

Retrofitting an Image: Chrysler Corporation's Rhetoric of Redemption

SONJA K. FOSS

In this essay, the "bailout" of Chrysler Corporation by the federal government is analyzed as a rhetorical act that symbolized Chrysler's failures and revealed possible sources of guilt for Chrysler as well. An analysis of Chrysler's advertising suggests that it was motivated by an effort to expunge its guilt and to create a new public identity. The strategies Chrysler selected, however, failed in part because of the strength of the symbolism of the bailout itself.

LARGELY THROUGH THE impetus of the protest movements of the 1960s, rhetorical criticism has expanded to include the study of the symbolic dimensions of physical actions. At the Wingspread Conference of The National Development Project on Rhetoric, such expansion was evident as several of the participants called for the study of acts as symbolic or rhetorical. Becker (1971), for example, asserted that we need to be concerned with "symbolic speech," with the phenomenon whereby "one has a greater chance of being 'heard' if he *does* something than if he *says* something" (p. 30). Others suggested that the effort should be made to expand the scope of rhetorical criticism to include "the event or transaction which is unintentionally as well as intentionally suasive" (Sloan, 1971, p. 221). In their essay on the rhetoric of confrontation, Scott and Smith (1969) continued to develop this idea, viewing a confrontational act as "inherently symbolic" in that "the act carries a message" (p. 7).

Various studies have examined human action itself as rhetoric. Bosmajian (1968), for example, studied marching as a persuasive strategy for the Nazis, and Ritchie (1970) analyzed the strategy of the sit-in of the civil rights movement, which she concluded was effective because it "leaves messages there which the habitually 'blind' and 'deaf' must see and hear" (p. 22). Windt's (1972) study of the Cynics of ancient Greece and the Yippies of the late sixties also dealt with the rhetoric of human action, and he argued that the acts of both groups "symbolically reinforced the commitment to a different way of living" (p. 5). Doolittle's (1976) study of the riot as a symbolic act is a further example of such studies.

Undoubtedly because the call for a study of acts as rhetorical was derived in part from the protest tactics of the sixties, most studies done in this area

have been concerned with acts that are part of a social or political movement and are confrontational and perhaps even violent. Yet other acts deserve study. They may not carry the urgency and immediacy of an act in the context of a passionate movement for change, but they still may fulfill critical functions for the participants and shape the society in which they occur. In this essay, I have chosen for analysis one such act—the “bailout” of the Chrysler Corporation by the federal government. I will first analyze the bailout as a rhetorical act that symbolized Chrysler’s failure to the public. I will then examine Chrysler’s efforts to counter the impact of the act and assess its success in creating a new public image. Chrysler’s problems are not unique, and an understanding of how Chrysler attempted to create a new image might suggest rhetorical strategies that are effective for other companies or rhetors facing a similar need for redemption.

BACKGROUND OF THE BAILOUT

Chrysler’s efforts to gain federal aid began in 1979 with a request for a relaxation of federal standards for fuel economy, safety, and exhaust emissions, followed by a petition for tax relief. Both were rejected by G. William Miller, Secretary of the Treasury who proposed, instead, federal loan guarantees for Chrysler of up to \$750 million. Loan guarantees are promises by the government to make good on the cash supplied by private banks to a company if the firm cannot repay the money. The borrower pays interest not only to the banks but also to the Treasury. Although Chrysler was not eager to pursue loan guarantees because they would add to the already burdensome interest charges Chrysler was paying, it offered to the Treasury Secretary a proposal for \$500 million in immediate loan guarantees and \$700 million in contingency guarantees (Moritz and Seaman, 1981, pp. 277–278). Miller rejected the plan because it did not include aid commitments from unions and local governments.

President Jimmy Carter, however, decided to support Chrysler’s bid for federal aid, and hearings in the House and Senate on the Chrysler issue were held. Miller then agreed to back a plan calling for \$1.5 billion in loan guarantees, to be matched by an equal amount raised by Chrysler from sales of assets and from concessions by various parties (Moritz and Seaman, p. 284). On December 18, the House of Representatives passed the Chrysler Corporation Loan Guarantee Act of 1979 by a vote of 271 to 136 (Moritz and Seaman, p. 290). The following day the Senate passed a similar bill by 53 to 44 votes (Moritz and Seaman, p. 294). After a joint conference committee had worked out the differences between the two bills, the bill passed Congress, and President Carter signed the legislation on January 7, 1980. The bill gave Chrysler \$1.5 billion in federal loan guarantees (“Carter Signs Legislation,” 1980) with the loans due in 1990 (Taylor, 1983, p. 61).

To qualify for the loans, Chrysler had to raise \$2 billion on its own; and bankers, employees, suppliers, and the states and cities in which the company’s operations were located all were asked to participate in the bailout. Their concessions included \$462.5 million in wage concessions by the United Auto Workers and \$125 million in pay cuts for salaried workers, a loan by the state

of Michigan for \$150 million, and a loan by the city of Detroit for \$28.7 million (Nicholson, 1980). On June 24, Chrysler had permission to draw down its first \$500 million of guaranteed loans (Pasztor, 1980).

SYMBOLISM OF THE BAILOUT

If Chrysler's request for federal aid and the government's bailout of the corporation are viewed as symbolic acts, they must have larger implications than what is obvious on the surface—that a request was made and granted. As rhetorical acts, they symbolized three important failures for the Chrysler Corporation.

