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Hitting Turbulence:
A Crisis Management Analysis of ValuJet Flight 592, Trans World Airlines Flight 800, and EgyptAir Flight 990

By

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Acknowledgments

To my family and friends,

for their constant support and encouragement.
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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is two-fold: to analyze the corporate responses of three major airplane crashes that occurred in the 1990s, and to examine how the strategies that each airline used and the nature of the crisis environments both served to help, and hurt, the companies’ futures. ValuJet Flight 592, Trans World Airlines Flight 800 and EgyptAir Flight 990 will be analyzed through the lens of two prominent crisis communication theories, Fink’s stage analysis theory and Benoit’s image restoration strategies, in order to provide a comprehensive assessment of each crisis. I will then give insight as to the effectiveness of each airline in response to its crash, keeping in mind the unique environment that surrounded each situation. ValuJet made poor crisis management decisions that, when combined with its lack of satisfactory safety standards both before and after the crash of Flight 592, irreparably damaged the airline’s public image. TWA, like ValuJet, made errors in its strategy choices after the crash of Flight 800, but was able to escape blame and restore public confidence because of the heavy media focus on the unsuccessful criminal investigation. EgyptAir made appropriate crisis management choices after the crash of Flight 990, and also took advantage of the tense political situation in which no obvious regulating presence exerted authority, and thus successfully evaded responsibility for its crash.
Chapter 1: Introduction

No organization wishes to find itself in the midst of a crisis. The term \textit{crisis} itself evokes a sense of fear, destruction, and impending loss. It suggests that some horrific event has occurred, one that has most likely cost the subject its positive public image and maybe even human lives. An organization’s crisis is usually a turning point, one that exposes its weaknesses to the public, and ever-present media, and calls for immediate reaction. For an airline company, the worst crisis possible is a large commercial airplane crash. These crashes, like other crisis situations, can involve the loss of hundreds of lives and expose all the parties involved to the scrutiny of the media, the government, and the public. When these crashes occur, the impact that they leave on the organization lasts much longer than the amount of time it takes it to pick up the pieces.

Fishman (2011) defines a crisis as having three conditions: (1) it is unexpected; (2) it threatens important values; and (3) it requires a quick response (p. 493). The crash of a commercial airplane encompasses these conditions, and many more. After the crashes of ValuJet Flight 592, Trans World Airlines (TWA) Flight 800, and EgyptAir Flight 990, the airlines not only had to quickly answer for the lives of hundreds of people, but also simultaneously attempt to defend their reputations against potential legal liability and recover from the negative scrutiny of the media and the government. Most airplane crash crisis situations can be categorized as organizational crises, which Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (2003) define as “a specific, unexpected and non-routine organizationally based event or series of events which creates high levels of uncertainty and threat or perceived threat to an organization’s high priority goals” (p. 7). An organizational crisis is one that is a consequence of human or system error rather than of natural disaster. Although it is possible that the exact cause of an airplane crash remains unknown even
after investigation, nearly all crashes are a result of the combination of complex technological systems in society and human error.

Crises can occur in countless different situations and to any person or organization, no matter the size. Theories of crisis communication offer explanations, plans and strategies that any entity can use to help minimize the impact of a crisis and recover. However, large airplane crashes present different crisis situations than most. In fact, these crashes have certain characteristics that distinguish them from other organizational crises, and which impact both the way that companies deal with the crisis and how the public reacts.

Unlike most other crisis situations, airplane crashes often involve many different organizations, and thus it is much more difficult for any one of those organizations to control the story and avoid blame. In some crises, such as the Tylenol cyanide poisoning or the Exxon Valdez oil spill, there is only one main company involved. Regardless of how the group chooses to manage the crisis and who or what it chooses to blame, all media attention is focused on that one organization. Johnson & Johnson, for example, shifted the blame for its crisis to an unidentified person poisoning the Tylenol capsules, but there was no other group facing the media that attempted to shift the blame back onto Johnson & Johnson. Similarly, ExxonMobil blamed the captain of its ship for the oil spill, and was able to successfully do so because it was the focus of all the media attention. However, with airplane crashes, there are often many different parties involved that share publicity and blame for the crisis. The airline and its employees, as well as the airplane manufacturer, are usually initially implicated. In EgyptAir Flight 990, there were many parties that shared news attention: EgyptAir, Boeing, the Egyptian government, the NTSB, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), and the FBI. All of these entities gave opinions to the media regarding who or what was to blame for the crash of Flight
990, and as a result it was much more difficult for each group to maintain its own positive public image. What is more, government organizations that are involved in airline investigations, such as the NTSB, are viewed as credible and thus have the power to influence public perception. Whereas one organization receiving attention can more effectively control media speculation and blame, major airplane crashes often implicate many parties, making it difficult for any one of them to control the story.

With large-scale airplane crashes such as the ones analyzed in this thesis, the impact of each is always the most disastrous that it can be. There are rarely any survivors, and the responsible parties are almost always left to deal with the worst situation that they could face. Crisis communications theorist Steven Fink (1986) suggests that prior to dealing with a crisis, every organization should identify what would be the worst thing that could possibly happen to it and the probability of that worst case scenario actually occurring (p. 36). Some organizations may get lucky in that the crises that they face never reach the worst level. However, large airplane crashes fit into Fink’s “Big Bang” crisis category, because they are always devastating and yet there is a relatively low probability of occurrence. In all of these cases, the news of the crisis is frightening and widespread, and often incurs large costs through investigations and reparations (Fink, 1986, p. 48). Airplane crashes, which result in hundreds of deaths and an increased fear of flying in the public, force all the parties involved to deal with the worst possible scenario.

The final way that airplane crashes are inherently different than other crisis situations is that it is reasonable to assume that the time period immediately after the hype of the crash dies down, what Fink refers to as the chronic crisis phase, will be incredibly long and drawn out. Fink (1986), whose stage analysis theory explains the development of crisis situations through four
distinct phases, suggests that all crises progress differently (p. 20). However, it is possible to predict that certain conditions will lead to a particularly long, and perhaps endless, chronic stage. Unlike most crises, airplane crashes include every characteristic that Fink (1986) deems will lead to a lengthy chronic stage: “A public company, a highly visible/household-word company, a visible CEO…involves the loss of lives, especially in large numbers…creates a panic, demonstrates an industry weakness or trend, is exposed by the media…entails conspiracies, moral offenses, kickbacks, bribes, or swindles” (p. 87). Because airplane crashes encompass so many of these characteristics, it is reasonable to argue that when airlines suffer a crash, they should prepare their resources for a long, drawn-out post-crisis period.

This analysis will deal with three large airplane crashes that affected the United States in the late 1990s. On May 11, 1996, ValuJet Flight 592 crashed into the Everglades, killing all 110 people on board. ValuJet, the FAA and maintenance subcontractor SabreTech were all blamed during the aftermath of the crash of Flight 592. Only two months later, on July 17, 1996, TWA Flight 800 crashed off the coast of Long Island, New York, and killed the 230 crew members and passengers on board, resulting in an investigation that would become one of the longest in history. Three years later, on October 31, 1999, 217 people died when EgyptAir Flight 990 crashed into the Atlantic Ocean. The crashes, although completely independent of one another, provide useful data for an investigation into the responses of airlines during apparently similar crisis situations. Each crash will be divided into stages based on the development of the crisis situation through Fink’s stage analysis theory, in order to understand how the crisis progressed chronologically. The strategies used by each of the parties involved in the different stages of the crashes will then be categorized using Benoit’s image restoration strategies, for the purpose of examining the successfulness of the airlines in eventually surmounting the crisis situation. These
three case studies are particularly interesting in relation to each other because although the airlines often used similar crisis management strategies, the effectiveness of those strategies was largely dependent on the intricacies of each crisis situation, and so the three cases present starkly different outcomes.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this thesis is two-fold: to analyze the corporate responses to three major airplane crashes affecting America in the 1990s, and to examine how the strategies that each airline used and the nature of the crisis environments both served to help, and hurt, the companies’ futures. First, it is crucial to compare and contrast the corporate responses of all the parties involved in the three selected major airline crashes: ValuJet Flight 592, Trans World Airlines Flight 800, and EgyptAir Flight 990. In order to provide a comprehensive assessment of each crisis situation, I will examine each through the lens of two prominent crisis communication theories, Fink’s stage analysis theory and Benoit’s image restoration strategies. Both theories examine the intricacies of a crisis situation and the potential responses, and thus by using a combination of the two theories a complete picture of each crash will emerge.

