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**NAVAL
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MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

THESIS

**THE NEVADA FAMILY: POLITICAL CRISIS
LEADERSHIP AND RESILIENCE NARRATIVES IN THE
SILVER STATE**

by

Caleb S. Cage

December 2017

Thesis Advisor:
Second Reader:

Carolyn Halladay
Christopher Bellavita

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**THE NEVADA FAMILY: POLITICAL CRISIS LEADERSHIP AND
RESILIENCE NARRATIVES IN THE SILVER STATE**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
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ABSTRACT

Emergencies and disasters are political events, and can often become political crises for elected and appointed officials. Current scholarship suggests that five key tasks for political officials allow them to manage these crises: sensemaking, decision making, meaning making, terminating, and learning. These practices provide a solid foundation for political leaders during crises, but it is argued in this thesis that this approach is limited wholly to prescriptive recommendations, and that it does not include a realistic and descriptive understanding of how political leaders actually respond to crises. The key distinction is that political leaders must balance the perception of their effective governing during the crisis with the perception that they should not be blamed for causing or allowing the crisis to occur or be held responsible for any of the deficiencies in how the crisis was handled. Furthermore, in addition to including addressing blame risk, these five key tasks must also happen before, during, and after the crisis, which amounts to political crisis leadership, whereas applying the five tasks during the crisis amounts to political crisis management. Since the most important of these tasks for a political official is meaning making, political officials can best lead crises before they happen by establishing resilience narratives.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Emergencies and disasters are inherently political events. Major crises in the United States in recent years have transformed political careers, for better or worse. Furthermore, scholars have taken an interest in determining the political factors involved with these emergencies and disasters and the political crises they produce, seeking to determine how politics drive recovery efforts, what factors contribute to a politician's success or failure following a crisis, and what characteristics and tools political leaders should deploy to best manage a crisis, or at least, create the perception of effective leadership during a crisis.

Current scholarship argues five key tasks for political officials allow them to manage these crises: sensemaking, decision making, meaning making, terminating, and learning. These tasks are ongoing throughout an emergency or disaster, and are intended to allow the official both to govern and avoid blame for causing the crisis or any additional crises that result from how it was handled. For elected and appointed officials, the most important of these tasks is meaning making, or, the messaging of the event that explains what happened, what the consequences are, and how the causes and consequences are being addressed.

While this model is valuable, it outlines how political officials ought to manage crises, and it does not account for how they actually behave. While this model does acknowledge that political figures must both govern and avoid blame for the event, it does not take into consideration the scholarship of blame risk and blame avoidance, which suggests that political leaders are far more likely to focus their efforts on avoiding blame than on governing during catastrophic events. If managing the blame risk of crises figures significantly into political calculations during crises, then the current prescriptive model must be expanded to include these considerations.

This thesis accepts the five key tasks for political leaders, but it also accepts the reality of blame risk and blame avoidance. Elected officials must indeed manage the

crisis, as well as managing any potential blame from that crisis, or they will not be able to lead going forward.

To expand the existing model and address legitimate concerns of blame risk and blame avoidance, an expanded model is provided with two key features. First, it makes a distinction between political crisis management and political crisis leadership. Political crisis management describes actions of political leaders who are focused primarily on managing the blame during the event. Political crisis leadership describes actions of political leaders focused on both governing and blame avoidance before, during, and after the event. In this expanded model, applying the five key tasks before, during, and after the incident through political crisis leadership is the preferred approach.

Second, this thesis argues for the development of resilience narratives before a crisis occurs. Resilience narratives are efforts to communicate a jurisdiction's history of overcoming difficulty and adversity. They can be developed by political leaders through various means, but they are established early on to establish renewal narratives better during and after the event. Since they are developed before a crisis and they transform to renewal narratives during and after the crisis, they are an example of meaning making in the political crisis leadership model.

This expanded model is based on concepts from the current literature on crisis leadership, political crises, and crisis narratives, which are all applied to and examined through case studies from recent crises within the state of Nevada. These incidents are both man-made and natural disasters, and they occur over long and short time periods. These case studies allow for the actions and decisions of political leaders during crisis to be analyzed and for the model presented in this thesis to be developed.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Addressing Congress in 1996, James Lee Witt, the former administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, noted, “Disasters are very political events.”¹ A study of disaster declarations for flood-related incidents from 1965 to 1997, for instance, showed that instances of presidential disaster declarations were 45 percent higher during election years than in non-election years.² As political events, disasters also have the ability to alter the trajectory of political careers, either in politicians’ favor or to their detriment.³

Two prominent disasters, both involving sitting presidents and the mayors of the affected cities, exemplify divergent ways that politicians manage the political nature of crises. The first, the attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, show President George W. Bush and New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani largely benefiting politically from the attacks. Conversely, when Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico in September 2017, President Donald Trump and San Juan, Puerto Rico Mayor Carmen Yulín Cruz exchanged barbs publically, apparently in an effort to damage the other politically. Each incident shows the impact of political crisis leadership and political crisis management, respectively, during major crises.

President Bush believed that history would judge him largely by how well he responded to the attacks on his country so early in his tenure.⁴ By October 8 following the attacks, his political advisor, Karl Rove, had produced the first of his “racing forms,” detailing polling analysis that showed the public was responding to the president’s leadership following the attacks approvingly, with his approval rating as ranging from a

¹ Alan B. Krueger, “At FEMA, Disasters and Politics Go Hand in Hand,” *New York Times*, September 15, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/15/business/at-fema-disasters-and-politics-go-hand-in-hand.html?mcubz=3>.

² Mary W. Downton and Roger A. Pielke Jr., “Discretion without Accountability: Politics, Flood Damage, and Climate,” *Natural Hazards Review* 2, no. 4 (November 2001): 163.

³ Kevin Arceneaux and Robert M. Stein, “Who is Held Responsible for a Natural Disaster in an Urban Election,” *Journal of Urban Affairs* 28, no. 1 (2006): 43–53.

⁴ Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), 205.

remarkable 84 to 90 percent.⁵ Rove believed these polling numbers would provide the president with enormous political capital for 30 or 40 weeks after the attack.⁶ By February 2004, Rove had realized that the decision to invade Iraq had become a political negative for the president.⁷ In addition to the harm caused by the Iraq War, the president's handling of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2006 further damaged him politically.⁸

The president's temporary boost in approval ratings contrasted the political fortunes of Mayor Giuliani, the local leader with whom he was seen to work so closely following the attack, and for whom the attacks proved to be transformational. Even though some criticized his city's emergency preparedness before the event and response during the event, the unifying leadership he embodied in the aftermath became the cornerstone of his legacy. The *New York Times* summarized this transformation, stating his leadership that day morphed him from "a grouchy pol slip-sliding into irrelevancy to the Republican presidential candidate introduced as America's mayor."⁹ One of the major reasons for the positive impact of the terrorist attacks on Mayor Giuliani's political career may have been that his leadership, and the leadership of others, was perceived as aligning with views of how a political official should act during such a dramatic and traumatic event.

Hurricane Maria, which hit Puerto Rico in September 2017, shows a contrasting view of how local and national chief executives worked in the aftermath of a major event. In what would become an infamous exchange, Mayor Yulín Cruz lashed out on September 29, 2017 at acting Homeland Security Secretary Elaine Duke's optimistic

⁵ Woodward, *Bush at War*, 206.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 430.

⁸ Arjen Boin, Paul 't Hart, and Allan McConnell, "Crisis Exploitation: Political and Policy Impacts of Framing Contests," *Journal of European Policy* 16, no. 1 (December 2008): 81–82.

⁹ Michael Powell, "In 9/11 Chaos, Giuliani Forged a Lasting Image," *New York Times*, September 21, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/21/us/politics/21giuliani.html?mcubz=3>.

comments on the federal response efforts, stating that it was “not a good news story.”¹⁰ She went on to criticize the federal response efforts by stating, “We are dying, and you are killing us with the inefficiency.”¹¹

The direct attacks from the mayor elicited an aggressive response from the president the following day, and only days after he expressed his full commitment to assisting the island in its recovery.¹² Through his Twitter account, the president attributed her statements to his opponents in the Democratic Party, and stated that there was “Such poor leadership ability by the Mayor of San Juan, and others in Puerto Rico, who are not able to get their workers to help.”¹³ A poll taken weeks after the exchange showed that President Trump’s approval ratings for hurricane response had “plummeted 20 points since Puerto Rico was devastated by back-to-back hurricanes last month.”¹⁴

The authors of *The Politics of Crisis Management*—a book that depicts Mayor Giuliani, President Bush, and New York Governor George Pataki on the cover—argue that the expected actions of public officials during crises amount to five key tasks: sensemaking, decision making, meaning making, terminating, and learning.¹⁵ As the senior executive public official for the city who received the bulk of the attacks that day, Mayor Giuliani was able to exhibit these characteristics while offering comfort and support within the first few hours of the attacks; characteristics that some have attributed directly to the remarkable transformation of his political career.¹⁶

¹⁰ Daniella Diaz, “San Juan Mayor: ‘Dammit, This is Not a Good News Story,’” CNN Politics, September 29, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/09/29/politics/puerto-rico-hurricane-maria-san-juan-mayor-trump-response/index.html>.

¹¹ “Hurricane Maria: Puerto Rican Mayor Says US ‘Killing Us with the Inefficiency,’” ABC News Online, September 29, 2017, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-09-30/puerto-rico-mayor-criticises-us-aid-response/9003760>.

¹² “Hurricane Maria: Donald Trump Snaps at Puerto Rico Capital’s Mayor over Emergency Aid Criticism,” ABC News Online, September 30, 2017, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-09-30/trump-snaps-at-san-juan-mayor-over-hurricane-maria-aid-criticism/9004614>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Mary Papenfuss, “Trump’s Approval for Hurricane Response Plunges 20 Points after Puerto Rico Storms,” *Huffington Post*, October 17, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/trump-approval-puerto-rico-hurricane_us_59e582b3e4b02a215b3288ee.

¹⁵ Arjen Boin et al., *The Politics of Crisis Management: Public Leadership under Pressure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 10.

¹⁶ Powell, “In 9/11 Chaos, Giuliani Forged a Lasting Image.”

How exactly Mayor Giuliani not only survived the terrorist attacks politically but also flourished afterward has been foundational to research ever since, especially for those interested in finding a formula for success that differentiates a positive political outcome from a negative one. Contrasting Giuliani's heroic image after the 9/11 attacks with that of President Bush's following his administration's response to Hurricane Katrina, some research provides a framework for how the actions of political leaders should be assessed during crises.¹⁷ Other research identifies an "incumbency advantage" for elected officials in future elections by studying voting trends in Florida before and after Hurricane Andrew.¹⁸ Another work argues that the political impacts of crises are difficult to predict; however, elected and appointed officials may best lead through and survive a crisis by establishing the frames that form the dominant perception of events.¹⁹

Since politicians must pursue the dual objectives of both governing and avoiding blame for a crisis, the most important of the five key tasks outlined in *The Politics of Crisis Management* is meaning making. Elected and appointed officials can communicate the results of their sensemaking efforts to the public, as well as their decisions on how to address the crisis. As the crisis develops and terminates, they can also frame the crisis through narratives that help them avoid the blame as well. If successful, these narratives can set the foundation for the formal organizational learning that takes place after the incident.

However, all these activities occur during and after an incident, and it is proposed in this thesis that political crisis leadership must also occur beforehand. If the objective of political leaders is to govern and avoid blame, and if meaning making is their primary mechanism for doing both, then political crisis leaders should work to establish narratives prior to crises that they can then transform during and after the event, which are described in this paper as "resilience narratives."

¹⁷ Arjen Boin, Sanneke Kuipers, and Werner Overdijk, "Leadership in Times of Crisis: A Framework for Assessment," *International Review of Public Administration* 18, no. 1 (2013): 79.

¹⁸ David. K. Twigg, *The Politics of Disaster: Tracking the Impact of Hurricane Andrew* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012).

¹⁹ Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell, "Crisis Exploitation: Political and Policy Impacts of Framing Contests," 81–106.

A. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Instead of analyzing which actions and factors most likely lead to success for political leaders during or following a crisis, as has been studied elsewhere, this work is organized around three different questions. Which factors contribute to political leaders choosing to engage in political crisis leadership instead of political crisis management? Which methods do political crisis leaders use both to govern and to avoid blame? And how can political crisis leaders better lead during all phases of crises, particularly before they emerge?

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

The understanding of crises has evolved in recent years, just as the types and impacts of crises have evolved. A definition from 1963 defines a crisis as “a situation that threatens high-priority goals of the decision-making unit; restricts the amount of time available for response before the decision is transformed, and surprises the members of the decision-making unit by its occurrence.”²⁰ Challenging all three aspects of this definition in their 1989 work, *Coping with Crises: The Management of Disasters, Riots and Terrorism*, authors Uriel Rosenthal, Michael T. Charles, and Paul ‘t Hart argue that a crisis is “a serious threat to the basic structure of fundamental value and norms of a social system, which—under time pressures and highly uncertain circumstances—necessitates making critical decisions.”²¹ The definition has continued to develop.

More recently, scholars have been less interested in defining crises and have rather been taken by the extraordinary complexity of crises altogether. In *Crisis Leadership: Planning for the Unthinkable*, Ian Mitroff refuses to give a concrete definition of a crisis, instead opting to give what he calls a “guiding definition:”

A crisis is an event that affects or has the potential to affect the *whole* organization. If something affects only a small part of an organization it may not be a crisis. In order for a crisis to result, it must exact a *major toll*

²⁰ Charles F. Hermann, “Some Consequences of Crisis which Limit the Viability of Organizations,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 8 (1963): 61–82.

²¹ Uriel Rosenthal, Michael T. Charles, and Paul ‘t Hart, *Coping with Crises: The Management of Disasters, Riots and Terrorism* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thompson Publisher, 1989), 10.

on the lives, property, financial earnings, reputations and general well-being of an organization. More often than not, all of these occur simultaneously. A crisis is something that ‘cannot be contained within the walls of the organization.’²²

Based on this purposely vague definition, Mitroff argues that contemporary crises are far more complex than crises from earlier periods; complexities concentrated by technology, while most modern organizations are still organized around machine-age principles.²³ In *Leadership in Unconventional Crises: A Transatlantic and Cross-Sector Assessment*, Erwan Lagadec agrees with Mitroff’s overall assessment. In defining *unconventional crises*, Lagadec argues the key distinction in these new crises is found in their “networked” nature. In particular, it is in the “paradoxical combination of extreme complexity and extreme simplicity in the disruptions that modern networks enable.”²⁴ Both Mitroff and Lagadec envision new forms of leadership to manage these complex crises. They argue for a less traditional crisis management structure and call for a new culture of leadership as evolved as the threat of the modern or unconventional crisis.²⁵

Just as the complexity of crises evolves, in other words, so must the characteristics and cultures of leaders within organizations who confront those crises. In particular, Mitroff distinguishes between crisis management and crisis leadership, arguing strongly for the latter. Generally speaking, Mitroff argues that crisis management is reactive where proactive crisis leadership aims to “identify crises and prepare an organization systematically, i.e., as a whole system, before a major crisis has happened.”²⁶ Crisis leadership, according to Mitroff, requires critical thinking, communication, and decision making during all phases of the crisis.²⁷

²² Ian Mitroff, *Crisis Leadership: Planning for the Unthinkable* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2004), 63.

²³ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁴ Erwan Lagadec, *Leadership in Unconventional Crises: A Transatlantic and Cross-Sector Assessment* (Washington, DC: Center for Transatlantic Relations, 2009), 2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 30; Mitroff, *Crisis Leadership: Planning for the Unthinkable*, 10.

²⁶ Mitroff, *Crisis Leadership: Planning for the Unthinkable*, 10.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

In his 2013 volume titled *Handbook of Research on Crisis Leadership in Organizations*, Andrew J. DuBrin summarizes the arguments on crisis definition, typology, and leadership. He writes, “Crisis leadership is the process of leading group members through a sudden and largely unanticipated, intensely negative, and emotionally draining circumstances.”²⁸ He continues, “Crises facing organizations can be classified as financial, informational, destruction of property, human resources, reputational, and violent behavior.”²⁹

Even as the academic understanding of crises has evolved, and as variations in definitions have exposed different academic perspectives, as shown through the definitions provided in this thesis, several consistent aspects to a unified definition have emerged. Based on the similarities in these definitions, it can be inferred that crises appear in many forms, they involve at least the threat of negative disruption to systems and services, and the perception of risk and threat changes for various actors over time, as the crisis becomes more or less acute. Accepting Mitroff’s distinction between “crisis manager” and “crisis leader” also implies that crises are best addressed at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels.

C. ADDRESSING POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF CRISES

Often, as these complex and unconventional crises have an impact on the public, elected officials must take action or suffer political consequences, meaning that political crisis leadership is a category of crisis leadership. In “Political Leadership in Times of Crisis,” the authors argue that “in today’s world, political leaders may well be defined in terms of their performance under pressure and stress.”³⁰ Thus, elected leaders must learn to act during times when the “stakes are much higher, the public is much more attentive,

²⁸ Andrew J. DuBrin, “Personal Attributes and Behaviors of Effective Crisis Leaders,” in *Handbook of Research on Crisis Leadership in Organizations*, ed. Andrew J. DuBrin (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2013), 20.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Chris Hansell, Arjen Boin, and Paul ‘t Hart, “Political Leadership in Times of Crisis,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Leadership*, ed. R.A.W. Rhodes and Paul ‘t Hart (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 418.

its mood more volatile, and institutional constraints on elite decision making are considerably looser.”³¹

These authors note that scholars have studied crises since the 1960s; yet, it was not until the 1980s that public administration and policy scholars began to study the subject. This interest in crisis in these fields developed two main branches of research, they argue, first, research studied how government processes and structure changed in response to crises, and the second branch of research “conceptualized crises as ‘critical junctures’ in politics and public policy.”³² These authors argue that throughout this period, “a genuinely interdisciplinary venture has emerged,” which is based on a fundamental assumption, “that conditions of crisis—high threat, uncertainty, and deep urgency—evoke political and psychological mechanisms that change the way in which people, organizations, governments, polities, and media act and interact, yielding both great challenges and great opportunities for the exercise of public leadership.”³³

This research suggests that in these complex, modern crises, elected and appointed political figures see an intense leadership challenge. They recognize potential calamity and consequences, which can be negative accountability measures or positive opportunities, and that they must navigate these issues. “Just as crisis politics differs from politics as usual, crisis leadership differs from leadership in routine times,” these authors write.³⁴

In *The Politics of Crisis Management: Public Leadership Under Pressure*, Arjen Boin, Paul ‘t Hart, Eric Stern, and Bengt Sendelius provide a framework for understanding political leadership during crises. They are careful to note that they are not providing a handbook for elected officials to use during crises, but rather they aim to extend the interdisciplinary approach of political crisis leadership. “We view crisis management not just in terms of the coping capacity of governmental institutions and public policies but first and foremost as a deeply controversial and intensely political

³¹ Hansell, Boin, and ‘t Hart, “Political Leadership in Times of Crisis,” 418–419.

³² Ibid., 420.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 418.

activity.”³⁵ Through their work, they wish to contribute by highlighting the “political dimensions of crisis leadership: issues of conflict, power, and legitimacy.”³⁶

According to *The Politics of Crisis Management*, political leaders can avail themselves of five essential tasks during crises: “sensemaking,” “decision making,” “meaning making,” “terminating,” and “learning.” These individual tasks are not necessarily linear in nature and can take place at different times and varying intensities throughout a crisis. Due to this fact, these authors embrace something akin to the vague definition of crisis offered by Mitroff and Lagadec, stating, “non-linear dynamics and complexity make a crisis hard to detect.”³⁷

Sensemaking is detecting the development of a crisis before, during, and after the event.³⁸ Since “the driving mechanisms of crisis are often concealed behind (and embedded within) the complexities of our modern systems,” political leaders at the strategic level must ensure that subordinate leaders at the operational and tactical levels have appropriate mechanisms in place to detect rising crises to frame those crises in a way that allows them to manage them.³⁹ If these do not exist, then it is possible that the image projected to the outside is one of “paralysis and ineffectiveness.”⁴⁰

But even when these mechanisms are in place within organizational structures that does not always mean that the data are not “the subject of a political process.”⁴¹ In other words, when data is presented, organizations have the ability to interpret it, with some choosing “to divorce themselves from any impending threat” to avoid blame, while others “may seek to define the problem at hand in such a way that the organization will

³⁵ Boin et al., *The Politics of Crisis Management: Public Leadership under Pressure*, 9.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 7.

³⁸ Ibid., 10–11.

³⁹ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 23.

⁴¹ Ibid., 22.

actually benefit from the crisis.”⁴² The impacts of these political approaches can be mitigated by how political leaders choose to make sense of the crisis and the response.

Decision making refers to the need for political leaders to make decisions during crises; however, these authors challenge how crisis decision making is commonly viewed.⁴³ It is often assumed that effective crisis management is based on critical decisions made by leaders at key junctures during the crisis; however, they argue that a much more important factor is how the leader chooses to make decisions that lead to a “facilitation of crisis implementation and coordination throughout the response network.”⁴⁴ That is, “crises present leaders with choice opportunities” that are “highly consequential,” they are likely to present “trade-off choices,” they can “present leaders with major uncertainties,” and they must be made within strict time constraints.⁴⁵

Meaning making as an essential task for political leaders during crisis combines sensemaking and decision making by providing an opportunity for political leaders to shape “people’s understanding of a crisis and thus in building public support for their policies.”⁴⁶ Meaning making by political leaders during crisis is important for a number of reasons, but primarily by attempting to “reduce the public and political uncertainty of the crisis.”⁴⁷ Political leaders do this “by communicating a persuasive story line (a narrative) that explains what happened, why it had to be that way, what its repercussions are, how it can be resolved, who can be relied upon to do so, and who is to blame.”⁴⁸ Providing this information through a crisis narrative allows leaders to maintain support during the crisis and to avoid blame in its aftermath.

Terminating as an essential task for political crisis leaders is greater than ending the response activities. In fact, for political leaders, the political crisis can become more

⁴² Boin et al., *The Politics of Crisis Management: Public Leadership under Pressure*, 23.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 11–12.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 44–45.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 69–70.

acute for their offices after the immediate threat and danger passes.⁴⁹ These authors argue that the termination of the crisis depends directly on “the way leaders deal with the accountability process following the operational phase of the crisis.”⁵⁰

Learning as an essential task for crisis political leaders refers to how political leaders and others decide to change their organizations, policies, and procedures in the aftermath of a crisis.⁵¹ Learning following a crisis often comes through blue-ribbon committees, legislative reviews, or formal assessments of other kinds. Learning is how blame and credit can be determined, and how policy changes must happen.⁵²

D. MANAGING CRISES THROUGH MEANING MAKING

As the authors of *The Politics of Crisis Management* point out, political leaders during crises are tasked with dual objectives, they must both govern through the crisis by “shifting back from emergency to routine,” and they must also provide a believable explanation for what has happened and why they should not be blamed for it.⁵³ However, giving these dual objectives equal weight as this work does misidentifies the true nature of the crisis from the perspective of the political leader, and therefore, focuses too heavily on how political officials ought to lead during instead of describing how they actually perceive the threats they face and respond accordingly. Since elected officials seldom face the personal urgency of fighting fire, or responding to flood, terrorist attack, or other major crises, their greatest risk is blame risk, or in how the public who elects or appoints them perceives the handling of the crisis.