First, the act suggested to the public that Chrysler had failed to meet the standards of quality desired by the public for cars. People do not buy cars of low quality such as Chrysler's, this message suggested, and the bailout pointed to Chrysler's failure in this area.¹ A second theme symbolized by the bailout was that Chrysler had failed to respond to the demand for small cars. Chrysler eventually began producing more of the smaller cars that American consumers were demanding, but it was late in doing so; and the bailout emphasized the tardiness of this response to consumer demand.² Most important, of course, the bailout symbolized Chrysler's inability to make a profit. In 1980 Chrysler's losses ran to \$1.7 billion, and they were at \$475.6 million at the end of 1981 (Taylor, 1983, p. 57). Obviously, Chrysler was not achieving its primary goal of making money, and the bailout communicated this in a powerful way to the American public.³

But the symbolic act of the bailout can be studied in ways other than what was communicated to those who witnessed the act. Failure of the magnitude symbolized by the bailout suggests that inherent in the bailout for Chrysler was a sense of guilt, for it had failed at three of the most critical tasks of a business corporation. The bailout forced Chrysler to confront its guilt and made that guilt public.

Burke's notion of guilt is a useful tool through which to view such guilt, tension, or uneasiness, which Burke maintains is one of the consequences of being a symbol user. Burke's notion of guilt was formulated to apply to individual human beings as symbol users, but it can be applied to the Chrysler Corporation as well. Human symbolicity is at the core of a corporation, and the corporation would not exist without it. As Burke explains, "in a language-using species 'language is ever present'" (Burke, 1966, p. 456). Thus, I will personify the Chrysler Corporation in my discussion of the guilt that accompanied the bailout, recognizing that the corporation itself is not human but functions as such at the symbolic level.

Each of the failures symbolized by the bailout reveals a possible source of guilt for Chrysler. Guilt at failing to produce cars of high quality was possible as a result of the low quality ranking Chrysler products received compared to others. Burke sees such a source of guilt as arising from the principle of hierarchy (Burke, 1950, p. 141). Cars with reputations for quality such as the Rolls Royce, the Mercedes-Benz, or even Japanese imports, would hold places at the top of the hierarchy; and Chrysler's ranking was far below them. Not only was Chrysler not at the top of the desired hierarchy, but it was apparently

quite far from it. This guilt for Chrysler also was a consequence of what Burke has called the principle of perfection (Rueckert, pp. 132-133). Chrysler was not able to meet ideal standards of quality, to produce ideal cars, and to develop an ideal reputation. As a result of the distance between Chrysler's actual performance and the ideal in terms of quality, Chrysler was likely to experience guilt.

Chrysler's failure to respond to the demand for small cars suggests another possible source of guilt for Chrysler. It had broken a basic rule of the capitalistic system in which it functioned—that a company may not ignore marketplace forces and the demands they create. In its disobedience of this rule, with its critical role in establishing proper conduct for a corporation, Chrysler experienced the guilt that results from breaking rules established by what Burke calls the principle of the negative (Burke, 1966, p. 342).

The symbolism of the bailout that Chrysler had failed to make a profit also contributed to Chrysler's guilt in that Chrysler was not in a top position on the hierarchy of American automobile companies; it was number three behind General Motors and Ford. Nor was it in a top position in American business in general in terms of size, financial success, market share, or any other criterion that could be used to determine such a ranking. It had not attained perfection in any category according to capitalistic ideals. Whether Chrysler actually experienced guilt can only be surmised, of course, but the bailout revealed to the public these possible sources of guilt for the company.

CHRYSLER'S STRATEGIES FOR REDEMPTION

If a symbol system is a source of guilt, it is also the means, according to Burke, by which the purging of guilt and redemption occur. Because of the negative view of Chrysler symbolized in the bailout and the concomitant guilt suggested, Chrysler could be expected to expunge that guilt and to redeem itself through the creation of a new identity divested of its previous failures. With this new identity, of course, Chrysler hoped to sell more cars and make a profit—its underlying motive for its efforts to expunge guilt and achieve redemption.

Because Chrysler's advertising represents the standard and routine rhetoric by which the company communicates with the public, Chrysler's attempts to redeem its image were likely to be presented through this medium. That Chrysler indeed attempted to present a new identity through its advertising was evident in its hiring of a new advertising agency, Kenyon & Eckhardt of New York, in March 1979 (Gray and Kanner, 1979, p. 83) and in the slogan developed by the new agency that appeared in many of Chrysler's ads during the bailout period, "The New Chrysler Corporation" (4, 20, 25, 31, 33, 42, 43).⁴ Thus, I have chosen to focus on Chrysler's advertising to trace its efforts to purge its guilt.

My review of this advertising focused on Chrysler's ads in two nationally popular magazines, *Time* and *Motor Trend*, the former addressed to the public in general and the latter to car enthusiasts. I also reviewed the *Washington Post* and the *Denver Post* at times that Chrysler utilized the most newspaper adver-

tising, but magazines were selected as the primary data because they were Chrysler's principal advertising focus during the bailout period ("Chrysler Plans No National Newspaper Ads," 1982; Bloede, 1981). Television commercials as reported in advertising journals were also used as supplementary data.

My review of Chrysler's advertisements covered the years 1978 through 1981, selected because this was the period in which the bailout of Chrysler directly impacted on Chrysler's image. It was also a critical financial period for the company. Chrysler began to seek federal aid in 1979, drew its first loans from the government in 1980, and needed to demonstrate success in 1981 to convince the public and the government of the wisdom of the bailout.

Chrysler's efforts to expunge its guilt through its advertising during the bailout period took a variety of forms. In the following section, the major strategies used are described. With few exceptions, these strategies were employed throughout the period of the bailout and did not represent distinct campaigns with identifiable time boundaries.

Portrayal of Chrysler as a Victim of Changing Times

A strategy that was seen predominantly in the early part of the bailout period was the depiction of Chrysler as a victim of changing circumstances and times. With this strategy Chrysler attempted to transfer its guilt to an external source, what Burke describes as the strategy of victimage or scapegoating (Burke, 1945, pp. 406-408). Many of Chrysler's ads acknowledged that times had changed, making the large cars it had produced inappropriate. Had such changes not occurred, however, Chrysler would not have been a failure.

