

In Sorry Times:
The age of apologies in contemporary art and politics

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In June of 2020, the Philadelphia Art Museum apologized to their staff after an email was sent addressing the murder of George Floyd which included the statement “every individual life matters.”¹ This phrase echoes the expression “All Lives Matter,” which was used in counterprotest to the Black Lives Matter police brutality protests of 2020. In March of 2021, the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology apologized for their refusal to voluntarily return Native American funerary objects to their rightful tribes in accordance with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). Congress passed NAGPRA in 1990, requiring all federally funded institutions to repatriate the Native American cultural objects and human remains in their collections in consultation with Native American tribes.² In November of 2023, The Frick Pittsburgh art museum apologized for their decision to postpone an exhibition focusing on 10 centuries of Islamic art in light of the Israel-Palestine war. The exhibition was delayed out of fear that local Jewish community members would be offended, but Jewish and Muslim communities across the country denounced this decision.³ These public expressions of remorse are part of a global trend in which institutions and organizations are using apologies to gain commendation and avoid condemnation. Cultural institutions, such as art museums, are inherently political players, but what exactly is their role in political discourse? This question is grappled with perpetually in discussions of media presentation, crisis response, and the responsibility of the institution to utilize their platforms.

¹Stephen Salisbury, “Philadelphia Art Museum leaders apologize for word choice in Black Lives Matter message,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 11, 2020

² Oliver L. Riskin-Kutz, “Peabody Museum Apologizes for Practices Around Native American Cultural Objects, Announces Policy Changes,” *Harvard Crimson*, March 29, 2021

³ Zachary Small, “Pittsburgh Museum Apologizes for Handling of Islamic Art Show,” *The New York Times*, November 10, 2023

Oftentimes, apologies are exchanged on an interpersonal level between friends, family members, coworkers, or peers. They are sentimental expressions, acting as peace offerings in times of conflict or resolutions after harm. Public apologies disrupt the intimacy generally associated with apologies, and the near-constant stream of public apologies from public figures, politicians, and institutions dilutes the intensity of these offerings. What is the function of these public statements of regret? Are these apologies genuine and productive steps towards collective healing, or are they merely repetitive, performative forms of appeasement?

In the following discussion, I will examine examples of public apologies, contemporary artworks, and theoretical discourses to further understand the relationship between apologies and power and to situate my artwork *An exercise in memorization and performance with feeling: Public Apology* in relation to contemporary conceptual artwork and social discourse.

The redefinition of *apology*

In modern English, the word *apology* means an acknowledgement for a past wrongdoing, but this was not the case when it first came into use in the 15th century. *Apology* comes from the Greek *apologia* meaning “speech in defense” which derives from ‘*apologeisthai*, “to defend oneself.”⁴ In 339 BC, Socrates was put on trial, charged with impiety and corruption of the youth. Plato’s *Apologia Socratis*, a foundational text on Western thought, is a written dialogue of the speech Socrates gave at his trial defending himself. Until the 18th century, the word *apology* was more commonly used to denote an excuse or defense against criticism rather than as an act of contrition.

⁴ “Etymology of apology,” *Etymonline*, September 24, 2022

Today, the social function of the apology is to express regret and initiate reconciliation after wrongdoing. We no longer associate an apology with the act of proving one's innocence, but in some ways, the contemporary social usage still reflects the historical definition of the word. In linguistics, the phrase "I apologize" is an example of what linguist J.L. Austin called a 'speech act' in which the speaker states they are doing something, hoping to invoke sentiment or incite action from the listener.⁵ It is a sneakily rhetorical statement, convincing the listener that the psychological state of "being sorry" is happening inside the speaker. William L. Benoit says that those who engage in *mortification* attempt to create beliefs in the audience by persuading the audience that the speaker feels remorse, accepts blame, and hopes to receive forgiveness.⁶ While other speech acts are provable—after someone promises to do something in the future, we need only wait to see if they keep the promise—the acceptance of an apology hinges on the receiver believing the apologizer is sincere and acting on genuine principles.

