailing official norms, ideologies and attitudes (van Dijk, 1999, p.39). The conservative backlash to political apologies will be examined through the lens of American exceptionalism, with reference to U.S. foreign and domestic policy, and broader partisan dynamics.

Analysis of discursive strategies to reproduce or challenge dominant discursive narratives

CPDA will be used to analyze how Republican and conservative opposition employs narrative strategies in defense of American exceptionalism in the context of public apologies and resists more critical or nuanced interpretations of U.S. identity in the political arena, media, and partisan think tanks.

3.3 Application of Macro-Analytic Critical-Political Discourse Analysis

The CPDA tools will be applied in three steps. First, political discourse will be collected from Republican members of Congress and other prominent Republican figures, opinionated media, and partisan think tanks, organizing it into thematic clusters of key discursive topics. From these, core arguments against public apologies to structure the analysis will be distilled, integrating relevant socio-political and historical context where needed. Second, these arguments and topics will be compared to the key narrative propositions derived from the literature review to assess how the political opposition frames public discourse on U.S. misdeeds and apologies. Finally, it will be analyzed whether and how the narrative strategies of ‘pride’, ‘shame’, ‘denial’, and ‘insult’ reflect efforts to defend and reinforce exceptionalist identity challenged by apologetic rhetoric.

This thesis will collect data from U.S. Congressional Records, media interviews, public speeches, and publications by prominent political figures. Political discourse in media and expert circles will be analyzed by consulting opinion pieces across diverse media outlets, with a particular focus on conservative voices such as Fox News, National Review, the Weekly Standard, Breitbart and New York Post, as well as publications by partisan think tanks like the Heritage Foundation critical of the ‘apology tour’.

3.4 Key Narrative Propositions

Drawing on the literature of American exceptionalism and its core premises, this thesis posits three key narrative propositions likely to arise in political discourse on public apologies during the Obama administration. It further posits that Republican politicians and conservative political commentators in the media and think tanks will employ a combination of discursive strategies in their rhetoric, notably narratives of ‘pride’, ‘shame’, ‘denial’, and ‘insult’, to moderate ontological insecurity and defend American exceptionalism.

Apologies as Signs of Weakness and American Decline

This thesis anticipates political apologies to be framed as signs of weakness that undermine U.S. power, challenge American exceptionalism and announce or promote decline. Obama’s ‘apologetic’ rhetoric, domestically and internationally, is seen not only as inappropriate but also strategically flawed for a global hegemon expected to project strength. Public apologies are taken to reflect the president’s misconception of American exceptionalism, which holds that a strong America is essential for global peace and the promotion of liberal democracy.

America’s Noble Wars and the Indispensable Nation’s Rejection of Apologies

Conservative opposition is expected to view the United States as a benevolent global leader acting in good faith. Past missteps are framed as exceptions that divert from its moral mission and achievements. As an exceptional and morally superior nation, the United States cannot be held to conventional moral standards. Given its substantial sacrifices, both financial and human, gratitude, rather than criticism, is deemed appropriate. Public apologies, in this view, represent a betrayal of American people and values.

Public Apologies as Expressions of Liberal Discomfort with American Exceptionalism

In the context of heightened partisan politics, particularly leading up to the 2012 presidential election, opposition to public apologies is likely framed as symptomatic of the political left’s discomfort with American exceptionalism, a perceived erosion of patriotism, and a broader political agenda staunchly opposed by the Republican Party.

4 Political Discourse Among Republican Politicians

This chapter begins with a brief contextual overview of the ‘apology tour’ allegation, providing background for the subsequent analysis. It then examines Republican backlash against President Obama’s alleged ‘apologetic’ rhetoric, focusing on political discourse in U.S. Congressional debates and publications and speeches by prominent Republican figures.

4.1 Obama’s ‘Apology Tour’

Barack Obama took office vowing to improve U.S. relationships with the Muslim world and recalibrate America’s role in the world, repairing the country’s image after unpopular military campaigns in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the war on terror under the previous Bush administration (Nakamura & Eilperin, 2016). One of the first to raise the ‘apology tour’ allegation was Karl Rove, a senior advisor in the Bush administration (Charnock, 2022, p.181). In a *Wall Street Journal* article, Rove (2009) claimed President Obama had apologized on three different continents for America’s past actions within the first 100 days in office. The criticism referred to Obama’s early international presidential visits and speeches in Strasbourg, London, Turkey, and Cairo where he publicly acknowledged U.S. shortcomings and mistakes (Farley, 2012; PolitiFact, n.d.). Statements by the president such as “there’s plenty of blame to go around (...) and the United States certainly shares blame” in Strasbourg or “the United States is still working through some of our own darker periods” in Cairo fueled national political controversy (Obama, 2009, as cited in PolitiFact, n.d.).

Former U.S. Senator and Governor of Massachusetts Mitt Romney advanced the ‘apology tour’ narrative in his book *No Apology: Believe in America*, which accused Obama of issuing apologies abroad as well as at home, revealing the president’s belief in American arrogance, unilateralism, and moral failings (pp.39-40). By contrast, Democrats such as Rep. Lynn Woolsey complimented Cairo as courageous act of acknowledging past mistakes and a bold new foreign policy direction (155 Cong. Rec. H6239, 2009).

The ‘apology tour’ theme gained momentum during Romney’s 2012 presidential campaign (Farley, 2012; Kessler, 2012) and was amplified by conservative media and Republican figures like Sarah Palin (Lind, 2010). Several fact-checker sites confirmed that Obama’s words did not constitute actual apologies (Farley, 2012; Kessler, 2012). Obama (2012) dismissed the allegations as “the biggest whopper that’s been told during the course of this campaign” (as cited in Sterling, 2012).

Later trips – in many cases historical or first presidential visits – to Cuba, Argentina, Vietnam, Laos, and Hiroshima in Japan in 2016 were similarly framed as continuations of the ‘apology tour’ (Marcotte, 2016). President Obama concluded a comprehensive partnership with Vietnam, which specifically addressed war legacies and normalized U.S.-Cuba relations, a period known as Cuban thaw (The White House, 2013; The Economist, 2016). Liberal political commentators interpreted these trips as part of Obama’s legacy of promoting reconciliation and mutual respect (Weisberg, 2016; Marcotte, 2016) and strategic diplomatic pivot to Asia (Charnock, 2022, p.181). Whether viewed as strategic geopolitics, genuine remorse and reconciliation efforts, or apologies for America, the presidential visits and speeches stirred significant political controversy (Borchers, 2016).