An ad for the Dodge Omni in early 1978, for example, implicitly recognized that the times had changed and let the reader know that Chrysler's cars now were in tune with the times: "On one hand, we wanted the new Omni to be able to live comfortably in a world that is tightening its belt" (30). Still other ads focused on the new demands of the times, as did an ad for the Dodge Aspen: "Aspen is designed to live in a world that has become increasingly concerned with the efficient use of fuel, space, and money" (24).

In an ad for Chrysler products that dealt directly with the issues surrounding the reasons for the bailout, Chrysler asserted that its products were not behind the times: "If you want to buy a gas guzzler, you'd better see somebody else. Not Chrysler. . . . If anybody is behind the times, it isn't going to be Chrysler" (3). The phrase, "isn't going to be," suggests a future plan or goal; it implies that Chrysler once was behind the times, but it was forced eventually to change its product line to align with the new circumstances. Portraying itself as a victim of change, then, this strategy placed the responsibility for Chrysler's failures outside Chrysler itself.

Association with the Japanese

A primary strategy used by Chrysler to inform the public that it was attempting to correct its failures and alleviate its guilt was to associate itself with Japanese products, workmanship, quality, and technology. Chrysler seemed to be saying here that little could be done immediately to improve the quality

and reputation of Chrysler's own manufacturing techniques (in part because product lines cannot be changed quickly), but it was doing what it could to improve the quality of the products sold under the Chrysler name. This meant aligning itself with the Japanese who had an excellent reputation for quality.

This strategy was first manifest in a simple identification of Chrysler's imported cars *as imports*, emphasizing that the cars advertised, although sold by Chrysler, were not actually built by the corporation. In an ad for Dodge Colt Hatchbacks, for example, bold lettering informed the reader that the products were "The '79 Dodge Colts: Imported From Japan" (26). In April 1979, another ad was headlined, "The Most Technologically Advanced Japanese Imports You Can Buy." Also featured prominently in the ad were the words, "Built by Mitsubishi. Sold Exclusively by Dodge & Chrysler/Plymouth Dealers" (19), explicitly informing the reader that the cars were built by a Japanese company and not by Chrysler.

In the spring of 1979, Mitsubishi, the Japanese company that produced Chrysler's imports, began to be featured in ads rather than the Chrysler Corporation, although the cars advertised were sold by Chrysler and considered Chrysler products. In one such ad, "Mitsubishi Motors Corporation" appeared in large lettering next to the Mitsubishi logo, and in much smaller letters were the words, "Mitsubishi cars and pickup trucks are sold in the U.S. by Chrysler Corporation" (35). Its own products may not be of high quality, suggested this strategy, but Chrysler was able to achieve a level of quality through association with those who had a reputation for such quality.

Rebates

With the offering of rebates for its customers, Chrysler continued its attempts to transform its image. These rebates acknowledged that the potential buyer may not want to buy a Chrysler car on the basis of its quality or reputation, but may be encouraged to overlook some of the negative aspects of Chrysler's cars if the price were low enough. As such, then, this was a strategy that implicitly suggested little confidence in Chrysler's products and little success in selling them.

The rebate ploy began in the summer of 1979 with a campaign billed as "The Great Chrysler Plymouth & Dodge Inventory Reduction Sale," with ads offering a \$400 rebate on selected cars and trucks (17). In television commercials, Joe Garagiola listed the names of the various Chrysler vehicles and repeated the rebate offer with each one: "Get a Chrysler Newport . . . get a check; get a Dodge St. Regis . . . get a check, etc." ("Chrysler resorts," 1979, p. 64).

In November, Chrysler began to offer rebates of \$300 to the first 100,000 buyers of its 1980 models of domestic cars and trucks except Omni and Horizon. Called a "special introductory offer," the rebate program was the first in which rebates were offered on just-introduced new models; it followed a 57% drop in October sales (Gray, November 1979; Pasztor, 1979). In December of 1980, Chrysler again offered rebates on its new models (Koten, November 1980; Koten, December 1980).

At the beginning of 1981, Chrysler's rebates assumed a new form—a 7% interest allowance, in which 7% of the sticker price was deducted from the price of the car. "There's never been a better time to buy a Chrysler," the ads stated, since the "7% Interest Allowance Plan . . . puts money back in your pocket" (34). At the same time, a new twist to the ads was introduced—a customer did not even have to buy a Chrysler to get a rebate: "We'll give you \$50 to test drive any new 1981 Chrysler, Plymouth, Dodge car, truck or van . . . Then compare them to any Datsun, VW, Chevy, Ford—any competitive car . . . Buy either their car or our car within thirty days and you've got yourself \$50" (10). In a 30-day test of this type of offer in Kansas City in January, Chrysler signed up about 1,000 shoppers and sold 678 of them Chrysler cars (Apcar, 1980).

The use of the rebate constituted a form of mortification for Chrysler, in which it engaged in self-inflicted punishment as a means of purging its guilt (Burke, 1950, p. 266). Although the rebates were successful as a short-term sales gimmick by generating immediate revenue and helping to sell Chrysler cars (Pasztor, 1979), they reduced the profit margins on cash sales and lessened Chrysler's working capital. By the end of 1979 alone, rebates had cost Chrysler more than \$100,000,000 ("Chrysler Corporation," 1980), capital that was critically needed for Chrysler's survival.

Dissociation from Past Low Quality

The strategy of dissociation from Chrysler's poor reputation for quality of the past generally was used in the latter part of the bailout. Again, this probably was the result of Chrysler's inability to change its entire line of cars quickly. Thus, it was stuck in the early part of the bailout with a line of cars that lacked a reputation for high quality, and it could not totally dissociate itself from its past products and their quality until the introduction of new lines.

Some of Chrysler's ads that used this strategy explicitly announced that its new products were of higher quality than those of the past had been. "New confidence," for example, was the featured slogan of an ad for the Plymouth Horizon in early 1978 (39). A new image of quality was even more explicitly discussed in advertising for the Plymouth Reliant-K in the fall of 1980:

Over 2,000 quality inspections and checks are performed before each car leaves the assembly line. Followed by one of the most extensive "running-in" programs in Chrysler history.