As English speakers, we rely heavily on words to be the conduits by which abstract thoughts and feelings are transported from speaker to listener. Have you ever been in an argument, and all you want from the other person is for them to say "I'm sorry?" It is socially understood that an apology should contain phrases such as "I apologize", "I regret this", and/or "I'm sorry". These simple utterances act as emotional markers to express the complex emotions of regret and shame that an apology avows. But at what point does an apology require more than just words? At what point do these words lose their meaning? An apology is a first step towards reconciliation, but it is not

⁵ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Clarendon Press, 1975

⁶ William L. Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: Image Repair Theory and Research*, State University of New York Press, 2015

the final goal. Inspired by the apology as a simple linguistic formula used to communicate an emotionally charged message, my work *An exercise in memorization and performance with feeling: Public Apology* explores the performativity of political apologies and the inherent power play in apologies.

Performance and the political

To apologize is to display softness, which in politics is often equated with weakness, but a shift is occurring towards apologizing as a display of strength of character. The history of political apologies has no clear beginning, although there has been a noticeable upward trend of public apologies made by political figures in the last 20 years⁷. These requests for forgiveness have been made in regard to historical events for which the current political body had no direct responsibility, as well as more recent acts for which the current political body does bear responsibility. They range in severity from personal blunders to mistreatment of minority groups to geopolitical warfare and tend to be offered during diplomatic visits and commemorations. It would be naive for the recipients of these apologies to ignore their tactful timeliness.

Bill Clinton's 1998 apology to Rwanda for the United States' failure to provide aid during the Rwandan Genocide can act as a case study of the motives and efficacy of an apology. In fact, Clinton's speech may not even be considered an apology for it does not contain the words apology, apologize, sorry, or regret. Still, it explicates the shortcomings of the US government and lays out steps to initiate change for the future, a model that resembles a bid for reconciliation. Clinton delivered his speech on the

⁷ Marieke Zoodsma and Juliette Schaafsma, "Examining the 'age of apology': Insights from the Political Apology database," Sage Journals, 2022

tarmac of the Kigali airport during a three and a half hour stop in Rwanda⁸. In his speech, Clinton thanks the Rwandan President, Vice President, and several survivors of the Genocide, describes the horrors of the Rwandan Genocide, acknowledges the mistake made by the US administration under his leadership to not provide aid, and outlines a plan of action to address potential global genocidal violence in the future. In the video recording of the speech, Clinton is shot from his shoulders up, and he delivers his words with the calm and confident cadence notably associated with his public persona. He periodically looks down at the pedestal, presumably consulting the typed script in front of him. Of course, it is important to consider that presidential speeches are written by White House officials who consult methods of image repair theory and crisis management. These officials carefully construct speeches using strategies of denial, responsibility evasion, reduction of offense, corrective action, and mortification, all with the intention to capitalize positively on the increased public interest in their politician.⁹



An exercise in memorization and performance with feeling: Public Apology

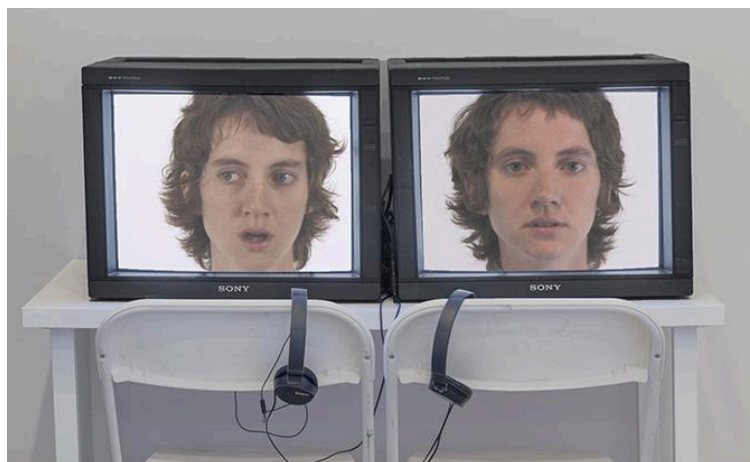
utilizes quotes from Bill Clinton's Rwandan address as well as more than ten other

⁸Jason Edwards and Thomasena Shaw, "A Superpower Apologizes? President Clinton's Address in Rwanda," Communication & Theater Association of Minnesota Journal, 2013

⁹ William L. Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: Image Repair Theory and Research*, State University of New York Press, 2015

videotaped apologies given by political figures from the United States, Canada, and Britain over the last 30 years. Similarities and near-identical repetitions of language became apparent as I gathered sources for the work. Their word choices are generic, and the differences emerge only through the details of their accusations and the intonation of their voices. As I prepared to memorize the compiled apologies I had collected, I recognized the relationship between public speeches and theatrical performances. They share all the main components—a role, a script, and an audience. Inspired by this relationship, I looked to other artists working in video who have used performance to reappropriate historical dialogues and explore language repetition.