4.2 Discourse Analysis among Republican Elites

The arguments against apologies, drawn from key topics encountered in political discourse, are organized thematically and discussed in separate sections corresponding to the three key propositions outlined in the methodology section for comparison and analysis. Alongside the analysis of these arguments, the identification of narrative strategies offers insights into whether and how Republicans oppose state apologies for U.S. misdeeds by employing exceptionalist rhetoric and moderating ontological insecurity. This chapter seeks to examine the thesis’ central hypothesis: A state’s rationale for issuing apologies is influenced by perceived threats to ontological security, understood in terms of dominant state identity narratives, that can trigger political opposition.

Apologies as Signs of Weakness and American Decline

Republican politicians made several arguments against U.S. apologies, viewing them as ideologically conflicting with and strategically damaging to U.S. supremacy and hegemony central to the master narrative of U.S. exceptionalism. Apologies were broadly understood as signaling weakness to both allies and adversaries – by America as a nation and by the U.S. president specifically. Obama’s alleged ‘apology tour’ was viewed as symbolic of national decline, contradicting a core assumption of American exceptionalism, which some Republicans decried and sought to counter, and others denied. Furthermore, Obama’s ‘apologetic’ diplomacy coincided with rising super power rivalry, escalating geopolitical tensions and terrorist threats, alienating America’s allies and naively appeasing its enemies.

Romney not only understood Obama’s ‘apologetic’ diplomacy as an ideological challenge of American supremacy, but also as a strategic error in Realpolitik threatening American global

leadership. He specifically placed Obama's 'apology tour' in the context rising threats from China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and jihadist extremists (Romney, 2010, p.87). In a world of advancing rival powers, where only America championed freedom, democracy, and human rights, U.S. leadership was indispensable (Romney, 2010, p. 298). Evaluating all political action through the lens of national strength, Romney (2010) viewed Obama's public apologies for America as signs of weakness and irresolution toward hostile regimes, acquiescence to foreign opinions, as well as missed opportunities to reinforce U.S. leadership (pp.34,41,113,307). He argued that hostile actors respond not to "earnest words and furrowed brows," but to bold, decisive action backed by strength (Romney, 2009). Though not conspiratorial, Romney (2010) considered Obama's apologetic posture "potentially ominous and ruinous" if left unchallenged (p. 293). Romney (2010) warned that Obama's apologetic diplomacy was creating a global political vacuum that could be filled by states with malign intentions – something he considered a naive miscalculation (p.44). Despite the United States' still unmatched military and economic strength, Romney (2010) warned of the risk of strategic decline resulting from Obama's unprecedented U.S. defense budget cuts (p.87). Obama's apologies earned praise from autocratic regimes, while alienating key allies such as Israel (Romney, 2010, pp.40–41). By emphasizing America's perceived decline under Obama's 'apologetic' leadership and calling for a forceful demonstration and restoration of American strength and authority, Romney mainly employed 'narratives of shame' to moderate ontological insecurity.

In *America by Heart: Reflections on Family, Faith, and Flag*, former Alaska Governor and 2008 vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin (2010) criticized Obama's 'apology tour' by claiming that "ordinary Americans are tired of (...) hearing about what a weak country America is from left-wing professors and journalists" (as cited in MacAskill, 2010). Similarly, in her farewell speech as governor, Palin (2009) lamented Obama's apologetic rhetoric implying U.S. decline, a claim she firmly rejected. Palin employed narratives of 'denial' and 'insult' by treating American weakness and decline implied by Obama's apologies as unthinkable, yet deeply offensive.

Congressional criticism of Obama's 'apology tour' reflected broader concerns about weak leadership and America's perceived decline amid global security threats. Rep. West decried a lack of leadership from the White House (157 Cong. Rec. H8315, 2011). Similarly, Sen. Graham called for a shift "from a policy of apology to a policy of leadership" (158 Cong. Rec. S6480, 2012). Republicans agreed that Obama's "charm offensive" yielded no results apart from emboldening enemies and antagonizing allies (156 Cong. Rec. H2448, 2010; 156 Cong. Rec. S20, 2010; 158 Cong. Rec. S6480, 2012). Rep. Gohmert claimed Obama's weak

leadership trapped America in a political “quagmire” and made it appear a “toothless tiger” ridiculed by enemies (162 Cong. Rec. H361, 2016; 161 Cong. Rec. H2407, 2015). After Obama left office in 2017, Rep. Cheney criticized “8 years of apologies and weakness,” praising President Trump for reversing that trend (164 Cong. Rec. H6292, 2018).

Congressional debates frequently linked Obama’s ‘apology tour’ to Israel, which Obama had failed to visit, and the Iranian nuclear threat. The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action [JCPOA] to limit Iran’s nuclear program sparked major controversy over its terms, prompting a hearing by the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform (White House Narratives on the Iran Nuclear Deal, 2016). Many Republicans viewed Obama’s handling of Iran and the Islamist rise in Egypt as a threat to Israel (158 Cong. Rec. H5850, 2012; 162 Cong. Rec. H3701, 2016). Sen. Risch condemned Obama’s Middle East ‘apology tour’ for raising doubts about America’s commitment to its most important and regional ally Israel (158 Cong. Rec. H3395, 2012; 158 Cong. Rec. S6480, 2012). Rep. Franks accused the Obama administration of appeasement and naive denial towards Iran as the greatest sponsor of terrorism (156 Cong. Rec. H2448, 2010; 158 Cong. Rec. H5693, 2012). Following the Iran nuclear deal, Obama was viewed as a “total pushover” for capitulating on U.S. demands during the negotiations (163 Cong. Rec. H380-H389, 2017).