Reliant's Trans-4 engines are machined and assembled in an environment approaching the cleanliness of an operating room. Every engine is "hot" tested and rated by computer for 54 different operations. Unless it gets 54 straight A's, it doesn't get into a Reliant-K (42).

Explicit attention to new standards of quality was prominent in Chrysler's ads in early 1981 as well. The heading, "The Rebirth of an American Car Company," signaled an attempted dissociation from its former image of low quality. Quality is "the one goal," stated the ads. "The result of Chrysler's rebirth . . . an advanced technological system designed to deliver a level of Chrysler quality never before

achieved" (2). This strategy, then, represented an overt effort to address Chrysler's past reputation for low-quality products.

Comparison with Other Companies' Products

Chrysler's ads during the period of the bailout included numerous comparisons of its products with those of other auto companies, designed to demonstrate, of course, the superiority of Chrysler's cars over the others. Here the effort again was to show that Chrysler did indeed deserve a high ranking—if not the top spot—on the hierarchy of automotive manufacturers.

Chrysler compared its cars to those of other companies on various dimensions. The space in a Dodge Aspen, for example, was described as "interior space that's bigger than a Cadillac Seville's in seven out of eight important people measurements" (23). Price also was the basis for a comparison; an ad for the 1979 Chrysler Newport asserted, "At \$6762, the Chrysler Newport shown is sticker-priced like a comparably equipped Chevy Caprice" (6). Luxury features were compared in other Chrysler ads. "We built Chrysler New Yorker to compete with Buick Electra. Most owners put it in a class with Cadillac or Lincoln," a Chrysler engineer was quoted as saying in one ad (8). Manufacturing experience was the basis for comparison in other ads. One headline of an ad read, "The New Chrysler Corporation has 1 billion miles more front-wheel-drive experience than Toyota or Datsun. Ford doesn't. GM doesn't" (15). In numerous areas, all of which were important considerations for the potential car buyer, Chrysler attempted to demonstrate its superiority over the cars offered by other companies.

Dissociation from Japanese Products

This strategy, which contradicted Chrysler's strategy of association with the Japanese, began in the summer of 1980, although ads in which an association with the Japanese was stressed continued to be run at the same time. Toward the end of the bailout period, Chrysler apparently felt confident enough in its own ability to produce automobiles that it no longer had to rely on its Japanese imports for an image of quality and desirability.

One series of ads stressed a break with the Japanese with the slogan, "The New Chrysler Corporation has the front-wheel-drive cars to challenge the imports." In these ads, a test panel was reported to have preferred Chrysler products to the Japanese ones when comparisons were made between the Plymouth Horizon and the Datsun 510 (40), the Plymouth TC3 and the Toyota Corolla (44), and the Dodge 024 and the Datsun 200 SX (32). The theme was made even more explicit in an ad for the Chrysler Corporation in general in early 1981: "K cars are the proof . . . you don't have to be Japanese to build quality cars" (2). This strategy, although it contradicted another and also disparaged to some degree the Japanese cars imported by Chrysler, signaled a greater confidence in Chrysler's own ability to correct its failures of the past.

Featuring of Gas-Mileage Ratings

To illustrate its position near or at the top of automobile companies in terms of the gas mileage of the cars it produced, a common strategy for Chrysler during the bailout was to feature prominently the gas-mileage ratings of its cars. Mileage figures were shown in Chrysler's ads, for example, in bold type (30), enclosed in a square (5), or set apart in a circle (23).

In other ads, high gas mileage was featured in the headline or text of the ad. "Introducing our mileage champ," read an ad for Plymouth Champ (37), and "Mileage that's a real 'pick-me-up'" was the description used in an ad for the Plymouth Arrow pickup (36). An ad for Chrysler products in general carried the heading, "Shopping for a 25 est. mpg car? Come to Chrysler." The ad continued, "If you want high mileage . . . come to the mileage maker . . ." (16). Later that year, in a general image-building ad for Chrysler, the question was specifically asked, "Is Chrysler building gas guzzlers?" "The fact is," was the response, "that Chrysler has the best average gas mileage of the Big 3" (1). An overt strategy to counter Chrysler's image as a producer of large, gas-guzzling cars, then, was employed in Chrysler's ads throughout the period of the bailout.

Personalities' Endorsements of Chrysler's Cars

Chrysler's efforts at redemption of its image in its ads also included the featuring of prominent personalities extolling the virtues of Chrysler's cars. Because these personalities lent their names to Chrysler products, Chrysler was no longer a faceless company where the customer dealt with unknown people unwilling to associate themselves with the company. With "the name of an individual [standing] behind what was offered publicly as a tacit assumption of responsibility" (Weaver, 1948, p. 141), Chrysler suggested that because people now were willing to assume such responsibility, Chrysler's reputation and image had changed for the better.

Throughout the period of the bailout, personalities such as actor John Houseman, former Dallas Cowboy's running back Walt Garrison (Gray, 1981), former baseball star Joe Garagiola (12), former astronaut Neil Armstrong (Gray, March 1979, p. 83), actor Ricardo Montalban (21), and singer Frank Sinatra, for whom the Imperial FS was named (Gray, 1981, p. 71), promoted Chrysler products in magazine, newspaper, and television advertising. Chrysler's own chairman, Lee Iacocca, also was used as a spokesperson in Chrysler's ads (Gray, 1980). The fact that a specific person was willing to assume responsibility for Chrysler's quality met with a positive response from the audience. Russell Baker's reaction to Iacocca's appearance in television commercials was typical of this response:

I like Iacocca, though we've never met. I like the cut of his jib and the jut of his jaw as he walks and talks. He strikes me as a corporation leader who's interested in making something. . . . "Lee Iacocca," I often murmur, when under the spell of the commercials, "you are the man I want to make my cars" (Baker, 1983).