The idea of “blame risk” is studied extensively by Christopher Hood in *The Blame Game: Spin, Bureaucracy, and Self-preservation in Government*.⁵⁴ *The Blame Game* builds upon a work by R. Kent Weaver, which argues that political leaders are

⁴⁹ Boin et al., *The Politics of Crisis Management: Public Leadership under Pressure*, 91.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 92.

⁵¹ Ibid., 14–15.

⁵² Ibid., 129.

⁵³ Ibid., 14.

⁵⁴ Christopher Hood, *The Blame Game: Spin, Bureaucracy, and Self-preservation in Government*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

more likely to work to avoid blame than to position themselves to claim credit for an event due to a “negativity bias” among voters, which suggests that voters give politicians less blame for good policy than blame for failures.⁵⁵ Negativity bias supports the idea that elected and appointed officials will apply less energy toward positioning for credit through governing, and greater energy toward avoiding blame.

Hood outlines three strategies often used to avoid blame: presentational strategies, agency strategies, and policy strategies. Presentational strategies, which fall under meaning making in the framework provided in *The Politics of Crisis Management*, are often used by executive elected and appointed politicians who own responsibility for the systems that have been disrupted by the crisis, as well as the systems of response. According to Hood, “‘presentational strategies’ involve various ways of trying to avoid blame by spin, stage management, and argument.”⁵⁶ As shown in Table 1, these strategies consist of four major kinds—“keeping a low profile,” “winning the argument,” “changing the subject,” and “drawing a line”—each of which can be deployed in different circumstances, although it not guaranteed that any will result in actual blame avoidance.⁵⁷

Table 1. Some Examples of Presentational Strategies⁵⁸

Keeping a Low Profile:	Winning the Argument:
Motto: “Keep your head down until it blows over.” Example: Being unavailable for comment.	Motto: “Fight your corner to win over your audience.” Example: Offering persuasive excuses and justifications.
Changing the Subject: Motto: “Divert the attention of your critics or the public.” Example: Finding good times to bury bad news.	Drawing the Line: Motto: “Disarm your critics before they turn nasty.” Example: The tactics of “sorry democracy.”

⁵⁵ R. Kent Weaver, “The Politics of Blame Avoidance,” *Journal of Public Policy* 6, no. 4 (1986): 371–98.

⁵⁶ Hood, *The Blame Game: Spin, Bureaucracy, and Self-preservation in Government*, 17.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁵⁸ Source: *Ibid.*

Depending on the nature of the crisis and on the credibility of the political official feeling the blame risk, these presentational strategies can be used to avoid blame in multiple ways. Matthew W. Seeger and Timothy L. Sellnow argue in *Narratives of Crisis: Telling Stories of Ruin and Renewal*, that crises have enormous and immediate social impacts, and that “much of the meaning, power, and ultimate impact of a crisis are functions of the ensuing network of narratives.”⁵⁹ These narratives consist of blame narratives, renewal narratives, hero narratives, victim narratives, and memorial narratives, all of which can become central aspects of presentational strategies deployed by political leaders to avoid or minimize blame.

These narratives and other aspects of the presentational strategies do not exist in a vacuum, just as crises seldom do. Instead, according to Arjen Boin, Paul ‘t Hart, and Allan McConnell in their article, “Crisis Exploitation: Political and Policy Impacts of Framing Contests,” “crises typically generate a contest between frames and counter-frames concerning the nature and severity of a crisis, its causes, the responsibility for its occurrence or escalation, and implications for the future.”⁶⁰ How effectively political officials deploy presentational strategies and crisis narratives to avoid blame will often dictate how they weather the crisis, even more than how effectively the government manages the public safety or other risks of the crisis.

Lars W. Nord and Eva-Karin Olsson describe how one political official can establish a dominant frame and win the framing contest as described by Boin, ‘t Hart, and McConnell in “Frame, Set, Match! Towards a model of successful crisis rhetoric.” In this article, they argue for a model that can be used by political actors to avoid blame during a

⁵⁹ Matthew W. Seeger and Timothy L. Sellnow, *Narratives of Crisis: Telling Stories of Ruin and Renewal* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 9.

⁶⁰ Boin, ‘t Hart, and McConnell, “Crisis Exploitation: Political and Policy Impacts of Framing Contests,” 82.

crisis. The primary factor in assessing political actors' ability to avoid blame is in how well they can frame the crisis as exogenous (outside of their control) instead of endogenous (they are both responsible for the crisis and its causes).⁶¹ As the nature of the crisis may dictate whether it is framed as exogenous or endogenous, the authors suggest a three-part model that can be used by political actors to avoid blame during a crisis. Their model begins with "the frames promoted by the political actor," it then goes to how well those frames resonate with other frames to make them more powerful, and finally, how those strengthened frames resonate with the existing media narratives, or media logic, surrounding the crisis.⁶²

If the crisis has passed and damage has been done by blame being assigned to the elected or appointed officials for various aspects of the crisis, they may have to work to restore their reputations after the crisis has terminated. William L. Benoit bases his theory of image restoration on two basic assumptions in his work, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: A Theory of Image Restoration Strategies*, first, that communication is "a goal-directed strategy," and second, that "maintaining a positive reputation is one of the central goals of communication."⁶³ Based on these assumptions, Benoit provides five methods that can be used to restore someone's image after blame has been assigned: denial, evasion, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and victimage (scapegoating) and mortification (accepting blame and seeking forgiveness).⁶⁴

As Table 2 shows, Mitroff argues that the differences between crisis management and crisis leadership are significant.

⁶¹ Lars W. Nord and Eva-Karin Olsson, "Frame, Set, Match! Towards a Model of Successful Crisis Rhetoric," *Public Relations Inquiry* 2, no. 1 (2013): 81.

⁶² Nord and Olsson, "Frame, Set, Match! Towards a Model of Successful Crisis Rhetoric," 82.

⁶³ William L. Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: A Theory of Image Restoration Strategies* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 63.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 75–82.

Table 2. Characteristics of Political Crisis Management vs. Political Crisis Leadership⁶⁵

Characteristics of Crisis Management	Characteristics of Crisis Leadership
<i>Technical approach to handling crises</i>	<i>Philosophical approach to handling crises</i>
<i>Takes place during crisis</i>	<i>Takes place before, during, and after crisis</i>
<i>Reactive to the crisis</i>	<i>Proactive toward unthinkable crises</i>
<i>Centralized/bureaucratic</i>	<i>Globally integrated/locally responsible</i>

Although several key differences appear between crisis leadership and crisis management, Mitroff argues that the central difference is that crisis leadership understand the need to manage the four factors of a crisis—“crisis types,” “crisis mechanisms,” “crisis systems,” and “crisis stakeholders”—“before, during, and after a crisis.”⁶⁶ If the same factors apply to the differences between political crisis management and political crisis leadership, and if the time component is also the key differentiation between political crisis management and political crisis leadership, then the time component can help illuminate the difference between decisions to govern or manage blame during the stages of crises by political officials.

An overlap occurs between political crisis management and political crisis leadership, though. Elected and appointed officials practicing political crisis leadership, those who lead before, during, and after a crisis, also have to manage during the crisis, just like those practicing political crisis management. The key difference between how political crisis leaders manage crises, though, is that they focus on both governing and avoiding blame, while political crisis managers focus their actions during the crisis more on blame avoidance and less on governing during the crisis, which can become image restoration after the crisis, as depicted in Tables 3 and 4.

⁶⁵ Adapted from Mitroff, *Crisis Leadership: Planning for the Unthinkable*, 10.

⁶⁶ Mitroff, *Crisis Leadership: Planning for the Unthinkable*, 4–5.

Table 3. Political Crisis Management Framework⁶⁷

	<i>Before</i>	<i>During</i>	<i>After</i>
<i>Sensemaking</i>		<i>Assess crisis and determine the potential blame risk.</i>	
<i>Decision Making</i>		<i>Emphasize reduction of blame risk over operational considerations.</i>	
<i>Meaning Making</i>		<i>Invoke blame narratives or other presentational strategies to avoid blame.</i>	
<i>Terminating</i>		<i>Work to terminate blame risk instead of terminate operational crisis.</i>	
<i>Learning</i>		<i>Avoid organizational learning that may bring more scrutiny and ongoing blame risk potential.</i>	

Table 3 depicts the political crisis manager’s emphasis on blame avoidance during a crisis, while Table 4 shows the political crisis leader’s focus on both governing and avoiding blame during all phases of the crisis; that is, before, during, and after. These tables show an application of Mitroff’s characteristics of both political crisis managers and political crisis leaders as organized by the five key tasks for political officials during crises: sensemaking, decision making, meaning making, terminating, and learning.

⁶⁷ Adapted from Boin et al., *The Politics of Crisis Management: Public Leadership under Pressure*, 10-15; Mitroff, *Crisis Leadership: Planning for the Unthinkable*, 10.

Table 4. Political Crisis Leadership Framework⁶⁸

	<i>Before</i>	<i>During</i>	<i>After</i>
<i>Sensemaking</i>	Imagine worst-case crises and develop detection and information sharing mechanisms.	<i>Assess crisis to determine potential consequences for jurisdiction as we as potential blame risk.</i>	Improve understanding of worst-case crises and effectiveness of detection and information sharing mechanisms.
<i>Decision Making</i>	Plan, train, and exercise through entire government to ensure subordinates are knowledgeable and empowered.	<i>Equally weigh governing with blame risk reduction.</i>	Improve preparedness efforts based on effectiveness of response and recovery operations.
<i>Meaning Making</i>	Develop resilience narratives based on the jurisdiction’s identity.	<i>Transform resilience narratives into renewal narratives.</i>	Continue to develop renewal narrative throughout the recovery process.
<i>Terminating</i>		<i>Work to terminate blame risk while also terminating operational crisis.</i>	
<i>Learning</i>	Conduct after-action reviews following exercises to develop recommendations for improvement.	<i>Maintain transparency and gather relevant information that can inform an after-action review.</i>	Conduct after-action reviews following crisis to develop recommendations for improvement.

These two tables show two items of note. First, while the entire “before” and “after” periods are shaded in for the political crisis manager, indicating a lack of attention to the crisis outside of the “during” phase, the entry for “terminating” is shaded in for the political crisis leader table. While some methods may be implemented that a political crisis leader can work with to terminate a crisis before it starts or after it is over, such methods need to be studied in future research, as it is not the focus of this study.

⁶⁸ Adapted from Boin et al., *The Politics of Crisis Management: Public Leadership under Pressure*, 10-15; Mitroff, *Crisis Leadership: Planning for the Unthinkable*, 10.

Also of note is the reference to “resilience narratives” in the political crisis leader table listed under “meaning making” before the crisis occurs. Resilience narratives amount to intentional efforts by political leaders to establish a message of resilience long before a crisis can occur, and that can be transformed into renewal narratives during the crisis and when it has terminated. The frameworks provided in this thesis for political crisis management and political crisis leadership, as well as the development of the concept resilience narratives, amount to the novel contribution of this work.

E. RESEARCH DESIGN

While this thesis involves aspects of each of the topics discussed in these preceding works, it also aims to expand on them in a number of ways. First, this thesis modifies the current five-part framework. Second, it asks a different set of questions than the scholarship briefly cited. And third, it offers practical recommendations for how political leaders can better prepare for the political and operational implications of a crisis.

First, the framework of the five key tasks presented in *The Politics of Crisis Management* is generally accepted in this thesis, as is the assertion that these five tasks must be directed toward the elected or appointed officials’ dual objectives of both governing and avoiding blame for the crisis.⁶⁹ However, this five-part framework is prescriptive in nature, defining how elected officials *ought* to behave during crises, and therefore, insufficiently describes how political officials *actually do* behave during crises. In a very minor addition to this current and dominant framework, this work argues for a descriptive addendum that distinguishes between what is referred to as political crisis *leadership* and political crisis *management*.

The development of the concepts of political crisis leadership and political crisis management are related directly to the concepts of crisis leadership and crisis management. The key difference between the concepts, then, is that political crisis

⁶⁹ Boin et al., *The Politics of Crisis Management: Public Leadership under Pressure*, 14.

management is reactive and takes place during the crisis while political crisis leadership is proactive and strategic and takes place before, during, and after the crisis. Another difference between the two concepts is that politicians who engage in crisis management focus primarily on blame avoidance or blame management during the crisis while political crisis leadership balances the need to govern and avoid blame throughout all stages of the crisis.

The decision by political leaders to call for a written record of the failures that led to the attacks of September 11, 2001, through *The 9/11 Commission Report*, exemplifies a difference between political crisis leadership and political crisis management, especially with respect to the key task of learning. This task almost by definition must take place after the critical point in the incident has terminated, and it involves formal mechanisms like the blue ribbon commission or policymaking bodies to examine the situation, make recommendations, and otherwise find changes that will prevent such failures in the future. Political crisis managers seldom engage in the high liability activity of learning because they do not wish to encourage others to examine what mistakes were made.⁷⁰ However, few crises in the nation's history have resulted in as robust and public an analysis as that produced in the *9/11 Commission Report*, the final chapter of which outlines comprehensive recommendations for ensuring that future attacks are avoided.⁷¹

Case studies are used to answer the research questions in a way that can be generalized for other political leaders and other crises in the future. The case studies in this thesis examine three specific crises that took place in recent years in the state of Nevada. The incidents have varying time pressures—fast-moving, slow-moving, and a combination thereof—and they are both man-made and naturally occurring incidents. The analysis in the case studies focuses primarily on the actions of political leaders.

Through the actions of political leaders during these three crises, it is argued in this paper that the most significant factor in determining whether a political leader

⁷⁰ Ibid., 118.

⁷¹ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company), 399–428.

chooses to pursue political crisis leadership or political crisis management is the perception of blame risk. That is, if the political leaders perceive they have a high likelihood of being blamed for the crisis or how it is handled, they choose political crisis management, or conversely, if they perceive that they have a low likelihood of being blamed for the crisis or how it is handled, they choose political crisis leadership. According to the authors of *The Politics of Crisis Management*, the blame risk is most defined during the termination of a crisis, suggesting that blame risk is associated directly with the speed with which the crisis ends.⁷² It is further argued in this work that effective crisis leaders use presentational strategies to set a dominant narrative that not only highlights the effective steps taken to manage the crisis, but also ensures they are not blamed for causing or mishandling the event. Finally, because political crisis leaders use presentational strategies during or after crises to both govern and avoid blame, they can take steps to establish resilience narratives prior to the crisis that transition into renewal narratives during and after the crisis terminates.

F. CHAPTER OUTLINE

Chapter II is a case study that examines the April 2014 standoff between law enforcement and the family of Cliven Bundy and their militia supporters. Chapter III is a case study that examines the assassination of two Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department Officers by radicals hoping to spark an anti-government revolution in June 2014. Chapter IV is case study that examines a series of flooding events that occurred throughout northern Nevada in January and February 2017, each resulting in presidential major disaster declarations. Chapter V provides analysis of the three case studies and concludes with recommendations regarding the use of “resilience narratives” by political leaders before crises occur. Chapter VI provides a coda for this thesis, describing political crisis leadership during a mass shooting attack in Las Vegas, Nevada, and how resilience narratives were employed by a key political leader to establish the framework for the resilience narrative that followed.

⁷² Boin et al., *The Politics of Crisis Management: Public Leadership under Pressure*, 91.

II. THE BUNKERVILLE STANDOFF: APRIL 2014

On April 12, 2014, local, state, and federal law enforcement officials faced off with hundreds of militia members who had gathered near the town of Bunkerville, Nevada, at the call of rancher Cliven Bundy and his family. The “Battle of Bunkerville,” as the militia members called it, was a political and public safety crisis that reached its acute stage that morning in the rural Nevada desert in 2014, but it had been a slow-moving crisis that had been building for weeks, years, and even decades before. And it continued for long afterwards.

The blame risk associated with the Bunkerville standoff was substantial for all the elected officials involved. It was the latest in a longstanding and very contentious dispute over the rights of private citizens to use public lands, and one that often pitted states’ rights against federal authority. Local elected leaders, particularly elected law enforcement, were responsible for keeping the peace within Clark County, and the state government had an interest and some authority in preserving the peace as well. When federal officials chose to enforce a court order to impound Bundy’s cattle by deploying law enforcement, the Bundy family and their fellow militia members had a near perfect scenario to claim they were victims of federal overreach.

The tension built between law enforcement and heavily armed citizens and increased under national media attention. The standoff was heavily covered by the national media, and media outlets sympathetic to the Bundy family, like Alex Jones, reinforced the militia’s narrative by referring to the standoff as “a Waco-style confrontation.”⁷³ This attention increased the blame risk for the elected officials involved, and it continued for months after the federal government chose to acquiesce to the militia members’ demands and release the cattle; a decision that had significant implications for the future of the federalism issues surrounding land management and land use by private citizens.

⁷³ Paul Joseph Watson and Alex Jones, “Feds Back Down in New Bundy Standoff, Agree to Release Cattle,” InfoWars, April 12, 2014, <https://www.infowars.com/feds-back-down-in-new-bundy-standoff-agree-to-release-cattle/>.

A. RANGE WAR

The current tension between local ranchers in the American west and the federal government began in earnest in the late 1970s and continued through the 1980s, when it failed to gain the necessary political traction. The Sagebrush Rebellion, as the ranchers' movement was known at the time, represented differences between land management practices by the federal government and local ranch operations practices.⁷⁴ Specifically, ranchers bristled at what they perceived as the federal government's penchant for increasing fees required for grazing, reducing or cancelling grazing permits seemingly on a whim, and otherwise requiring the ranchers to pay fees that other users of the rangeland did not have to pay.⁷⁵ Although several federal agencies were involved, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) received much of the ranchers' attention and ire during the rebellion.

Although the resistance to federal land management spanned the Great Basin and the greater west, the Sagebrush Rebellion essentially started in Nevada when the state legislature passed Assembly Bill 413, which asserted that the state now held control of "48 million acres of BLM lands in Nevada, roughly 79 percent of the state."⁷⁶ Assembly Bill 413 in Nevada exemplified much of the action of the Sagebrush Rebellion throughout its existence, which mostly consisted of state governments passing laws and private citizens using administrative and legal means to pursue remedies for their complaints. Although the Sagebrush Rebellion gained national attention, and even support from President Ronald Reagan, the movement faltered in the early 1980s when the rebels failed to convert their "dissatisfaction into meaningful political power."⁷⁷ The movement ended, but the tension between ranchers in the west and federal land managers lingered.

⁷⁴ R. McGreggor Cawley, *Federal Land, Western Anger: The Sagebrush Rebellion and Environmental Politics* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1993), 1.

⁷⁵ Leisl Carr Childers, *The Size of the Risk: Histories of Multiple Use in the Great Basin* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015), 212–213.

⁷⁶ Cawley, *Federal Land, Western Anger: The Sagebrush Rebellion and Environmental Politics*, 1.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 144.

Cliven Bundy's confrontation of the federal government in 2014 was the culmination of his life as a rancher in rural Clark County, Nevada, during the days of the Sagebrush Rebellion. Bundy moved to Bunkerville, Nevada, as a young child in the 1950s when his father, David Ammon Bundy, brought his family there from Mount Trumbull, Arizona.⁷⁸ David Bundy applied for and received his initial permit to graze 95 cattle in 1953 and began grazing on the Bunkerville Allotment in 1954.⁷⁹ Cliven continued to pay the grazing fees to the BLM from 1973 to 1993, but after 1993, when the BLM reduced the number of cattle he was allowed to graze to 150 cattle, the younger Bundy stopped paying his fees.⁸⁰ Nonetheless, he continued to graze 192 cattle on the Bunkerville Allotment.⁸¹

The BLM's decision to reduce the number of cattle grazing on federally managed land was based on a larger decision to set aside hundreds of thousands of acres of land for conservation.⁸² This decision was the result of a 1989 decision by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list the desert tortoise as "endangered," and a year later, it changed the listing to "threatened."⁸³ This decision, though based on federal policy from multiple agencies, further reinforced the ranchers' view that their needs were prioritized below the wishes of the other users of federal land.

A series of legal battles over the years culminated in the 2014 standoff. The BLM issued orders for Bundy to remove his cattle in 1994 and again in 1995.⁸⁴ In 1996, the Nevada State Legislature sought to reassert states' rights against federal land managers in their jurisdiction by again taking action to amend the Nevada Constitution by repealing

⁷⁸ "Bundy's Federal Feud: A Timeline," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, January 27, 2016, <https://www.reviewjournal.com/news/nation-and-world/bundys-federal-feud-timeline-of-events/>.

⁷⁹ Christi Turner, "Timeline: The BLM vs. Cliven Bundy," *High Country News*, May 12, 2014, http://www.hcn.org/issues/46.8/the-blm-vs-cliven-bundy-timeline/image_view_fullscreen?f=graphic.

⁸⁰ "Bundy's Federal Feud: A Timeline."

⁸¹ Turner, "Timeline: The BLM vs. Cliven Bundy."

⁸² Jaime Fuller, "The Long Fight between the Bundys and the Federal Government from 1989 to Today," *Washington Post*, January 4, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2014/04/15/everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-long-fight-between-cliven-bundy-and-the-federal-government/?utm_term=.810305051eda.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ "Bundy's Federal Feud: A Timeline."

the “disclaimer clause,” which had precluded Nevadans from the right to own the vast acreage of public land in the state.⁸⁵ The repeal by the legislature and citizens of Nevada was mostly symbolic though, and in 1998, the U.S. District Court of Nevada issued an order to Bundy reading, in part, “it is further ordered that Bundy is permanently enjoined from grazing his livestock within the Bunkerville Allotment and shall remove his livestock from this allotment on or before November 30, 1998.”⁸⁶

Considerable and increased angst and even violence against the federal government was seen during this same period in Nevada and nationwide. In 1992 and 1993, respectively, the United States saw the Ruby Ridge standoff in Idaho and the Waco raid in Texas, both of which attracted overwhelming national news coverage and attention. They also attracted the attention of various right-wing groups within the country, particularly as both events ended in tragedy, seemingly all due to federal overreach and overreaction, which appeared to galvanize these groups toward violence against the federal government in the years that would follow, culminating with the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995.

Violence between those sympathetic to the ranchers’ cause and the federal government exhibited as well. In 1993, a bomb was thrown onto the roof of the BLM headquarters in Reno, Nevada, with no reports of injury though.⁸⁷ Between March and August 1995, a series of bombings occurred on Forest Service property from Carson City to Elko, Nevada.⁸⁸ These attacks did not result in any injuries, and two Nevada men were eventually indicted by a federal grand jury for one of the attacks in Elko.⁸⁹

Violence against the federal government over land issues in Nevada was not only the purview of anonymous, private citizens, either. In 1994, Richard Carver, a rancher

⁸⁵ “Bundy’s Federal Feud: A Timeline.”

⁸⁶ Turner, “Timeline: The BLM vs. Cliven Bundy.”

⁸⁷ “Forest Rangers Becomes the Target of Two Bombings,” *New York Times*, August 5, 1996, <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/08/06/us/forest-ranger-becomes-target-of-2-bombings.html>.