By acknowledging a crisis of American leadership driven by Obama’s apologetic diplomacy, a development that needed to be reversed, Republicans employed ‘narratives of shame’. Many took offense by Obama’s apologies and foreign policy and understood them as an attack, deliberate or not, on American supremacy and hegemony, thereby employing ‘narratives of insult’. ‘Narratives of pride’ were implicitly present when contrasting Obama’s ‘weak’ leadership with the United States’ historic role as global power.

America’s Noble Wars and the Indispensable Nation’s Rejection of Apologies

Republican arguments against state apologies were rooted in praise for American sacrifices and achievements in securing peace, liberty, and prosperity abroad, and the rejection of U.S. misdeeds. Furthermore, apologies implied a moral equivalence between the United States and the rest of the international community, which Republicans maintained did not exist. Republican backlash and argumentation reflected a combination of narratives of ‘denial’, ‘pride’ and ‘insult’ by celebrating national sacrifices that rendered what they considered minor U.S. missteps insignificant, leading them to reject the grounds for apologies and instead frame them as offensive ingratitude.

In a world of increasing geopolitical tensions and the rise rival powers, America's leadership in championing freedom, democracy and human rights was indispensable (Romney, 2010, p.298). Romney (2010) repeatedly emphasized America's unmatched global contributions "in treasure and in life" (p.279), asserting that America had done more to promote noble causes such as world peace, liberty and prosperity than any other nation (pp.4,47). Yet, he claimed, President Obama failed to show gratitude and instead apologized for American misdeeds abroad (Romney, 2010, p.47). Romney (2010) called America "a *decidedly* good nation" (p.65, original emphasis), one that had always acted with the best of intentions – not to colonize, not to subjugate, but always to liberate – and with unprecedented restraint in exercising its superpower (pp.25,310). He argued that past mistakes had been adequately addressed and did not warrant repeated apologies (Romney, 2010, p.47). Considering the balance sheet of contributions and mistakes, the United States had nothing to apologize for but deserved presidential praise and defense (Romney, 2010, pp. 47, 113). While readily blaming America and overlooking its 'goodness', Obama was alleged to refrain from judging 'rogue countries', whose conduct he partly attributed to past imperialism and exploitation (Romney, 2010, p.293).

Similarly, Palin (2010) criticized Obama for depicting America as morally inferior to other countries, hypocritical in its ideals, shirking away from responsibility, and in perpetual need of correction (as cited in MacAskill, 2010). Ahead of the 2012 presidential elections, Palin decried Obama's ingratitude and disrespect towards American military personnel "with his naive apologies to savages in Afghanistan who turn around and kill our soldiers" (Palin, 2012). She specifically criticized Obama for apologizing over U.S. sacrifices and peace missions in the Middle East (Glueck, 2012). In response to anti-American protests across the Middle East, sparked by a U.S. amateur film mocking the Prophet Muhammad, which led to violent attacks on American embassies and the killing of the U.S. ambassador in Libya (Babb, 2012), Palin (2012) accused Obama of "waving the white flag" (as cited in Glueck, 2012).

Rhetoric in congress echoed Romney's sentiments of the United States deserving of praise and gratitude. Rep. Gohmert asserted that "freedom-loving people understand around the world when America gets weaker, they suffer" and that "America has been a gift to the world" (162 Cong. Rec. H3702, 2016). Gohmert criticized Obama for apologizing to countries where American soldiers had sacrificed their lives, demonstrating less concern and empathy toward U.S. citizens than foreigners (158 Cong. Rec. H1299, 2012). Furthermore, America did not owe apologies for securing the freedom of others (162 Cong. Rec. H3699, 2016).

Ingratitude for American military presence and benevolence in Afghanistan became a focal point of criticism. In response to President Obama's public apology for the burning of Qurans by U.S. military personnel stationed in Afghanistan, Rep. Duncan questioned the 'apology balance sheet', criticizing the absence of apologies and gratitude from Afghan leadership (158 Cong. Rec. H973, 2012). Rep. Gohmert similarly condemned Obama for apologizing "to those who house the killers of (...) American officers," emphasizing that Afghan leaders "wouldn't be there but for American soldiers, yet no apology from Afghanistan" (158 Cong. Rec. H962, 2012).

Public Apologies as Expressions of Liberal Discomfort with American Exceptionalism

For many Republicans, Obama's 'apology tour' encapsulated the liberal unease with American supremacy and the rejection of American values, fueling anti-American sentiment. Opposition to Obama's 'apologetic' diplomacy was framed within conservative critiques of the Democratic agenda at odds with American culture. A focal point of criticism was the 2010 Affordable Care Act (Obamacare), a health-care reform bill which provoked wide-spread national controversy (Wolf, 2022). Interpreting Obama's alleged apologies as unpatriotic acts and betrayal of values and principles that underpinned American success, Republicans primarily employed narratives of 'insult' and 'pride' to defend and reinforce American exceptionalism.

According to Romney (2010), no previous U.S. president had apologized so widely for America's real and perceived wrongs (p.39) – "a most unfortunate distinction at any time" (Romney, 2009). Obama's apologies reflected an understanding, even validation, of anti-American sentiment and the penchant of Western intellectuals for "self-loathing" (Romney, 2010, pp.39,90). Romney (2010) stressed that U.S. presidents must accept that unpopularity was an inevitable side effect of American supremacy (p.113). Instead of expressing patriotism and national pride, Obama opted for national fault-finding (Romney, 2010, p.293). A Democratic administration apologizing for American ideals was seen as rejecting and replacing the foundational values of a "supreme American culture" that helped the United States become "the powerhouse of the world" (Romney, 2010, pp.17, 265). Similarly, Palin (2010) argued that America yearned for unapologetic and patriotic leaders (as cited in MacAskill, 2010)

Romney (2010) connected the 'apology tour' to a broader critique of Obama's political program arguing that "every Democratic policy position has a weakening effect on America" (p.306). By questioning not only the possibility but desirability of American supremacy in his apologetic speeches, Obama risked triggering a self-fulfilling prophecy of a "post-American world" (p.42). The means to reverse decline – corrective political action, strong leadership, national consensus,

and national strength – were either absent under Obama or undermined by his Democratic political agenda (p.28).