The association of specific individuals with Chrysler's products was designed to emphasize the transformed nature of the products. They now were good enough that people were willing to have their names associated with them.

Money-Back Guarantees

Another strategy used to help achieve a new identity for Chrysler assumed the form of money-back guarantees, which Chrysler initiated in January of 1980. This was an unprecedented strategy for an automobile company and one that had long been ridiculed by auto executives as unworkable. In contrast to the symbolism of the rebate offers, this strategy suggested great confidence in Chrysler's products by the manufacturers and dealers. "We build and back our cars to guarantee your satisfaction," stated an ad in the summer of 1980. "When you buy a new car from The New Chrysler Corporation, there is no risk. If you're not happy, for any reason, we'll take the car back . . . and give you your money back" (14). An ad for Plymouth Reliant-K in that same year also offered the guarantee: "So confident are we of Reliant's quality, that it comes with a 30 day/1,000 mile money-back guarantee" (41).

"This is going to revolutionize the way cars are bought, sold and traded in this country," asserted Bryan Wilkinson, a Chrysler-Plymouth dealer in suburban Salt Lake City, who said the concept got his business off to its best start in years (Apcar, 1980). Chrysler hoped the guarantee would revitalize its image as well, for with it, Chrysler took full responsibility for the quality of its products.

American Appeal

A final major strategy used by Chrysler to redeem its image attempted to show Chrysler as a leader not only in manufacturing cars, but also in terms of its ability to lead America in the fight to overcome the threat posed by foreign oil. This appeal to Americanism and use of an explicit scapegoat in the form of foreign oil began appearing in Chrysler's advertising in the fall of 1980. In ads introducing the Plymouth Reliant-K, the headlines asserted, "The K Cars are Here," and the K, which was red-and-white striped and contained Chrysler's pentastar logo in blue, took on an all-American look. "The American way to beat the pump," was the slogan used in the ads for Plymouth Reliant-K (41), and ads for the Dodge Aries-K contained a variation of this American theme: "With Aries-K pulling for you, America's not going to be pushed around anymore" (22).

At the end of 1980, a new version of the American appeal and victimage of the foreign—particularly foreign oil—was introduced. An ad for Plymouth front-wheel-drive cars asserted, "If everyone drove a Plymouth front-wheel-drive car, America wouldn't have to import one drop of OPEC oil for gasoline." A footnote in the ad explained that "44% of our OPEC oil is made into gasoline" (38). The timing of these ads to correspond to the holding of American hostages in Iran, of course, made the appeal to American patriotism and the scapegoat of foreign oil and foreign evil more vivid.

CONCLUSIONS

Numerous criteria can be used to assess Chrysler's success at expunging its guilt and thus redeeming its public image for the bailout period of 1978 through 1981. Because its efforts at redemption ultimately were motivated by the desire to make money, one measure of success is whether Chrysler's advertising persuaded the public to buy more Chrysler cars, thus placing Chrysler in a better financial position. According to this criterion, Chrysler seemed unable—immediately after the bailout—to convince the public that it was indeed a “new” company, rid of its former image and guilt. Chrysler ended 1981, the year after the bailout, with net losses of \$475.6 million (Taylor, p. 57), leaving it still vulnerable to any further downturn in the market and lacking the financial defenses needed to survive another financial crisis. In September 1981, Iacocca told reporters that Chrysler's strategy was almost a “profits be damned” approach as it struggled simply to stay solvent (Behr, 1981).

In 1982, there were other indications that Chrysler's strategies had not been immediately successful. Chrysler closed its plants in Detroit and Belvidere, Illinois—half its U.S. capacity—for two weeks in October to balance its inventories and to clear away leftover 1982 models from showrooms. Into 1983 Chrysler remained burdened by \$2 billion in long-term debts (Taylor, p. 51). From a financial perspective alone, Chrysler seemed to have failed in its initial efforts to redeem its image.

Another way to assess Chrysler's success in its image campaign is to evaluate the strategies used in terms of their coherence and internal consistency—whether a clear image of a transformed Chrysler Corporation emerged from the advertising as a result of the strategies selected. The application of this criterion suggests that some of the strategies contradicted each other. In some ads, Chrysler associated itself with Japanese quality and products, but in others it attempted to dissociate itself from the Japanese. Similarly, in some ads Chrysler abdicated responsibility for its failures, but in others it shouldered that responsibility. In still other instances, an association with the Japanese violated the American appeal used in other ads.

Certainly some of this contradiction might be explained as simply an attempt to market Chrysler's various cars for particular audiences, but most of these strategies were used in advertising across various models, making the charge of inconsistency still relevant. As a consequence, Chrysler's image was not as clear and as focused as it might have been. Even though the impression created through Chrysler's advertising was generally positive, the mixing of a number of very different images and themes—sometimes contradictory—detracted somewhat from the total transformation of identity toward which Chrysler was striving.

Another way in which to assess the effectiveness of Chrysler's strategies is through the degree to which the strategies demonstrated Chrysler's assumption of responsibility for its actions. One of Chrysler's strategies in particular—portrayal of Chrysler as a victim of the changing times—suggested that Chrysler was not in control of the situation in which it found itself; it lay the blame

for Chrysler's failures on outside sources. In another set of strategies, Chrysler appeared to be considering assumption of its responsibility for its past failures. The strategies of association with the Japanese, rebates, and dissociation from past low quality were these kinds of strategies. "We're doing what we can" and "we're working on our problems" seemed to have been the messages Chrysler emphasized with the strategies in this category. With their use, Chrysler displayed more confidence in its products and was more willing to assume responsibility for them, thus likely attracting more car buyers.