⁸⁸ Ryan Lenz, Mark Potok, and Heidi Beirich, *War in the West: The Bundy Ranch Standoff and the American Radical Right* (Montgomery, AL: Southern Poverty Law Center, 2014), 24–25, https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/d6_legacy_files/downloads/publication/war_in_the_west_report.pdf.

⁸⁹ “Hostility Unnerves Federal Employees,” *Las Vegas Sun*, November 11, 1999, <https://lasvegas.sun.com/news/1999/nov/11/hostility-unnerves-federal-employees/>.

and elected county commissioner from Nye County, used heavy equipment to reopen a road that had been blocked by the U.S. Forest Service and threatened violence with the armed protesters who joined and supported him.⁹⁰ A lone U.S. Forest Service agent “retreated up the canyon, still holding a sign that informed Carver that he was trespassing,” and Nevada’s then-Governor, Bob Miller, later denounced Carver’s actions.⁹¹ But against federal regulations and the highest state authority, Carver’s actions had established him as a hero for those who believed in “county supremacy” over the federal and state governments as he did.⁹²

Throughout the 1990s, Bundy continued to pursue a resolution through legal means; however, federal patience was wearing thin. In 2008, the Interior Board of Land Appeals denied Bundy’s appeal of the BLM’s decision to cancel his range improvement authorization.⁹³ In 2011, the BLM sent a notice to Bundy to remove his cattle or they would be removed by the federal agency. He refused. Thus, in April 2012, the BLM initiated an operation to round up and remove more than 500 of Bundy’s cattle that were illegally grazing near Gold Butte, but the agency suspended the operation indefinitely amid safety concerns for the federal officials and contractors who were to be involved in the gather.⁹⁴

A similar set of circumstances developed ahead of the 2014 standoff. In July 2013, the U.S. District Court of Nevada issued an order for Bundy to remove his cattle from public land within 45 days.⁹⁵ In March 2014, the BLM alerted Bundy of its intent to gather and impound his cattle if he continued to graze them illegally on federal land. In

⁹⁰ Gary Andrew Poole, “Hold It! This Land Is My Land!: Led by Commissioner Dick Carver, Nevada’s Nye County Is Now Ground Zero in the West’s War Against the U.S. Government,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 3, 1995, http://articles.latimes.com/1995-12-03/magazine/tm-9835_1_nye-county.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ “Bundy’s Federal Feud: A Timeline.”

⁹⁴ Keith Rogers, “BLM Puts Gold Butte Cattle Roundup on Hold.” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, April 11, 2012, <https://www.reviewjournal.com/news/blm-puts-gold-butte-cattle-roundup-on-hold/>.

⁹⁵ “Bundy’s Federal Feud: A Timeline.”

response to this notice, Bundy distributed a letter titled “Range War Emergency Notice and Demand for Protection” to local, state, and federal officials.⁹⁶

Bundy’s letter, which adopted the language of the Sovereign Citizen Movement, and his subsequent media presence, served as a call to action for members of various militia-related movements around the country.⁹⁷ Many of the supporters of Cliven Bundy and his family wore military-type clothing and carried weapons in the open, all of which seemed to reinforce the vague threats of violence that came from Mr. Bundy and members of his family in public statements. Due to the growing public interest in the BLM’s activities in Bunkerville from both supporters and opponents of the Bundy family, the agency set up two “first amendment areas” in Bunkerville to provide the protestors a place to express their freedom of speech and also to keep them away from the gather operation.⁹⁸

The confluence of federal law enforcement, militia members, and media heightened the celebrity status of the Bundy family among their right-wing sympathizers around the country, status that would only continue to rise with the tensions between the two sides in the days following April 5, 2014, when the cattle gather began.⁹⁹ On April 6, one of Bundy’s sons was “cited for misdemeanor refusing to disperse and resisting arrest,” for which he spent a day in jail.¹⁰⁰ On April 9, as militia members began to converge on the Bundy’s Bunkerville ranch, another of Cliven’s sons, Ammon, was shot with a stun gun by BLM law enforcement officials for kicking a police dog, but not arrested.¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ Fuller, “The Long Fight between the Bundys and the Federal Government from 1989 to Today.”

⁹⁷ J. J. McNab, “Context Matters: The Cliven Bundy Standoff—Part 1,” *Forbes*, April 30, 2014, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jjmacnab/2014/04/30/context-matters-the-cliven-bundy-standoff-part-1/#3d03cc9d7138>.

⁹⁸ Fuller, “The Long Fight between the Bundys and the Federal Government from 1989 to Today.”

⁹⁹ “Bundy’s Federal Feud: A Timeline.”

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Sarah Childress, “The Battle over Bunkerville: The Bundys, the Federal Government and the New Militia Movement,” *Frontline*, May 16, 2017, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/the-battle-over-bunkerville>.

While the news coverage persisted and the Bundy family achieved even higher heroic status among their supporters, who continued to travel to Bunkerville, often armed, the political crisis grew. Elected officials from local, state, and federal governments conveyed their views on the standoff, with Nevada's U.S. Senators Harry Reid and Dean Heller disagreeing on whether the militia members were terrorists or patriots, respectively.¹⁰² But for the officials closer to the activity in Nevada, and therefore potentially closer to the blame risk, the potential for a "Waco-style confrontation" required more thoughtful responses.

On April 8, Nevada Governor Brian Sandoval issued the first of his three press releases regarding the ranchers' crisis that was unfolding within his state. Noting that his office had received calls about the cattle gather, Governor Sandoval claimed that he "expressed those concerns directly to the BLM."¹⁰³ "Most disturbing to me," the governor continued, "is the BLM's establishment of a 'First Amendment Area' that tramples upon Nevadans' fundamental rights under the U.S. Constitution." He concluded his statement stating that "the BLM needs to reconsider its approach to this matter and act accordingly."¹⁰⁴ If his message was broad, national media coverage refined the target of the Governor's criticism. The Drudge Report for April 9, 2014, aired Governor Sandoval's statement under an inflammatory headline reading, "Governor Calls Fed Actions 'Intimidation'."¹⁰⁵

As the tension built in Bunkerville, and as more militia members arrived in Nevada to assist the Bundy family, the Governor got involved again. On April 11, he issued a second statement on the matter, which first restated his call to the BLM not to

¹⁰² Steve Benen, "Dean Heller Has Second Thoughts on Bundy," MSNBC, The Rachel Maddow Show (blog), April 30, 2014, <http://www.msnbc.com/rachel-maddow-show/dean-heller-has-second-thoughts-bundy>.

¹⁰³ Brian Sandoval, "Sandoval Statement on BLM Roundup," April 8, 2014, <http://gov.nv.gov/News-and-Media/Press/2014/Sandoval-Statement-on-BLM-Roundup/>.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ McNab, "Context Matters: The Cluven Bundy Standoff—Part 1."

“limit or hinder the constitutional rights of Nevadans and be mindful of its conduct.”¹⁰⁶ Furthermore he noted the high tensions and called for restraint from everyone involved before the situation turned violent.¹⁰⁷

By April 12, local, state, federal law enforcement faced off with armed supporters of the Bundy family, while BLM-contracted cowboys had gathered only about a third of Bundy’s approximately 900 cattle, which were dispersed across thousands of acres of open rangeland.¹⁰⁸ By the afternoon of that day, the intensity of the armed standoff was defused, at least momentarily, when an official with the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department announced that the BLM would discontinue the cattle gather, and that the federal agency would be returning the cattle to the land where they were gathered in a short period of time.¹⁰⁹ The tension continued again, though, when Bundy rejected the announcement and demanded instead that the federal government turn in all their weapons to the County sheriff, which he saw as the only legitimate law enforcement in the area, within an hour.¹¹⁰ When the BLM did not turn in their weapons, Bundy led supporters in releasing the cattle themselves.¹¹¹

The BLM released a statement acknowledging that it was discontinuing the cattle gather out of concerns for the safety of its staff and contractors.¹¹² Video footage posted online shows the BLM law enforcement personnel retreating after the decision to discontinue the gather, and being jeered and taunted by supporters of the Bundy family as

¹⁰⁶ “Sandoval Statement on BLM Roundup and Organized Protests,” Brian Sandoval, April 11, 2014, <http://gov.nv.gov/News-and-Media/Press/2014/Sandoval-Statement-on-BLM-Roundup-and-Organized-Protests/>.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ “Bundy’s Federal Feud: A Timeline.”

¹⁰⁹ Childress, “The Battle over Bunkerville: The Bundys, the Federal Government and the New Militia Movement.”

¹¹⁰ Lenz, Potok, and Beirich, *War in the West: The Bundy Ranch Standoff and the American Radical Right*, 24–25.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² “Feds Make Abrupt Move in Fight with Rancher,” CBS News, April 12, 2014, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/cliven-bundys-fight-in-nevada-with-federal-government-takes-turn/>.

they disembarked.¹¹³ To the militia members in Bunkerville, the BLM's decision was seen as a clear retreat in the face of military resistance. As the BLM vehicles drove through the crowd of militia members, "Bundy's supporters erupted with joy, waved flags, and called him a hero."¹¹⁴ Bundy congratulated his followers, stating that they had "backed those bureaucrats down and they run out of this country into Utah."¹¹⁵ Acknowledging that violence had been averted, Governor Sandoval issued his third and final statement for the standoff on April 12, stating that he had achieved his goal of maintaining safety throughout the event, and he further expressed appreciation to the BLM for its willingness to "listen to the concerns of the people of Nevada."¹¹⁶

B. BLAME GAME

Although the "Battle of Bunkerville" ended peacefully, the very public failure of the cattle gather on April 12 resulted in a blame game. A prominent conservative pundit in Nevada published an op-ed in the state's largest newspaper with an op-ed on April 14, titled, "Blame BLM Chief Neil Kornze, period."¹¹⁷ For their part, local and federal law enforcement noted that they would continue to pursue legitimate legal remedies against the militia members and the Bundy family. A spokesperson for the BLM's noted that it would continue to pursue resolution to the issue through other legal means following the standoff that day.¹¹⁸ And the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department stated that it was participating in investigations regarding the events in Bunkerville as well.¹¹⁹ Both

¹¹³ "Desert Duel: Bundy and Cowboys Force BLM Retreat," YouTube video, 4:40, posted by midnight sun, April 13, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QPOhq48IUMA>.

¹¹⁴ James Aho, *Far Right Fantasy: A Sociology of Religion and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2016), xiii.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Brian Sandoval, "Sandoval Statement on the Conclusion of BLM's Round Up," April 12, 2014, http://gov.nv.gov/News-and-Media/Press/2014/Sandoval-Statement-on-the-Conclusion-of-BLM_s-Round-Up/.

¹¹⁷ Sherm Frederick, "Blame BLM Chief Niel Kornze, Period," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, April 16, 2014, <https://www.reviewjournal.com/uncategorized/blame-blm-chief-neil-kornze-period/>.

¹¹⁸ "Nevada Rancher Standoff Turns on States' Rights Debate," CBS News, April 14, 2014, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/cliven-bundy-nevada-rancher-standoff-turns-on-a-states-rights-debate/>.

¹¹⁹ Jeff German, "Sheriff: FBI Is Investigating Threats Made to Law Enforcement during Bundy Showdown," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, May 9, 2014, <https://www.reviewjournal.com/news/bundy-blm/sheriff-fbi-is-investigating-threats-made-to-law-enforcement-during-bundy-showdown/>.

agencies actions helped show they were taking the failed outcome seriously, but victory for the far-right militia members was emboldening as Ruby Ridge and Waco had been over two decades before.

In the days and months that followed, two divergent perspectives continued to shape the broader understanding of what happened over that period, and who was responsible for it. First, on April 14, Nevada State Assemblywoman Michelle Fiore posted a lengthy blog entry that claimed to provide “the truth about the Bundy’s [sic] vs. the BLM.”¹²⁰ The post begins with an emotional picture and description of her nursing a calf that had been separated from its mother during the cattle gather and was unable to receive nourishment for several days. In her post, she hails the efforts of the “American-minded Bundy supporters,” contrasting them with the “Nazi-minded” law enforcement that was present.¹²¹ After proposing conspiracy theories about why the BLM wanted its land, she issues a call to action for her fellow elected officials to join her in writing state legislation that would prevent the federal government from carrying out similar actions in the future.¹²²

Second, Clark County Sheriff Doug Gillespie waited longer to share his beliefs on who was to blame for the standoff. In early July 2014, Gillespie spoke with members of the media and stated that both the BLM and Bundy shared the blame for the crisis that “nearly led to a bloodbath in his jurisdiction.”¹²³ On one hand, he “harshly criticized” Bundy and his family members for their response to the BLM’s law enforcement actions, noting that he had spoken to Cliven Bundy many times prior to the standoff and urged him to ensure that any protests would be peaceful.¹²⁴ However, Gillespie also noted that

¹²⁰ Michelle Fiore, “Assemblywoman Fiore: The Truth about the Bundy’s vs. BLM,” April 18, 2014, http://www.thedailysheep.com/assemblywoman-fiore-the-truth-about-the-bundys-vs-blm_042014.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Joe Schoenmann, “Sheriff Breaks Silence, says BLM, Bundy Share Blame for Near-Catastrophe,” *Las Vegas Sun*, July 2, 2014, <https://lasvegassun.com/news/2014/jul/02/sheriff-breaks-silence-says-blm-bundy-share-blame/>.

¹²⁴ Mike Blasky, “Sheriff, Cliven Bundy Should Be Held Accountable for Crossing the Line,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, July 3, 2014, <https://www.reviewjournal.com/news/sheriff-cliven-bundy-should-be-held-accountable-for-crossing-the-line/>.

the “BLM deserves blame for escalating the situation, ignoring his advice, dismissing his warnings and even lying about their operation.”¹²⁵ Specifically, Gillespie stated that he had advised the federal agency to hold public meetings about the gather, meetings that never took place.¹²⁶

Shortly after Gillespie’s comments were published, a BLM spokesperson released a statement firing back at Sheriff Gillespie. “It is unfortunate that the sheriff is now attempting to rewrite the details of what occurred, including his claims that the BLM did not share accurate information,” the BLM Spokesperson said, adding that he had “encouraged the operation and promised to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with us as we enforced two recent federal court orders.”¹²⁷ She concluded her statement with another sentiment clearly intended to offer some of the blame to Sheriff Gillespie as well. “Sadly, he backed out of his commitment shortly before the operation—and after months of joint planning—leaving the BLM and the National Park Service to handle the crowd control that the sheriff previously committed to handling.”¹²⁸

C. POLITICAL CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN SLOW-MOVING CRISES

Why would an elected state legislator engage in ad hominem attacks against federal law enforcement officials as the situation reached its boiling point? Why would the state’s chief executive focus the majority of his first public statement on a First Amendment areas created by the BLM? And why would the responsible federal officials retreat from armed militants who had declared a “range war” and had shown clear signs of a willingness to carry one out? These decisions, and others made by these political leaders throughout the standoff, do not make sense when they are assessed in terms of political crisis leadership, but they make sense when assessed in terms of blame management as a form of political crisis management.

¹²⁵ Blasky, “Sheriff, Cliven Bundy Should Be Held Accountable for Crossing the Line.”

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Martin Griffith, “BLM: Bundy Must be Held Accountable,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, July 5, 2014, <https://www.reviewjournal.com/news/blm-bundy-must-be-held-accountable/>.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

Each of these political actors felt a different level of blame risk, and their actions reflect this perception. Based on their own level of blame risk, real or perceived, they engaged in meaning making by deploying various presentational strategies to frame the events in terms favorable to them and contest the frames unfavorable to them. Although decisions were undoubtedly made based on intelligence, operational considerations, or officer safety, these efforts to manage this political crisis by decreasing personal blame risk directly contributed to the negative outcomes of this slow-moving crisis over the months and years to follow the BLM's retreat.

Assemblywoman Fiore had the least blame risk of any of the significant official political actors throughout the Bunkerville standoff. As a member of the state legislature, she lacked authority over this federal lands issue; in fact, Bunkerville and its residents were not even in her legislative district. At best, she could claim some oversight and budgetary responsibilities for the state agencies that deal with agriculture and natural resources issues, as well as some affinity for the constituents involved. Thus, the risk of being blamed for any negative outcome from the standoff was near zero, meaning that the “negativity bias” did not apply to her political calculations. Instead, Fiore sought to claim credit for the events at Bunkerville instead of avoiding blame, which people in her position do “to increase their chances of re-election, reappointment, promotion, and favorable repute during or even after their lifetimes.”¹²⁹

This lack of blame risk allowed Assemblywoman Fiore to be a political entrepreneur during the Bunkerville standoff. Through social media, she was able to tell an “evocative story of heroes of villains,” as described in *The Politics of Crisis Management*.¹³⁰ In doing so, she was able to establish a blame narrative to “reduce, limit, or explain responsibility in a way that is favorable to one group or individual.”¹³¹ To her, the militia members were peaceful protestors who were aggressed by the “poor-excuses of BLM staffers,” who attacked members of the Bundy family, picking “up Mr. Bundy’s elderly sister from behind, a total sneak attack,” ordered a dog to attack his son Ammon,

¹²⁹ Hood, *The Blame Game: Spin, Bureaucracy, and Self-preservation in Government*, 9.

¹³⁰ Boin et al., *The Politics of Crisis Management: Public Leadership under Pressure*, 105.

¹³¹ Seeger and Sellnow, *Narratives of Crisis: Telling Stories of Ruin and Renewal*, 66.

and then “the brutal BLM thugs beat up Dave Bundy, a pilot out of Las Vegas.”¹³² In her telling, the brave members of the militia had stood their ground against the fascist federal government, they had stood for states’ rights over illegitimate federal powers, and they were willing to die for their cause.

Fiore continued to attempt to set this frame and to contest frames critical of the Bundy standoff through her various media engagements that followed, even more than two years later when she participated in a lengthy article on her political activities.¹³³ The article, which covered her failed congressional campaign in 2016, covers her contact with the anti-government militia group, the Oath Keepers, and quotes her referring to the Bundy’s and others as “political prisoners.”¹³⁴ She even brought Cliven Bundy’s son Ammon to the Nevada State Legislature in 2015 to testify about her legislation that would encourage Nevada to take back lands managed by the federal government, a bill that ultimately failed to pass.¹³⁵

Governor Sandoval may have assumed that he had more blame risk than Assemblywoman Fiore but less than the local and federal law enforcement officials. While the law enforcement activities in Bunkerville were primarily federal and county-level, the Nevada Revised Statutes does allow the Governor to take certain specific actions during such an event. For example, the Governor may order his agencies or his military forces to use force in cases of “unlawful or riotous assembly.”¹³⁶ Also, the Nevada Revised Statutes authorizes the governor to declare a county in insurrection when “satisfied that the execution of civil or criminal process has been forcibly resisted in any county, by bodies of persons...”¹³⁷ While these statutes may have applied, the

¹³² Fiore, “Assemblywoman Fiore: The Truth about the Bundy’s vs. BLM.”

¹³³ Nick R. Martin, “Three Days on the Trail with America’s Most Radical Pro-Gun Candidate for Congress,” *Buzzfeed*, June 13, 2016, https://www.buzzfeed.com/nickrmartin/three-days-on-the-trail-with-americas-most-radical-pro-gun-c?utm_term=.jipZPyGdl#.ijqNdJVxn.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ “Bill Backed by Cliven Bundy Supporter Falls in Nevada Legislature,” *Las Vegas Sun*, April 22, 2015, <https://lasvegassun.com/news/2015/apr/22/bill-backed-cliven-bundy-falls-nevada-legislature/>.

¹³⁶ Nevada Revised Statutes 223.160, “Governor May Order Armed Force when Unlawful Or Riotous Assembly.”

¹³⁷ Nevada Revised Statutes 223.180, “Governor May Proclaim County in Insurrection.”

Governor's decision not to invoke either of them may have been wise given the extremely volatile situation on the ground, and more important, how such actions may have played into the militants' anti-government narrative.

However, even if choosing not to invoke these two legal options made operational sense, the governor's focus on the BLM's establishment of First Amendment areas during the standoff can be understood as a presentational strategy deployed to avoid the risks associated with blame. In other words, the governor's focus on the BLM's First Amendment areas appears to align with the approach referred to as "changing the subject."¹³⁸ The most typical form of changing the subject is "the creation or use of diversions to avoid the spotlight of blame and shift the public agenda onto other issues," which does offer an explanation for the governor's gambit in this paper.¹³⁹ However, because the governor also used words like "intimidation" in his initial press release, it appears also to be a form of "strategic evasion," where a political leader insists "that the main responsibility for crisis response lies with other agencies or levels of government."¹⁴⁰ This approach was effective in the framing contest throughout the standoff because it appealed to the "macrolevel blame narrative" of federal overreach that was pervasive throughout the various iterations of the Sagebrush Rebellion.¹⁴¹ At the same time, the governor was also careful not to praise the militia members' actions through his public statements as well.

The highest blame risk during the Bunkerville Standoff was shared between the federal and local governments, namely the BLM and the Clark County Sheriff. Unlike Assemblywoman Fiore and Governor Sandoval, the federal law enforcement officials were responsible for carrying out the federal judge's order.¹⁴² Furthermore according to the Nevada Revised Statutes, sheriffs in Nevada counties are generally responsible for

¹³⁸ Hood, *The Blame Game: Spin, Bureaucracy, and Self-preservation in Government*, 56.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Boin et al., *The Politics of Crisis Management: Public Leadership under Pressure*, 53.

¹⁴¹ Seeger and Sellnow, *Narratives of Crisis: Telling Stories of Ruin and Renewal*, 74.

¹⁴² Ralph Ellis and Michael Martinez, "Feds End Roundup, Release Cattle after Tense Nevada Showdown," CNN, April 14, 2014, http://www.cnn.com/2014/04/12/us/nevada-rancher-rangers-cattle-showdown/?hpt=hp_bn1.

keeping the peace, and in particular, the statute states that they shall “keep and preserve the peace in their respective counties, and quiet and suppress all affrays, riots and insurrections.”¹⁴³ Thus, not only did both law enforcement agencies have to make operational decisions, but they also had to make decisions that would help them avoid blame for this crisis within their jurisdictions.

As a local sheriff, Sheriff Doug Gillespie chose several presentational strategies to avoid the blame from this crisis. He first chose to “keep a low profile,” by waiting until July to provide his perspective to the media.¹⁴⁴ In his July remarks, he employed a different presentational strategy, namely that of “winning the argument.”¹⁴⁵ In this approach, executives employ presentational strategies that make credible cases that either deny that a problem had arisen or acknowledge that a problem had actually existed, but explain that the blame truly lies elsewhere.¹⁴⁶ This presentational strategy also amounts to a blame narrative, and the fact it was delivered long after the framing contests had lost momentum, which possibly made it more effective.¹⁴⁷ In an interview three months after the event, Sheriff Gillespie outlined his criticism toward both Cliven Bundy and the BLM.¹⁴⁸ As if inviting an after-action review from a federal agency, Gillespie noted, “I think if anybody would look at how they handled the protesting with the use of Tasers and police dogs, anyone would had been in policing would question those tactics.”¹⁴⁹

The BLM carried nearly all the blame risk throughout this event. The federal land management organization had allowed Bundy to continue to graze for two decades, and had even called off similar cattle gathers prior to the 2014 event. Officials came in with a paramilitary approach that played directly into the anti-government narrative of the Sagebrush Rebellion and the militia movement. Perhaps worst of all, they chose to retreat

¹⁴³ Nevada Revised Statutes 248.090, “General Duties.”