Using the analysis of these three crises, I will then evaluate the effectiveness of each airline in response to its crash, keeping in mind the unique environment that surrounded each situation. While certain strategies afford an airline more control over the news story captured by the media, it is not always the case that possessing control helps the airline. Similarly, certain image restoring strategies can be effective in a specific environment, whereas those same strategies might be detrimental when an airline is faced with anger, hostility and blame. In the case of ValuJet, the inability to meet safety standards both before and after the crash of Flight 592 irreparably damaged the airline’s public image. ValuJet made poor crisis management
choices throughout the development of the crash investigation, and was not able to prevail over its poor safety record and the hostile environment it faced. TWA, like ValuJet, made errors in its strategy choices after Flight 800 by appointing an unpopular spokesman and by not meeting the needs of the victims’ families. However, because the media was focused on the FBI criminal investigation for such a long time, TWA was able to ultimately escape blame for its crash and restore public confidence in its safety. Lastly, EgyptAir made appropriate crisis management choices to fit the situation that existed after the crash of Flight 990. Although the airline denied all accountability in the crash, the political tension that existed between the U.S. and Egypt sheltered EgyptAir from direct blame. Because the cause of the crash was determined to be the lone actions of the first relief officer of the flight, it was unnecessary to place culpability on the airline or the Egyptian government.

Organization

This thesis will consist of five chapters. The following is an overview of the content of each of these sections:

“Chapter One: Introduction” will discuss the main topic and purpose of this thesis, as well as give an overview of the two leading theories in the field of crisis communication, Fink’s stage analysis theory and Benoit’s image restoration strategies, which will be used to frame the analysis of the three major airplane crashes discussed.

“Chapter Two: ValuJet Flight 592” will provide the details of the crash of ValuJet Flight 592 as it unfolded through Fink’s stages. It will offer an analysis of the different image restoration strategies used by ValuJet, SabreTech and the Federal Aviation Administration during each stage of the crisis, as well as how these strategies were accepted by the public. This
chapter will conclude with an analysis of why ValuJet’s strategies were inappropriate for the crisis situation that it faced, and how its poor safety record permanently damaged its reputation.

“Chapter Three: Trans World Airlines Flight 800” will examine each stage of the crash of TWA Flight 800, and the responses of and strategies used by TWA, Boeing, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) and the FBI over the course of the investigation. It will also discuss how, although TWA eventually reached the end of its crisis situation due to the media focus on the criminal investigation that took place, its unpopular spokesman and strategy choices delayed its success until the company was bought out.

“Chapter Four: EgyptAir Flight 990” will analyze the crash of EgyptAir Flight 990 through each of Fink’s four stages, as well as describe the image restoring strategies used by EgyptAir, the NTSB, Boeing, and the Egyptian Civil Aviation Authority. It will also include an analysis of how EgyptAir’s strategies and the political tension involved in the crisis situation allowed the airline to reach the chronic crisis stage.

“Chapter Five: Conclusion” will provide a summary of the purpose of the essay, as well as the key points of analysis for each case.

**Methodology**

Among emerging theories in crisis communication, two major approaches stand out: stage analysis theory and image restoration strategies. While other crisis communication theorists have focused on notable instances of success or failure in an organization’s handling of a crisis situation, the stage analysis and image restoration theories can be used to more thoroughly evaluate the development of a complete crisis situation. The following is a summary of the key
ideas of Steven Fink, the leading theorist for the stage analysis approach, and William Benoit, the main theorist for the image restoration strategies approach.

**Fink’s Stage Analysis Theory**

Steven Fink’s (1986) stage analysis theory is grounded in his definition of a crisis situation as “an unstable time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending—either one with the distinct possibility of a highly undesirable outcome or one with the distinct possibility of a highly *desirable* and extremely *positive* outcome” (p. 15). Not all crises, therefore, become negative events. A crisis situation, or turning point, becomes much worse when any of five possible developments occur: “Escalating in intensity, falling under close media or government scrutiny, interfering with the normal operations of business, jeopardizing the positive public image presently enjoyed by a company or its officers, or damaging a company’s bottom line in any way” (Fink, 1986, p. 15-16). Once a crisis escalates into a negative turning point for a person or organization, Fink argues that a crisis communication event can be divided into four distinct stages: the prodromal crisis stage, the acute crisis stage, the chronic crisis stage, and the crisis resolution stage.

The prodromal crisis stage, named for the Greek word for “running before” and meaning the “warning signs,” is the first stage during which indications of the impending crisis begin to emerge (Fink, 1986, p. 7). Because most people are yet unaware of the approaching crisis, it is “much easier to manage a crisis” during this stage than after the crisis situation escalates and the media becomes involved (Fink, 1986, p. 21). However, most organizations either do not recognize or do not address prodromal warning signs until after the next stage erupts, and as a result, crisis management is often only retroactive damage control. One way for an organization
to recognize an imminent crisis, Fink argues, is to consider the crisis of a competitor as a prodrome, and to take necessary precautions before its own crisis develops (Fink, 1986, p. 90). Even if nothing can be done to stop the crisis from occurring, the organization could have an opportunity to prepare for the acute crisis stage if prodromal warning signs are discerned.

The second stage of Fink’s (1986) model is the acute crisis stage, or the “point of no return” in the crisis situation (p. 22). This stage begins when the actual crisis event takes place, such as an airplane crash, and often feels like the longest of the four stages despite usually being the shortest. Organizations should prepare for the acute part of the crisis during the prodromal stage, with the hopes of managing the “avalanchelike speed and intensity” that characterize this phase of the crisis (Fink, 1986, p. 23). It is also during the acute stage that any or all of Fink’s negative developments occur, such as close media and government scrutiny or damage to the company’s bottom line. How well an organization handles these developments determines how quickly the crisis reaches the chronic crisis stage.

The third stage, the chronic crisis stage, begins after the intense scrutiny and media attention has subsided and the organization is left to mend. Fink (1986) refers to the stage as the “period of recovery, of self-analysis, of self-doubt, and of healing” (p. 24). During this seemingly endless stage, investigations continue, lawsuits are filed, and the organization attempts to defend itself and restore positive public image. If the crisis is handled incorrectly, the chronic crisis stage can “linger indefinitely” and the organization’s crisis will never reach the final stage (Fink, 1986, p. 24).

The fourth and final stage of Fink’s (1986) stage analysis theory is the crisis resolution stage, and is reached when the crisis has ended and the organization is “well and whole again” (p. 25). Fink warns, however, that crises usually occur in a cyclical pattern, and when a crisis has
reached this final stage it may mean that another is looming on the horizon, and the crisis manager should again be watchful for prodromal warning signs.