The artist Sharon Hayes' 2003 video work *Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) Screeds #13, 16, 20, & 29* introduces new ideas about political performance and collective memory, displaying not apology but political conviction. The work is a close-up video of the artist reciting scripts from the 1974 ransom tapes of then 19-year-old Patty Hearst who was kidnapped by the SLA, a radical political organization, from her home in Berkeley, California. In the multi-channel videos, Hayes speaks directly to the camera, her face consuming most of the shot.



Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) Screeds #13, 16, 20, & 29, 2003, 4-channel video, SD, color, sound, 9:50 min to 20 min, dimensions variable

As she recites the memorized dialogue, an off-camera audience holds the script in their hands and corrects her when she makes a mistake. The work distills the provocation of the calls made by Patty Hearst to her family into a sterile performance resembling a rehearsal. The story of Hearst, who when offered the choice to be released from captivity or join the SLA forces chose to become a member of the SLA, adds an interesting dimension to Hayes' work. The phone calls included Hearst being prompted by her kidnappers to assure her parents that she was safe. Sometimes, when we say things so much, we begin to believe them.

Another artwork that explores recitation and repetition is Bruce Nauman's *Thank You* also utilizes a close-up head shot of the artist as he repeats the phrase "thank you" into the camera. He speaks with an intensity and urgency that contradicts his words, and as he rapidly spits them out, they morph into animalistic shouts. The phrase spoken by Nauman is also a speech act in which the speaker tells the listener that they are experiencing feelings of gratitude. *Thank You* complicates this sentiment and urges the viewer to consider what happens when what you say and how you say it are misaligned.

My artwork *An exercise in memorization and performance with feeling: Public Apology* is in dialogue with these artworks as I reappropriate, memorize, and recite repetitive historical apologies. Utilizing collected dialogue from public apologies by notable political figures, the 3-channel video highlights the repetition of apologetic phrases as they become essentially meaningless. The element of performance is emphasized in the presentation of the work which includes a screen displaying the selected 'final' take, and another screen that includes fragments of the twenty prior takes cut and collaged together. Hours of practice are distilled into 3 looping videos with

a cumulative runtime of about 10 minutes. The third screen displays an extended cut, a 6 minute long video in which I attempt to recite the script multiple times, become frustrated with the process as my belief in my own performance dwindles, and lose understanding of the meaning and weight of my words.



An exercise in memorization and performance with feeling: Public Apology, 2024, 3-channel video, AV equipment, 2:30 min to 6 min, dimensions variable

In the weeks following the recording of this work, I have found myself hyper aware of apologies—those that I offer, those that I receive, and those that I overhear. I have become disillusioned with apologies given by politicians on the news and institutions as they recycle the same verbiage I made myself fluent in. I am unimpressed and unsurprised, desensitized to the reasons for these apologies but increasingly more interested in the specific linguistic decisions made. Apologies are fundamentally ambiguous, propped up by carefully chosen tone and timing, and maintained by the necessity for powerful people and institutions to remain in power.

Power and apology

In Foucauldian theory, any relation is a power relation, and the relation of a governing power to its governed body is defined by its power dynamic.¹⁰ Apologies offered by governments to their people are deliberate and calculated. The act of apology can both restabilize relationships and reinstate power dynamics. In his 2022 journal analyzing state apologies, Jasper Friedrich asserts that, “The state, through apologizing, reaffirms the norms governing its relationship to its subjects at a moment when a past transgression threatens to destabilize this relation.”¹¹ An apology is not so much a self-renouncement and trade of power, but rather a restatement of the government’s control. In fact, these political public apologies have even been shown to boost approval in the recipient’s country.¹² To commit an atrocity and then publicly denounce the action is a net positive political move.