The most frequently used strategy, however, was the one in which Chrysler took full responsibility for the production of high quality, desirable, and salable products and set its own high standards for its products. A number of strategies fell into this category—comparison with other companies' products, dissociation from Japanese products, featuring of gas-mileage ratings, personalities' endorsements of Chrysler's cars, money-back guarantees, and the American appeal. With the use of these strategies, Chrysler not only showed a high degree of confidence in its ability to produce good cars, but the locus of control over Chrysler's operations appeared to have shifted to Chrysler itself. In Weaver's terms, Chrysler used argument by genus or definition in these strategies, basing its advertising on a definition of what a car ideally is supposed to be and showing that it was both establishing and maintaining the standards for this ideal (Weaver, 1953, p. 86).

If a corporation is attempting to change its image from a company that produces cars that consumers will not buy to one of leadership and viability, strategies that focus on the role of victim seem less appropriate than those that portray the company as assuming responsibility and maintaining high standards for its products. Wisely, Chrysler used only a few strategies that portrayed it as a victim or as indecisive as to how much responsibility to assume in its attempts to transform its image. Its frequent use of strategies that conveyed idealism, confidence, and responsibility might suggest that Chrysler's image transformation and consequent ability to make a profit should have been successful. Yet, as I will suggest later, other factors influenced the image-transformation process, mitigating the effects of what appeared to be strategies that should have been effective for redemption.

Still another indication of Chrysler's inability to redeem itself through its advertising is that it continues to engage in the same strategies it used throughout the period of the bailout. This suggests that as yet, Chrysler has not convinced the public of its new identity since it sees the need to continue to work on the transformation of its image. For example, in October 1982, Chrysler asserted that it was not going to use the strategy of the rebate to sell cars any more. It raised the base sticker prices on its 1983 models an average three to four percent above the final 1982 prices in a move targeted at "getting away from the concept of selling cars on hard cash" (Koten, 1982). Yet rebates of \$300 to \$750 were back in ads in April 1983: "Nobody gives you more help than Chrysler," the ads read, and customers were given a choice of "9.8% annual percentage rate financing or rebates" (9).

What might account for Chrysler's lack of success in transforming its image.

redeeming itself of the past guilt created by its failures, and achieving its goal of financial success? The strategies it used in its attempt at redemption seem to be ones that should have been effective, yet several methods of assessment indicate that Chrysler has yet to achieve the new identity it desires. The answer seems to lie in the fact that the bailout as a symbolic act communicated more about Chrysler than simply Chrysler's failures in various areas. It also communicated four messages that went beyond a concern with Chrysler alone and that in combination had a very strong impact on the public's perception of Chrysler.

First, the bailout communicated that the United States does not adhere to a totally capitalistic, free-enterprise system. The act gave lie to the commonly held notion that in America the marketplace imposes standards through the form of competition; if these are not met, an enterprise must go out of business as the rightful consequence. Of course, a pure capitalistic system in which the government does not interfere in the private sector always has been more myth than reality in the United States,⁵ but the bailout of Chrysler reminded the American public of this fact, which it may not have wanted to confront explicitly.

Second, the bailout itself re-emphasized for Americans a theme that has been rampant in American culture for most of its history: bigger is better. One writer explained this belief as espoused by Americans:

It was not just Detroit that taught Americans that everything large was adorable. There were few limits to the use and display of national wealth. The government built the freeways, towering dams and sprawling military bases. Houses grew larger and suburban yards stretched out to accommodate swings and greenhouses. . . . The pie was only getting bigger (Moritz and Seaman, pp. 341-342).

Recognizing—perhaps only unconsciously—the danger of such an emphasis on bigness in our culture, Americans may have felt they could not support Chrysler and view it in a new light regardless of the image it presented in its ads.

Not only did Chrysler itself represent big cars, great distances, and vast stretches of freeway, all further legitimized by the bailout, but its large size was used to justify the bailout. A song by Tom Paxton, "I'm Changing My Name to Chrysler," summarized this symbolism of the bailout: "If you're a corporate Titanic and your failure is gigantic/Down in Congress there's a safety net for you" (Paxton, 1980). Chrysler deserved to be saved because it was big, many argued; smaller firms would not have received the federal aid. The bailout communicated to Americans the inequity and injustice inherent in American politics and economics, and confronting this fact via the bailout made the strategies for redemption used by Chrysler less likely to be effective.

But perhaps most important, the bailout conveyed to the public that Chrysler was not a viable firm. It asserted that Chrysler could not make it on its own in the marketplace and since it had to obtain federal aid, it was not a company that made cars that consumers wanted. As much as Chrysler attempted to change this image through its advertising, the bailout was always present, canceling out its efforts to portray itself as alive and viable. The bailout asserted

that there was little reason to have confidence in the Chrysler Corporation; if there were, it would have had access to private capital and would have had no need to resort to public financing. Chrysler could affirm its viability throughout its advertising in numerous ways, yet the ads could not change the bailout as a significant constraint on the very transformation of image that Chrysler sought.

Whether Chrysler can overcome the symbolism of the bailout and achieve a total transformation of its image remains to be seen. As yet, it has not been able to rid itself completely of the guilt with which it seems plagued and the remnants of its old dysfunctional image. In the spring of 1983, there were indications that Chrysler slowly was overcoming the negative image created by the bailout and was achieving some financial success. It made a small profit in 1982 (\$170 million on sales of \$10 billion), although the profit came mostly from the sale of its tank division, not from making cars (Taylor, p. 50). In the first three months of 1983, Chrysler had earned \$172.1 million (Woolley, 1983), had a cash hoard of \$800 million, and its shares had more than quintupled in price (Taylor, p. 50). On June 15, Chrysler paid off \$400 million of its government loans (Cichowski, 1983). These results indicate that Chrysler may be on its way to becoming a profit-making corporation as the symbolism of the bailout begins to fade from consumers' minds.

Yet as General Motors' chairman Roger Smith explained, "The jury is still out on Chrysler. It all depends on the product they introduce and whether they can sell it" (Taylor, p. 50). And whether Chrysler's products sell depends in part on whether the corporation can redeem its image by expunging from it the guilt that the bailout made public for Chrysler.