While it is often difficult to distinguish the stages of a crisis neatly, Fink’s model provides a linear approach to organizing and understanding a crisis situation. As Fishman (1999) states, “Fink’s model provides a complete cycle for examining the origins, development, maturation, and resolution of a crisis” (p. 350). Other theorists have proposed shorter models of crises, including only pre-crisis, crisis and post-crisis stages (Meyers & Holusha, 1986, p. 13; Seeger et al., 2003, p. 97). However, for the purpose of presenting a comprehensive analysis of the three airplane crashes in this thesis, including whether or not each was able to ever fully recover from its crash, they will be examined using Fink’s four-stage model.

**Benoit’s Image Restoration Strategies**

William Benoit is the leading theorist of a strategies-based model for crisis communication research. His theory is based on rhetorical strategies that an individual or company experiencing a crisis should use in order to manage its reputation in the face of criticism. An attack, he argues, must have two components: “1. The accused is held responsible for an action, and 2. That act is considered offensive” (Benoit, 1997, p. 178). Benoit adds that although the act may not actually be offensive, just as the person or company being held accountable for the act may not be truly responsible, it is really the perception of the offensiveness and responsibility that are important. In the case of large airplane crashes, the offensiveness of the act cannot be in question because it involves the loss of hundreds of human lives. Further, the perception of who bears responsibility can often fall on more than one person or organization.
Benoit (1997) outlines five main categories of “message options” that accept or reject responsibility for the act to varying degrees (p. 179). Each category contains specific strategies with different characteristics that can be used as a response to the crisis at hand. The first category is denial. One form of denial is simple denial, in which an organization rejects that the act occurred, that it bears any responsibility for the act, or that the act was in fact harmful. The other form of denial is shifting the blame, or “arguing that another person or organization is actually responsible for the offensive act” (Benoit, 1997, p. 180). In the case of shifting the blame, the accused group is acknowledging that the offensive act occurred, but pointing to someone or something else as the cause of that act.

The second category, consisting of four image-repairing strategies, also involves the evasion of responsibility for the act. Provocation, the first strategy in this category, is the argument that the act is a reasonable response to the act of another. Thus, the act is not offensive but defensive in nature. The second strategy is defeasibility, which refers to the act as excusable due to “a lack of information about or control over important elements of the situation” (Benoit, 1997, p. 180). The third way to evade responsibility for the offensive act is to suggest that it occurred by accident. If the act was truly accidental and thus could not have been prevented at all, the organization may be held less responsible. The fourth and final strategy in this category is to argue that the act was committed with good intentions (Benoit, 1997, p. 180).

The third message option is to reduce the offensiveness of the act in question. There are six strategies in this category: bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking the accuser, and compensation. Bolstering refers to an organization’s attempt to strengthen the audience’s positive feelings towards it, usually through describing past positive actions or strong post-crisis efforts (Benoit, 1997, p. 180). Minimization involves reducing negative feelings that
are associated with the act, or downplaying the severity of the damage that was caused.

Differentiation occurs when, “the act is distinguished from other similar but more offensive actions” (Benoit, 1997, p. 181). By comparing the act in question to one that is more damaging, it is possible to reduce its offensiveness. Transcendence involves placing the act in a more favorable context, or to focus on more important considerations. Attacking the accuser refers to directly confronting the source of the accusation with the hopes of reducing its credibility and, as a result, reducing the offensiveness of the act. Compensation, the final strategy in this category, involves providing a gift or offering to the victims of the act, with the hope of lessening the impact of the wrong that they endured.

The fourth broad strategy that Benoit (1997) discusses is corrective action, in which the organization takes steps to correct the problem that caused the crisis (p. 181). This can involve the creation of a development plan to improve some aspect of the company, organizational changes such as firing or hiring of employees, or simply the promise that the offensive act will never be repeated.

The fifth and final strategy is mortification. Mortification involves the full admission of guilt and responsibility from the organization, and the use of apologies to seek forgiveness for the act (Benoit, 1997, p. 181). Companies often use only partial mortification, by seeking forgiveness from the public but still never fully admitting guilt, only implying it. Full mortification, unlike other strategies, can often lead to unwanted legal consequences.

In analyzing each crisis situation, it is beneficial first to look at its different parts through Fink’s stage analysis theory. Fink’s theory provides a useful context for understanding the different actions taken by an organization involved in a crisis, as well as a picture of the crisis situation as a whole. Benoit’s image restoration strategies can then be applied to each case, in
order to better understand the specific tactics used in the aftermath of the crashes and why these strategies were or were not successful. Neither theory alone provides a comprehensive analysis of the similarities and differences of the three cases. Both together, however, give a clear picture as to which strategies benefitted each airline and which was inappropriate for each crisis situation, and why.
Chapter 2: ValuJet Flight 592

Progression of the Crisis

Prodromal Stage (October, 1993 – May 11, 1996)

Fink’s (1986) first stage, the prodromal crisis stage, is also called the “warning stage” of a crisis (p. 21). During this period, a problem may be evident to those involved, but no generally preventative actions are taken to stop the problem from escalating into a full-blown crisis. This was the case for ValuJet beginning when Robert Priddy, Maurice Gallagher, and Tim Flynn established the company in March of 1993 (Fishman, 1999). Their idea was to create an airline that would attract riders with basic air transportation at a much lower price than competitors’ prices. ValuJet’s business model cut costs by using older, recycled airplanes, outsourcing maintenance to contractors, offering employees a base salary and no bonuses, and cutting out the usual frills that most people associate with a luxury travel experience (Schiavo & Chartrand, 1997). ValuJet quickly became a profitable airline, and by 1996, was expanding at a rapid pace.

Beginning with the company’s first operations in October of 1993, however, there were many signs that ValuJet’s cost cutting was leading to major safety issues. A National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) report showed that ValuJet had “accumulated accident and incident reports at a rate four times that of Delta, American, and United” (Cobb & Primo, 2003, p. 81). Mishaps between January and April 1996 alone included two planes swerving off runways and the collapse of the main landing gear of an aircraft (Alexander, 1996). These mishaps were a direct result of both cost-cutting strategies and the company’s dangerously fast expansion, both of which led to the lapses of many safety procedures and precautions. Mary Schiavo, Inspector General for the United States Department of Transportation (DOT) at the time,
was the first person to speak publically about ValuJet’s problems. She reported that ValuJet pilots had made 15 emergency landings in 1994 alone, and were forced down a record-breaking 57 times in 1995 (Schiavo & Chartrand, 1997, p. 12). Unfortunately, ValuJet ignored her concerns until after the crash of Flight 592.

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) also failed to respond to the early warning signs of ValuJet’s safety malfunctions throughout the prodromal stage. At the time, the FAA had two written administrative objectives—to promote and to police aviation (Schiavo & Chartrand, 1997). However, the FAA largely ignored its second objective and ValuJet’s safety problems in favor of its first objective, citing the company as a “prime example” of fostering price competition in an industry otherwise dominated by the larger players (Cobb & Primo, 2003, p. 81). Schiavo & Chartrand (1997) point out that, “FAA inspectors had looked at ValuJet planes nearly 5,000 times in the three years it had been flying, yet they had never reported any significant problems or concerns” (p. 13). In February of 1996, the FAA finally did begin a 120-day investigation into ValuJet’s safety operations (Alexander, 1996). ValuJet stalled its rapid growth as a result of the scrutiny, although continued operating its existing routes normally. Whether unintentional or not, the lack of diligence by the FAA was later cited by the NTSB as one of the main causes of the crash (NTSB, 1997, p. 137).