We also encounter an equally astounding stream of non-apologies from political powers. These non-apologies are statements that appear at the surface to express the sentiment of acknowledgement and regret for offense but in fact fail to meet the standards of an apology in any meaningful way. Non-apologies subtly flip the blame, accusing the victim of being at fault for misunderstanding or misinterpreting. They are passed out to the public after a scandal transpires, directed by the government or politician’s public relations consultants, and they hit with a flatness that poorly disguises their performativity. Take for example the 2010 “apology” by Congressman Joe Barton which consisted of the following statement: “If anything I have said this morning has

¹⁰ Sergiu Balan, “*M. Foucault’s View on Power Relations*,” Institute of Philosophy and Psychology C.R. Motru, Bucharest, 2010

¹¹ Jasper Friedrich, “*Settling Accounts at the End of History: A Nonideal Approach to State Apologies*,” Sage Journals, 2022

¹² Risa Kitagawa and Jonathan A. Chu, “*The Impact of Political Apologies on Public Opinion*,” Cambridge University Press, 2021

been misconstrued to the opposite effect, I want to apologize for that misconstrued misconception.”¹³ The prevalence of non-apologies potentially undermines the trusting relationship between government and subject which the political apology attempts to build. If political apologies work to humanize the governing state through honesty and remorse, non-apologies unravel this through disingenuity and disinterest. They are all facade and no substance, revealing a truth about American politics that we would rather not believe—that every decision is made with the goal of appeasing the majority, securing the votes, and maintaining the power.

A number of apologies in the contemporary age of public political apologies have been directed towards historical events, including civil wars, genocides, and colonizations. This practice has spread to well intended liberal-minded folks in the US in the form of land acknowledgements—statements that recognize the historical existence of Indigenous people in what is now North America. Land acknowledgments, while seeming on the surface to serve as public apologies, are rather more like non-apologies, with recognition rather than apology or reconciliation being the core message. Land acknowledgements often utilize language that centers the physical land rather than the people, situating Indigenous people in the historic past and wrongly applying our colonial conception of land ownership to the practices of Indigenous people. More and more institutions and organizations are publishing written land acknowledgements on their websites. Non-profit consultants generally suggest that an organization or institution consult their local Native nation to ensure that their statement is respectful. These consulting sessions, which Indigenous people are often expected to provide for free, are check marks of approval for organizations that want to protect their

¹³ Robert M. Eisinger, *“The Political Non-Apology,”* Society, 2011

public image. I faced the performativity of these statements firsthand when I was tasked by my employer to construct a land acknowledgement for the website of our arts non-profit organization. What are the implications of apologizing today for injustices committed hundreds of years ago by a group that I am not a part of? How can this acknowledgement be stated with respect and integrity if it is foundationally artificial? Are we really uplifting our local Indigenous community by consulting them when the Land Acknowledgement has become a purely symbolic gesture for other non-Indigenous whistleblowers?

In his book *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Michele-Rolph Trouillot discusses a proposal from the early '90s for an amusement park called "Disney's America." It was to have been built on the site of a historic plantation in Virginia and to have included attractions simulating slavery and the Civil War. Trouillot says of this desire to recreate a violent history with the intention to educate and reproach,

"The collective guilt of some white liberals toward the slave past of the US or the colonial past of Europe can be both misplaced and inauthentic. As a response to current accusations, it is misplaced inasmuch as these individuals are not responsible for the actions of their chosen ancestors. As a self-inflicted wound, it is comfortable inasmuch as it protects *them* from a racist present."

Trouillot suggests that these sort of recognitions in the name of regret serve the ego of the apologizer much more directly than they forge a positive future path for the historically oppressed.

When an apology is provided by a living person or group for an occurrence that took place decades and centuries prior, the apology changes form. It becomes a purely symbolic gesture as there is no possibility of reversing the generational and societal damage of colonization and slavery. The apology remains incomplete. Sociologist Nicholas Tavuchis calls this dynamic “the paradox of apologies.”¹⁴ An apology is at once imperative to restoring relationships and also meaningless, for it cannot undo what has been done. But apologies are made meaningful because the substance that they are made out of is *meaning*. Apologies are symbolic gestures wielded not for their material function but as intangible offerings, interpreted to the receiver’s own appeasement.

The artist apologizes

Artists have been called by the public to apologize on countless occasions for personal scandals and public works alike. Many hold the belief that we should “separate the art from the artist” when the artist as celebrity produces a personal blunder, but what is the responsibility of the artist to apologize when the artwork is what is being criticized? Artists are endowed with creative freedom, but their work does not exist in a vacuum, and it is not protected from social criticism. A well-known example of an artwork that became a public sensation and incited public ridicule is Dana Schutz’s *Open Casket*.

