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Commentary

'I'm Sorry' as a Sign of Weakness

■ Contrition is something that all people—especially men—resist, fearful of losing power.

By DEBORAH TANNEN

Apologies are very important to many people—perhaps women more than men—as a show of contrition and a prerequisite for forgiveness. This assumption seemed to drive the expectation that the president should offer one. But at the same time, many people—perhaps more men than women—resist apologizing, because it puts them in a position of weakness that could be exploited in the future. That's why many of us find ways to express contrition, such as "I'm sorry" and "I regret," that stop short of apology—just as the president did in his remarks Monday.

We live now in what I call an argument

culture, in which everything is cast as a metaphorical battle. In this climate, apologizing might indeed weaken the president in the eyes not only of American citizens but also of potential enemies or negotiators in other countries. To the extent that the president is the country's leader, many citizens themselves no doubt prefer that he maintain a stance of strength—even of belligerence, ever the fighter.

An apology is a ritual that works best when it's matched: I apologize for my part of the blame but I expect you to apologize for yours. If people see Clinton as deserving blame for his behavior, they also see the independent counsel as deserving blame for hounding the president and diverting his (and our) attention from affairs of state to what they believe should be a private matter. Yet it seems unlikely that Starr would have responded to a presidential apology with a matching

one ("and I'm sorry I put you in an impossible position by subpoenaing everyone you ever spoke to"). This may also have contributed to the president's reluctance to offer one.

Yet the president's statement had many of the crucial elements of an apology. He admitted fault ("It was wrong," "a critical lapse in judgment," "a personal failure on my part"). And he declared his intention to make amends ("I must put it right, and I am prepared to do whatever it takes to do so.") And focusing on anger at the independent counsel investigation, while offending some critics, probably reflected not only his own sentiments but those of a majority of American citizens.

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