**Acute Crisis Stage (May 11, 1996 – June, 1996)**

Fink (1986) describes the acute crisis stage as “the point of no return” in a crisis situation, characterized by “avalanchelike speed and intensity” (p. 22-23). These features could not be more fitting in the case of airplane crashes, which immediately invite a flood of attention and scrutiny. In the case of ValuJet, the acute stage began on May 11, 1996 when Flight 592, a
Douglas DC-9-32, crashed into the Everglades off the coast of Florida at 2:13 p.m. EST, killing all 110 people on board (NTSB, 1997, p. 1). The first focus of the airline and media attention was on recovery efforts in the Everglades. Due to the extremely hazardous conditions of the area, however, access for rescue crews was nearly impossible and there was very little hope to recover bodies (Cobb & Primo, 2003, p. 82). In a *New York Times* article that appeared the day after the crash, officials called it “the most challenging crash site they have ever encountered” (Navarro, 1996).

Attention quickly shifted to the cause of the crash, which could not be determined until an investigation of the wreckage was completed. Many people looked at the 25-year-old plane and immediately blamed the crash on a mechanical failure (Wald, 1999b). It was quickly determined, however, that the crash “resulted from a fire in the airplane’s class D cargo compartment that was initiated by the actuation of one or more oxygen generators being improperly carried as cargo” (NTSB, 1997, p. x). The oxygen generators were contained in boxes labeled COMAT, or company materials, but were marked as empty and thus were not perceived by their airport handlers to be hazardous. A maintenance subcontractor named SabreTech mislabeled and delivered the boxes to ValuJet to be transported on the aircraft as a routine matter. Ten minutes into the flight, the oxygen generators ignited a fire that spread through the cabin and cockpit and caused the aircraft to crash. With the specific cause of the fire revealed, the only question that remained in the public’s mind was who to blame for the reckless mistake.

After speculation about the cause of the crash faded, the public rapidly turned hostile towards ValuJet. Documents surfaced showing that ValuJet had been under FAA scrutiny at the time of the crash, based on a recommendation by FAA investigators in Atlanta. These reports,
Fishman (1999) argues, “implied that ValuJet had operated flights without regard to the safety of its airplanes or had placed profits ahead of safety concerns” (p. 359). In fact, a memo surfaced that was written by the FAA prior to the crash, warning ValuJet that it was not operating at the highest degree of safety and recommending that ValuJet be recertified. After the crash, Schiavo & Chartrand (1997) realized that the “[Department of] Transportation and FAA officials…were simply lying to the public about ValuJet’s record,” and Americans were recognizing it, too (p. 21). Although ValuJet had experienced less severe incidents previously, the crash of Flight 592 caused the general public to finally began to see the links between cost cutting, rapid expansion and a lack of safety. A New York Times article stated the now apparent conundrum: “everyone wants to know whether it is safe to fly on cheap, no-frills airlines like ValuJet” (“The Safety of Low-Cost Airlines,” 1996).

ValuJet, the FAA and SabreTech all swiftly responded to the crisis, and employed many of Benoit’s strategies while doing so. Lewis Jordan, ValuJet’s President and spokesperson at the time of the crisis, mainly utilized the strategies of denial and bolstering in the immediate aftermath of the crash. Englehardt, Sallot and Springston (2004) argue for Benoit’s claim that, “admitting fault immediately is essential [to recovery] if the company is to blame for the crisis” (p. 149). While Jordan responded immediately with grief and remorse at the loss of so many lives, at no point did Jordan assume responsibility for the crash (Fishman, 1999, p. 358). He even stated, “ValuJet had nothing to do with this” (Fishman, 1999, p. 362). Although ValuJet was criticized for its old fleet, Jordan completely denied that ValuJet’s airplanes were too old and unsafe and instead delivered a message that the company was and always had been committed to safety (Fishman, 1999, p. 362). Faced by a hostile media looking for answers as to why the crash occurred, Jordan did not heed Benoit’s caution that admitting fault is necessary for a company to
survive a crisis, but instead chose to focus on all the positive aspects of the low-cost airline and its consistently positive evaluations by the FAA.

Many government officials immediately responded in support of ValuJet. In a *Nightline* interview the night after the crash, FAA Administrator David Hinson assured the public, “The airline is safe to fly. I would fly it” (Schiavo & Chartrand, 1997, p. 21). DOT Secretary Federico Peña also defended the airline, and his agency, saying, “I have flown ValuJet. ValuJet is a safe airline, as is our entire aviation system…if ValuJet was unsafe, we would have grounded it” (Schiavo & Chartrand, 1997, p. 19). The FAA, too, mostly employed the strategies of denial and bolstering in the acute stage. It continued to try and quash all rumors that inexpensive airlines were unsafe, preferring to protect these low cost airlines because of the competition that they brought to the airline industry. Fishman (1999) explains that, “neither the management at ValuJet nor the FAA wanted to disrupt an innovative business experiment in the airline industry” (p. 357).

Since no fatalities had occurred in the many previous ValuJet incidents, those in front of the camera acted as if it was still possible to deny how serious and systematic the problems really were (Fishman, 1999, p. 357). However, unable to quell the outcry of the media and due to the 110 deaths that occurred, the FAA launched a deeper review of ValuJet in the weeks after the crash.

SabreTech was the only organization that immediately reacted to the crisis with the strategy of shifting blame. It pushed all responsibility onto the airline, whose employees had actually loaded the canisters onto the aircraft. In a statement a week after the crash, SabreTech’s chief lawyer Kenneth Quinn maintained that, “The bottom line is that ValuJet made an independent decision to ship their returned company materials on board an aircraft, and apparently did not ensure that they were properly labeled, packaged, and stored” (Quinn, 1996).
Interestingly, SabreTech did not make many statements during this acute phase, possibly due to the FBI investigation that began to look into the SabreTech employees who had labeled the canisters (Kaye, 1996). Each of its statements during this phase, however, had a tone similar to the one above. SabreTech officials strategically anticipated that ValuJet would eventually cast blame their way, and thus attempted to defend the company against those future claims by preemptively pushing responsibility onto ValuJet.

While it is often difficult to determine exactly when the acute crisis stage ends and the chronic crisis stage begins, the best indicators are when the peak of recovery efforts diminish, media stories decrease in frequency, and lengthy hearings and investigations begin. In the case of ValuJet, the immediate post-crash frenzy and most of the media scrutiny died down after the end of June, just one month after the crash. The New York Times covered the crash of Flight 592 with 33 stories (8 front page) in May, 26 stories (3 front page) in June, and only 5 stories in July (Cobb & Primo, 2003, p. 99). Because the exact cause of the crash was determined promptly, media attention waned. The FAA also grounded ValuJet on June 17, quelling the immediate fears of another disaster. Not coincidentally, after this period there was also a shift in the strategies employed by the different companies under examination.

**Chronic Crisis Stage (July, 1996 – August, 1997)**

Fink’s (1986) chronic crisis stage is usually the longest of the four stages, and is also known as the “clean-up phase” (p. 23). It is during this stage that longer interviews and investigations take place, and definite explanations for the crisis finally emerge. At the beginning of July of 1996, the FAA had temporarily grounded ValuJet and the first official hearing before the Aviation Subcommittee of the U.S. House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee
began. A second hearing, this one before the NTSB, began on November 18, 1996. Both hearings were aimed at discovering the cause of the crash and who or what was to blame, in the hopes that corrective action might be taken and another crisis such as this one could be prevented. During these hearings and other interviews in this time period, the strategies that ValuJet, the FAA and SabreTech mainly employed were mortification, shifting the blame, and corrective action.