ENDNOTES

1. The accuracy of this message had been confirmed at various times throughout Chrysler's history. In 1957, for instance, when Chrysler had cut the development cycle for its new cars, the forced pace was evident: the doors and windows leaked, the body panels rusted, and several series of engines were poorly designed and built. In the late 1960s, Chrysler's quality suffered again when Chrysler cut back on its expenses; quality deteriorated so much that a vice president was put in charge of handling customers' complaints. The year 1975 raised further questions about the quality of Chrysler's cars with the launch of the Aspen/Volaré. More than 3.5 million Aspens and Volarés were recalled for free repairs, and the Center for Auto Safety called the cars the 1977 "Lemons of the Year" (Moritz and Seaman, pp. 15-16, 56, 121).

2. Early evidence of Chrysler's refusal to recognize the demand for small cars came in 1968, when imports captured 10% of the United States auto market (Moritz and Seaman, p. 114), and General Motors, Ford, and American Motors all began designing smaller cars (the Maverick, the Hornet, and the Vega). Chrysler, however, believed that its share of the subcompact market would be too small to insure a profit, and Chrysler continued to resist the production of small cars into the 1970s. Even in the fall of 1978, after disruption in production in the Iranian oil fields led to gas lines and high gas prices in the United States, the only new models Chrysler introduced were mid-sized and big cars.

3. Chrysler's financial history shows the extent of this problem for Chrysler. In 1956, Chrysler lost \$29.6 million and was saved only with an emergency \$150 million line

of credit with 100 banks (Moritz and Seaman, p. 59). It had a long-term debt of \$791 million in 1970 (Moritz and Seaman, p. 119), losses of \$52.1 million in 1974 ("Chrysler Posts 4th Period Loss," 1975), and was unable to pay dividends to its stockholders in 1975 ("Chrysler Considers Resumption," 1976). In 1978, a prosperous year for the other United States auto companies, Chrysler lost \$205 million (Chapman, 1979). Standard & Poor downgraded the company's credit rating in April 1979, and that year Chrysler became the first United States corporation to lose more than \$1 billion ("Chrysler Corporation," 1980; Taylor, p. 57).

4. Because of numerous references to Chrysler's advertisements throughout this essay, I have devised a special system of citation for them. All ads cited are listed at the end of the References section, and the numbers in parentheses in the text refer to the numbers by the ads in this section.

5. Among government intervention in private business have been aid to builders and operators of ships in 1789, aid to companies building canals and railroads during the nineteenth century, aid to firms that banks would not finance through the Reconstruction Finance Corporation during the Depression, and aid to Amtrak, Lockheed, and New York City ("Handout or Helping Hand?" 1979).

REFERENCES

- Apcar, L. M. Chrysler offers "money-back guarantee" and \$50 test drive in innovative effort. *Wall Street Journal*, January 25, 1980, p. 4.
- Baker, R. Lee Iacocca, a peripatetic pitchman. *Denver Post*, March 25, 1983, p. B3.
- Becker, S. L. Rhetorical studies for the contemporary world. In L. Bitzer and E. Black (eds.), *The prospect of rhetoric*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971, pp. 21-43.
- Behr, P. Auto sales slump fuels concern about Chrysler. *Washington Post*, October 21, 1981, p. A1.
- Bloede, B. Newspaper advertising out in Chrysler new car intro. *Editor & Publisher*, September 12, 1981, p. 15.
- Bosmajian, H. A. The persuasiveness of Nazi marching and der Kampf um die Strasse. *Today's Speech*, 16 (1968), 17-22.
- Burke, K. *A grammar of motives*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969. (Originally published 1945.)
- . *A rhetoric of motives*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969. (Originally published 1950.)
- . *Language as symbolic action: essays on life, literature, and method*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966.
- Carter signs legislation on Chrysler aid package. *Wall Street Journal*, January 8, 1980, p. 17.
- Chapman, S. On the hill: Welfare Chrysler. *New Republic*, August 4 & 11, 1979, p. 19.
- Chrysler considers resumption of payout as profit strengthens. *Wall Street Journal*, July 28, 1976, p. 19.
- Chrysler corporation. *Advertising Age*, September 11, 1980, p. 52.
- Chrysler plans no national newspaper ads for '83 cars. *Editor & Publisher*, September 25, 1982, p. 65.
- Chrysler posts 4th period loss of \$73.5 million. *Wall Street Journal*, February 18, 1975, p. 3.
- Chrysler resorts to \$400 rebates. *Advertising Age*, August 20, 1979, pp. 2 & 64.
- Chrysler resumes rebates, this time on vans and trucks. *Wall Street Journal*, October 3, 1979, p. 4.
- Cichowski, L. Bailout: It's worked for some, but can it help utility? *USA Today*, June 27, 1983, p. B3.
- Doolittle, R. J. Riots as symbolic: A criticism and approach. *Central States Speech Journal*, 1976, 27, 310-317.