¹⁴⁴ Hood, *The Blame Game: Spin, Bureaucracy, and Self-preservation in Government*, 58.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Seeger and Sellnow, *Narratives of Crisis: Telling Stories of Ruin and Renewal*, 66.

¹⁴⁸ Schoenmann, “Sheriff Breaks Silence, Says BLM, Bundy Share Blame for Near-Catastrophe.”

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

in the face of aggressive tactics by the Bundy family and their militia supporters. Perhaps because they recognized the position they were in, they chose the presentational strategy of “keeping a low profile,” which amounts to controlling information and waiting for the storm of the crisis to pass.¹⁵⁰

D. CONSEQUENCES OF BUNKERVILLE

While the authors of *The Politics of Crisis Management* argue prescriptively that political responses to crises involve five key elements—“sensemaking,” “decision making,” “meaning making,” “terminating,” and “learning”—the response to the crisis presented by the Bunkerville Standoff was largely focused around meaning making. The focus on meaning making was due to the fact that the political actors involved, particularly those who felt some blame risk associated with the event, were practicing political crisis management and not political crisis leadership. While this approach appears to have been largely effective with respect to blame management, it focused only on the events before and during the crisis and failed to allow these leaders to recognize what might come afterwards.

For those involved in this event, very little could be referred to as “learning” from the crisis, as referenced in the model presented in *The Politics of Crisis Management*. Law enforcement agencies involved did conduct internal and confidential after action reviews, and legislation was presented in 2015 that would have addressed aspects of this crisis, but a body was not empanelled to suggest improvements or other typical approaches to learning for public agencies following crises. The real learning appears to have occurred within the radical militants who forced the government to retreat from Bunkerville after threatening violence, when they found they could defeat the government through force and rhetoric.

The collision between federal, state, and local law enforcement and the militants at Bunkerville emboldened the anti-government forces. Federal law enforcement had faced off with militia members, and the militia members won. Just more than 18 months later, Ammon Bundy built on the success of the standoff in Bunkerville by initiating an

¹⁵⁰ Hood, *The Blame Game: Spin, Bureaucracy, and Self-preservation in Government*, 58.

offensive occupation on the Malheur Federal Wildlife Refuge in Burns, Oregon.¹⁵¹ He and other members of the militia actually stated that they felt emboldened by their victory over the federal government in Nevada in 2014, and that it led to their actions in Oregon in 2016.¹⁵² Although two of the Bundy brothers were arrested and tried along with others for their involvement in the Burns occupation, they were found not guilty.¹⁵³ This verdict may have emboldened them even further, but their future anti-government efforts will have to wait until five incarcerated male members of the Bundy family learn the verdict for their involvement in the Bunkerville standoff.¹⁵⁴

Those directly engaged in various levels of the Bunkerville standoff in April 2014 could not necessarily predict how the militia members pointing rifles at them would act in the next minute, let alone the next 18 months. They had to govern, and operationally, that meant making decisions that avoided a bloodbath in the Nevada desert. However, as this case study shows, they chose to act through political crisis management and not political crisis leadership, prioritizing blame avoidance and operations during the crisis over more strategic concerns. Thus, they simply did not consider or even recognize the long-term implications of their actions and decisions that day.

¹⁵¹ Childress, “The Battle over Bunkerville: The Bundys, the Federal Government and the New Militia Movement.”

¹⁵² Jeff German, “Bunkerville ‘Success’ May Spur Anti-government Fight,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, June 11, 2014. <https://www.reviewjournal.com/news/bundy-blm/bunkerville-success-may-spur-anti-government-fight/>.

¹⁵³ Childress, “The Battle over Bunkerville: The Bundys, the Federal Government and the New Militia Movement.”

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

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III. LAS VEGAS POLICE AMBUSH: JUNE 2014

On June 8, 2014, two assailants entered a pizzeria in Las Vegas, Nevada, and murdered two police officers. It was not only that they committed their act of violence during primary election voting that made this assassination a political act, but it was also immediately clear that they hoped to initiate an anti-government revolution through their assassination. Given the national climate regarding violence against law enforcement at the time and the local impact of the shocking violence, political actors from all levels responded. However, the fast-moving nature of this crisis changed the blame risk dynamic considerably, and therefore, the political response was different as well.

Dramatic incidents like the daytime murder of two police officers in a major metropolitan area evoke many immediate questions both locally and internationally. Who were the assailants, and more importantly, what was their motive? Were their families and friends aware of their intentions, and did anyone assist them? And what did law enforcement know about them, and when? If these questions remain unresolved for a significant period of time, the subjects of the questions may experience blame risk, which may require efforts to manage any of the corresponding blame.

Just as quickly as such questions arose, though, various commentators offered suggestions to fill the void. Former Nevada gubernatorial candidate David VanDerBeek, who ran on the anti-government platform of Independent American Party, which had long advocated against federal control of land within Nevada, had met with the murderers on numerous occasions at his campaign events, was quoted as saying that they “were simply insane people who wanted to kill.”¹⁵⁵ Lydia Warren of the *Daily Mail* newspaper asserted that they were “white supremacists.”¹⁵⁶ And John Hayward combined multiple theories to conclude that “they were drug-addled psychopaths with anarchist delusions

¹⁵⁵ Mike Blasky, Ben Botkin, and Colton Lochhead, “Rejected by the Revolution, Jerad and Amanda Miller Opted to Start Their Own,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, June 14, 2014, <https://www.reviewjournal.com/news/bundy-blm/rejected-by-the-revolution-jerad-and-amanda-miller-decided-to-start-their-own/>.

¹⁵⁶ Lydia Warren, “The Dawn of a New Day, May all of Our Sacrifices be Worth It,” *Daily Mail*, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2653139/Online-messages-white-supremacist-couple-Amanda-Jerad-Miller-gunned-two-police-officers-shopper-Walmart-taking-lives.html>.

whose malfunctioning mental hardware led them to declare a ‘revolution’ and attack the police.”¹⁵⁷ But these theories do not really withstand examination, as Jerad and Amanda Miller, a married couple ages 31 and 22, respectively, at the time of their attack on Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department Officers Alyn Beck and Igor Soldo, had a lengthy history of radical anti-government sentiment prior to the incident.

A. FAILED REVOLUTIONARIES

Amanda Miller was born Amanda Woodruff in 1991 and raised in Lafayette, Indiana. According to reports, “she played violin and was a solid student at Jefferson High School.”¹⁵⁸ She was a high-school graduate, she was able to hold a steady job, and she did not have a criminal record.¹⁵⁹ Conversely, Jerad Miller was born in 1983 in Washington State, and according to one report, he was “the son of conservative Christians.”¹⁶⁰ Another report stated that he “came from a very strict home,” and after his parents divorced, he moved with his mother to Indiana. Unlike Amanda, he was a high-school dropout, and he had difficulty maintaining employment.¹⁶¹ Jerad also had a significant criminal record, which dated back to 2001 and included theft, driving under the influence, assault, various drug charges, and felony criminal recklessness for pointing a firearm.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁷ John Hayward, “The Hunt for the Ever Elusive Tea Party Killers Leads to... Occupy Wall Street,” Breitbart News (blog), <http://www.breitbart.com/blog/2014/06/16/the-hunt-for-the-ever-elusive-tea-party-killer-leads-to-occupy-wall-street/>.

¹⁵⁸ Matthew Walberg and Michael Muskal, “Dad of Female Las Vegas Shooter Begged Her Not to Marry Jerad Miller,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 9, 2014, <http://www.latimes.com/nation/nationnow/la-na-amanda-jared-miller-father-las-vegas-shooting-20140609-story.html>.

¹⁵⁹ Zoe Thorkildsen et al., *Las Vegas After-Action Assessment: Lessons Learned from the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department’s Ambush Incident* (Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2016), 2–3.

¹⁶⁰ Blasky, Botkin, and Lochhead, “Rejected by the Revolution, Jerad and Amanda Miller Opted to Start Their Own.”

¹⁶¹ Thorkildsen et al., *Las Vegas After-Action Assessment: Lessons Learned from the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department’s Ambush Incident*, 2–5.

¹⁶² Steve Kanigher, “Jerad Miller Criminal History Dated to 2001,” KLAS-TV, <http://www.lasvegastv.com/news/jerad-miller-criminal-history-dated-to-2001/71059693>.

Jerad and Amanda Miller met in December of 2010, and on September 27, 2012, they were married.¹⁶³ Over the course of the next two years, they radicalized together, culminating in their attempt at “revolution” in Las Vegas. Jerad’s radicalization appears to have coincided with his ongoing involvement with the criminal justice system, including court appearances, arrests, and stints in county jail. As documented on their personal Facebook pages, Jerad’s frustrations with the criminal justice system led him to an anti-government ideology that denounced the police state, the war on drugs, and other forms of government authority that he perceived as illegitimate, and eventually became an obsession for him.¹⁶⁴

Following Jerad’s release from jail in Indiana, the two drove to Nevada where they would start a new life. Following the murders, Amanda’s father, Todd Woodruff, “said he begged his daughter not to marry the man who was obsessed with far-right-wing movements like Patriot Nation,” the article reads.¹⁶⁵ Woodruff eventually relented on their relationship, and he could not stop her when she and Jerad told her family that they were moving to Las Vegas. Woodruff is quoted in the article saying, “she said there was something out there, some movement she wanted to be a part of.”¹⁶⁶

In fact, they moved to Nevada “with plans to campaign for Independent American Party gubernatorial candidate David Lory VanDerBeek.”¹⁶⁷ VanDerBeek held extreme political views, and the Independent American Party had long advocated against federal control of land within Nevada, among other conservative positions. Although VanDerBeek met the Millers several times, he noted in an interview after their terrorist attack, although they may have agreed generically on issues like federal overreach and

¹⁶³ Thorkildsen et al., *Las Vegas After-Action Assessment: Lessons Learned from the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department’s Ambush Incident*, 2.

¹⁶⁴ Jerad and Amanda’s Facebook pages are still active. Jerad’s can be found here, <https://www.facebook.com/jerad.miller.1>, and Amanda’s can be found here, <https://www.facebook.com/amanda.woodruff.9?pnref=lhc>.

¹⁶⁵ Walberg and Muskal, “Dad of Female Las Vegas Shooter Begged Her Not to Marry Jerad Miller.”

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ Blasky, Botkin, and Lochhead, “Rejected by the Revolution, Jerad and Amanda Miller Opted to Start Their Own.”

the police state, “after meeting me and listening to me, I am sure it was obvious to them that I was not violent.”¹⁶⁸

Jerad and Amanda Miller were both known to law enforcement during their time in Nevada, and in fact, they had frequent contact with the police. According to one report, they were stopped by law enforcement during their initial drive into Nevada for a minor infraction. Later, Jerad was questioned by police at one point for calling in a bomb threat on the Indiana Department of Motor Vehicles over a dispute.¹⁶⁹ These interactions did not result in any further actions by law enforcement.

On April 9, 2014, Jerad posted on his Facebook page that he and Amanda would be joining the Bundy family and militia members in the Bunkerville standoff, which they viewed to be the beginning of a brewing revolution. Jerad was interviewed by news outlets in the days following the BLM’s decision to discontinue the gather; he was photographed carrying a rifle and wearing military-type fatigues, and he watched as the militia members from all over the country gathered to defend what they saw as government overreach.¹⁷⁰ After being at the militia encampment for only a few days, Jerad and Amanda were apparently asked to leave by members of the militia because of Jerad’s criminal history.¹⁷¹ In the comments of a YouTube video post about Bundy, Jerad expressed frustration at his rejection from the movement for which they had moved to Nevada to join.¹⁷²

Following their departure from the Bunkerville standoff, Jerad and Amanda Miller went back to Las Vegas where they were even more determined to carry out the

¹⁶⁸ Blasky, Botkin, and Lochhead, “Rejected by the Revolution, Jerad and Amanda Miller Opted to Start Their Own.”

¹⁶⁹ Thorkildsen et al., *Las Vegas After-Action Assessment: Lessons Learned from the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department’s Ambush Incident*, 3.

¹⁷⁰ Andrew Kirell, “Video Emerges of Vegas Cop Killer Jerad Miller Speaking at Bundy Ranch,” Mediaite, June 9, 2014, <http://www.mediaite.com/tv/video-emerges-of-vegas-cop-killer-jerad-miller-speaking-at-bundy-ranch/>.

¹⁷¹ David Corn, Dana Liebelson, and Asawin Suebsaeng, “The Chilling Anti-Government, Cliven Bundy-Loving Facebook Posts of the Alleged Las Vegas Shooters,” Mother Jones, June 9, 2014, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2014/06/jerad-amanda-miller-las-vegas-shooting-cliven-bundy-anti-government>.

¹⁷² Ibid.

revolution they were denied in Bunkerville. On June 8, 2014, they entered a CiCi's Pizza restaurant and executed Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department Officers Igor Soldo and Alyn Beck, who were eating lunch at the establishment. The Millers then dragged the officers' bodies out of the booth where they were seated and left a swastika pin and draped a Gadsden flag, a symbol of the anti-government movement depicting a snake and including the words "Don't Tread on Me," over Officer Beck.¹⁷³ They also pinned a note onto Officer Soldo declaring that he and his partner were the first casualties of their revolution.¹⁷⁴ The Millers then went to an adjacent Wal-Mart store and engaged in a standoff with police that ended with three more dead, including both Millers, and a Good Samaritan named Joseph Wilcox, who had tried to intervene. The whole incident lasted from 11:21 to 11:59 in the morning.¹⁷⁵

From June 9 through June 24, Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department Sheriff Doug Gillespie and his staff made extensive efforts to keep law enforcement and the public informed of the events and the findings from the ongoing investigation. The Southern Nevada Counter-Terrorism Center, the state's designated fusion center, released a homeland security advisory on June 9, and the Department held press conferences in the morning and in the afternoon.¹⁷⁶ On June 11, the Department released additional information on the investigation.¹⁷⁷ And on June 23, Sheriff Gillespie held an additional press briefing, where he discussed details of the incident, as well as the various investigations underway regarding the officer involved shooting.¹⁷⁸

One of Gillespie's assistant sheriffs, Joseph Lombardo, was a leading candidate in the primary election then underway. Lombardo temporarily curtailed his campaign for the office immediately after the murders, stating, "out of respect to the officers' families, and

¹⁷³ Thorkildsen et al., *Las Vegas After-Action Assessment: Lessons Learned from the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department's Ambush Incident*, 4.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 2-5.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 2-7.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

the entire department, I'm suspending campaign efforts through tomorrow's election."¹⁷⁹ Sheriff Candidate Larry Burns, who would be defeated by Lombardo in the general election, also suspended his campaign. Burns stated, "We lost two brave officers and an innocent bystander," adding, "Our thoughts and prayers are with their families, friends, and colleagues, as well as everyone who was affected by this unimaginable act of violence."¹⁸⁰

Several important political responses followed the attacks. The first was a rush to lump the Bunkerville participants in with the Millers as dangerous extremists. The day after the murders, Interior Secretary Sally Jewell noted to the media that the Millers were reportedly participants within the standoff. "It is very important to bring lawbreakers to justice," Jewell said, referring not to the deceased Jerad and Amanda Miller, but to the Bundy family and the militia members who joined them in Bunkerville.¹⁸¹

Carol Bundy, the wife of Cliven Bundy, denied any connection between the standoff and the police shootings, stating, "I have not seen or heard anything from the militia and others who have come to our ranch that would, in any way, make me think they had an intent to kill or harm anyone."¹⁸² Ammon Bundy, Cliven's son, noted that the Millers were kicked off the ranch after a few days during the standoff because their views were too extreme.¹⁸³

The Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department also responded with several internal measures. First, by initiating an internal investigation through its Critical Incident Response Team, and according to the Director of the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Police Services, Sheriff Gillespie also requested an official after-

¹⁷⁹ Annalise Porter and Ricardo Torres, "Shooters Attempted to Cozy Up to Election Candidates," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, June 9, 2014, <https://www.reviewjournal.com/crime/courts/shooters-attempted-to-cozy-up-to-election-candidates/>.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Reid Wilson, "Interior Secretary Jewell Connects Las Vegas Shooting to Bundy Ranch," *Washington Post*, June 9, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/govbeat/wp/2014/06/09/interior-secretary-jewell-connects-las-vegas-shooting-to-bundy-ranch/?utm_term=.3dbdaa081a05.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Martin Griffith, "Cliven Bundy's Son: Vegas Shooters Jerad and Amanda Miller Were Kicked off Our Ranch," *Mercury News*, June 9, 2014, <http://www.mercurynews.com/2014/06/09/cliven-bundys-son-vegas-shooters-jerad-and-amanda-miller-were-kicked-off-our-ranch/>.

action report from the federal agency, in which the sheriff is commended for his transparency and collaboration.¹⁸⁴

In March 2015, after Lombardo had been elected sheriff of Clark County, replacing Sheriff Gillespie, he reflected on the shooting in an interview with a local newspaper, emphasizing his ongoing concern for “lone wolf” terrorist attacks like this one and the need to remain vigilant against them.¹⁸⁵ Just more than a year later, the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department announced that 23 officers received the department’s Medal of Valor and Unit Meritorious certificates for responding to the threat posed by Jerad and Amanda Miller.¹⁸⁶

B. POLITICAL CRISIS LEADERSHIP AND IMAGE RESTORATION IN FAST-MOVING CRISES

The blame risk for this attack and the response operations was different for this fast-moving crisis than for the slow-moving crisis at Bunkerville months prior. In this case, such official political entities as the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department perceived their blame risk to be relatively low, while other political actors who likely would not have been given a platform if not for these attacks perceived their blame risk to be higher. Due to these respective perceptions of blame risk, official political entities responded largely in ways that aligned with political crisis leadership, even rejecting negativity bias in some cases, while the political newcomers responded in ways that aligned with blame management as political crisis management.

Since the event terminated so quickly, sensemaking and decision making were made at the tactical level. However, Sheriff Gillespie and his subordinate leaders were able to participate in meaning making for the event immediately after the fact, which allowed them to frame the events in terms of the tragedy within their community and

¹⁸⁴ Thorkildsen et al., *Las Vegas After-Action Assessment: Lessons Learned from the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department’s Ambush Incident*, V.

¹⁸⁵ Ana Ley, “Lombardo on Terrorism: ‘My Biggest Concern is the Lone Wolf,’” *Las Vegas Sun*, March 27, 2015, <https://lasvegassun.com/news/2015/mar/27/lombardo-terrorism-my-biggest-concern-lone-wolf/>.

¹⁸⁶ “Officer Ambush,” YouTube video, 11:11, posted by Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, July 14, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gIzvLdiynAw>.

their continued commitment to ensuring public safety. Sheriff Gillespie's press briefing on the morning of the attack provided basic details of the tragic event for the Las Vegas Community.¹⁸⁷ At the press briefing the following day, Sheriff Gillespie, Assistant Sheriff Kevin McMahill, and Assistant Sheriff Joseph Lombardo provided additional details on the ongoing investigation and on the Department's security posture.¹⁸⁸ These press briefings provided a foundation for the hero narrative that would be reinforced when 23 members of their police force were honored with awards a year following the event.

Sheriff Gillespie also participated in learning in a number of ways following this event. Conducting an internal investigation through the department's Critical Incident Review Team was an important step in this process, but requesting an additional after-action review from the Office of Community Oriented Police Services, an external federal agency, further reinforces the Sheriff's commitment to organizational learning. Beyond organizational learning, which can also help other organizations learn, these efforts signal an organization's commitment to transparency and accountable for the leaders involved, a step that reflects political crisis leadership and not political crisis management.

Sheriff Gillespie was not the only leader who proved he was not influenced as much by negativity bias by taking affirmative steps. Sheriff Lombardo's decision to suspend his campaign could be criticized as opportunistic, but because it aligns with the political crisis leadership and hero narrative established by Sheriff Gillespie throughout this crisis, Lombardo's decision appears to be respectful and professional.¹⁸⁹ Much like Mayor Giuliani was praised for his focus on the response and recovery from the 9/11 attacks without obvious concern for the political implications, the current and future sheriffs were able to communicate poise and seriousness in spite of the potentially

¹⁸⁷ "Media Briefing: Two LVMPD Officers Killed in Ambush Attack," YouTube video, 4:29, posted by Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, June 8, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4db4SujPyRM>.

¹⁸⁸ "PRESS CONFERENCE: Update on Officers Killed," YouTube video, 15:32, posted by Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, June 9, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPwosrYonP4>.

¹⁸⁹ Seeger and Sellnow, *Narratives of Crisis: Telling Stories of Ruin and Renewal*, 113.

shifting political landscape in which they were forced to operate. The fact that several of his opponents suspended their campaigns as well further supports Lombardo's framing.

Secretary Jewell's statements following the event seem to be more opportunistic, actually aligning more with image restoration techniques than with blame avoidance. Her decision to engage in image restoration suggests that the Secretary of the Department of Interior, which oversees the BLM, felt some damage from the distribution of blame following the Bunkerville standoff only two months earlier. The murders of the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department Officers provided her with an opportunity to scapegoat the Bundys and their fellow militia members as anti-government radicals much like the Millers, thus justifying the paramilitary tactics used, and abandoned, during the cattle gather, and possibly to justify the BLM's decision to use an aggressive law enforcement approach to the situation in Bunkerville months before.

Due to the framing contest initiated by Secretary Jewell, members of the Bundy family responded to their association with the Millers immediately when asked, and sought ideological distance from the attackers. Carol Bundy's statement regarding the peaceful nature of militia members who showed up to her defense during the standoff may appear absurd to some, but to those who believe in her family's stand against the federal government, it may have helped to continue the narrative they established at Bunkerville. To their supporters, they were the victims of government overreach and they were fully right to respond the way they did, messages that align well with her statements following Secretary Jewell's comments.

Radical political actors who might have otherwise remained obscure felt some blame risk from the Millers' ambush on law enforcement. Media coverage, as well as the finger pointing from such figures as the Secretary of Interior, provided them a platform they likely would have not had otherwise. They used these platforms to both avoid blame by association, or to continue reinforcing their preferred narratives.

Former Nevada gubernatorial candidate David VanDerBeek and others simply sought to distance themselves from any of the blame. He stated that he had met the Millers at campaign events, but it was clear that they were not politically aligned. Gordon

Martines, a former Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department detective who was also running for Sheriff, stated that the Millers had become vocal advocates for his campaign, but that he had asked them to stop supporting him when he learned of Jerad's criminal history.¹⁹⁰

C. CONSEQUENCES OF THE LAS VEGAS POLICE AMBUSH

Beyond the murder of two peace officers and the impact these murders had on the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department and the Las Vegas community, the consequences of this incident were not as pronounced as they were for the Bunkerville standoff. In a number of ways, however, the gains enjoyed by the militia members from the standoff were further solidified. Following the coverage of the police ambush, the militia narrative was further legitimized by the media, which was reinforced even more by the BLM carrying much of the residual blame for the event.