During the chronic crisis stage, Englehardt et al. (2004) report that mortification strategies were used in 63.6% of ValuJet’s corporate messages (p. 141). Lewis Jordan continued to be ValuJet’s spokesperson, and at the first hearing in July he stressed his 30-year experience in the industry. Jordan did not use true mortification, however, because he never explicitly accepted blame. He apologized on behalf of the airline and sought forgiveness, but did not admit responsibility. In this statement, Jordan used indirect mortification and bolstering to voice regret for the event: “Certainly our thoughts and prayers and our sincere emotions go out to the people who were on board the airplane, their families, their loved ones, their friends, that includes both the customers aboard that airplane and ValuJet’s crew members. It is impossible to put into words how devastating something like this is to human beings who care” (Englehardt et al., 2004, p. 138). ValuJet never officially apologized for the crash or admitted that ValuJet deserved any blame, most likely due to the legal complications involved, and thus did not heed Benoit’s claim that admitting fault is absolutely necessary for a guilty party to survive a crisis.

Jordan also used the strategy of shifting blame by unequivocally blaming SabreTech and its employees. While he maintained that ValuJet had the utmost concern for safety, he shifted responsibility for the crash onto SabreTech (Englehardt et al., 2004, p. 149). He said, “I am outraged by SabreTech’s complete lack of regard for the truth in acknowledging any
responsibility for shipping the generators” (Cobb & Primo, 2003, p. 87). Jordan’s reasoning was that because the canisters were not labeled as hazardous waste, it was not the airline’s responsibility to recognize the dangerous content. Therefore, the fire could not have been ValuJet’s fault. Jordan even pointed a finger at the FAA, which he argued was now unfairly subjecting ValuJet to a higher level of scrutiny than other airlines (Cobb & Primo, 2003, p. 87). The airline’s spokesman even went so far as to say that the accident “could have happened to any airline in the world, and that ValuJet is also a victim and ValuJet’s people [employees] are victims” (“ValuJet Crash Prompts,” 1999).

Regardless of the lack of responsibility he took for his company, Jordan did announce corrective actions that ValuJet would introduce in order to demonstrate a higher concern for safety in the future. First, there were changes made in the company’s management team. Jordan was re-assigned to Chairman and Joseph Corr, former head of Continental Airlines, was hired to run daily operations (Fishman, 1999, p. 363). The company also created a Senior Vice President of Maintenance and Engineering position, responsible for overseeing proper aircraft maintenance, raising the profile of its concerns for safety. ValuJet even launched a review of its own aircraft and operations, halting 50% of its flying schedule to do so (Cobb & Primo, 2003, p. 93). In an effort to recast its safety record operations and salvage its reputation, ValuJet also severed ties with SabreTech. Notwithstanding instituting all these corrective actions to show the public an improved safety commitment, Jordan never once backed down from his assertion that ValuJet was completely safe and blameless (Schiavo & Chartrand, 1997).

During this stage, the FAA finally delved much deeper into its investigation into ValuJet. As Schiavo & Chartrand (1997) predicted, the FAA “couldn’t reconcile its conflicting duties” and admitted to focusing more on promoting aviation than policing it (p. 13). In an attempt to
restore the agency’s image, FAA officials also used the strategies of mortification, shifting the blame, and corrective action. Schiavo & Chartrand (1997) explain FAA Administrator David Hinson’s use of mortification: “Soon after, the whole operation was grounded and Hinson admitted that ‘serious deficiencies’ in ValuJet’s maintenance led to its shutdown. In one of the understatements of the year, he added: ‘Yes, we bear some responsibilities in this case’” (p. 25). This is the only time that any of the organizations involved in the crisis of Flight 592 publically admitted to bearing some of the blame for the crash. Even so, the FAA did make a scapegoat of Anthony Broderick, longtime safety official, by shifting undeserved blame onto him and forcing him into retirement at the end of June. Most notably, the FAA employed corrective action when it highlighted how it would finally get serious about safety. It began an intensive 30-day investigation of ValuJet’s operations, boasting that it conducted over 2,000 inspections and “four years of inspections in a four-week period” (Cobb & Primo, 2003, p. 93).

SabreTech continued its approach from the acute crisis stage and shifted the blame back onto ValuJet as the main culprit of the crash. SabreTech’s president Steven Townes countered Jordan’s accusations by maintaining that it was ValuJet’s responsibility to know what it carried on its aircraft at all times (Quinn, 1996). One of SabreTech’s lawyers, Martin Raskin, also pointed to the old plane as a source of vulnerabilities: “The plane that crashed was an old plane, with old wiring” (Bragg, 1999). The maintenance company, hounded by significant adverse legal consequences, tried to avoid blame by diverting it to ValuJet. SabreTech officials also attempted corrective action by conducting their own review of company procedures in order to ensure no future occurrences. They installed “new, stringent safety procedures” in the hopes of reestablishing itself as a safety-conscious company (Cobb & Primo, 2003, p. 93).
The outcome of the NTSB hearing, as presented in the official report, highlighted three causes of the crash of Flight 592:

(1) The failure of SabreTech to properly prepare, package, and identify unexpended chemical oxygen generators before presenting them to ValuJet for carriage; (2) the failure of ValuJet to properly oversee its contract maintenance program to ensure compliance with maintenance, maintenance training, and hazardous materials requirements and practices; and (3) the failure of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to require smoke detection and fire suppression systems in the class D cargo compartments.

Contributing to the accident was the failure of the FAA to adequately monitor ValuJet’s heavy maintenance programs and responsibilities… (NTSB, 1997, p. 137)

Thus, all three entities shared the official blame for the devastating crash.

The end of the chronic crisis stage, which Fink (1986) says can continue indefinitely, comes when the organization is “well and whole again” (p. 25). However, neither ValuJet nor SabreTech made it to the ultimate crisis resolution stage. SabreTech closed its office in January of 1997, less than a year after the crash occurred, after being charged with criminal liability for the crash, fined more than $10 million by the FAA, and subject to multiple civil lawsuits by families of victims (“SabreTech to Close Miami Facility,” 1997). ValuJet attempted to remake its image with an $8 million advertisement campaign in October of 1996. However, flyers never regained trust in the safety of the low-cost airline. Tarnished by the crash and its negative image, ValuJet ceased to be an independent company when it merged with AirTran in August of 1997. The combined companies dropped the ValuJet name completely (“ValuJet, AirTran to Merge,” 1997). Fifteen years later AirTran is doing very well, but there is no public trace of the ValuJet airline company.
Analysis

ValuJet was unsuccessful in quelling the negative responses from the public and the media after the crash of Flight 592. The environment surrounding the company during the aftermath of the crash was hostile, and the strategies that it used proved to be inadequate to reconcile the damage done by its lapses in safety. Eventually, ValuJet folded under the public scrutiny and high costs of the crash and ceased to exist as an independent company. There were many characteristics of the environment that worked against ValuJet, as well as its responses that did more to hurt the images of the organization than to help it.

ValuJet clearly experienced a lengthy prodromal crisis stage. Many officials, including the Inspector General of the DOT, Mary Schiavo, had been anxiously aware of ValuJet’s dangerous cost cutting and lack of safety procedures. In fact, the FAA had been officially looking into those safety procedures, and one or more FAA officials had recommended that the airline be grounded until further inspection could take place. After the crash occurred, it became painfully obvious that it may have been prevented had ValuJet heeded warnings or had the FAA been stricter in its discipline. If the airline had implemented more stringent safety procedures or the company regulated its contractors more closely, it may have been possible to drastically reduce the devastation of the crash, or even prevent it completely. Starting immediately in the acute crisis stage, ValuJet had to answer to the question of why it did not take steps to prevent the crisis from happening in the first place. In the eyes of the public, the clear indications that a disaster was impending based on the cost cutting and lack of safety on the part of ValuJet made it natural to place full blame for the loss of so many lives on the company’s shoulders.
Within a week of the crash of Flight 592, investigators concluded that the oxygen generators were the source of the fire that took down the plane, and the public was quickly informed. This proved to be extremely bad news for ValuJet, because there was no time for the company to formulate a planned response, to deny that it deserved blame, or to control the story. Instead, ValuJet was found to be directly responsible for the cause of the crash almost immediately, when public anger and sadness over the loss of so many lives was highest. Thus, not only did ValuJet share official blame, but it bore that blame at a time in the development of the crisis when there was the most media attention, scrutiny of the airline, and public mourning over the lost lives.