- Gray, R. Chrysler again forced to turn to costly rebates. *Advertising Age*, November 12, 1979, p. 3.
- . Iacocca vows best marketing job ever for debut of K-car. *Advertising Age*, February 18, 1980, p. 20.
- . No backseat role for K & E: Laux. *Advertising Age*, March 26, 1979, pp. 2, 83.
- . Star Power for Chrysler. *Advertising Age*, September 7, 1981, pp. 2, 71.
- Gray, R. & Kanner, B. Foreign aid, new ads for Chrysler? *Advertising Age*, August 13, 1979, pp. 1, 83.
- Handout or helping hand? *Time*, November 12, 1979, p. 100.
- Kotén, J. Chrysler Corp. acts to overhaul market strategy. *Wall Street Journal*, October 1, 1982, p. 2.
- . Chrysler initiates 1981-model promotion that includes rebates and finders' fees. *Wall Street Journal*, November 24, 1980, p. 7.
- . Chrysler links new rebate program to prime rate; Ford's president trims forecast for '81 industry sales. *Wall Street Journal*, December 5, 1980, p. 3.
- Mortiz, M. and Seaman, B. *Going for broke: The Chrysler story*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1981.
- Nicholson, T. The Chrysler cliff-hanger. *Newsweek*, April 14, 1980, p. 83.
- Pasztor, A. Chrysler says it faces tight race to win pledges to match \$1.5 billion in U.S. aid. *Wall Street Journal*, November 5, 1979, p. 2.
- . Iacocca says U.S. aid is turning point for Chrysler, sees rosy future for firm. *Wall Street Journal*, June 26, 1980, p. 4.
- Paxton, T. I'm changing my name to Chrysler. *Precious friend: Arlo Guthrie and Pete Seeger*. Warner, 1980.
- Ritchie, G. The sit-in: A rhetoric of human action. *Today's Speech*, 1970, 18, 22-25.
- Rueckert, W. H. *Kenneth Burke and the drama of human relations*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963.
- Scott, R. L. and Smith, D. K. The rhetoric of confrontation. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 1969, 55, 1-8.
- Sloan, T. O. (Chair). Report of the committee on the advancement and refinement of rhetorical criticism. In L. Bitzer and E. Black (eds.), *The prospect of rhetoric*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971, pp. 220-227.
- Taylor, A. L., III. Iacocca's tightrope act. *Time*, March 21, 1983, pp. 50-54, 57-58, 60-61.
- Weaver, R. *Ideas have consequences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948.
- . *The ethics of rhetoric*. Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1953.
- Windt, T. O., Jr. The diatribe: Last resort for protest. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 1972, 58, 1-14.
- Woolley, A. J. Chrysler posts \$172 million profit. *Denver Post*, April 22, 1983, p. F1.

Advertisements

1. Ad for Chrysler Corporation. *Time*, August 27, 1979, pp. 16-17.
2. Ad for Chrysler Corporation. *Time*, February 23, 1981, inside front cover.
3. Ad for Chrysler Corporation. *Time*, October 1, 1979, pp. 98-99.
4. Ad for Chrysler Corporation. *Time*, October 19, 1981, pp. 84-85.
5. Ad for Chrysler LeBaron. *Time*, April 17, 1978, inside front cover.
6. Ad for Chrysler Newport. *Time*, February 26, 1979, pp. 22-23.
7. Ad for Chrysler Newport. *Time*, October 16, 1978, pp. 132-33.
8. Ad for Chrysler New Yorker. *Time*, November 5, 1979, pp. 54-55.
9. Ad for Chrysler products. *Denver Post*, April 13, 1983, p. 8C.
10. Ad for Chrysler products. *Denver Post*, April 17, 1981, p. 12.

11. Ad for Chrysler products. *Denver Post*, February 23, 1981, p. 7.
12. Ad for Chrysler products. *Time*, April 23, 1979, pp. 18-19.
13. Ad for Chrysler products. *Time*, August 11, 1980, p. 51.
14. Ad for Chrysler products. *Time*, July 28, 1980, p. 67.
15. Ad for Chrysler products. *Time*, June 16, 1980, p. 43.
16. Ad for Chrysler products. *Time*, May 28, 1979, pp. 58-59.
17. Ad for Chrysler products. *Washington Post*, August 18, 1979, p. A22.
18. Ad for Chrysler products. *Washington Post*, March 29, 1981, p. A15.
19. Ad for Chrysler's Japanese imports. *Time*, April 2, 1979, pp. 84-85.
20. Ad for Cordoba. *Time*, May 25, 1981, pp. 72-73.
21. Ad for Cordoba. *Time*, November 19, 1979, pp. 94-95.
22. Ad for Dodge Aries-K. *Time*, October 13, 1980, pp. 94-95.
23. Ad for Dodge Aspen. *Time*, April 17, 1978, pp. 16-17.
24. Ad for Dodge Aspen. *Time*, May 1, 1978, pp. 76-77.
25. Ad for Dodge Charger. *Motor Trend*, August 1981, inside front cover.
26. Ad for Dodge Colt Hatchback. *Time*, November 13, 1978, pp. 34-35.
27. Ad for Dodge Diplomat. *Time*, May 29, 1978, pp. 42-43.
28. Ad for Dodge Omni. *Motor Trend*, March 1978, n.p.
29. Ad for Dodge Omni. *Time*, April 10, 1978, p. 82.
30. Ad for Dodge Omni. *Time*, February 6, 1978, pp. 40-41.
31. Ad for Dodge Omni and Plymouth Horizon. *Time*, June 16, 1980, p. 41.
32. Ad for Dodge 024. *Time*, July 14, 1980, p. 59.
33. Ad for Imperial. *Time*, November 3, 1980, pp. 92-93.
34. Ad for K-cars. *Time*, January 26, 1981, inside front cover.
35. Ad for Mitsubishi's twin stick. *Motor Trend*, March 1979, p. 64.
36. Ad for Plymouth Arrow Pickup. *Motor Trend*, December 1978, n.p.
37. Ad for Plymouth Champ. *Time*, November 20, 1978, pp. 128-129.
38. Ad for Plymouth front-wheel-drive cars. *Time*, December 15, 1980, p. 4.
39. Ad for Plymouth Horizon. *Motor Trend*, March 1978, inside front cover.
40. Ad for Plymouth Horizon. *Time*, July 14, 1980, p. 55.
41. Ad for Plymouth Reliant-K. *Time*, November 10, 1980, pp. 53-54.
42. Ad for Plymouth Reliant-K. *Time*, October 6, 1980, pp. 78-79.
43. Ad for Plymouth Reliant-K and Dodge Aries-K. *Motor Trend*, March 1981, pp. 76-77.
44. Ad for Plymouth TC3. *Time*, July 14, 1980, p. 57.