Since Jerad and Amanda Miller had been present at the Bunkerville standoff, if only briefly, members of the Bundy family and the militia movement were allowed an opportunity to participate in the resulting blame game. The fact that the militia response was covered in media reporting allowed them to shape their narrative away from the radicalism of Jerad and Amanda Miller and further their message as standing against unjust government authority. That is, the militia members' participation in the blame game legitimized them as political actors, if only marginally, a mantle they would carry forward into the Burns occupation in 2016.

This narrative was advanced further through Sheriff Gillespie's blame of the BLM in the standoff. Even though Secretary Jewell attempted to use the police murders in an attempt at image restoration, she had few opportunities to gain traction for this narrative as media interest flagged. Any chance for redemption for the BLM would have to come through the courts as members of the Bundy family and their fellow militia members were tried on charges for their roles in the Bunkerville standoff throughout 2017.

¹⁹⁰ Porter and Torres, "Shooters Attempted to Cozy Up to Election Candidates."

IV. NORTHERN NEVADA FLOODS: WINTER 2016

Starting in January 2017, northern Nevada experienced an unprecedented number of emergencies and disasters, most directly due to or related to major flooding events. Flooding in January saturated river basins in a drought-stricken region, while more major flooding in February hit communities throughout the northern part of the state as well. Climatologists had predicted both of these floods, and though the incident periods stretched longer than a week in each case, the actual periods of the greatest threats were brief, making these fast-moving crises.

The 2017 floods in Nevada provide a different perspective on blame risk and political crisis management versus political crisis management than the Bunkerville standoff and the police officer assassination. As natural disasters, the events began as exogenous events, where the cause of the crisis was out of the purview and control of the elected officials. Although the exogenous nature of these floods reduced the initial blame risk for the officials, elected and appointed officials could still be held accountable for how government agencies responded to them.

The floods also provide a different perspective with respect to the time pressures the crises placed on public officials. If Bunkerville represents a slow-moving crisis that developed over decades and continued afterwards, and the police assassination in Las Vegas represents a fast-moving crisis that terminated in 38 minutes, the 2017 floods in Nevada represent a crisis that was a combination of both a fast-moving crisis and a slow-moving crisis. That is, while a great deal of focus was given to the fast-moving aspects of these crises, which were both successfully handled, both floods contributed to a slow-moving crisis that developed in the Washoe County community of Lemmon Valley, which was built around what was once a dry lakebed.

A. UNPRECEDENTED FLOODS

On Monday, January 2, 2017, the Reno, Nevada, office of the National Weather Service changed its predictions of cold weather in the Sierra Mountains. Instead, a large “atmospheric river,” also called a “Pineapple Express” was likely to occur, which could

quickly bring large amounts of warm moisture into the atmosphere by the weekend.¹⁹¹ Since large amounts of snow had accumulated in the Sierra Nevada Mountains in late December 2016, warm rain in the mountains could melt that snow and overwhelm the river basins below the Sierra, threatening the communities around them. The potential for flooding in early 2017 looked very similar to flooding that had occurred in the same area in 1997, and again in late 2005 and early 2006.

With the news from the National Weather Service, local, state, tribal, and federal entities began preparing their respective communities. In addition to mitigation measures that had been underway for the Truckee River and other basins following the flood of 2005 and 2006, public works and public safety professionals in all the communities worked to fill and distribute sandbags, and clear debris from the waterways.¹⁹² As water began pooling in populated areas, public officials also worked to inform the local populace ahead of the period of greatest threat.¹⁹³

The most intense flooding in the January storm was to hit the Truckee River system in and around Reno, in Washoe County, which contained the highest population in the affected area, on the evening of Sunday, January 8, and the morning of Monday, January 9.¹⁹⁴ Communities in the affected areas worked hard to protect human life and property from damage from the flooding, especially as the various rivers were anticipated to reach peak flood stages in areas that were populated or had a concentration of businesses.¹⁹⁵ Their efforts consisted of sharing public information, announcing sandbag locations for residents to emplace at their homes or businesses, and continue to deploy

¹⁹¹ Kevin MacMillan, “Lake Tahoe Weather: Officials Warn—‘This Storm Is Serious Business,’” *Sierra Sun*, January 5, 2017, <http://www.sierrasun.com/news/environment/lake-tahoe-weather-flooding-along-truckee-river-likely-by-monday/>.

¹⁹² “Northern Nevada and the Sierra Prep for Area Flooding,” News Channel 4, January 6, 2017, <http://mynews4.com/news/local/standing-water-reported-in-northern-nevada-as-rain-falls>.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ Mike Higdon, “After Rain, Northern Nevada Assesses Flooding Damage,” *USA Today*, January 10, 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2017/01/10/northern-nevada-flood-damage/96384374/>.

¹⁹⁵ Benjamin Spillman, Jason Hidalgo, and Anjeanette Damon, “Under Water: Flooding Overwhelms Reno-Sparks,” *Reno Gazette-Journal*, January 8, 2017, <http://www.rgj.com/story/news/2017/01/09/water/96334818/>.

teams from local, state, and tribal agencies to areas of concern.¹⁹⁶ In all, the counties of Washoe, Douglas, Lyon, Storey, the Independent City of Carson City, the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony, the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe, and the Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California declared states of emergencies and requested additional support and resources from the state.¹⁹⁷ Governor Sandoval declared a state of emergency for all the counties and tribal governments in the affected area on January 7, 2017.¹⁹⁸

Although the primary focus was on the river basins, continued weather events in addition to the atmospheric river also contributed to damages. The weather damaged 88 county roads and 20 state roads, residents in certain areas were asked to shelter in place, and debris removal efforts had to be initiated almost immediately.¹⁹⁹ Throughout the entire period of the incident, the State Emergency Operations Center was activated, and was supported by a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Incident Management Assistance Team, with local, state, and tribal resources exhausted, if only temporarily.²⁰⁰

Perhaps the hardest hit community was the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe, which is primarily located on three communities, Sutcliffe, Wadsworth, and Nixon.²⁰¹ The tribe lost major lifeline services due to the flooding: floods washed out their drinkable water system, they lost electricity, their sewage system was overwhelmed, and State Route 446, which connected community members with healthcare and other services, was completely impassable.²⁰² Overall, such destruction on the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribal Reservation land, and throughout the counties and tribes in the affected area, resulted in nearly \$14 million dollars in damages.²⁰³

¹⁹⁶ Spillman, Hidalgo, and Damon, “Under Water: Flooding Overwhelms Reno-Sparks.”

¹⁹⁷ Brian Sandoval, “Brian Sandoval to President Donald Trump” (letter, February 9, 2017).

¹⁹⁸ Brian Sandoval, “Declaration of Emergency” (proclamation, January 7, 2017).

¹⁹⁹ Sandoval, “Brian Sandoval to President Donald Trump,” February 9, 2017.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid.

Although the weather system persisted for more than a week, the period of highest threat remained when the Truckee River reached peak flood levels on Sunday evening and Monday morning. As this period marked the highest threat to life and property in the area, political figures appropriately seized the opportunity to comment on the recent events and the efforts to respond to them. Since the weather event was ongoing, these media engagements offered them an opportunity to continue to inform residents and visitors of the affected areas of the precautions that should be taken due to the ongoing threat.

On Tuesday, January 10, 2017, various elected and appointed officials toured the damaged sites and commented on the success of local and state efforts to respond, and the need to stay vigilant going forward. Governor Sandoval noted that he was pleased with the work by local and state governments to prepare for and respond to this flood. “I think they did everything they could possibly do to try and anticipate what could happen,” he said, adding that he believed everyone did a “wonderful job.”²⁰⁴ City of Reno Mayor, Hillary Schieve, noted that even though the peak flood stage had passed, the river was still extremely high and urged residents to stay away for longer.²⁰⁵ Washoe County Manager, John Slaughter, also noted that he was pleased, but stated that the weather event presented challenges that they could not have foreseen.²⁰⁶

On February 9, allowing time for damage assessment teams to conduct their analysis, Governor Brian Sandoval requested a Presidential Major Disaster Declaration from President Donald Trump.²⁰⁷ On February 17, 2017, President Trump approved the governor’s request for a declaration for Public Assistance and Hazard Mitigation, recovery programs managed by the FEMA.²⁰⁸ Before then, Nevada’s most recent Presidential Major Disaster Declaration was in 2014, when the Moapa Band of Paiutes

²⁰⁴ Spillman, Hidalgo, and Damon, “Under Water: Flooding Overwhelms Reno-Sparks.”

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Sandoval, “Brian Sandoval to President Donald Trump,” February 9, 2017.

²⁰⁸ Federal Emergency Management Agency, “President Trump Approves Major Disaster Declaration for Nevada,” February 17, 2017, <https://www.fema.gov/news-release/2017/02/17/president-trump-approve-s-major-disaster-declaration-nevada>.

experienced severe flooding in Clark County; the next most recent Presidential Major Disaster Declaration was in 2008.²⁰⁹ On February 18, Governor Sandoval also requested that the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) declare an administrative emergency to assist the private homeowners and business owners in the area through low-interest loans and other disaster programs.²¹⁰ The SBA approved the disaster declaration on February 23.²¹¹

Beginning around February 5, 2017, northern Nevada received another round of storms, this time spanning across the entire northern half of the state.²¹² As with the January flooding, this storm included heavy snowfall in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, transportation routes were closed, communities were isolated, and much like in California around the same time, dams failed. The weather was not as intense as in January, and many of the sandbags and other preparedness efforts remained in place, which, once again resulted in no loss of life or property.²¹³

Although the response to the February flooding was successful, it continued to stretch local, state, and tribal resources. Nevada's Division of Emergency Management filled dozens of resource requests for the new event, the Department of Transportation and the Highway Patrol managed roadways and ensured safety throughout the region, and the Division of Forestry deployed inmate hand crews around the state.²¹⁴ Initially, the Counties of Douglas, Elko, and Humboldt, as well as the Independent City of Carson, all

²⁰⁹ "Disaster Declarations by State/Tribal Government: Nevada," Federal Emergency Management Agency, accessed November 17, 2017, https://www.fema.gov/disasters/state-tribal-government/NV?field_dv2_declaration_type_value=All.

²¹⁰ Brian Sandoval, "Brian Sandoval to Ms. Tanya N. Garfield" (letter, February 18, 2017).

²¹¹ "NV 15055-01 SBA Offers Disaster Assistance to Nevada Businesses and Residents Affected by the Severe Winter Storms, Flooding and Mudslides," U.S. Small Business Administration, February 23, 2017, <https://www.sba.gov/offices/disaster/dfocw/resources/1563254>.

²¹² Scott Sonner, "Northern Nevada Braces for More Flooding Thursday and Beyond," *U.S. News & World Report*, February 14, 2017, <https://www.usnews.com/news/nevada/articles/2017-02-14/northern-nevada-braces-for-more-flooding-thursday-and-beyond>.

²¹³ *Ibid.*

²¹⁴ Brian Sandoval, "Brian Sandoval to President Donald Trump" (letter, March 8, 2017).

declared emergencies for the February event, and Governor Sandoval followed suit with a state declaration of emergency for this new event on February 10.²¹⁵

When the February flooding began to subside throughout the northern part of the state, statewide damage assessments began in earnest to establish whether federal indicators had been established for a second Presidential Major Disaster Declaration. The February floods were spread out over a much larger geographic area than the January flooding, and impacted the peak flood levels were not as dramatic. Also fewer publicized tours of flood preparedness sites and other damage areas were conducted by political leaders for the February flooding as well.

B. A SLOW-MOVING SURPRISE

Thus, by the second half of February, a second fast-moving crisis in as many months had been averted, and elected leaders were focusing their considerable influence and interest elsewhere. However, by the last week of February, early indications were beginning to show that another crisis loomed. More precisely, by the end of the month, it became clear that a profound, slow-moving crisis had emerged in the shadow of these two fast-moving and successfully managed crises.

On February 23, 2017, the Washoe County Manager signed a declaration of emergency for his county for the February flooding event.²¹⁶ Although the declaration cited that an emergency was declared for all areas of the county, news reports suggested that the most acute flooding was in the Lemmon Valley area north of Reno.²¹⁷ Initial media reports described the once-dry lake-bed now filled with water, with 20 homes affected, road closures, and continued threats if the water rose.²¹⁸

²¹⁵ Brian Sandoval, “Declaration of Emergency” (proclamation, February 10, 2017).

²¹⁶ John Slaughter, “Declaration of Emergency” (proclamation, February 23, 2017).

²¹⁷ Zac Mooney, “Flooding Forms a Lake in Lemmon Valley,” KTVN, February 10, 2017, <http://www.ktvn.com/story/34480647/flooding-forms-a-lake-in-lemmon-valley>.

²¹⁸ “Flooding Closes Part of Lemmon Drive,” KOLO, February 23, 2017, <http://www.kolotv.com/content/news/Washoe-County-dealing-with-Lemmon-Valley-flooding-414633603.html>.

The situation in Lemmon Valley had been dramatic for several weeks prior to the County's declaration of emergency.²¹⁹ Not only was water slowly rising and getting into more homes, but septic tanks were also becoming affected by the water, potentially contaminating the new body of water as it grew.²²⁰ Governor Sandoval signed an amended emergency declaration on March 2, 2017 to include the new Washoe County Declaration and the state's potential request for a Presidential Major Disaster Declaration.²²¹

Governor Sandoval formally requested a Presidential Major Disaster Declaration on March 8.²²² Like the January declaration request, the February declaration requested approval of the FEMA Public Assistance Program and the Hazard Mitigation Program.²²³ Unlike the January declaration request, the governor also requested approval of the FEMA Individual Assistance Program for Washoe and Elko Counties, specifically citing Lemmon Valley in his request.²²⁴

Within his request for a Presidential Major Disaster Declaration, the governor also requested direct federal assistance from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for assistance with dewatering Lemmon Valley.²²⁵ The governor also authorized his state agencies to pursue advance measures for flood fighting from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers as well, which he supported through a letter of his own on March 8 as well.²²⁶ Both requests resulted in a site visit and an extensive report on potential solutions to the enormous challenge in Lemmon Valley, as well as an ongoing dialog with the federal agency during the recovery process.²²⁷

²¹⁹ Mooney, "Flooding Forms a Lake in Lemmon Valley."

²²⁰ Zac Mooney, "State and County Resources for Lemmon Valley Flooding," KTVN, March 2, 2017, <http://www.ktvn.com/story/34654546/state-and-county-resources-for-lemmon-valley-flooding>.

²²¹ Brian Sandoval, "Declaration of Emergency" (proclamation, March 2, 2017).

²²² Sandoval, "Brian Sandoval to President Donald Trump," March 8, 2017.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Brian Sandoval, "Brian Sandoval to Colonel David Rey" (letter, March 8, 2017).

²²⁷ U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Sacramento District, *Advance Measures Technical Assistance—Swan Lake Flooding* (Sacramento, CA: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Sacramento District, 2017).

Governor Sandoval also engaged more heavily in the media aspect of the February storm event following the notification of the situation in Lemmon Valley. On March 3, Governor Sandoval visited the most heavily damaged area of Lemmon Valley, at which point the flood waters had been in homes and caused damage for two months.²²⁸ “First and foremost, my prayers are with the residents out here,” the Governor said.²²⁹ “This is horrible, it’s catastrophic, and it’s as bad as anything I have ever seen in the state,” he added.²³⁰ He referred to the crisis in Lemmon Valley as a “small Katrina” and noted that he and the resources of the state were available to help.²³¹

Governor Sandoval also issued a statement following the tour of the Lemmon Valley damages.²³² After noting his sadness for the residents of the area, he stated that the state was “working with Washoe County, the lead for this event due to the location,” and that it would “continue to support the county’s efforts and the residents who are still suffering.”²³³ In this statement, he also noted that he had requested an extension from FEMA for the allowable time period to request a Major Presidential Disaster Declaration.²³⁴

Following the governor’s visit, Washoe County hosted a community meeting for residents of the Lemmon Valley area.²³⁵ So many people were interested in the update that residents had to be turned away, and many of the residents able to attend expressed

²²⁸ Terri Russell, “Gov. Sandoval Visits Flooded Lemmon Valley Neighborhood,” KOLO, March 3, 2017, <http://www.kolotv.com/content/news/Gov-Sandoval-tours-Lemmon-Valley-says-state-is-trying-to-help-415372563.html>.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Brian Sandoval, “Statement from Governor Sandoval Following Tour of Lemmon Valley Flood Tour,” Nevada Governor Brian Sandoval, March 3, 2017, <http://gov.nv.gov/News-and-Media/Press/2017/Statement-from-Governor-Sandoval-Following-Tour-of-Lemmon-Valley-Flood-Tour/>.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Ibid.; Brian Sandoval, “Brian Sandoval to Corey Gruber” (letter, March 1, 2017).

²³⁵ “Community Meeting for Lemmon Valley Residents,” KTVN, March 8, 2017, <http://www.ktvn.com/story/34701665/community-meeting-for-lemmon-valley-residents>.

frustration that they had not seen any action from the local government to help.²³⁶ These frustrations persisted through the end of the month, when additional meetings were held.²³⁷

Part of this frustration from local residents in the Lemmon Valley area appeared to be coming from Washoe County's messaging system. On March 8, the same day as the Governor's request for a presidential Major Disaster Declaration, Washoe County Community Services Director, Dave Salero, noted that Mother Nature was to blame for the events.²³⁸ Regarding the solutions available to the county, he spoke of prioritization, "Would we spend \$40 million dollars on 100 residents or would we spend it on parks, libraries and other residents?"²³⁹ At the community meeting at the end of March, Solaro increased his estimate for fixing the problem from \$40 million to \$100 million and suggested that the residents of Lemmon Valley would pay for that fix through monthly assessments.²⁴⁰

By March 16, the county had initiated a flood fighting plan, which consisted of emplacing barriers between the water and the neighborhoods and pumping water back into the lake area. The Truckee Meadows Fire Protection District, the county's fire service, had taken over the operational control of the incident.²⁴¹ These efforts were supported by ongoing efforts at the state and federal levels, and would eventually require

²³⁶ Rebecca Kitchen, "Frustrations Brew at Community Meeting in Lemmon Valley," KOLO, March 7, 2017, <http://www.kolotv.com/content/news/Frustrations-brew-at-community-meeting-in-Lemmon-Valley-415543183.html>.

²³⁷ Olivia DeGennaro, "Lemmon Valley Residents Demand Answers about Permanent Solutions to Severe Flooding," KRNVT, March 29, 2017, <http://mynews4.com/news/local/lemmon-valley-residents-demand-answers-about-permanent-solution-to-severe-flooding>.

²³⁸ Sandoval, "Brian Sandoval to Donald Trump," March 8, 2017; Mike Higdon, "'Blame Mother Nature: No Fix for Persistent Lemmon Valley Flooding,'" *Reno Gazette Journal*, March 8, 2017, <http://www.rgj.com/story/news/2017/03/08/blame-mother-nature-no-fix-persistent-lemmon-valley-flooding/98882022/>.

²³⁹ Higdon, "'Blame Mother Nature: No Fix for Persistent Lemmon Valley Flooding.'"

²⁴⁰ DeGennaro, "Lemmon Valley Residents Demand Answers about Permanent Solutions to Severe Flooding."

²⁴¹ Terri Russell, "No Quick Fix for Lemmon Valley Flooding," KOLO, March 9, 2017, <http://www.kolotv.com/content/news/No-quick-fix-for-Lemmon-Valley-flooding-415839853.html>.

legislation to be passed during the ongoing legislative session to repay the state's emergency assistance account for all the emergency support provided.²⁴²

On March 27, the president announced that a presidential major disaster had been declared for the counties noted in the governor's request.²⁴³ Specifically, the governor's request for approval of the public assistance and hazard mitigation programs were approved, but the request for individual assistance remained under review.²⁴⁴ The request for individual assistance would eventually be denied.²⁴⁵

Also by late March, a new problem was evolving due to the floods in the northern part of the state. Governor Sandoval visited Fallon in Churchill County, which had declared an emergency ahead of massive runoff anticipated from the Sierra Nevada Mountains.²⁴⁶ The efforts in Fallon began in February and culminated in June with the completion of what they referred to as the "Big Dig," a 17-mile canal that would divert the water coming into the community into the Lahontan reservoir, which was already at capacity.²⁴⁷ Based on the tremendous effort and expense that Churchill County and the City of Fallon, as well as other local organizations had put into this preparedness effort, the governor amended his previous declaration of emergency to include both Churchill and Storey counties.²⁴⁸

With the ongoing threat of snow runoff potentially affecting communities that had already been damaged by floods in January and February, Governor Sandoval held a

²⁴² Nevada Legislature, *Nevada Assembly Bill 495, 79th Legislative Session* (Carson City, NV: Nevada Legislature, 2017), https://www.leg.state.nv.us/Session/79th2017/Bills/AB/AB495_EN.pdf.

²⁴³ "Public Notice—Major Disaster Declaration—FEMA-4307-DR-NV," Federal Emergency Management Agency, April 4, 2017, <https://www.fema.gov/disaster/4307/notices/public-notice-major-disaster-declaration-fema-4307-dr-nv>.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁵ Brian Sandoval, "Corey Gruber to Brian Sandoval" (letter, April 7, 2017).

²⁴⁶ Ed Pearce, "Governor Sandoval Tours Fallon-area Flood Preparations," KOLO, March 24, 2017, <http://www.kolotv.com/content/news/Governor-Sandoval-tours-Fallon-area-flood-preparations-417070883.html>.

²⁴⁷ Ed Pearce, "'Big Dig' Completes Fallon's Extraordinary Flood Preparations," KOLO, May 10, 2017, <http://www.kolotv.com/content/news/Big-Dig-completes-Fallons-extraordinary-flood-preparations-421943384.html>.

²⁴⁸ Sandoval, "Declaration of Emergency," March 2, 2017.

public meeting to outline what had been done and what needed to be done going forward on April 13.²⁴⁹ With experts from various agencies represented, the group discussed with the governor what was known about the amount of snow and the potential for flooding in the various river basins within Nevada.²⁵⁰ During the briefing, Governor Sandoval noted that the response to the flooding would continue to be a “bottom-up approach,” which would start with local government and move to the state and federal government as additional resources were required.²⁵¹ Following this meeting, the State of Nevada’s Division of Emergency Management and representatives from FEMA Region IX developed the “2017 Nevada Spring Flood Plan,” which served as a comprehensive plan for the floods that would follow.²⁵²

On May 25, Governor Sandoval also requested a second SBA declaration of disaster for the February flooding as well.²⁵³ This disaster declaration was specifically requested for Washoe and Elko Counties due to the extensive damages that flooding had caused in each area.²⁵⁴ The SBA declared an administrative emergency on the same day as the request.²⁵⁵

In addition to these initial requests, the governor continued his engagement through the declaration process. He requested that the incident period for the February declaration remain ongoing to include continuing response and preparedness efforts, and he appealed the denial of individual assistance for Elko and Washoe counties.²⁵⁶ Both

²⁴⁹ Paul Nielson, “Sandoval Holds Meeting to Plan for Possible Flooding,” KTVN, April 13, 2017, <http://www.ktvn.com/story/35148155/sandoval-holds-meeting-to-plan-for-possible-flooding>.

²⁵⁰ Sandra Chereb, “Record Snowfall Brings Sobering Flooding Assessment for Northern Nevada,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, April 13, 2017, <https://www.reviewjournal.com/local/local-nevada/record-snowfall-brings-sobering-flooding-assessment-for-northern-nevada/>.