ValuJet never claimed direct responsibility of the crash, just as most airlines would not if they were faced with a similar situation, most likely due to potential adverse legal consequences. However, because the cause of the crash emerged so quickly into the investigation, ValuJet’s strategy of complete denial was not a sufficient response. Benoit (1997) argues that, “A company that is at fault should probably admit this immediately…Apart from the fact that this is morally the correct thing to do, attempting to deny true accusations can backfire. An organization that falsely denies responsibility for offensive actions risks substantially damaged credibility if the truth emerges” (p. 183-184). However, ValuJet representatives did not heed Benoit’s advice, and instead immediately and adamantly maintained that the airline was completely safe, even in the midst of the circumstantial evidence as to the cause of the horrible disaster. Because the source of the crash was pinpointed relatively early into the investigation, the airline looked foolish in its attempt to convince the public that it was not to blame. Interestingly, ValuJet had unprecedented support from government officials in the immediate aftermath of the crash. Many officials assured the public that there was nothing wrong with the safety standards that the airline upheld.
However, that support was not enough to allow the airline to successfully deny all responsibility. As it turned out, the government officials found themselves also deflecting blame away from their failures.

ValuJet’s response was not only inappropriate based on the clear contribution of the airline to the crash, but the airline also greatly reduced its credibility by not presenting a transparent or consistent response. Benoit (1997) advises that in order to maintain credibility, companies should “avoid making false claims; provide adequate support for claims, develop themes throughout a campaign; avoid arguments that may backfire” (p. 183). First, ValuJet made the false claim that it was not at all involved in causing the crash, which was then contradicted by evidence. Also, many times throughout the course of the acute and chronic stages, documents surfaced showing that ValuJet had been aware of its safety problems and had hidden them rather than taken actions to correct them. For example, the FAA memo from the Atlantic division that suggested the company stop all flying until it went through recertification had been concealed by the ValuJet top officials. Later, when the memo became public anyway, ValuJet appeared untrustworthy. ValuJet representatives also did not maintain a consistent defensive strategy throughout the acute and chronic resolution stages, greatly reducing their credibility in the eyes of the public. Jordan first denied all responsibility, even arguing that ValuJet was a victim in the crisis, and then eventually employed corrective action that implied that his company was at fault.

The airline company’s use of denial and shifting the blame was most likely an attempt to control the story received by the public through the media. Different categories of Benoit’s strategies afford organizations varying levels of control over their public perception. For example, when a spokesman uses a strategy of denial or shifting the blame to defend his organization, it is presumably an attempt to disseminate his opinion of its innocence as the truth.
On the other hand, using strategies such as mortification and corrective action give up control to the media and the public, because these strategies presume that an organization admits to bearing blame in the crisis and thus makes it vulnerable to attack. Regardless of the quick conclusion as to the cause of the crash, ValuJet attempted to remain in control of the media story when it was simply not possible to do so. By repeatedly denying ValuJet’s responsibility for the crash and shifting the blame onto SabreTech, CEO Lewis Jordan attempted to navigate the media story and slant public perception to favor his company. Apparently, he believed if he repeatedly denied ValuJet’s contribution to the crash, the public would come to believe that the airline was not at fault. Jordan did eventually use the strategy of partial mortification, but refused to ever admit that his company was to blame. However, it is not always advantageous for a company to try and manage the media by maintaining complete control over the story. In a situation where the company is clearly at fault, a conclusive investigation leaves little time to deny involvement, and the emotional impact of the deaths is at its highest, the best strategies are perhaps mortification and corrective action, which leave control in the hands of others.

Although it would have been strategic for ValuJet to admit to bearing some responsibility in the crash in the beginning stages of the crisis situation, it is possible that even admitting involvement would not have helped the airline recover because the surrounding environment was simply too hostile in light of its safety record being so poor. The airline’s responsibility in the crash was direct and significant, and so even if it had used different strategies in the acute and chronic stages, it might not have been possible to have recovered from the crisis, and ValuJet would still have been bought out by AirTran due to flyers’ concerns for safety. However, the strategic choices that ValuJet made in the aftermath of the crash were immediately detrimental to its public image. The airline repeatedly denied any responsibility, even though it was quickly
found to be accountable for the oxygen canisters that ignited the fire that took down the aircraft. Not only did ValuJet oppose the indisputable evidence against it, but it also covered up serious safety issues that had plagued the airline for years previous to the disaster. When documents emerged contradicting ValuJet’s assertion that it had always enforced strict safety regulations, it lost all credibility and damaged its public image permanently. Ultimately, ValuJet was perceived as an unsafe airline, and the crash of Flight 592 prompted public fear that resulted in the weakening of the airline so that it eventually was bought out by AirTran.
Chapter 3: Trans World Airlines Flight 800

Progression of the Crisis

Prodromal Stage (N/A – July 17, 1996)

In contrast to ValuJet, Trans World Airlines (TWA) was not plagued by a devastating past, and had very few prodromal warning signs for the crash of Flight 800 on July 17, 1996. Since its formation as Western Air Express in 1925, TWA had suffered through 19 accidents resulting in fatalities prior to Flight 800, the worst of which took place in 1974 and resulted in 92 deaths (Aviation Safety Database, 2012). The airplane involved, a Boeing 747, had one of the best safety records in aviation history, with only 1.6 fatal accidents per million departures (Milton, 1999, p. 48). In the aftermath of the crash, there was some media speculation that more could have been done to anticipate and prevent the disaster in 1996, despite the lack of obvious prodromal warning signs. However, the media focus was not on TWA, but on the FAA and the NTSB. TWA Flight 800 crashed only two short months after ValuJet Flight 592, and while the two incidents were completely independent of each other, many nervous Americans wondered why there was such a sudden lapse in the safety of the aircraft industry. The second crash heightened the fear of flying that many Americans were still feeling after the crash in May. In a CBS News poll taken only a few days after TWA Flight 800 went down, 83% of regular fliers in America believed that, “airlines and government should spend more money on airline safety even if it meant higher ticket prices” (Cobb & Primo, 2003, p. 10). Fink (1986) argues that “guilt by association” can occur when a competitor had previously suffered through a similar crisis, and that a company “should view a competitor’s crisis as a prodrome for [its] own company” (p.
While there had only been one recent major airplane crash before Flight 800, the proximity of the two crashes led many to believe that the FAA should have instituted some type of safety regulations after the ValuJet crash in order to prevent the TWA flight from going down.

Coincidentally, both the FAA and the NTSB had just helped with an investigation of an electrical fire that ignited on an Scandinavian Airlines (SAS) jet in Denmark in 1993, which concluded that the cause of the fire was dangerous wiring that short-circuited and lit flammable cabin insulation (“Timeline of Insulation,” 2005). The final official NTSB report on TWA Flight 800, released many years later, also claimed that sparked electrical wiring was the cause of the crash. While the incidents were again completely independent of each other, and in fact involved different types of aircrafts, news sources criticized the FAA and the NTSB for knowing the dangers of complicated circuitry on aircrafts and doing nothing in the way of safety regulations prior to the TWA crash. In a USA Today article written in 2001, private experts criticized the two agencies for their lack of action after learning about the dangers of the wiring and the flammable Mylar insulation, and called the SAS fire a “precursor of the two deadly North American crashes” (Stoller, 2001). However, TWA itself was not under any scrutiny from the government or the public, and so was faced with an acute crisis on July 17, 1996 when TWA Flight 800 crashed.