Republican opposition in Congress expressed similar arguments. Rep. Gohmert criticized Obama’s foreign policy as rooted in an “apology mentality” and driven by the misguided belief that the world would be better off without the superpower America (162 Cong. Rec. H3699, 2016). Uneasy with power politics, Obama’s strategy of delivering apologetic speeches in hopes of winning affection was seen as misguided (158 Cong. Rec. H4679, 2012). Ahead of the 2012 presidential election, Rep. West warned that America faced a crucial choice about whether to remain a “shining city that sits upon a hill” (157 Cong. Rec. H8315, 2011). He characterized Obama’s presidency as restrained by perceived guilt over past and fear of future ‘overreach’ by an assertive America (163 Cong. Rec. H386, 2017).

Sen. Kyl argued that instead of making good on campaign promises, Obama embarked on an “apology tour of sorts” (156 Cong. Rec. S19, 2010). America’s role as the indispensable nation had been weakened by both domestic policies, such as costly healthcare spending, and foreign policy marked by apologies and military cuts (156 Cong. Rec. S21, 2010). Echoing this sentiment, Sen. Thune argued that it was the American people to whom Obama owed an apology for failed domestic policies like Obamacare (159 Cong. Rec. S6695, 2013). Similarly, Rep. West and Franks argued that the administration’s domestic agenda, leading an “anemic military campaign” and undermining the U.S. economy, had damaging implications for U.S. leadership (157 Cong. Rec. H8315, 2011; 163 Cong. Rec. H380, 2017).

President Obama as a Focal Point of Conservative Opposition

The analysis of political discourse among Republican elites revealed a fourth, new category of topics and arguments raised in the context of Obama’s alleged ‘apology tour’, that, to some degree, transcended the narrative framework of American exceptionalism underpinning the three key propositions covered in the previous sections. Although not fully in line with the analytical framework proposed by this thesis, this category of criticisms warrants a separate discussion in the following section.

Beyond partisan politics and Republican distrust of Democratic leadership, Obama was repeatedly portrayed as a uniquely disruptive and radical force and subjected to personal attacks ranging from accusations of incompetence to insinuations of a conspiratorial sorts. In addition to perceived threats to America’s state identity, Republicans associated Obama’s alleged apologies with unfair accusations of racism directed at patriotic Americans, as well as undermining national unity and bipartisanship.

Romney (2010) insinuated that Obama did not only commit the mistake of leading America down the road of socialism, crushing America's pioneering, innovating and entrepreneurial spirit, but abandoned the beaten path of American success altogether (pp.9,11-12). Obama's apologetic behavior marked a blatant "rupture with some of the key assumptions that have undergirded more than six decades of foreign policy" (Romney, 2010, p.36). President Obama further disrupted the bipartisan consensus in place since 1945 by advancing a version of America that acted as a neutral player in world affairs, rather than as the protector and defender of the liberal world order (Romney, 2010, p.37).

Palin suggested that Obama, in his tendency to find fault at home, was unfairly levelling the charge of racism towards patriotic Americans (MacAskill, 2010). She argued this reflected his belief that America was fundamentally unjust and unequal, a conviction that, in her view, drove his frequent apologies for the nation (MacAskill, 2010). A Romney spokesperson criticized Obama's "Uncle Jims references" as condescending toward middle-class Americans, noting that unlike Obama, they did not mock "America the Beautiful" (Meriwether, 2012, as cited in Snyder, 2012).

In Congress, Rep. Gohmert reflected on (inter-)national hopes tied to electing the first African American president, which, he argued, were overshadowed by perceptions of a weak, apologetic U.S. leadership abroad (158 Cong. Rec. H4679, 2012). Similarly, Rep. Franks contrasted "the grand promise of candidate Barack Obama, bedecked with Greek columns and the rhetoric of bipartisan unity" with what he saw as an apologetic president and "a partisan heckler at home" (163 Cong. Rec. H380, 2017).

Some congressional criticism veered into conspiratorial territory, claiming Obama entertained ties to radical Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic State (162 Cong. Rec. H3701, 2016; 163 Cong. Rec. H381, 2017). Rep. Gohmert argued that Obama's Cairo speech and broader apologetic posture empowered Islamist movements during the Arab Spring (158 Cong. Rec. H5197, 2012). Similarly, Rep. King accused Obama's 2009 Cairo speech of including Muslim Brotherhood leaders in the audience, interpreting it a signal of presidential support (162 Cong. Rec. H265, 2016).

Synthesis of Discussion

The analysis of the political discourse among Republican political elites offers insights into domestic political dynamics to understand what motivates apology backlash. It substantiates the central claim of this thesis, which posits that apologies are framed as threats to American

exceptionalism, as by extension, U.S. state identity. Furthermore, it sheds light on the narrative practices and strategies used to moderate these perceived attacks and the reactions they provoke, aiming to reinforce ontological security.

Critics of Obama's 'apologetic' rhetoric employed overlapping narrative strategies to preserve ontological security, understood as the continuity of the master narrative of American exceptionalism that underpins U.S. state identity. 'Narratives of pride' reasserted U.S. leadership and achievement, often countering perceived efforts to undermine American supremacy. 'Narratives of shame' emerged in acknowledgments of American decline under the Obama administration and in calls for its reversal. 'Narratives of denial' for example defended American supremacy and leadership by rejecting the premise that the United States had anything to apologize for. Finally, 'narratives of insult' were evident in Republicans taking offense at Obama's alleged 'apologies', often expressed through defensive, inflammatory, or scornful attacks on Obama's rhetoric, policies, and, at times, person.

The first three thematic sections and arguments against state apologies largely accommodate and reflect the key narrative propositions outlined in the methodology section. (1) Political opponents portrayed Obama's 'apologies' as signs of weakness, unfit for a global hegemon like the United States, undermining American exceptionalism and projecting decline rather than inevitable, unapologetic leadership amid domestic and global instability. (2) Republican political elites took offense at the idea that the United States – unmatched in its sacrifices for global peace and prosperity – should apologize for what they viewed as minor lapses. (3) Obama's 'apology tour' revealed discomfort with American supremacy, rejection of American values and Democratic fear of unpopularity.