²⁵¹ Nielson, “Sandoval Holds Meeting to Plan for Possible Flooding.”

²⁵² Federal Emergency Management Agency, Region X and Nevada Division of Emergency Management, *2017 Nevada Spring Flood Plan* (Carson, NV, Oakland, CA: Federal Emergency Management Agency, Region X and Nevada Division of Emergency Management, 2017).

²⁵³ Brian Sandoval, “Brian Sandoval to Tanya N. Garfield” (letter, May 25, 2017).

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁵ “NV 15055-01 SBA Offers Disaster Assistance to Nevada Businesses and Residents Affected by the Severe Winter Storms, Flooding and Mudslides.”

²⁵⁶ Brian Sandoval, “Brian Sandoval to Corey Gruber” (letter, May 5, 2017); Brian Sandoval, “Brian Sandoval to Donald Trump” (letter, May 5, 2017).

requests were denied.²⁵⁷ On May 12, the governor requested and received approval, however, to add Storey and Churchill counties to the Presidential Major Disaster Declaration for February, which was necessary due to the heavy snowpack in the Sierra Nevada Mountains and the full reservoirs in both of these communities due to the record floods.²⁵⁸

Throughout the remainder of the summer of 2017, the situation largely stabilized. The water in Lemmon Valley did not evaporate as quickly as had been initially expected, which caused lingering concern. However, the preparedness efforts in places like Churchill County, Storey County and other areas averted major additional flooding, and potentially, an even more unprecedented third Presidential Major Disaster Declaration in a single year for ongoing flooding.

C. AVOIDING HIDDEN BLAME

Following the events of the major flooding in January and again in February, the posture of the political leaders suggested that these crises were relatively free of blame risk. Elected and appointed leaders were available to the media, they appeared together publicly, and they praised the efforts of their respective staffs. This unity and positivity likely resulted because these were fast-moving crises during which the government response was viewed positively, and no tragic losses of life occurred.

However, hidden within these fast-moving crises was the Lemmon Valley crisis, which was a slow-moving crisis that offered extensive blame risk. Since the Lemmon Valley crisis was highly visible and media coverage continued throughout the period of the immediate crisis, government officials responded through presentational strategies to develop narratives that would frame their actions in ways that would help them avoid blame. Given the level of blame risk and the existing narratives going into this crisis, some narratives were more powerful than others.

²⁵⁷ Robert Fenton, “Robert Fenton to Brian Sandoval” (letter, May 17, 2017); Robert Fenton, “Robert Fenton to Brian Sandoval” (letter, May 22, 2017).

²⁵⁸ Robert J. Fenton, “Nevada; Amendment No. 2 to Notice of a Major Disaster Declaration” (official memorandum, Washington, DC: Department of Homeland Security, 2017).

Governor Sandoval had the least blame risk in the Lemmon Valley flood crisis. The two floods in 2017 had been resolved quickly and well, and by the end of March, he would be able to take credit for ably managing unprecedented back-to-back Presidential Major Disaster Declarations. He had been out in the public, meeting with first responders and local officials, and communicating with the public about his actions and directions. Furthermore although the community had been dealing with rising water since January, he was only notified of the situation through the county's declaration of emergency in late February.

Though the governor was exposed to very limited blame risk, he did not fully engage in political opportunism; instead likely observing a limited form of negativity bias by visiting the residents of Lemmon Valley and engaging the media on their behalf. However, even without fully exploiting the situation for political gain, the governor was still able to use presentational strategies to ensure that his version of the narrative was in place.²⁵⁹ In visiting the Lemmon Valley community in early March, and through his media engagement from the event, he was able to develop the victim narrative for the community members, which was reinforced by his reference to Hurricane Katrina. Finally, he was able to establish that the responsibility for solving this issue was at the county level, with the state in full support, a statutory division of labor that also works to assign most of the blame risk to the county as well.

By holding the public briefing in April to discuss all the ongoing flood preparedness efforts, the governor was able to continue to win the framing contest by emphasizing these same points. He noted that the state was remaining engaged, but that managing the crisis remained "bottom-up" efforts, meaning the counties and local governments remained responsible for solving the issues, and also for any of the ongoing failures. These public efforts corresponded with his extensive efforts to advocate for the people in Lemmon Valley through his appeals for support to the federal government.

Even without the governor's powerful narrative, the highest level of blame risk for the slow-moving Lemmon Valley crisis remained with Washoe County. Lemmon

²⁵⁹ Seeger and Sellnow, *Narratives of Crisis: Telling Stories of Ruin and Renewal*, 98.

Valley sits within the county, and Washoe County is responsible for providing public services to the area. While Washoe County had remained engaged in the flood preparedness and response efforts since January, a negative narrative about official engagement in Lemmon Valley had already developed by the time the county manager signed the emergency declaration on February 23.

The county's presentational strategies to establish their own narrative failed to take hold, as seen through the ongoing tense and contentious public meetings they hosted with the residents of Lemmon Valley. One reason for the county's failure to establish an effective narrative regarding their efforts for the community, which were in fact extensive and costly, was the narrative chosen by county representatives and the solutions derived from that narrative. When the county representative was quoted as calling for "Mother Nature" to receive the blame, he may have lost the framing contest. Scholarship on framing contests suggests that narratives that blame things beyond the control of the officials, so-called "acts of God," are not compelling to the public.²⁶⁰ The fact that the solution to fix Mother Nature's failure was a local tax levied against the residents of Lemmon Valley to raise approximately \$100 million dollars possibly only made this narrative less compelling.

The county presented this exogenous narrative in a framing contest against the governor's narrative, and it failed miserably. The people of the Lemmon Valley community had presented their frustrations through media outlets, and the visuals associated with the coverage were compelling. The governor's narrative matched the local narrative and the media logic, allowing him to "win the argument."²⁶¹

D. CONSEQUENCES OF THE 2017 NORTHERN NEVADA FLOODS

The consequences of these floods and their administrative and operational responses continued throughout 2017, particularly for the residents of Lemmon Valley. Although Washoe County had successfully moved water out of homes and

²⁶⁰ Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell, "Crisis Exploitation: Political and Policy Impacts of Framing Contests," 85.

²⁶¹ Hood, *The Blame Game: Spin, Bureaucracy, and Self-preservation in Government*, 49.

neighborhoods, it remained in the dry lake bed and as an ongoing community flashpoint. By the fall of 2017, frustrated community members angrily contested a proposal for a new housing development in the area.²⁶² Some in the community believed that a perceived rise in local illness was directly associated with the sitting water in the area.²⁶³ As winter approached at the end of the year, many were concerned about preparations for a new round of storms that could bring more water to the area.²⁶⁴ While the community met these challenges, the most significant consequence was perhaps the broken trust between the residents and their community leaders.

²⁶² Gurajpal Sangha, “Battle Underway over Proposed Development in Lemmon Valley,” KOLO, September 15, 2017, <http://www.kolotv.com/content/news/Battle-over-a-proposed-development-in-Lemmon-Valley-444605343.html>.

²⁶³ Kim Burrows, “On Your Side: Lemmon Valley Residents say Flood Water is Making Them Sick,” KNTV, September 13, 2017, <http://mynews4.com/on-your-side/on-your-side-iteam/on-your-side-lemmon-valley-residents-say-flood-water-is-making-them-sick>.

²⁶⁴ Melissa Metheny, “As Winter Nears, Northern Nevada’s Typically Dry Lake Beds are Still Full of Water,” News 4, November 1, 2017, <http://mynews4.com/news/local/as-winter-nears-n-nevadas-typically-dry-lake-beds-are-still-full-of-water>.

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V. FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLITICAL CRISIS LEADERS

The framework established in this paper argues for a distinction between political crisis leadership and political crisis management. Through the case studies examined in this thesis, the framework provides for a number of findings and conclusions regarding what factors contribute to elected and appointed officials' decisions to be either crisis political leaders or managers, and what methods they use to do so. These findings and conclusions support a recommendation for political crisis leaders, namely, that they establish resilience narratives well before a crisis is underway.

A. FINDINGS

The case studies examined illuminate the actions of political leaders during crises, and particularly the factors that contribute to their decisions to be political crisis leaders or political crisis managers. In general, the perception of blame risk for the political official in question appears to be the single most significant factor in this decision, and blame risk is often associated with how quickly a crisis terminates. Furthermore because they are political officials and not first responders, their preferred method for either leading or managing through the event is often through presentational strategies, or efforts to establish an effective narrative to accomplish their political and operational goals.

More specifically, in crises where the blame risk was perceived to be relatively low for certain public officials, the same officials were more likely to respond in a way that aligned with political crisis leadership. In these cases, such as the assassination of the police officers, and the first two floods of 2017 in Nevada, the fast-moving nature of the crises meant that the operational threat was neutralized quickly, and so was the political threat. Therefore, these political crisis leaders were able to develop positive narratives, to continue to govern, and unique to these instances, to ensure that organizational learning was formalized and continued well after the events concluded, as was the case with the sheriff's after-action review and the governor's public planning event for the floods.

During the crises where blame risk was perceived to be relatively higher for certain public officials, the same officials were more likely to respond in a way that aligned with political crisis management. In the cases where blame risk was much higher, such as the Bunkerville standoff, and the persistent flooding in Lemmon Valley following the January flood, political leaders deployed presentational strategies to develop narratives and engage in framing contests to avoid blame. Unfortunately, in the case of the Bunkerville standoff, this approach had operational implications, which emboldened the militia group involved, and led to a subsequent offensive occupation where a person was killed. In the Lemmon Valley flood, it meant that the slow-moving crisis persisted even 11 months after the declaration of an emergency.

B. CONCLUSIONS

These cases suggest that presentational strategies used to make meaning of the situation are the best method for political crisis leaders to achieve their goals of both governing and of avoiding blame. On one hand, these efforts to make meaning of the crisis allow them to explain to the public how the incident occurred, what is being done to stabilize the situation, and what will be done to ensure that such a crisis does not happen again. On the other hand, these same messages can be used to address the emotional nature of the event and provide hope for renewal in the future.

In all the cases studied, elected and appointed officials showed their aptitude at meaning making during an event, though with exceptions. In the two most complex crises, the Bunkerville Standoff and the 2017 floods, successful political leaders managed to identify presentational strategies and narratives that showed the resources, decisions, and actions under their control in the best light possible. These approaches created powerful and convincing frames that blamed others when things went poorly and that praised positive collaboration when things went well. In both cases, the focus only on the response phase during the most acute period of the crisis allowed for the very different complexities in each crisis to be missed, though in both cases, blame had been fairly clearly established.

Also in both cases, the focus by political leaders across the spectrum largely ended when the perceived threat ended, except when blame could be attributed after the fact as with Sheriff Gillespie's blame of both Bundy and the BLM, and Secretary Jewell's image restoration strategy following the police assassinations. In both cases, any public efforts for organizational learning were limited at best.

C. RECOMMENDATION FOR CRISIS LEADERS

What appears to be missing from all these cases is a significant effort to frame the potential crisis before it is clear that such a crisis may be looming, which is an essential element for political crisis leadership. Leadership before the crisis can come in many forms, but efforts can largely be categorized as either governing or avoiding blame. As noted, both are required of political crisis leaders, and they are required throughout all phases of the crisis.

Political crisis leadership as governing before a crisis occurs has been studied thoroughly. Largely referred to as "preparedness" within public safety and emergency management circles, leadership in this area can take many forms. Political leaders can ensure that specific threats and hazards for their jurisdictions are identified and their ability to respond to those threats assessed. They can ensure that plans are written, key personnel are trained against those plans, and that the training is exercised. These sorts of activities happen daily, often without input from political leaders, but political leaders can ensure that barriers are reduced between agencies, resources are available, and preparedness is and remains a priority.

Research on political crisis leadership as blame management before a crisis occurs is not as robust. As these case studies show, blame management efforts prior to crises appears to be an area where even the most successful crisis management efforts were lacking. Effective political crisis leaders can avoid this challenge during crises by establishing resilience narrative that can be invoked and reintroduced as a renewal narrative during the crisis.

D. RESILIENCE NARRATIVES

Focusing exclusively on blame risk during a crisis amounts to political crisis management. Political crisis leaders must focus on addressing their blame risk, as well as governing. To both govern and avoid blame, political crisis leaders must engage in the five essential tasks outlined in *The Politics of Crisis Management* before, during, and after the event. If presentational strategies provide political figures with their best opportunity to both govern and avoid blame, then they must establish narratives before crises that can be relied upon during and after the event is terminated. These narratives established prior to the event are referred as resilience narratives.

In addition to the “postcrisis narratives of accountability, responsibility, and blame” common immediately following a crisis, “alternative narratives of growth, learning, rebirth, resurrection, restoration, and renewal” can also be found.²⁶⁵ In crises where “renewal narratives” are found, they can capture how a community decides to rebuild and reinvent itself following a crisis.²⁶⁶ It acknowledges the figurative and literal space for change and adaptation following an event like a major fire, flood, or otherwise, and looks to the future for growth and opportunity even through the community’s present suffering.²⁶⁷

Renewal narratives, like all narratives during a crisis, have to be believable. They have to be framed correctly, and voiced by credible messengers as a part of a framing contest. Establishing the foundation for the renewal narrative, argued in this thesis as through establishing a strategic resilience narrative, is the essential task for the political crisis leader before a crisis both to govern and to avoid the risk of blame during and after an incident.

The concept of strategic narratives is commonly found in the field of international relations. In *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*, Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, and Laura Roselle define narratives as

²⁶⁵ Seeger and Sellnow, *Narratives of Crisis: Telling Stories of Ruin and Renewal*, 81.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

“frameworks that allow humans to connect apparently unconnected phenomena around some causal transformation,” they include “an initial situation or order, a problem that disrupts that order, and a resolution that reestablishes order,” and “they articulate end states and suggest how to get there.”²⁶⁸ Based on this definition of “narrative,” they argue “strategic narratives are a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors.”²⁶⁹ Furthermore they are “a tool for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which they operate.”²⁷⁰

In *Ordering International Politics: Identity, Crisis, and Representational Force*, Janice Bially Mattern argues that “identity” is a nation’s key source of international order.²⁷¹ In her argument, “identity is “the cognitive, sociological, emotional, and other nontangible bonds among states that constitute their roles in relations to one another and so endows states with a self-definition or concept.”²⁷² Assuming a postmodern view of national identity, Bially Mattern argues that all identity is narrative, and that the identity or narrative breaks down in crisis, which provides an ideal “opportunity for exploring the process by which order is imposed upon disorder.”²⁷³ During a crisis, when identity is shaken and needs to be “re-produced,” Bially Mattern argues that narrators can do so through representational force.²⁷⁴

According to Bially Mattern, representational force amounts to a “do-or-die command,” it is a “challenge so grave to a victim’s subjectivity that the victim ends up trapped in a position of either abandoning his dissent and complying with the demands of

²⁶⁸ Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 5.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁷¹ Janice Bially Mattern, *Ordering International Politics: Identity, Crisis, and Representational Force* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 6.

²⁷² *Ibid.*

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 12–13.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

the force-wielder or suffering subjective death.”²⁷⁵ In her example, she describes the Anglo-American Suez Crisis of 1956, in which a standoff between the two nations ensued, but was resolved without violence or threat of violence.²⁷⁶ It was the “special relationship” identities shared between the two countries that existed prior to the crisis and that had to be re-produced during the crisis that was the source of order for the two nations vying to be leaders of the western world.²⁷⁷

In a publication of the Woodrow Wilson Center titled “A National Strategic Narrative,” Captain Wayne Porter and Colonel Mark Mykleby, provide an example of how the ideas presented in *Strategic Narratives* can apply ahead of and during crises, as described in *Ordering National Politics*. *A National Strategic Narrative* argues that the United States at the time of its writing (2011) remains dominant, but that the complexity of the 21st century world requires it to evolve to protect its key values of “security and prosperity.”²⁷⁸ To evolve with this changing world, the authors provide a new strategic narrative that reads, in the 21st century, the United States wants “to become the strongest competitor and most influential player in a deeply inter-connected global system, which requires that we invest less in defense and more in sustainable prosperity and the tools of effective global engagement.”²⁷⁹ While this statement may appear to be bureaucratic language and not a narrative, it embraces the key strengths that allowed for American dominance in the 20th century and shows how its needs to change to remain dominant in the 21st century. All an effective leader must do is create the story depicting this narrative.

The authors of *Strategic Narratives* argue “leaders cannot create a narrative out of nothing, off the cuff.”²⁸⁰ The author of *Ordering National Politics* argues that identity

²⁷⁵ Mattern, *Ordering International Politics: Identity, Crisis, and Representational Force*, 14.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 20–21.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁷⁸ Wayne Porter and Mark Mykleby, *A National Strategic Narrative* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2011), 5.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁸⁰ Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*, 8.

narratives prior to a crisis are the source of political order following the crisis if leaders use representational force to manage the crisis.²⁸¹ In addition, the authors of “A National Strategic Narrative” assert that a strategic narrative is essential to leading the United States through the difficulties of an evolving world order.²⁸²

If these three arguments about the strength of strategic narratives are true regarding international politics, then they should also be true about domestic politics. Therefore, with respect to these case studies, a crisis political leader ought to work to both govern and manage blame by establishing a strategic narrative that supports an identity of resilience for the community or jurisdiction for which they are responsible. This effort should be underway before crisis strikes, so that the strategic resilience narrative can evolve into a renewal narrative during and immediately following the crisis.

With respect to crises, resilience is generally the ability of a jurisdiction, state, or even a country to recover quickly from a crisis of any kind. A strategic resilience narrative, then, is a set of facts about an entity’s history arranged to emphasize the challenges it has faced before and how it has overcome those challenges. If developed early within a political leader’s term, that is, prior to any crises, and if it is general enough, such a resilience narrative can be transformed into a renewal narrative if delivered through effective presentational strategies by a credible leader.

While the “Boston Strong” slogan became a compelling rallying cry for the city and the entire nation following the Boston Marathon bombings in 2013, it was created after the city experienced the crisis and the lengthy manhunt.²⁸³ Perhaps the most compelling example of a resilience narrative was delivered by the great British orator and political leader, Winston Churchill. Although Churchill was just as capable of undercutting himself by his speeches in the British Parliament, he gave three speeches

²⁸¹ Mattern, *Ordering International Politics: Identity, Crisis, and Representational Force*, 21.

²⁸² Porter and Mykleby, *A National Strategic Narrative*, 5.

²⁸³ Ben Zimmer, “‘Boston Strong,’ The Phrase that Rallied a City,” *Boston Globe*, May 12, 2013, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/ideas/2013/05/11/boston-strong-phrase-that-rallied-city/uNPFaI8Mv4QxsWqpjXBOQO/story.html>.

that are famous today for how they reflected and cemented the British character of resilience at an extremely difficult time in his nation's history.

Churchill had assumed the role of Prime Minister of his country on May 10, eight months after the beginning of the Second World War, and during a time when his country faced considerable danger of a Nazi invasion.²⁸⁴ On May 13, he delivered his first of three speeches, which is commonly referred to as "Blood, toil, tears, and sweat;" on June 4, he delivered his famous speech, "We shall fight on the beaches;" and on June 18, he delivered his speech entitled, "This was their finest hour."²⁸⁵

His second speech is perhaps his most famous. "We shall fight on the beaches" was delivered at a time when the United Kingdom was desperate. Nazi Germany was threatening to invade, and they required the assistance of American military forces to survive. This threat, presented an impending crisis, and recognizing that, Churchill concluded his speech with this paragraph:

I have, myself, full confidence that if all do their duty, if nothing is neglected, and if the best arrangements are made, as they are being made, we shall prove ourselves once again able to defend our Island home, to ride out the storm of war, and to outlive the menace of tyranny, if necessary for years, if necessary alone. At any rate, that is what we are going to try to do. That is the resolve of His Majesty's Government—every man of them. That is the will of Parliament and the nation. The British Empire and the French Republic, linked together in their cause and in their need, will defend to the death their native soil, aiding each other like good comrades to the utmost of their strength. Even though large tracts of Europe and many old and famous States have fallen or may fall into the grip of the Gestapo and all the odious apparatus of Nazi rule, we shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender, and even if, which I do not for a moment believe, this Island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet,

²⁸⁴ William Manchester and Paul Reid, *The Last Lion: Winston Spencer Churchill, Defender of the Realm, 1940–1965* (New York: Bantam Books, 2012), 51.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 56, 86, 114.

would carry on the struggle, until, in God's good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old.²⁸⁶

Not only is the prose presented by Churchill famously beautiful and effective, but it also sets the conditions for a renewal narrative if the German military invaded. The British were resilient, and they have had to defend their Island before. As the common title states, Churchill was emphasizing the fact that they as a people were fighters and they would fight the enemy with everything they had in the event of an invasion.

A leader does not have to be as effective an orator as Churchill, or even have the political stature to develop a strategic resilience narrative as he does. Every community, no matter the jurisdiction, has been through hardship before and has emerged, often stronger. This strength is the core of the strategic resilience narrative, a concept that leaders in each of these case studies ought to have practiced prior to their crises, just as each of the leaders should have practiced other elements of political crisis leadership in all the crises, whether they were fast-moving, slow-moving, or combination crises.

²⁸⁶ Winston Churchill, "We Shall Fight on the Beaches," International Churchill Society (ICS), June 4, 1940, <https://www.winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1940-the-finest-hour/we-shall-fight-on-the-beaches/>.

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VI. #VEGASSTRONG: THE POLITICAL CRISIS MODEL AND RESILIENCE NARRATIVES APPLIED

On the evening of October 1, 2017, an unknown gunman opened fire on an open-air concert below his hotel room at the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino in Las Vegas, Nevada, with initial reports indicating that dozens had been killed or wounded.²⁸⁷ The incident also took place at the beginning of the 2018 Governor's race in Nevada, which coincided with other federal and state elections in the state. Due to the shocking nature of this massacre, the increased political activity associated with these political races, as well as the simmering national debate on gun control surrounding mass shootings, this crisis was immediately politicized.²⁸⁸ The complex operational and political dynamics associated with this event provide an opportunity to apply both the political crisis model described previously, as well as the resilience narrative concept.

This incident took place as an audience of thousands took in the final set of a country music festival near the Las Vegas Strip, with video and updates painting partial pictures of a horrific scene. It happened in an iconic American city, and it would take hours for the full scale of the atrocity to be realized. But by the next day, the attack was dubbed, the "deadliest mass shooting in modern U.S. history."²⁸⁹

Important details of the incident were revealed in the hours and days that followed. With some important questions answered early on in the investigation, media outlets focused on determining the assailant's or assailants' motives, identifying any deficiencies in the coordination of the response between law enforcement, fire departments, and other agencies, and the role of the state's relaxed gun laws in allowing such an atrocity to take place. Just as quickly, though, elected officials made intentional

²⁸⁷ Richard Winton, "From the 32nd Floor, Las Vegas Gunman Caused Mass Carnage despite Security Measures at Concert," *Los Angeles Times*, October 2, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-na-shooting-las-vegas-sniper-tactics-20171002-story.html>.

²⁸⁸ Jon Ralston, "Politicians Behave, More or Less, Like Politicians during Week of Tragedy in Las Vegas," *Nevada Independent*, October 8, 2017, <https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/politicians-behave-more-or-less-like-politicians-during-week-of-tragedy-in-las-vegas>.