**Acute Crisis Stage (July 17, 1996 – September, 1996)**

The acute crisis stage for TWA commenced on July 17, 1996 at approximately 8:31 p.m. EST when Flight 800, a Boeing 747, crashed into the Atlantic Ocean near East Moriches, New York (NTSB, 2000, p. 1). The flight was scheduled to fly from John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York to Charles DeGaulle International Airport in Paris, France. The crash killed the 2 pilots, 2 flight engineers, 14 flight attendants, and 212 passengers on board. Immediately,
the Coast Guard began what it soon realized were futile efforts to locate any survivors among the 230 missing. Any passenger that might have survived the airplane splitting in half in midair due to the explosion surely did not endure the impact with the cold water and the hours it took rescue crews to reach the scene. The wreckage was spread over a huge area of water, and the recovery of bodies took weeks longer than anticipated.

As with any devastating crash, the families of the victims were concerned with the quickest possible recovery of the bodies of loved ones. However, salvage efforts were extremely slow, and many families did not get confirmation of recovered bodies for more than two weeks after the crash occurred (Milton, 1999, p. 178). Because of the midair explosion, the wreckage spread over an almost 100 mile area from Southampton to Coney Island (Sexton, 1996). Although there could surely be no survivors of the crash, many families held out hope that somehow their loved ones had not boarded the plane (Phillips, 1996). Confirmation of the passenger list took much longer than anticipated, however, and a *New York Times* article reported that four days after the crash there were only 101 bodies accounted for and only 46 victims identified (Kifner, 1996). Lead investigators called for more professionals to help with the autopsies, but rescue efforts were still slow and two weeks after the crash, only 171 bodies had been recovered and 165 of those identified (Milton, 1999, p. 178).

As with ValuJet 592, initial thoughts about what took down TWA Flight 800 were scattered and unfounded. Each person in the many investigative parties seemed to have his own opinion about what occurred, and as a result the public was bombarded by many different theories. Media outlets reported every possibility having to do with the airplane itself, including mechanical malfunction, engine problems, and fuel explosion (Cobb & Primo, 2003, p. 104). FBI officials, who quickly became involved in the investigation, leaked opinions that implied
that there had been a terrorist attack of some sort. The damage done to the front of the plane, they said, was consistent with bomb damage. While the investigation had yet to be conducted, hundreds of eyewitnesses came forward to the media and recounted seeing what appeared to be a bomb or missile collide with airplane. Of the over 700 eyewitness accounts that the FBI eventually documented, 96 of them “described seeing a streak of light or what appeared to be a flare moving up from the Earth and eventually leading to an explosion over the Atlantic” (Ruppe, 2000). There was no sure cause of the crash at this time, but these eyewitness accounts strongly supported the rumors of an act of terrorism. Larry Johnson, a former State Department counterterrorism official who was not a part of the investigation, told CNN that in his expert opinion, “There was a bomb on board without a doubt. You do not get these kinds of midair explosions on commercial airlines without a bomb on board” (Dowling, 1996). Even before the investigation began, speculation about the crash weighed heavily on a terrorist threat rather than some type of mechanical malfunction. Four days after the crash, the FBI agent in charge of the investigation, James Kallstrom, reported to the press that the FBI and the NTSB had three official theories as to the cause: “There was a bomb on the plane, the plane was hit with a rocket or there was a mechanical, electrical or some malfunction on the plane that caused the plane to explode” (Kifner, 1996).

Jeffrey H. Erickson, the CEO of TWA at the time of the crash and the appointed spokesperson for the company, was largely criticized for the way both he and his company handled the crash during the acute crisis phase. Erickson, who had never handled a major disaster despite his many years in the aviation industry, was in London at the time of the crash and did not address the public until after he returned to New York (Milton, 1999, p. 71). When he did appear, he refused to answer any questions, and “came across as a bottom-line executive
worried more about his company’s image than the lives lost on Flight 800” (Milton, 1999, p. 71).

In fact, Erickson was continuously criticized throughout the post-crisis stages for managing the situation poorly. New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani fiercely condemned TWA’s CEO for failing to notify families of victims in a timely manner (Milton, 1999, p. 97). He also told the media that Erickson lied to him about the passenger list, which was not released for 23 hours after the crash for reasons unknown (Weisensee & Flander, 1996). Even after the list of victims was released, Erickson remained largely unseen and quiet during the acute crisis stage. Theodore Harris, a man who lost his son in the crash, wrote in a letter to the New York Times that in the 16 days of waiting with other families after the event, he spoke with Mayor Giuliani, Governor George Pataki, and President Clinton, but was never addressed by Erickson (Harris, 1996).

Erickson’s statements for TWA immediately following the crash of Flight 800 were brief and sporadic, and encompassed many of Benoit’s techniques including transcendence, bolstering, shifting the blame, and attacking accusers. In fact, Erickson employed almost all of these techniques in only one interview with Jim Lehrer on PBS NewsHour a week after the crash. Throughout the interview, Erickson focused on the airline company’s dedication to serving the families of the victims, as well as his own emotional connection to the families and his priority of determining the cause of the crash promptly for their sake. He stated, “I think everybody’s spirits, including mine, were increased substantially on Sunday when for the first time we had indication that we had found parts of the airplane underwater, and that will lead us [to] bringing back the loved ones that everybody wants” (Erickson, 1996). Later in the interview, the CEO again focused on the recovery efforts rather than the disaster of the crash when he said, “I think we all want to see the rest of the victims recovered as quickly as possible” (Erickson, 1996). By
using transcendence, Erickson attempted to shift the focus of the public from blaming the airline to more important considerations, mainly the families of the victims and their needs.

In the same interview, Erickson used Benoit’s strategy of bolstering to strengthen the public’s positive feelings towards himself and TWA. He repeatedly reassured Lehrer that, “TWA’s primary effort is in providing families support,” despite being accused by Giuliani for doing exactly the opposite immediately after the crash (Erickson, 1996). He also attempted to bolster his own image after several media criticisms by ensuring listeners that, “There is no one more than I who wants to know the cause of this accident” (Erickson, 1996). At the end of the interview, Erickson utilized the strategy of shifting the blame by pointing to the failure of rescue teams as the reason that he and TWA were not able to provide families with adequate support. When asked why families were not getting the information that they wanted, Erickson stated that, “part of the problem is because there still is so much of [the] airplane under the water” (Erickson, 1996). Not only did Erickson shift blame from his company to the slow response of rescue teams and the harsh elements, but he also evaded TWA’s responsibility by alluding to the teams’ defeasibility in the post-crisis environment.

Despite his interview with Jim Lehrer, Erickson was criticized for his lack of public appearances and statements, as well as his apparent lack of compassion for the families of the victims. Gerald Meyers, a professor of crisis management at Carnegie Mellon University, argued that, “[Erickson’s] response has been truly lacking. He should have been on the front edge of the company’s response and leading the way and showing compassion, and he hasn’t been visible” (Stout, 1996). When he was visible to the public, Erickson often came off as a cold and indifferent CEO who was only concerned with his company rather than the lives lost in the crash. William Curry, an independent public relations consultant and former official at Boeing, told the
New York Times, “He portrayed himself, and therefore T.W.A., as being closed, at a time when it is extremely important to be open” (Gilpin, 1996). In response to criticisms of his rigid demeanor, Erickson directly attacked TWA’s accusers. He stated, “We lost 53 employees and family members. Any extraneous comment that we don’t care is extremely callous” (Gilpin, 1996). Through this comment, Erickson attempted to reestablish TWA’s image by emphasizing his own emotional involvement in the crash, and attacking anyone who questioned it.