The fourth section and thematic category, however, encompasses a broader critique of Obama as political figure and first black president in U.S. history, often portrayed as a progressive or even radical figure. Obama was criticized not only for policies perceived as lacking exceptionalist rhetoric and patriotism, but also for alleged personal shortcomings, for what he symbolized in terms of ethnic background and cultural identity, and for challenging traditional conceptions of American leadership. Criticisms leveled at Obama's 'apology tour' partly transcended the discursive defense of American exceptionalism, portraying him as an enemy of political conservatism and, to some extent, America itself.

5 Political Discourse in Media and Think Tanks

To substantiate the findings and results of the previous chapter, this chapter analyzes in an analogous manner the political backlash toward President Obama's so-called 'apology tour', focusing on opinion editorials, political commentary, and policy analysis. It examines rhetoric from conservative media, including broadcast networks, television segments, articles, and think tank publications.

Apologies as Signs of Weakness and the Demand for American Strength

Criticism of Obama's alleged 'apology tour' centered on accusations that his rhetoric demonstrated weakness and a lack in leadership. Amid rising geopolitical tensions, critics argued that this approach emboldened enemies and yielded few, if any, political gains. Obama's apologetic rhetoric was further interpreted as evidence of naivety and poor understanding of Realpolitik. Political commentators and analysts, offended by rhetoric they believed signaled weakness and damaged the United States' global image, framed their responses through narrative strategies of 'shame' and 'insult'. These narratives emphasized the perceived decline of America under President Obama, portraying it as a condition that urgently needed reversal.

The phrase "leading from behind," first used by a White House adviser in a *New Yorker* article, was quickly appropriated by Republicans in characterizing Obama's foreign policy (Cohen, 2011). Obama's perceived lack of leadership – marked by an apologetic tone, the retreat from the Middle East, and deep defense cuts – was said to project weakness and encourage international aggression (Hannity, 2009b; Gardiner & Roach, 2009; Inhofe, 2012). While the West might admire apologetic rhetoric by "an earnest moralist struggling with America's complicated past" (Holmes, 2014), enemy states saw it as signs of weakness and uncertainty (Gerecht, 2009).

Obama was criticized for turning the "war on terror" into a "war on semantics" (Hannity, 2009b), relying naively on dialogue, instead of crafting realistic policy (Bromund, 2016; Taheri, 2012). Obama's "language of peace" was not understood by hostile nations fluent in the "language of violence" (Cartier, 2014). Rather, Obama's naive *mea culpas* fueled anti-Americanism (Holmes, 2010; Holmes, 2014). Critics argued that while Obama apologized around the world, America was seen as a "paper tiger" abroad as North Korea tested nuclear missiles and Iran advanced its nuclear program (Bolton, 2009, as cited in Hannity, 2009a; Morrison, 2009, as interviewed in Hannity, 2009b; Gardiner, 2009; Gardiner & Roach, 2009). Rather than creating room for cooperative success, Obama's foreign policy rhetoric created a vacuum in global leadership (Gerecht, 2009; Inhofe, 2012; Taheri, 2012). Obama's "pre-9/11

appeasement mentality” towards hostile states, critics argued, threatened American national security by straining alliances and emboldening adversaries (Hannity, 2009b; Terrill, 2009; Wehner, 2011).

One recurring theme of Obama’s apologetic diplomacy critics took special interest in was his alleged “penchant for bowing to foreign leaders” (Bolton, 2016). Along with other perceived displays of submission, bowing was seen as a desperate and misguided effort to appease the Muslim world (Hannity, 2009e; O’Reilly, 2009; Charen, 2009). Critics argued that bowing, something distinctly un-American – “we fought a revolution to establish that point” (Bolton, 2016) – was inappropriate presidential conduct.

Obama’s 2009 ‘apology tour’ not only weakened America’s image, critics argued, but delivered no political results. In return for apologizing, Obama was “rebuffed by Europe” (Charen, 2009): NATO denied his request for additional military support in Afghanistan, and Europe rejected increased stimulus spending in response to the 2008 financial and economic crisis (Krauthammer, 2009; Hannity, 2009b; Peters, 2009; Holmes, 2010). Obama’s apologetic rhetoric further had little impact on Asian relationships (Terrill, 2009). And while Russia withheld support on Iran, China blocked international responses to North Korea’s missile tests (Krauthammer, 2009). Hanson (2009d) observed that there was “no concrete evidence of any help – or hope and change – from any foreign leader”, earning Obama little beyond “a couple of pats on the back” (Kasich, 2009, as interviewed in Hannity, 2009c). President Obama was criticized for fundamentally misunderstanding *Realpolitik*: “We could drop on our knees in tearful self-flagellation, and it wouldn’t make a difference” (Holmes, 2010)

Instead of seeking to “conquer,” Obama “stoops,” Krauthammer (2012) wrote, which earned him the label “architect of American decline” (Wehner, 2011). As Krauthammer (2009) put it: “A few more such overseas [apology] tours, and Obama will have a lot more decline to celebrate”. Obama was furthermore accused of outsourcing U.S. foreign policy and yielding to the opinions and wishes of foreign leaders (Rove, 2009, as interviewed in Hannity, 2009d; Morrison, 2009, as interviewed in Hannity, 2009b). Ultimately, critics maintained that it was not Obama’s apologies or hopes, which hostile regimes failed to reciprocate, but the U.S. military that remained the true “linchpin of deterrence” (Terrill, 2009).

America’s Noble Wars and the Indispensable Nation’s Rejection of Apologies

Arguments in defense of American exceptionalism, perceived as being undermined by Obama’s ‘apologetic’ foreign policy rhetoric, relied on a combination of narrative strategies of ‘insult’, ‘denial’, and ‘pride’. Many commentators took offense at Obama’s omission of America’s

greatness and beneficence during his ‘apology tour’ (Hannity, 2009d). Critics argued he misunderstood America’s role in history, mistaking “liberating” other nations for “dictating” them (Krauthammer, 2009), and that he apologized instead of proudly affirmed U.S. support in times of need (Hannity, 2009c). They also held that America was fighting wars with “might and right” (York, 2017).