In 2017, Dana Schutz presented a painting as part of the Whitney Biennial that depicted the deceased 12-year-old Emmett Till, the victim of a racially charged murder in 1955, in his open casket. The artwork *Open Casket* is an oil painting rendered in

¹⁴ Nicholas Tavuchis, *Mea Culpa: A Sociology of Apology and Reconciliation*, Stanford University Press, 1991

Schutz' grotesque, quasi-cubist style, and the figure's facial features are smeared and rearranged. The painting was incredibly controversial, being met with outrage by many viewers who viewed it as an insensitive and unfortunate rendering in ill taste. Artist Parker Bright organized a protest on the day of the exhibition's public opening in which he and other protestors stood in front of the painting with shirts that read "BLACK DEATH SPECTACLE" until the museum closed for the day. Artist and writer Hannah Black published an open letter demanding that the painting be removed from the show, and the letter was signed by forty seven art world figures, all black.



Open Casket, 2016, oil on canvas, 39 in x 53 in

Schutz has been engaging with political and socially controversial subject matter in her artwork since she broke into the contemporary painting scene in the early 2000s. Her early body of work includes an imagined portrait of the former Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko and a cultish scene of the cabinet members of George W. Bush engaging in blind-folded ritual. But these works and others which convey politically charged and grotesque scenes are quite different from *Open Casket* which depicts the very real and very gruesome abduction and murder of a black child by a group of white

men. The question for many viewers was whether it was appropriate for a white artist, who had never made work about racism before, to depict such a violent and visceral image, one that was also central to the Civil Rights Movement.¹⁵

An apology letter from the artist that called for the removal of the painting from the show was circulated and published on notable news sites such as Huffington Post and Artsy, but it was confirmed to be fake shortly after. The real Schutz never issued any statement in response to the public backlash. Responses from artists, critics, and curators have varied, with some, such as Coco Fusco, defending Schutz's making of the work and the inclusion of it in the Biennial, claiming that censorship is the real issue to be abolished.¹⁶

The controversy highlights the precarious discussion of the artist's place in socio political discourse. Recalling the earlier discussion of Trouillot, is a white artist depicting historical violence against a black person in a way associating themselves with the villain? What is the responsibility of the oppressor to speak on the wrongdoings of their people? Is it necessary to apologize for your art, and if so, when? What is the line? What if Schutz's painting had been beautiful, would it be different then? Carolyn Brant, the woman whose accusation of assault against Emmett Till led to his murder, recanted this fatal false claim to a historian in 2017. She died in 2023 without ever apologizing.

I began this project with a curiosity about apologies in my personal life and those that I observe out in the world. I had a sense that these sentiments that I held with such sincerity were being wielded and weaponized to win approval and maintain power. How could a politician apologizing to an entire nation ever *mean* it? How could I ever write a

¹⁵ Aruna D'Souza, "Who Speaks Freely?: Art, Race, and Protest," *The Paris Review*, May 22, 2018

¹⁶ Coco Fusco, "Censorship, Not the Painting, Must Go: On Dana Schutz's Image of Emmett Till," *Hyperallergic*, March 27, 2017

land acknowledgment that *meant* anything for the website of my non-profit job? Through collecting and memorizing the apologies of prominent political figures, I recognized the repetitive pattern of the language used. I attempted to decode the motives for these apologies through sociological and theoretical research. I drew connections between my project and the work of other artists, situated my inquiries within the larger field of research on public image repair, traced the language back to its origins, and still, I am left with more questions.

When I presented *An exercise in memorization and performance with feeling: Public Apology*, a friend of mine shared a photo of the installation with the caption “Come see my friend’s artwork! She is apologizing for everything!” and I got a kick out of it. But I think that the surface sentiment is actually incredibly profound—the sensationalism connected to the public apologies of politicians is somehow a foil to the praise and recognition that artists garner in sharing our work. As artists, we create commentary on our observations of the world, but it’s misguided to ignore our own self interest and egos in the process of creating artwork.