²⁸⁹ "Deadliest Mass Shootings in Modern U.S. History Fast Facts," CNN, October 4, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/09/16/us/20-deadliest-mass-shootings-in-u-s-history-fast-facts/index.html>.

efforts to frame the incident, including showing the responders and citizens who helped as heroes, depicting the fallen as victims of the attack, and showing Las Vegas as a city that would undoubtedly rebound from the devastation it endured. Whether these efforts were powerful enough to gain traction in the media reporting that followed determined whether elected officials felt blame risk or not, and therefore, engaged in political crisis leadership or political crisis management in the days that followed.

A. THE DEADLIEST MASS SHOOTING IN MODERN U.S. HISTORY

On October 1, 2017, at approximately 10:08 PM, an unknown gunman opened fire from his hotel room on the 32nd floor of the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino onto a crowd below.²⁹⁰ Amateur videos posted on social media almost immediately after the attack show chaos as a massive crowd of people run from what sounds like automatic machine gunfire.²⁹¹ Although information developed slowly during the perilous response effort, it was immediately clear that this event was a major attack on one of the world's most iconic cities.

Initial details of the attack emerged through a series of press conferences held by Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department Sheriff Joseph Lombardo shortly after the incident. The crowd was estimated at over 22,000 people, all of whom were participating in the Route 91 Harvest Festival, a three-day, outdoor country music festival held near the Las Vegas Strip.²⁹² The shooter's room was on the 32nd floor of the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino that made it possible for him to shoot downward on the dispersing

²⁹⁰ Kieran Corcoran, Sonam Sheth, and Bryan Logan, "59 People Are Dead and More than 527 Are Injured after a Mass Shooting in Las Vegas," *Business Insider*, October 2, 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/las-vegas-shooting-reports-of-gunman-at-mandalay-bay-casino-2017-10>.

²⁹¹ Malachy Brown, "Reporting on Las Vegas, Pixel by Pixel," *New York Times*, October 23, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/23/insider/reporting-on-las-vegas-pixel-by-pixel.html?_r=0.

²⁹² "Las Vegas Mass Shooting: What We Know," CNN, October 3, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/10/02/us/las-vegas-shooting-what-we-know/index.html>.

crowd.²⁹³ He had broken out two windows on opposite sides of his suite that allowed him to change his shooting positions as the crowd moved.²⁹⁴

Although his name was not released immediately, he was eventually identified as Stephen Paddock. His girlfriend, Marilou Danley, was identified as a person of interest, though it was later revealed that she was out of the country at the time of the attack.²⁹⁵ Although he had incited untold terror on a crowd of people, it was initially unknown if Paddock acted alone, adding to the fear and insecurity in the city as the situation remained dynamic.²⁹⁶

In the days prior to October 1, it was clear Paddock had meticulously prepared for his attack. Unknown to hotel staff, he brought 23 guns into his hotel room, and fitted at least 12 of the guns with “bump stock” devices that transformed his assault rifles into automatic weapons.²⁹⁷ He also set up a system of cameras in his room and in his hallway outside his room, presumably so he could know when police were poised to disrupt his attack.²⁹⁸ The cameras were helpful, apparently, because Paddock killed himself while a Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department SWAT team breached his door.

Although it would take hours for the full scale of the attack to be reported, and when they were, it was clear that the results of his preparations were massive. The attack

²⁹³ Corcoran, Sheth, and Logan, “59 People Are Dead and More than 527 Are Injured after a Mass Shooting in Las Vegas.”

²⁹⁴ Euan McKirdy, “What Happened inside the Shooter’s Suite at the Mandalay Bay Hotel,” CNN, October 4, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/10/03/us/mandalay-bay-hotel-room-what-we-know/index.html>.

²⁹⁵ “LVMPD Sheriff Briefs Media Regarding Active Shooter 10/2/2017,” YouTube video, 6:02, posted by Las Vegas Metropolitan Police, October 2, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QQ6KZN9s5yY>.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Alex Horton, “Checkpoint the Las Vegas Shooter Modified a Dozen Rifles to Shoot like Automatic Weapons,” *Washington Post*, October 3, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/check-point/wp/2017/10/02/video-from-las-vegas-suggests-automatic-gunfire-heres-what-makes-machine-guns-different/?utm_term=.9c70eab10e68.

²⁹⁸ David Choi, “The Las Vegas Gunman Set up 2 Cameras in the Hallway outside his Hotel Room and a Camera in the Door,” *Business Insider*, October 3, 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/las-vegas-shooter-stephen-paddock-camera-rig-hotel-2017-10>.

resulted in 59 dead, including Paddock, and 489 were injured.²⁹⁹ Paddock fired on the crowd for approximately 11 minutes in total before he was stopped by hotel security and law enforcement.³⁰⁰

While emergency responders neutralized the threat posed by Paddock and evacuated casualties, the administrative and support response initiated as well. Clark County approved an emergency declaration and activated its Multi-Agency Coordination Center to coordinate information and resources for the response efforts.³⁰¹ The State of Nevada activated its Emergency Operations Center as well.³⁰² Governor Sandoval declared both a public health emergency to allow for reciprocal licensure to out-of-state medical professionals traveling to Nevada to assist with casualties, and also declared a general state of emergency to ensure that state resources were available for Clark County as necessary.³⁰³

Clark County moved quickly from the enormously successful response into recovery efforts. Under the county's leadership, a Family Assistance Center was established to provide comprehensive services for victims and their families.³⁰⁴ The Clark County Coroner's Office began the difficult work of victim identification, notification, and transportation.³⁰⁵ Clark County Commission Chairman Steve Sisolak even created a GoFundMe account that raised over \$8 million for the victims and their

²⁹⁹ Alan Gomez and Kaila White, "Here Are All the Victims of the Las Vegas Shooting," *USA Today*, October 6, 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2017/10/06/here-all-victims-las-vegas-shooting/733236001/>.

³⁰⁰ "Las Vegas Shooting: Gunman Fired for 9 to 11 Minutes, Police Say," Fox 2, October 4, 2017, <http://fox2now.com/2017/10/04/las-vegas-shooting-gunman-fired-for-9-to-11-minutes-police-say/>.

³⁰¹ Yolanda King, "Declaration of Emergency" (proclamation, October 2, 2017).

³⁰² "State Emergency Operations Center Activate," KOLO, October 2, 2017, <http://www.kolotv.com/content/news/State-Emergency-Operations-Center-activated-449157003.html>.

³⁰³ Brian Sandoval, "Declaring a Public Health and Medical Disaster" (proclamation, October 2, 2017); Brian Sandoval, "Declaration of Emergency" (proclamation, October 2, 2017).

³⁰⁴ Rio Lacanlale, "Assistance Center Shifts Mission to Recovery after Las Vegas Shooting," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, October 6, 2017, <https://www.reviewjournal.com/crime/shootings/assistance-center-shifts-mission-to-recovery-after-las-vegas-shooting/>.

³⁰⁵ Michael Nedelman, "Las Vegas Coroner 'Inundated' after Shootings," CNN, October 3, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/10/03/health/las-vegas-shooting-coroner/index.html>.

families in a few days.³⁰⁶ The hash-tag “#VegasStrong” became a common occurrence on social media.³⁰⁷

B. APPLYING THE POLITICAL CRISIS MODEL

Though many of these details are now known, media and the public had numerous questions about the attack for days after the event. What were Paddock’s motives? Why were “bump stocks” legal if they could cause so much destruction? Did Paddock have an accomplice? Did coordination between police and fire agencies successfully prevent stopping the threat once it had started? Although each of these questions and others would reveal more answers about an unprecedented act of violence on Nevada’s largest city, depending on how the questions were answered would determine who carried some of the blame for the attack.

Through a series of press conferences, Nevada’s elected officials began to address these questions and shape the public’s perception of the mass casualty event. Although the press conferences began small, with only the sheriff, the Clark County Fire Department Chief Greg Cassell, and Aaron Rouse, the Special Agent in Charge of the Las Vegas Office of the FBI, they grew into political affairs with increasingly more elected officials on the stage and offering remarks at each additional press conference. The culminating press event had more than 30 people on the stage, 10 of whom were elected officials, including the President of the United State States.³⁰⁸

During all the press conferences hosted by Sheriff Lombardo, the first of which was held within three hours after the attack, he and his immediate subordinates focused their remarks on the facts of the investigation as it developed, as well as on the heroic and combined efforts of the law enforcement, firefighters, emergency medical services, and

³⁰⁶ Nina Golgowski, “Las Vegas Officials Create GoFundMe Page for Shooting Victims,” *Huffington Post*, October 3, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/gofundme-las-vegas-shooting_us_59d26fbc-e4b05f005d35d9dc.

³⁰⁷ “#VegasStrong Becomes City’s Rallying Cry after Las Vegas Shooting,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, October 6, 2017, <https://www.reviewjournal.com/crime/shootings/vegasstrong-becomes-citys-rallying-cry-after-las-vegas-shooting/>.

³⁰⁸ “President Trump Meets First Responders in Las Vegas,” C-Span, video, 13:39, October 4, 2017, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?435137-1/president-trump-speaks-meeting-survivors-first-responders-las-vegas>.

private security guards.³⁰⁹ Joined at the initial press conferences by Clark County Fire Department Chief Greg Cassell, Sheriff Lombardo spoke of police and firefighters not hesitating to pair up and enter the hotel together, a fact, he noted, that was not the case in responses to mass shooting events in every jurisdiction in the country.³¹⁰ “Individuals with helmets and vests on,” Sheriff Lombardo noted during a later press conference, referring to pictures produced on social media, “those are firefighters.”³¹¹ He also later noted that Paddock’s room was discovered by a hotel security guard who had been shot at by the gunman before notifying police of the shooter’s location.³¹²

Sheriff Lombardo also addressed rumors as they arose during the press conferences. In the early hours of the investigation rumors suggested that Paddock had been assisted by another assailant in carrying out this attack. In an interview following the 2014 murder of two police officers in Las Vegas, Lombardo stated that his biggest fear for his community was an attack by a “lone wolf” actor.³¹³ Based on his understanding of events, it appeared that his fear was realized, as no signs could be found of an accomplice assisting Paddock in carrying out his attack.³¹⁴

As the number of politicians on the press conference stage grew, the politics of this attack on Nevada’s largest city emerged, especially as they pertained to the beginning of the 2018 race for governor. Present for most of the press conferences were both the announced democratic candidate for Governor, Chairman Sisolak, and the Nevada Attorney General, Adam Laxalt, who was expected to announce his bid for the

³⁰⁹ Lynh Bui, “Armed with a New Approach, Police and Medics Stormed through the Las Vegas Gunfire, Saving Lives,” *Washington Post*, October 5, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/armed-with-a-new-approach-police-and-medics-stormed-through-the-las-vegas-gunfire-saving-lives/2017/10/05/3f4c255e-a9fe-11e7-850e-2bdd1236be5d_story.html?utm_term=.0a4eaf8df75d.

³¹⁰ “News Conference on Las Vegas Mass Shooting,” C-Span, video, 35:30, October 2, 2017, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?435113-1/law-vegas-officials-provide-update-massshooting-investigation>.

³¹¹ “Sheriff Joseph Lombardo on the Vegas Shooting,” WREN, October 3, 2017, <http://www.wben.com/media/audio-channel/sheriff-joseph-lombardo-vegas-shooting>.

³¹² “Media Briefing with LVMPD Sheriff Lombardo on the Shooting Incident Last Night,” Periscope, video, 23:25, October 2, 2017, <https://www.pscptv.com/LVMPD/11PKqwbqzAYJb?t=1263>.

³¹³ Ley, “Lombardo on Terrorism: ‘My Biggest Concern is the Lone Wolf’.”

³¹⁴ “LVMPD Sheriff Briefs Media Regarding Active Shooter.”

Republican nomination for governor, but had cancelled his events due to the attacks.³¹⁵ Both officials stood on the stage and addressed the concerning situation facing the state, but some tension was noticeable. During an early press conference, Sisolak spoke first, but after Laxalt finished his remarks, Sisolak cut off the governor who was to speak next and offered additional remarks, asking everyone to thank first responders for risking their lives during the attack.³¹⁶ Although a minor event and could be interpreted a number of different ways, as time carried forward, the politics of this incident were easier to identify.

Many questions were answered through the various press conferences; however, two highly political questions remained. Namely, what were Paddock's motives, and why "bump stocks" were legal. As these questions remained unanswered, and because the incident was already highly politicized, both questions led to separate political tempests in the days that followed.

Speculating briefly on Paddock's motives during a press conference, Sheriff Lombardo asked rhetorically if Paddock might have been radicalized, a question that coincided with an announcement from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) that Paddock had converted to radical Islam six months prior to the shooting. This sole question was enough for far-right media outlets to hint at conspiracy theories, with Alex Jones' website leading with a story about the Sheriff's question.³¹⁷ Wayne Allyn Root, a Las Vegas businessman, media personality, and avid Donald Trump supporter, concluded from the sheriff's question and ISIL's claim that Paddock was either a radical Muslim convert or a radical member of leftist group, ANTIFA.³¹⁸ FBI Special Agent in Charge Rouse stated plainly during a press conference that no evidence was found of a

³¹⁵ "Laxalt Postpones Governor Bid Announcement Due to Shooting," *U.S. News and World Report*, October 2, 2017, <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/nevada/articles/2017-10-02/laxalt-postpones-governor-bid-announcement-due-to-shooting>.

³¹⁶ "News Conference on Las Vegas Mass Shooting."

³¹⁷ Paul Joseph Watson, "Breaking: Sheriff says Las Vegas Shooter Could Have Been 'Radicalized,'" *Infowars.com*, October 4, 2017, <https://www.infowars.com/breaking-sheriff-says-las-vegas-shooter-could-have-been-radicalized/>.

³¹⁸ Michael Edison Hayden, "Las Vegas Shooter Stephen Paddock Was 'ANTIFA,' According to Persistent Alt-Right Conspiracy," *Newsweek*, October 3, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/alt-right-conspiracy-theories-blame-antifa-mass-shooting-las-vegas-677075>.

connection with the radical Islamic group, though the investigation to Paddock's motives was ongoing.³¹⁹

Questions about the legality of the “bump stock” pushed the debate into the larger public debate on gun control. One article stated that Nevada's lax gun laws had made it easy for Paddock to commit his attack.³²⁰ An article in the *Nevada Independent* revealed that a gun control advocacy group had threatened to sue the state because of Attorney General Laxalt's refusal to implement a ballot measure approved by Nevada voters during the previous election that would require background checks for private gun sales. And on Wednesday, October 4, the *New York Times* editorial board wrote a scathing editorial against Laxalt, stating that the rationale used to not uphold the will of the voters “comes from a man who not only campaigned against the proposal but later praised the N.R.A. at the organization's annual convention in April for fighting sensible gun-safety laws.”³²¹ The incident created such a controversy that *Politico* reported some Republicans in the Senate were ready to vote on some modest gun control measures, including outlawing “bump stocks.”³²²

Following the culminating conference that included the president, Sheriff Lombardo continued to hold updates for the media and public. Hard questions, politics, and stories of heroism and resilience persisted through the reporting. But in the next press conference following the president's remarks in Las Vegas, Sheriff Lombardo was one of three elected officials standing on the stage.

³¹⁹ “News Conference on Las Vegas Mass Shooting.”

³²⁰ Callum Patton, “Las Vegas Gun Laws: Open Carry, Concealed Weapons, Machine Guns All Legal in Nevada,” *Newsweek*, October 2, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/las-vegas-gun-laws-open-carry-concealed-weapon-machine-guns-all-legal-nevada-675310>.

³²¹ Editorial Board, “On Guns, Nevada's Leaders Are Overruling Their Voters,” *New York Times*, October 4, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/04/opinion/nevada-gun-laws-vegas.html>.

³²² John Bresnahan, Seung Min Kim, and Burgess Everett, “Key GOP Senators Open to ‘Bump Stock’ Ban,” *Politico*, October 4, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/10/04/bump-stock-ban-republican-senators-243453>.

C. POLITICAL CRISIS LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

The blame risk for this attack and the response operations were different than for the slow-moving crisis in Bunkerville in April 2014 and similar to the fast-moving crisis of June 2014, when the Millers assassinated two police officers. In this incident, blame risk was perceived to be low for the responding agencies, while some political actors, especially those engaged in political campaigns, perceived their blame risk to be higher as the issue played out. These perceptions of blame risk help explain, at least in part, why some political leaders exhibited clear examples of political crisis leadership while others engaged in political crisis management.

For a number of reasons, the blame risk associated with the actual event was perceived by Sheriff Lombardo and Governor Sandoval to be relatively low, which may have contributed to their examples of political crisis leadership. First, the threat terminated in about 11 minutes from when it started, which, while perhaps a lifetime for those involved, was actually extremely fast. Second, although it was a deadly tragedy, the threat was neutralized and the scene was stabilized extremely effectively and quickly. And third, leaders like Sheriff Lombardo and Clark County Fire Chief Greg Cassell were able quickly and accurately to engage in meaning making to both inform the public and develop a believable and powerful narrative of heroism that proved to be dominant in the days that followed.

The Sheriff exhibited political crisis leadership by both governing and managing blame through his press conferences that were held quickly after the attack and throughout the response period. These press conferences were exceptional tools for sharing sensemaking and meaning making. The many unknowns of the incident evoked a number of questions in the public, and leaving those questions unanswered would have allowed for rumors and unofficial information to fill the gaps in the public understanding of these events. The sheriff and his colleagues aggressively communicated both the facts of the case, as well as how the public should perceive those facts.

The facts developed over time, but they were presented openly and steadily. As Sheriff Lombardo learned of new details that would help the public understand the

situation, and thus further understand that the threat was no longer present, he shared what he could, and demurred where he had to so as to preserve the investigation. Although the story changed over time, Sheriff Lombardo received praise for his even approach to information sharing during this dynamic event.³²³

During the press conferences, the sheriff was also able to engage in meaning making strategies for the incident, which were extremely successful. Lombardo's primary narrative was a hero narrative, specifically with respect to the first responders who engaged in this event, putting their life and safety at risk to do so.³²⁴ A part of this narrative was the successful joint efforts between police and fire responders, which the national media referred to as "a new approach" that resulted in saving lives.³²⁵ This narrative was effective because it aligned with a significant media narrative that developed around the same time.

Governor Sandoval also could have perceived ownership of some of the blame risk; however, his actions suggest a rejection of negativity bias and full political crisis leadership, as well. Governor Sandoval served as Chairman of the Nevada Commission on Homeland Security, which oversees grants and strategy for statewide homeland security efforts, and he is generally responsible for public safety in the state, both positions that link him to this event. As is appropriate for the state's chief executive, though, much of his leadership was shown through meaning making, and his words throughout the event proved to be as powerful as the sheriff's in setting the tone of the narrative that the media would embrace.

From his first tweet of the incident, the governor evoked the phrase "the Nevada family," a theme that continued throughout his remarks in the week that followed. This imagery showed Nevada as a tight-knit community during a crisis. It suggested that no matter their day-to-day differences, the citizens of Nevada would come together during

³²³ Jackie Valley and Megan Messerly, "In Wake of Shooting, Sheriff Balances Public Information, Police Interests," *Nevada Independent*, October 22, 2017, <https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/in-wake-of-shooting-sheriff-balances-public-information-police-interests>.

³²⁴ Seeger and Sellnow, *Narratives of Crisis: Telling Stories of Ruin and Renewal*, 113.

³²⁵ Bui, "Armed with a New Approach, Police and Medics Stormed through the Las Vegas Gunfire, Saving Lives."

the crisis, and thanks to the heroes described by Sheriff Lombardo, Nevada would come back stronger from this tragedy.

Governor Sandoval's comments evoked several narratives, but his most persistent contribution to meaning making for this incident was the creation of a powerful renewal narrative.³²⁶ The authors of *Narratives of Crisis* describe a renewal narrative as a message that assures the public that the community will come back just as strong or stronger than before.³²⁷ The governor relied on his use of the "Nevada Family" imagery to build out the components of his renewal narrative. He noted that the community had been hit hard, that heroes had stepped up, and that Nevada would come back from this event.³²⁸

The governor's final speech before introducing the President in Las Vegas perfectly exemplified the culmination of this message as it developed over the previous days.³²⁹ He spoke of anger and sadness, as he had all along, but he also spoke of resilience and strength.³³⁰ His message was a continuation of his statements on the incident from the very beginning, and at least one commentator remarked that he looked presidential making it.

Governor Sandoval's development of a renewal narrative for this event may have resonated because of similar messaging going out on social media. The Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority (LVCVA) posted a picture on various social media sites reading, "We've been there for you during good times. Thank you for being there for us now."³³¹ Another LVCVA picture posted on social media stated that the terrible incident that happened in Vegas was also inspiring because of the outpouring of support

³²⁶ Seeger and Sellnow, *Narratives of Crisis: Telling Stories of Ruin and Renewal*, 81.

³²⁷ Ibid.

³²⁸ "News Conference on Las Vegas Mass Shooting."

³²⁹ "President Trump Meets First Responders in Las Vegas."

³³⁰ Ibid.

³³¹ Tim Nudd, "How Las Vegas Is Helping the City Heal with Two Perfect Lines of Copy," Ad Week, October 5, 2017, <http://www.adweek.com/agencies/how-las-vegas-is-helping-the-city-heal-with-two-perfect-lines-of-copy/>.

received.³³² Both were concluded with the hash-tag “#VegasStrong,” which recalled the “#BostonStrong” motto that developed after the Boston Marathon attack in 2014.³³³

Chairman Sisolak and Attorney General Laxalt behaved much more in line with the characteristics of political crisis managers during this event. Chairman Sisolak’s blame risk came from his role as the Chairman of the Board of County Commissioners for the county government that headed up the response. Attorney General Laxalt’s role in the response was unclear; however, his advocacy for gun rights would be brought into sharp focus for the electorate with this event. The blame risk for both was heightened even further as they prepared to participate in the governor’s race.

However, to say that they were both exclusively participating in the response to this event as political crisis managers would not be fair. By all accounts, Clark County under Chairman Sisolak’s leadership responded extremely well to the attack. The police and fire services stabilized the scene quickly, the county approved a declaration, and all aspects of the local government contributed to a well-coordinated efforts. Sisolak further showed his engagement by appearing at the press conferences, by continuing the hero narrative established by Sheriff Lombardo, and by taking the initiative to establish the GoFundMe account to receive contributions, which topped \$8 million in the first few days.

All these efforts show an intentional eschewing of negativity bias; particularly true, however, for his involvement in establishing the account for the victims, an innovative idea for a public official, but one fraught with political liability. If any hint of malfeasance was associated with this account, or if victims were reported to having to deal with unnecessary bureaucracy to access this account, Sisolak could find himself with another political crisis on his hands. Certainly, he considered this liability, but he still chose pursue political crisis leadership in starting the account.

Attorney General Laxalt showed a similar willingness to eschew negativity bias and show leadership during the events and afterwards. He arranged to have a team of

³³² Nudd, “How Las Vegas Is Helping the City Heal with Two Perfect Lines of Copy.”