In his 2009 speech in Strasbourg, calling for overcoming past transatlantic grievances, President Obama described an America that “has shown arrogance and been dismissive, even derisive”, while simultaneously accusing Europe of misguided anti-Americanism ignorant of U.S. historic deeds (as cited in, PolitiFact, n.d.), sparking furor and defensive reactions. Conservative political commentators insisted that Europe owed the United States gratitude, not apologies, for coming to its rescue during World War I, World War II, as well as in the face of the Soviet threat during the Cold War (Bolton, 2016). Americans paid a high price for advancing freedom in Europe and did not deserve being labelled arrogant (Hannity, 2009b). Flowers (2009) wrote: “Just how arrogant were we when we sent our boys to storm the beaches of Normandy, at the cost of thousands of American lives (...) [or] brilliantly executed the Marshall Plan, which rebuilt Europe with American money”. Critics held that rather than apologize, the President of the United States should acknowledge American global power as “a great force for good” (Gardiner, 2009).

Obama’s 2009 speech in Turkey, asserting the U.S. was “not, and will never be, at war with Islam” (PolitiFact, n.d.), drew sharp criticism for ignoring America’s aid to Muslim communities (Hannity, 2009c; Bolton, 2009, as cited in Hannity, 2009a). Conservative commentators cited the U.S. intervention in Bosnia “when those morally superior folks in Europe wouldn’t lift a finger” (Flowers, 2009), liberation of Kuwait, aid to Jordan, Egypt, and Palestine, support for democratization in Iraq and Afghanistan, and liberal immigration policies to highlight American contributions (Flowers, 2009; Hanson, 2009a). Critics said Obama ignored self-inflicted issues in the Middle East such as autocracy, tribalism, religious intolerance, or gender apartheid, and instead apologized for “American insensitivity” (Hanson, 2009a). There was broad consensus among media commentators and think tank fellows that the United States had nothing to apologize for (Bolton, 2009, as interviewed in Hannity, 2009a; Peters, 2009; Bolton, 2016). America, it was argued, was a great country that did not need to continually “chide” itself (Miller, 2009, as interviewed in O’Reilly, 2009).

Another line of criticism centered on Obama’s apologies promoting moral equivalence where critics argued none existed (Bolton, 2016; Hanson, 2009d). Obama, described as the first post-

American president, was perceived as consistently inclined to “blame America first” (Bolton, 2009, as interviewed in Hannity, 2009a). Critics also blamed him for failing to acknowledge and condemn Europe’s colonial and imperial past, sparing it from the kind of criticism leveled against America (Charen, 2009). The president was furthermore faulted for drawing unfair comparisons, praising unelected autocrats like the Saudi monarch while criticizing U.S. efforts in the region (Hanson, 2009a).

Public Apologies as Expressions of Liberal Discomfort with American Exceptionalism

Obama’s ‘apology tour’ was seen by critics as revealing liberal Democrat’s unease with U.S. superpower. Democratic leadership seemingly prioritized moral idealism and international approval over America’s historical supremacy and patriotic affirmation. Offended by liberal Democrats’ rejection of what conservative commentators in media and thinktank regarded as US. values, features and global standing worthy of praise and confidence, they responded with narrative strategies of ‘insult’ and ‘pride’.

Obama’s ‘apology tour’ was viewed as aligning with ‘new liberal internationalism’, a worldview that critics traced back to the 1960s Vietnam War protests that came to dominate university faculties and shape Democratic politics (Holmes, 2013). Critics argued this view portrayed America as an aggressive, imperialist power in the Cold-War era whose global sins required atonement through apology (Gardiner & Roach, 2009). Obama’s moralism was labeled a “classic case study in foreign-policy idealism” (Krauthammer, 2016) and his apologies seen as reflecting a conflicted stance and discomfort toward American superpower (Holmes, 2013; Goodwin, 2011). Critics considered American leadership under Obama “an exercise in self-loathing” (Gardiner & Roach, 2009), elevated by Obama’s seeming delight in “prostrating the most powerful nation” (Gardiner, 2009). Commentators also argued that liberals mistook global leadership for a popularity contest, rather than recognizing that projecting U.S. power assertively and unapologetically was necessary (Gardiner & Roach, 2009). The liberal logic of good intentions and moral high ground was seen as dangerous wishful thinking (Phillips, 2010). The retreat of American power, viewed by Obama as an “agent of injustice or at least arrogant overreach”, had damaging effects on America and the world (Krauthammer, 2016). Some critics even accused Obama of actively undermining America’s global standing, making it less respected and feared abroad (Lowry, 2016).

Apologizing was perceived as a cultural issue, since it challenged the very essence of America and the American people (Ponnuru & Lowry, 2010). Moral equivalence, utopian pacifism, and multiculturalism, long promoted in liberal-leaning classrooms and faculties, had, critics argued,

“insidiously become our national gospel” under President Obama (Hanson, 2009d). Because Obama had “draped Lady Liberty in sackcloth and ashes” (Peters, 2009) and failed to affirm the guiding principles of the United States, it was left to Republicans to defend American views, values, and principles (Nordlinger, 2009b).

Conservatives perceived a presidential retreat from U.S. exceptionalism across the economy, constitution, and foreign policy. His foreign policy was seen as misguided and insensitive; while expanding costly social programs like Medicaid, thereby dramatically increasing the national debt, Obama cut defense budgets and focused on apologies abroad (Beck, 2009).

President Obama as a Focal Point of Conservative Opposition

Similar to the previous chapter, the analysis of the political discourse in media and think tanks reveals conservative criticism of the Obama administration that, in part, transcended the paradigm of American exceptionalism and narrative strategies to counter perceived threats as discussed in the last three sections. Beyond criticism of Obama’s apologetic rhetoric, diplomacy and policies allegedly conflicting with exceptionalist ideology, apology backlash was also directed at the president personally. He was accused, among other things, of political radicalism, deception and hypocrisy, as well as character deficiencies. The harsh and defensive tone adopted by conservative political commentators and analysts closely resembled the narrative strategies of ‘insult’ discussed in the previous sections.