Peter Santino is an artist, author, painting contractor, and historic restoration plasterer living in Eureka California. In a 2009 exhibition held at the ACC Galerie in Weimar, Germany, Santino presented a piece called *I Am Sorry*. It consisted of a text spelled out in Braille in a field of sand. Essentially, only the blind would be able to read it, and if they read it, they would ruin it. The text is an apology, an acknowledgement and admission of the ego exercised in art-making. It is a self exposition, first written in 1995 and since reused and reinterpreted in Santino’s work. When I found this work during my research for this paper, I was moved in a new way. For a long time, I have

believed that artmaking is a part of human nature but that it can and should be utilized publicly as a political tool for revolution. I have built my artistic identity around access, collaboration, community, and free distribution of opportunity and information. Santino's text challenged me to recognize that artmaking is also pleasure seeking. It is hedonistic, and thus self-serving. As artists, we self-identify as creators. We utilize the invisible essence of muse which moves us to create "the work" and then we share it, expecting people to care. Santino's text, as it appeared in the work at ACC Galerie, is transcribed below:

On January 25th, 1968, when I first began my creative work, I felt certain I had something to offer, a vision, something to put into the world.

Now, some 41 years later, it has become clear that what I must offer is my sincere apology. Nineteen years ago, I recognized and embraced my failure; my failure to achieve a measurable level of artistic communication. Despite numerous exhibitions and more than sufficient opportunities to explain my vision, no thing has been achieved.

I must apologize:

I am Sorry for allowing my ego to convince me of my cleverness.

I am Sorry for allowing that cleverness to permeate my work.

I am Sorry, Very Sorry for assuming my vision had merit enough
to conquer,
to change,
to dominate.

Appendix A

Script for *An exercise in memorization and performance with feeling: Public*

Apology

Today, I humbly stand before you to offer a long overdue apology. For that, I sincerely and humbly apologize. That was a mistake, I'm sorry about that, I take responsibility, uh and I'm trying to be as transparent as I possibly can. We cannot change the past, but we can and must do everything in our power to help you build a future without fear. I am sorry for harm I have caused. I have already expressed our apology, I once again offer a full apology. As anyone close to me knows, for months I have been grappling with how best to reconcile myself to the American people, but I'm not here this evening to seek sympathy or just to tell my story. Rather to make a public apology. I'm here to say the following: I'm sorry, I apologize, I regret this, but I think it is very important to draw a clear distinction between a tragic mistake and a deliberate act. I said it, I was wrong, and I apologize. We did not immediately call these crimes by their rightful name. And I take full responsibility. I apologize to my teammates and to the American people. I told them I was sorry. I am profoundly sorry, I am sorry, for all I have done wrong in words and deeds. I am sorry, I regret it very much, ummmm, and uh, I'd like to think I'll learn from it, I'd like to think other people might learn something from it too. It was a mistake that I have learned from, and I sincerely hope we all can learn from it.

Appendix B

Sources (in order of use) for *An exercise in memorization and performance with feeling: Public Apology*

Justin Trudeau apologizes to Indigenous people of Canada for boarding schools, November 24, 2017

Utah Lt. Gov Spencer Cox apologizes to LGBT community for past attitude toward gay people, June 15 2016

Hillary Clinton apologizes for email scandal, September 8, 2015

Bill Clinton remarks to victims and survivors of Rwandan Genocide, March 25, 1998

Elizabeth Warren apologizes to Native American people for claiming Native heritage, August 19, 2019

Bill Clinton apologizes for NATO bombing of Chinese embassy, May 10, 1999

Boris Johnson apologizes for breaking Covid laws for birthday party, April 12, 2022

Bill Clinton apologizes for relationship with Monica Lewinsky, December 11, 1999

Rep. Dean Phillips apologizes for remarks about January 6th, February 4, 2021

Gov. Gavin Newsom apologizes to California Native Americans, June 18, 2019

Trump apologizes for misogynistic comments about groping women, October 7, 2016

Defense Sec. Austin apologizes for keeping hospitalization a secret from Biden and public, February 1, 2024

George W. Bush apologizes for humiliation suffered while in US custody by Iraqi prisoners, May 5, 2004

Obama apologizes to American people for loss of healthcare coverage, November, 8 2013

Candidate Martin Hyde apologizes for belligerent and rude behavior toward police officer who pulled him over, February 23, 2022

US military officer General Mark Milley apologizes for appearing at Pres. Trump church photo op, June 11, 2020