³³³ Ibid.

attorneys general from other states with experience in victim advocacy come to Nevada to support Clark County's efforts.³³⁴ Much like Sisolak's victim account, Attorney General Laxalt's efforts to assist victims opened him up to complaints from victims, but he chose to participate anyway. Laxalt also showed leadership during this crisis by postponing his campaign announcement for governor, a step that could damage any momentum he might have had gained by making the announcement as planned on October 2.

The examples of political crisis management for the elected leaders were more subtle. As presumed opponents from opposite parties for the office of governor, they never addressed the public together to show they were working together and not allowing politics to interfere. While this may have been an extraordinary political step to begin with, there were examples of the perceived tension between the two. During the press conference on the morning of October 2 where both spoke, Sisolak insisted on speaking for a second time after the attorney general spoke, even cutting off the Governor to do so.

Laxalt played politics as well. After Chairman Sisolak had achieved incredible success through his GoFundMe account, Attorney General Laxalt released a statement through his office warning people not to be taken in by scams where people used GoFundMe accounts to solicit money that would never reach the victims.³³⁵ His largest political donor in the previous election, Sheldon Adelson, also created a competing fund with Sisolak's, and he donated \$4 million dollars to it.³³⁶

Even Laxalt's efforts exhibiting political crisis leadership can be seen as blame avoidance strategies, particularly since he had no formal role in the response. As is often the case with mass shootings, the topic of gun control entered the discussion surrounding the Vegas assault and presented a new and lingering element of blame risk, especially for

³³⁴ "Laxalt Launching Coalition of AG Offices to Assist Victims," CBS Las Vegas, October 5, 2017, <http://lasvegas.cbslocal.com/2017/10/05/laxalt-launching-coalition-of-ag-offices-to-assist-victims/>.

³³⁵ Ben Botkin, "Beware of Las Vegas Shooting GoFundMe Scams," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, October 5, 2017, <https://www.reviewjournal.com/crime/shootings/beware-of-las-vegas-shooting-gofundme-scams/>.

³³⁶ Nikki Bowers, "Sands Corp., Adelson Family Announce \$4M Relief Fund for Mass Shooting Victims, Families," *Las Vegas Now*, October 5, 2017, <http://www.lasvegasnow.com/news/sands-corp-adelson-family-announce-4m-relief-fund-for-mass-shooting-victims-families/827393250>.

Laxalt. His actions to override the will of the Nevada voters in halting the voter-approved ballot measure on gun background checks allowed his opponents to saddle him with the perception of blame for this event, even though the law he held up would not likely have had an impact on Paddock's ability to purchase guns legally. With state and federal legislators introducing gun control measures and even the *New York Times* editorial board attacking his position directly, he needed to take steps to show he was part of the solution. Assisting the victims provided him a way to do that by invoking the victim narrative.³³⁷

D. APPLYING RESILIENCE NARRATIVES

The political scrum from this tragedy helped shape the way that the public of Nevada and perhaps the world understood this event. A prominent political commentator in Nevada, Jon Ralston, who has been critical of Governor Sandoval's constant optimism in the past, spoke highly of the governor and of Sheriff Lombardo's handling of this event. To Ralston, Governor Sandoval looked "presidential," and Lombardo was "a no-nonsense leader," and "a consummate pro."³³⁸ While others politicized these events, according to Ralston, these officials led.³³⁹

Together, Lombardo and Sandoval reflected the leadership the public needed. Lombardo's attention to updating the public with what had happened and what was currently happening as the investigation developed filled much of the official information void, while Governor Sandoval's remarks focused on filling the emotional void for the residents and visitors of his state. Lombardo's themes of heroism, vigilance, and tragedy well complemented Sandoval's themes of sadness, anger, and renewal.

Governor Sandoval's remarks before introducing President Trump on October 5, 2017, not only presented a renewal narrative, but they were based on a resilience narrative that he had been developing since his first public address as governor on his

³³⁷ Seeger and Sellnow, *Narratives of Crisis: Telling Stories of Ruin and Renewal*, 98.

³³⁸ Ralston, "Politicians Behave, More or Less, Like Politicians during Week of Tragedy in Las Vegas."

³³⁹ *Ibid.*

first day in office. From his first inaugural address on January 3, 2011, through his final State of the State address on January 17, 2017, Sandoval had six major opportunities to address the people of Nevada on his vision and plans for his state. While resilience was not the only theme of these speeches, it figured prominently into each, setting the foundation for the renewal narrative that he would present to the public on October 5, 2017.

Sandoval's first of two consecutive terms began in 2011, and he assumed leadership of one of the hardest hit states in the Great Recession of 2008.³⁴⁰ Against this backdrop, Sandoval recognized that his state had been through hard times before, but he noted that "character is measured in times of crisis."³⁴¹ During this short speech, Sandoval also described his own humble beginnings and the hope that Nevada had offered him, which allowed him to establish himself as the proper person to lead Nevada out of its difficult times. "The Nevada I know will choose action, courage, and opportunity," he said.³⁴² "We will choose optimism."³⁴³

Weeks later, on January 24, 2011, Sandoval seized the opportunity to build upon the message of his inaugural address and provide key verbiage for his vision through his first State of the State address. In this address, Sandoval introduced a persistent image of what he called "the Nevada family" to embody the themes he emphasized: shared sacrifice, common purpose, and optimism.³⁴⁴ Through the image of the Nevada family, he established the foundation for the resilience narrative he invoked following the mass shooting in 2017.

The Nevada family was present the night of his first State of the State address, Sandoval noted, not just in the audience of the legislative chamber, but it was also

³⁴⁰ Brookings Mountain West, *Unify, Regionalize, Diversify: An Economic Development Agenda for Nevada* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2011), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/1114_nevada_economy.pdf.

³⁴¹ Brian Sandoval, "Inaugural Address" (speech, Carson City, NV, January 3, 2011).

³⁴² *Ibid.*

³⁴³ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁴ Brian Sandoval, "State of the State Address" (speech, Carson City, NV, January 24, 2011).

watching his remarks on television or in other ways.³⁴⁵ “It is as if the collective Nevada family has gathered around the table—each member leaning forward in his or her chair, eager to hear the news,” he said.³⁴⁶ “In this time of sacrifice, our Nevada family looks to us for reassurance, for solutions, and for leadership.”³⁴⁷

Through referencing the Nevada family, Sandoval was able to frame the shared sacrifice as the necessary result of their shared crisis. “As our family gathers tonight, Nevadans are confronted on all sides with bad news,” he said.³⁴⁸ Friends of the family had experienced financial ruin, family members had lost jobs, foreclosures and closed businesses fill communities, and a lack of access to healthcare only promises more anguish.³⁴⁹ But, according to Sandoval, the answer to these struggles was not more government spending, but shared sacrifice for all members of the family.³⁵⁰

This shared sacrifice began with the government’s budget, Sandoval said, adding, “Like any Nevada family or business, we began the budget process by looking at how much money we had to spend, not at automatic spending increases.”³⁵¹ His budget and policy proposals unveiled that evening would include cuts to state employee pay and benefits, reductions in support to public and higher education, new efficiencies in health and public safety budgets, and the redirection of services previously supported by state funds to cities and counties.³⁵² In his effort to match Nevada’s public spending with its revenue, the governor noted that he was not taking a conservative or a liberal approach, but that he was introducing major reforms to the way the state did business as well.³⁵³ He proposed dramatically changing the state’s policies and systems for economic development, education, and government responsiveness to focus the state’s efforts on

³⁴⁵ Sandoval, “State of the State Address,” January 24, 2011.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*

³⁵² *Ibid.*

³⁵³ *Ibid.*

addressing Nevada’s abysmal unemployment rates.³⁵⁴ In outlining his proposals to overhaul Nevada’s government functions in these areas, he mentioned the “New Nevada Task Force,” which hinted at the “new Nevada” phrase that would recur throughout his future speeches.³⁵⁵

To accomplish his vision of a new Nevada, Sandoval called for unity around the common purpose he proposed. As if foreshadowing the Las Vegas mass shooting in 2017, Sandoval invoked the shooting of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, a judge, and innocent bystanders days before his speech in Arizona.³⁵⁶ In Nevada, he said, “terror will not keep us from putting service above self, from treating each other with civility, and from working together to ensure public confidence in state government.”³⁵⁷ Nevada would, he proposed, form a more responsive government by, in part, marrying the state’s budget to its performance, creating oversight to detect instances of government waste, and streamlining the professional licensing process in the state.³⁵⁸ He concluded his call for unity around a common purpose by stating, “The Nevada family expects us to succeed by working together.”³⁵⁹

Throughout his first State of the State address, Sandoval emphasized optimism for Nevada’s future even though it was experiencing hard times. Like Churchill during World War II, he noted Nevada’s heritage of resilience, stating that the state “has a long history of economic peaks and valleys,” and that even though the current crisis was worse than had been experienced before, his plan and their unified efforts could ensure that Nevada’s best days were yet to come.³⁶⁰ He concluded his address in a way that brought all his themes together through the Nevada family image and set the foundation for the resilience that would be necessary for renewal:

³⁵⁴ Sandoval, “State of the State Address,” January 24, 2011.

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

My fellow Nevadans, I have no doubt that together we are changing the course of history. We are leading the Nevada family onto a new path, and I submit that it is one of progress and ultimate prosperity. If we have the courage to make the tough decisions, and there will be many, we will succeed. If we focus on new solutions that fundamentally change the way we do business, we will succeed. If we make supporting private sector job creation a way of life for all government agencies... if we control state spending... if we push forward with education reform... if we recognize that service above self is a way of life... if we do all of these things together, then truly Nevada will be Nevada again.³⁶¹

The tone of the governor's second State of the State address on January 16, 2013, shifted dramatically from his first in 2011. Instead of the bleak crisis he addressed in 2011, he provided upbeat evidence of the result of their shared sacrifice, common purpose, and optimism. Due to the progress made, the themes of his second address shifted slightly as well, to "improvement, realism and yes, optimism."³⁶²

"The recession has hurt the entire Nevada family," the Governor said, referring to the results of the shared sacrifice he called for in his first speech, but things had improved.³⁶³ When he had taken office, "Nevada led the nation in unemployment, housing foreclosures, and personal bankruptcies."³⁶⁴ During his first State of the State address, the Governor said, "I asked the Nevada family to embrace a fundamental course correction—to leave behind the limits of the past and consider the case of our state's future anew."³⁶⁵ The challenges the state faced at that time insisted that Nevada's leaders work together to address them, he said, concluding, "And we rose to the occasion."³⁶⁶

Although the state had achieved some recent successes, he noted, "our task is far from over."³⁶⁷ Through his remarks he called for realism, asserting that even as the economy was improving, it was not time to simply reinstate funding and programs that

³⁶¹ Sandoval, "State of the State Address," January 24, 2011.

³⁶² Brian Sandoval, "State of the State Address" (speech, Carson City, NV, January 16, 2013).

³⁶³ Ibid.

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

had been diminished during the most difficult part of the recession.³⁶⁸ Instead, his vision of realism called for a strategic investment in people, programs, and infrastructure that met the needs of the evolving economy.³⁶⁹

The governor concluded his remarks by continuing his call for optimism, even if he tempered his remarks with caution. “Tonight, we can take pride in our progress,” he said.³⁷⁰ “The table has been set by economic improvements, and we can now see a light at the end of the tunnel.”³⁷¹ However, Nevada as a whole would have to continue to work together to meet the persistent challenges that they faced.³⁷²

“Two years ago we gathered in difficult and confronted a time of triage,” the Governor said in his conclusion.³⁷³ “Tonight, we come together to further stabilize our state and lay a stronger foundation for its future.”³⁷⁴ Their work together during that session, he said, would “reveal a map of promise and opportunity.”³⁷⁵

In January 2015, Governor Sandoval delivered his second inaugural address after winning a resounding victory for a second term as the state’s GOVERNOR. Because the setting was one of celebration and not of policy development, the governor’s remarks during his inaugural address were full of aspiration and hope. However, they were not merely encouraging words, they reflected the themes he had developed in his previous major speeches, but they also reflected a culmination of the resilience narrative he had developed previously into a renewal narrative, rallying his fellow Nevadans toward the full realization of a better future.³⁷⁶

³⁶⁸ Sandoval, “State of the State Address,” January 16, 2013.

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

³⁷⁰ Ibid.

³⁷¹ Ibid.

³⁷² Ibid.

³⁷³ Ibid.

³⁷⁴ Ibid.

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

³⁷⁶ Brian Sandoval, “Inaugural Address” (speech, Carson City, NV, January 5, 2015).

Sandoval used three examples of Nevadans to establish his vision of Nevada ahead of his second term. He quoted Sarah Royce, a young woman crossing Nevada with her family from Council Bluffs, Iowa, by wagon in 1849 to discuss the hardship that Nevada had endured in the past, he quoted former governor Paul Laxalt, who was both Sandoval's political mentor and the grandfather to the current attorney general, Adam Laxalt, in describing the significance of why they were gathered there that day, and he highlighted the children of Nevada participating in the inauguration ceremonies as the future for whom he and his government would be committed to creating a better Nevada.³⁷⁷ The examples he chose suggested that though times had changed, the themes of his second term would be consistent with those of his first term.

"A sense of destiny and promise runs deep in this land," said Sandoval before introducing a diary entry from a young Sarah Royce in 1849.³⁷⁸ Crossing the Nevada desert, she notes that her family arose to make the final distance of the Nevada desert in front of them, and then the treacherous Sierra Nevada Mountain beyond the desert. "That feeling that we were once more going forward, instead of backwards," Royce writes, "gave an animation every step, which we could never have felt but by contrast."³⁷⁹ In the desert heat, Royce notes the fear and uncertainty of her travel ahead, stating that her family "ventured out upon the sea of sand; this time to cross or die."³⁸⁰

Sandoval contrasts the Nevada Royce faced with today's Nevada, stating that "we can hardly imagine the fear, uncertainty and courage of Sarah, her family, and her pioneer brethren."³⁸¹ But he also creates a comparison, calling on his fellow Nevadans to consider how far they have come over the last four years, concluding, "we, too, are once again moving forward, instead of backward."³⁸² By comparing and contrasting Nevada with Royce's story, Sandoval established an image capable of what Bially Mattern

³⁷⁷ Sandoval, "Inaugural Address," January 5, 2015.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*

³⁸² *Ibid.*

referred to as representational force, presenting a “do-or-die” command to the state, because even though it had had a successful journey to date, the state was now at a place where it must also “cross or die.”³⁸³

Moving from Royce and Nevada’s pioneer past, Sandoval points out that his mentor, Paul Laxalt, was the first Governor of Nevada to hold inaugural events outside of the capitol, as he was doing that day in 2015.³⁸⁴ “Paul Laxalt understood that on days like today,” Sandoval said, “the past, present, and future meet on this stage.”³⁸⁵ In 2015, he continued in Laxalt’s tradition, not only in where his inauguration was held, but also in embracing Nevada’s history, its present, and its future. “And so, in accordance with our constitution, and our tradition, we gather again as the Nevada family on this cold winter’s day to write another chapter in the story of our state,” he said.³⁸⁶

The future he was talking about was present on the stage with him, as children from all over the state carried out every aspect of the inaugural event. According to the governor, those children were not only present to assist with the speeches, songs, prayers, and introductions of the event, but they also represented an image of those who will “bravely begin the narrative for a future Nevada we can only begin to imagine.”³⁸⁷ The remaining four years of his administration would be dedicated to creating a Nevada that was worthy of them.³⁸⁸

His conclusion tied all of his themes together, and reiterated them again, fully transitioning the resilience narrative he began with in 2011 to a renewal narrative in 2015. Over the last four years, Nevada “endured unimaginable human tragedy and natural disasters,” but they were renewed because they “dared to dream of a better Nevada; a Nevada that can and will compete in the global economy and take its proper place among

³⁸³ Mattern, *Ordering International Politics: Identity, Crisis, and Representational Force*, 14.

³⁸⁴ Sandoval, “Inaugural Address,” January 5, 2015.

³⁸⁵ Ibid.

³⁸⁶ Ibid.

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

³⁸⁸ Ibid.

the great states in the union.”³⁸⁹ To achieve that greatness, the governor said, “We must each find in ourselves the grit and determination required to cross the deserts of our time.”³⁹⁰

Sandoval’s next State of the State address was a few weeks later on January 15, 2015, and he continued to present his vision for a renewed Nevada. Early in his speech, he mentioned a time capsule that had been sealed a month before as the conclusion to Nevada’s sesquicentennial celebration, the contents of which “capture a snapshot of the Nevada family today, to be presented to a 200-year-old Nevada in 2064.”³⁹¹ Sandoval stated that in sealing the capsule he “realized that the success or failure of the governor and people of Nevada in 2064 will largely depend on our decisions today.”³⁹²

By beginning his speech this way, Sandoval was able to continue the “do-or-die” proposition he established in his inaugural address by framing his state as at a crossroads. Together, they would begin to write the next chapter of Nevada’s story, as he had also said before, and he hoped they would collectively choose to invest in Nevada’s future.³⁹³ Since they had successfully weathered extreme economic times, he expanded his renewal narrative by claiming that he believed they stood “at the threshold of a New Nevada,” a phrase that indicated he aimed to continue his themes of shared sacrifice, common purpose, and optimism.³⁹⁴

These three themes culminated in a comprehensive plan to transform education within the state. He proposed shared sacrifice by changing the tax structure to generate more revenue, changing the government and accountability structures for the state’s education system, and investing in new programs to ensure the future success for an education system that had been struggling for years.³⁹⁵ He again called on the lawmakers

³⁸⁹ Sandoval, “Inaugural Address,” January 5, 2015.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁹¹ Brian Sandoval, “State of the State Address” (speech, Carson City, NV, January 15, 2015).

³⁹² *Ibid.*

³⁹³ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

to eschew partisanship and work towards his vision.³⁹⁶ He also argued that investing in education would be the bold decision they could all make to create the Nevada that he envisioned for the children who would inherit the New Nevada.³⁹⁷

Appropriately, the governor's final State of the State address on January 17, 2017, served as a bookend to his initial inaugural address and State of the State address. Largely a retrospective of the state's accomplishments in previous years, the speech served to cement the renewal that he had led the state through.³⁹⁸ While the governor discussed the economic difficulties of Nevada's recent past, the pioneers who came before, and the need to work for the future, the majority of his speech was committed to the programs and investments that he wanted to make on Nevada's behalf, something that he could not have done in any of his previous major addresses because of the state's dire economic straits.³⁹⁹

The governor's final speech did not follow an inaugural address, and it lacked much of the imagery and flourish of his previous speeches. Three references were made to the "new Nevada economy," but none to the "New Nevada."⁴⁰⁰ Also no references were made to the "Nevada family." Nevada's crisis was over, the state was renewed, just as he said it would, through sacrifice, unity, and an undying hope in a better future.⁴⁰¹

Nevada's hard-won renewal, as reflected in the governor's address in January 2017, was broken at about 10:08PM when Stephen Paddock opened fire on the crowd of approximately 22,000 concertgoers below his hotel room. The state had endured the largest mass shooting in recent U.S. history, and the shock persisted as questions remained open in the weeks that followed. The shock and uncertainty created a political blame game that followed, with Nevada politicians choosing to act as political crisis leaders or political crisis managers based on their level of blame risk. Governor Sandoval

³⁹⁶ Sandoval, "State of the State Address," January 15, 2015.

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

³⁹⁸ Brian Sandoval, "State of the State Address" (speech, Carson City, NV, January 17, 2017).

³⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid.

chose to be a political crisis leader, and reverted to the resilience narrative he had established in his first inaugural address and carried through his major speeches to follow to set the foundation for a renewal narrative that would help carry the state through this tragic crisis.

While the sheriff focused his remarks on the facts of the incident, and other elected officials offered support for victims and first responders, Governor Sandoval invoked powerful images of pain, anger, and healing in his comments following the attacks. In his first tweet following the event, the governor noted, “A tragic & heinous act of violence has shaken the #Nevada family. Our prayers are w/ the victims & all affected by this act of cowardice.” During his first public remarks at a press conference on Monday morning following the attack, the governor, visibly moved, offered solace for the victims, praised first responders, called for people to donate blood, asked people to pray, and offered pride in the way the response was handled. He concluded by saying that a lot could be learned from this “cowardly despicable act,” but noted that the unity of all Nevada’s leaders on stage with him showed “the Nevada family at its best.”⁴⁰²

The governor continued these themes in a media interview the same day. The article noted that he had visited the scene of the attack before making his remarks, possibly explaining why he appeared to be so moved.⁴⁰³ The article concluded by noting the governor’s expression of anger and sadness, but adding, “But in any event, Las Vegas will be stronger.”⁴⁰⁴

Sandoval’s most powerful remarks came during the culminating press conference before he introduced the president on October 4. The governor opened his remarks by thanking the president, Sheriff Lombardo, all the first responders, the private sector entities that had offered support, and the support that he and Las Vegas had received from

⁴⁰² “LVMPD Sheriff Briefs Media Regarding Active Shooter.”

⁴⁰³ Michelle Rindels, “‘My Heart Is Broken’: Sandoval Visits Las Vegas to Survey Aftermath of Deadliest Shooting in Modern History,” *Nevada Independent*, October 2, 2017, <https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/my-heart-is-broken-sandoval-visits-las-vegas-to-survey-aftermath-of-deadliest-shooting-in-modern-history>.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

the country.⁴⁰⁵ He then stated that he had attended an impromptu vigil in Reno, held to honor and remember what Las Vegas had endured. Describing a moment during the vigil, he said:

And at the moment, despite how dark it was, we saw that the greatest darkness cannot put out the smallest light, and we collectively felt the first pangs of hope. We saw that despite the deep sadness and grief all around us, that we are resilient and committed to fight, recover, and begin the lengthy process of healing. As Nevadans, we have a strong history of pulling together. We are hurt, but we are not broken. We see generosity on a scale that is unprecedented in Nevada history. We know that we will never forget this horrific event, but we will march forward, as a family, giving each other support, comfort, and love. The future will come one day at a time. We have a choice as to how we live each day. We must be glad, we must be good, and we must be brave, and we will emerge as a stronger, kinder, and better state and nation.⁴⁰⁶

E. CONCLUSION

Together, both Sheriff Lombardo and Governor Sandoval showed true political crisis leadership following the mass shooting incident in Las Vegas. Through their actions, they were able to both govern and avoid much of the blame directed elsewhere. This avoidance resulted in their ability, from their perspectives as local and state leaders, respectively, to meet the operational objectives during the response and ensure the community was able not only to recover but also to envision renewal following these events.

Their success in the immediate aftermath of the incident, especially as contrasted with their elected colleagues, should be appreciated, but it may not always be the outcome. Crises of any significant magnitude are complex in their very nature, meaning that political leaders cannot hope to control all potential aspects or outcomes of the events. Even if the models of political crisis leadership presented in this thesis do not provide models for absolute success, they provide models for effective leadership for elected officials before, during, and after dynamic events.

⁴⁰⁵ “President Trump Meets First Responders in Las Vegas.”

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

The same can be said for the governor's development and deployment of resilience narratives. In this case, his initial development of the narrative of the grit and resolve of the Nevada family, as he termed it, was originally to lay the foundation for Nevada's economic renewal. The fact that it was effective in the context of the improving economy ensured that it was established in time to be used again during the tragedy in Las Vegas in October 2017.

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