Obama’s ‘apologies’ and ‘reprimands’ of a nation that had paid dearly for global freedom were taken as signs of radical ideology (Hannity, 2009b). Beck (2009) lamented what he saw as a betrayal of democratic intent, asserting, “We didn’t vote to lose the republic. (...) We voted for change”. Critics accused him of fraudulent campaign promises and economic and foreign policy malpractice, as well as radical progressive social engineering undermining the Constitution, traditional values, and individual liberty as well as the American way of life (Wehner, 2011; York, 2017; Graham, 2017).

Many conservatives took offense at Obama allegedly ‘apologizing’ for policies of the previous Bush administration, which had repeatedly invoked American exceptionalism to justify the ‘Freedom Agenda’ in Iraq and Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks (Charen, 2009; Taheri, 2012; Grandin, 2016, p.25). His overtures were viewed as blaming Bush for all past misdeeds and casting all Americans but himself as arrogant, thereby dramatically deepening partisan divisions (Hanson, 2009d; Mansfield, 2010; York, 2017).

Some criticism of Obama's 'apology tour' went beyond policy objections and concerns about American exceptionalism, extending into personal disparagement. His political presence was seen as a repudiation of the "old and illiberal America" (Hanson, 2009d). Critics described his foreign policy as "adolescent utopianism" (Krauthammer, 2010) and saw his behavior as revealing someone with a "soft touch" or a "Jimmy Carter-like pushover" (Gardiner, 2009). Flowers (2009) accused him of turning foreign policy into a national "therapy session," driven by his "guilt complex". He was also regarded as an inexperienced leader who was attempting to "wing it" in the complex landscape of the Middle East – which, critics argued, demanded a level of expertise not attainable by simply "reading every book written" (Cartier, 2014).

Obama was accused of having a need for "praise and adulation abroad", which would cause America "real hell to pay" (Hanson, 2009d). A faculty lounge intellectual attempting to reshape the nation into an idealized version, he secured the applause of the world's elites in government, the UN and academia (Nordlinger, 2009a; Goodwin, 2011). Unlike Obama, Romney was not seeking "to make the world swoon", embodying "old-fashioned, unstylish" Republican politics from a time when America was more confident (Ajami, 2012). Obama's approach was said to prioritize "stagecraft over substance" (Rogan, 2016), with his 'apology tour' described as the "sophisticated staging of a rock star president" (Hanson, 2009d), a role he was repeatedly accused of assuming (Hannity, 2009b; Gardiner, 2009). Critics saw him taking pleasure in slighting America "for the sake of puffing himself up" (Nordlinger, 2009b). Labeled an "arrogant narcissist" (Hanson, 2009d), Obama was portrayed as a president who was "strikingly self-preoccupied and self-referential" (Kristol, 2009), placing "his vanity before the nation's pride and interests" (Bolton, 2016). Critics argued that Obama treated the presidency as a platform for personal gain (Kristol, 2009). Furthermore, he was accused of lying and advancing misinformation to serve his political agenda (York, 2017).

Obama's apologies were not taken as genuine, but rather as combining the "spirit of the non-apology apology with non-humble humility" (The Scrapbook, 2010), placing himself above America (Wehner, 2011), preaching morality as "messiah-like" president (Goodwin, 2011), and "acting the philosopher-king" (Krauthammer, 2009). Mainstream liberal U.S. and foreign press were accused of being complicit in uncritically endorsing Obama's rhetoric (Hannity, 2009b; Nordlinger, 2009a; Graham, 2009).

Critics also addressed the politically charged issue of racism when criticizing Obama's apologies for carrying highly polarizing subtext suggesting that "those of a different race, of a different era, or under a different president have done terrible things" (Hanson, 2009b). Critics

urged Obama to move beyond what they viewed as offensive racial stereotyping, such as portraying the “typical white person” as representative of America’s sinful past (Hanson, 2009e), and accused him of promoting “white guilt,” by being influenced by Black liberationist mentors (Graham, 2009).

Synthesis of Discussion

As in the previous chapter, critics of Obama’s alleged ‘apology tour’ in the media and partisan think tanks combined narrative strategies of ‘pride,’ ‘shame,’ ‘denial,’ and ‘insult,’ including defending America’s ‘noble’ wars, framing apologies as weakness, denying reasons for atonement and reacting defensively to criticisms of the American past. Especially ‘narratives of insult’ adopted a much harsher tone in media commentary and think tank publications than in Republican political discourse, often featuring offensive and disrespectful personal attacks on Obama.

Most findings and insights from the previous chapter were confirmed and substantiated. Criticisms of Obama’s ‘apology tour’ for the most part aligned with the three key propositions outlined in the methodology section, reiterating expected arguments in defense of American exceptionalism. (1) Critics argued that Obama’s ‘apologetic’ diplomacy projected weakness and conflicted with American exceptionalism. By prioritizing conciliatory rhetoric over strength and realism during a period of global instability, he was seen as accelerating U.S. decline while yielding no strategic benefits. (2) His approach was accused of downplaying America’s historical role in liberating others, promoting moral equivalence, and “blaming America first,” rather than affirming national pride in what were viewed as just and noble wars. (3) Obama’s ‘apology tour’ was seen as emblematic of a liberal worldview that portrayed the United States as an imperial power requiring atonement, and prioritizing moral idealism and international approval over America’s historical supremacy. His ‘apologetic’ posture further symbolized a broader, ill-timed, and damaging domestic liberal agenda.

Similar to the analysis of Republican backlash discourse, a new category of arguments emerged that, in part, transcended criticism rooted in exceptionalist ideology and rhetoric. President Obama was perceived as the adversary of political conservatism and target of harsh and disparaging personal attacks. Critics cast Obama as a radical idealist whose apologies not only undermined American exceptionalism but deepened partisan divides and, in their view, betrayed the nation itself. In their view, Obama’s ‘apology tour’ revealed a hubristic president who prioritized personal image and legacy over the good of the country.

The analysis of the political discourse among Republican politicians, as well as within conservative media and partisan think tanks, provides evidence in support of this thesis's central hypothesis: Obama's 'apology tour' triggered apology backlash in response to what was at least partly grounded in the perceived challenge to American exceptionalism, thereby threatening U.S. state identity. Two important qualifications, however, which cannot be addressed in sufficient detail, must be noted. First, the political discourse analysis also revealed elements of *Realpolitik* reasoning, indicating that beyond concerns over ontological security understood in terms of state identity, Republicans invoked physical and material threats to America's security and standing. More than merely ideologically and symbolically flawed, incorrect, or insulting, Obama's 'apology tour' was perceived as geopolitical miscalculation that signaled strategic American decline in the face of real and imminent physical threats from rising hostile powers. Second, since much of the apology backlash was directed specifically at President Obama and framed within broader conservative criticism of his presidency, it is difficult to disentangle how much of the apology backlash was rooted in regular partisan politics and opportunism, how much of it was genuine conservative disdain – creating unique conditions for apology backlash that limits comparability and generalizability of the findings –, and how much was driven by a perceived ontological threat to American state identity.

6 Conclusion

While political apologies have become more common in modern liberal democracies, prompting a burgeoning body of scholarship on the ‘age of apology’, states still rarely issue apologies for past wrongdoings. Prevailing explanations, typically grounded in national interests, geopolitical calculus, or assessments of efficacy and necessity, offer important but incomplete accounts.

This thesis set out to investigate the relatively understudied but increasingly acknowledged phenomenon of apology backlash, contributing to the academic debate on state apologies by studying domestic political conditions as potential impediments. The thesis offers a novel perspective by applying the theoretical framework of Ontological Security Studies to the analysis of apology backlash, foregrounding the role of threatened state identity in motivating backlash and shedding light on assertive narrative reinforcement of ontological security.

This thesis provides important answers to the research question: What does public discourse in U.S. politics, media, and expert circles reveal about the apology backlash during the Obama administration, and how does it relate to American exceptionalism and state identity? The analysis of the political discourse reveals that Obama’s ‘apology tour’ was largely framed as challenge to American exceptionalism. Republican elites, conservative media, and partisan think tanks echoed exceptionalist narratives in formulating opposition to state apologies. Firstly, political opponents portrayed Obama’s ‘apologetic’ diplomacy as signs of weakness conflicting with the notion of a strong and unapologetic U.S. hegemon and demonstrating U.S. decline amid global political instability. Secondly, by ‘apologizing’ for American past actions, Obama was perceived as downplaying America’s historical role in, and sacrifices paid for liberating others, promoting moral equivalence where there was none, and disrespecting America’s just and ‘noble’ wars. Lastly, Obama’s ‘apology tour’ was seen as emblematic for liberal Democrats’ discomfort with American supremacy and perceived as a rejection of American values and culture, as well as eroding patriotism. Furthermore, the research demonstrated how conservative opposition moderated ontological security through the use of narratives strategies of ‘pride’, ‘shame’, ‘denial’ and ‘insult’, thereby significantly shaping the content and form of political opposition framed within American exceptionalism. However, not all narrative positions in political discourse were rooted in exceptionalist rhetoric; some criticisms reflected political hostility toward Obama personally, who was cast as radical political figure and threat to American conservatism, and, in part, to the nation itself.

Although the findings substantiate a connection between apology backlash, state identity and ontological security, two important caveats, which would warrant more extensive study and discussion than is possible here, must be briefly addressed. First, the political discourse analysis revealed Republican concerns and conservative criticism beyond ontological security understood in terms of state identity, perceiving Obama's alleged 'apology tour' as evidence of a poor presidential grasp of *Realpolitik*, threatening U.S. national security. Second, President Obama was often the target of personal attacks that exceeded policy disagreement and exceptionalist rhetoric. This illustrates the difficulty of disentangling the extent to which apology backlash was driven by political opportunism and regular partisan rivalry, conservative hostility toward the president personally, or genuine perceived ontological threats to American state identity. The 'true' or 'dominant' intentions behind conservative apology backlash, thus, remain speculative. The present findings should, therefore, be understood primarily as offering insight into one possible motivator – threatened state image and ontological (in)security – among several potential factors. These caveats also have implications for the generalizability of the findings. Studying individual domestic political dynamics – each shaped by unique socio-political conditions – complicates cross-case comparability. In this case, the particular circumstances of the Obama presidency and the pervasive influence of the American exceptionalism narrative in public discourse might limit the generalizability of these findings. However, they certainly provide valuable insights into why states with traditions of high self-regard might struggle to issue apologies.

Critics might ask whether apologies matter at all, given that the United States has managed to restore bilateral relations with countries without showing contrition, and cynics might question whether the superpower will ever bother to apologize, given the harsh realities of *Realpolitik*. "Couple "right" with "might" and the idea of ever having to say, "I'm sorry" seems at best unnecessary and at worst harmful or degrading" (Gerstbauer, 2016, p.2). However, one would be hard-pressed to argue that there is no effect at all to public apologies, especially when one considers what might be the most famous example, West German Chancellor Willy Brandt's *Kniefall von Warschau* in 1970. Furthermore, the research question and topic seem pertinent in a current world order dominated by conflict and war that needs effective reconciliation. While it is difficult to predict whether the United States will in the future apologize for wrongs committed, it is possible and pertinent to analyze what prevents the 'city upon a hill' and largest economic and military power, from issuing state apologies. Challenging these standard rationales by highlighting and studying the role of apology backlash offers contributions beyond the realm of academic debate. Lind (2008), for example, considers apology backlash to

be harmful, even counterproductive to the process of reconciliation (pp.4, 182). Policymakers are likely to be confronted with the dilemma of balancing the imperative to acknowledging past misdeed against the potential risk of harmful apology backlash, and would benefit from further insight into the drivers and socio-political condition underlying the latter.

Lastly, although beyond the scope of this research, it would be interesting to explore a possible connection between the narrative underpinnings of conservative apology backlash and the transition from the Obama administration – during which President Obama was labelled “chief apologist” portraying America’s decline – to the current Trump administration, which, whether coincidentally or not, championed the slogan “Make America Great Again” and is described as “allergic to apology” (Gibbs, 2019).

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