Boeing issued relatively few statements immediately after the crash of its B-747 aircraft. Although the official NTSB report eventually determined that the crash resulted from, “an explosion of the center wing fuel tank (CWT), resulting from ignition of the flammable fuel/air mixture in the tank,” no one initially focused on Boeing as a source of blame (NTSB, 2000, p. 308). Almost immediately after the crash occurred, rumors of a terrorist attacks were widespread, based on the hundreds of eyewitnesses who claimed to have seen a missile of some kind collide with the aircraft. By its silence, Boeing allowed these rumors to deflect blame away from the company and its plane.

The bulk of the statements made to the media after the crash of TWA Flight 800 were not given by the airline or Boeing, but instead came from the two groups investigating the crash: the NTSB and the FBI. The FBI was almost immediately brought in to investigate the possibility of a criminal act involved in the crash, prompted by the possibility that a bomb or a missile may have ignited the aircraft. Until a criminal act is actually discovered, however, the NTSB remains the lead agency in charge of the crash investigation according to federal law (Rosenthal, Boin, & Comfort, 2001, p. 220). Even so, in this case the FBI dominated the NTSB, and tension arose between the two agencies due to the control that the FBI demanded (Rosenthal et al., 2001, p. 231). The two organizations distinguished themselves whenever possible, and Federal agents
emphasized that they were conducting a “parallel” rather than “joint” investigation (Sexton, 1996). Their goals were very different: the NTSB wanted to find the cause of the crash while maintaining transparency with the public, while the FBI was only concerned with the possibility of an act of terror and kept all evidence from its investigation confidential (Cobb & Primo, 2003, p. 107). The two groups repeatedly clashed both privately and publically, and due to a initial lack of evidence conclusively supporting any of the theories surrounding the cause of the crash, their “turf battles” became the focus of a great deal of the media attention given to the investigation (Cobb & Primo, 2003, p. 107). Although neither party was given sole responsibility to investigate the crash, a conflict arose between the two groups that developed from their inability to determine the true source of the explosion. This conflict led to both groups using Benoit’s strategies in order to deflect blame for the unsuccessful investigation onto the other.

The NTSB spokesperson at this time was Vice Chairman Robert Francis. Although he presented himself as an intelligent man with years of experience in the industry, Francis was not generally well liked by reporters because of his tendency to withhold information from the public even when it was unnecessary to do so (Milton, 1999, p. 132). His demeanor remained unpopular in the aftermath of this crash, and his short temper was often apparent during question and answer sessions. Milton (1999) reports that Francis snapped at a reporter, “Just because you have a loud voice doesn’t mean you’re going to get your questions answered” (Milton, 1999, p. 132). During Francis’s public appearances at the daily official press conferences, he used denial by maintaining that there was no concrete evidence that supported any definite cause of the crash, while simultaneously using transcendence by shifting the focus of the media to the victims. In one of the first conferences, he stated, “The highest priority remains the recovery of the victims in this accident, and that will continue to be the case” (Milton, 1999, p. 86). By focusing on the
victims, Francis attempted to shift media attention away from the difficult investigation and conflict with the FBI.

Other NTSB officials used direct strategies of shifting the blame for the unsuccessful investigation onto the FBI. Jim Hall, Chairman of the NTSB at the time, described a number of factors that caused the NTSB to lose control of the investigation, including “the strong personality of FBI ADIC James Kallstrom” and the FBI withholding important information from his team (ATF Report, 1999, p. 3). While the FBI generally keeps its investigations closed from the public, it is generally understood that any information that it had should have been shared with the NTSB so as not to hinder the investigation. Another safety board investigator echoed Hall’s sentiments in a statement to the New York Times, saying that, “[The FBI] are kind of overbearing. They immediately took control, and hampered a lot of things we did” (Sexton, 1996). By directly accusing the FBI for hindering the NTSB from executing a successful analysis, these NTSB officials aimed to deflect responsibility for the failing investigation.

James Kallstrom, described by Milton (1999) as “a bear of a man brimming with fierce energy,” acted as both the leader of the FBI’s investigation and its spokesman (p. 19). Kallstrom was known for being commanding and authoritative, and was cited as a large part of the reason that the NTSB lost control of the investigation. Like the NTSB officials, Kallstrom used strategies of transcendence during many of the initial press conferences the week after the crash. In one statement, he focused on the possibility of an act of terror against America and finding the perpetrator: “If it is a terrorist event, we then have the challenge to find out who the perpetrators were, who the cowards were that did this, as [we] do in all these other investigations” (Cobb & Primo, 2003, p. 107). Kallstrom continued to employ transcendence in a separate press conference, this time focusing on the victims rather than the perpetrators: “I had a very emotional
day. I’ve just left the families. I think it puts this tragedy in focus to visit with all of those people and see the unbelievable emotions they are going through…The scope of the human tragedy that is before us here is not a pretty sight” (Milton, 1999, p. 117). By centering his statement on the emotional suffering of the victims, Kallstrom bolstered his own image as sympathetic while simultaneously avoiding the topic of the unsuccessful investigation. Kallstrom was not the only FBI official to speak with reporters, and although he attempted to reduce the offensiveness of the crash through transcendence, others took a more aggressive approach. One anonymous FBI official even went as far as to directly attack the NTSB agents for their lack of leadership and inability to manage the investigation. He stated, “[The safety investigators] are not managers, not leaders, and they have no genes for managing significant resources to tackle a problem” (Sexton, 1996).

The crash of TWA Flight 800 was the subject of an exceptional amount of news coverage, most likely due to the possibility of an act of terrorism as well as the lack of evidence found for any cause of the crash. In fact, it was the “subject of more than 40 percent of New York Times stories on specific plane accidents in the 1990s” (Cobb & Primo, 2003, p. 103). With many different theories circulating, including that of a criminal act, there was ample material for reporters. The New York Times covered the story a total of 297 times in 1996, including 123 stories in July (25 front page), 88 stories in August (14 front page), and 30 stories in September (4 front page) (Cobb & Primo, 2003, p. 118). When preliminary tests on a piece of wreckage showed positive results for explosive residue, the information was leaked to the press and ignited a new flurry of articles and buzz (Van Natta, 1996). After the excitement surrounding this evidence died down, the acute crisis stage of the crash finally came to a close. Although investigators said that, “they were confident that it was only a matter of days, rather than weeks,
before they would get other positive results,” no such evidence came to light and the lengthy search for the cause of the crash continued into the longest stage of the crisis (Van Natta, 1996).

**Chronic Crisis Stage (October, 1996 – August, 2000)**

The chronic crisis stage began for TWA in October of 1996 when press coverage postulating different theories about the cause of the crash dwindled significantly. TWA, Boeing, the NTSB and the FBI all continued to use Benoit’s image restoration strategies during this lengthy period. TWA shifted its strategy to corrective action, although without the help of its spokesman. After suffering a $14.3 million third-quarter loss, Erickson resigned from his position as TWA CEO on October 24, 1996 (Gilpin, 1996). While Erickson reported that his decision to leave was his own, many organizations use personnel restructuring as an attempt to boost public image and prevent another crisis. In another attempt at corrective action directed towards the families involved, TWA held a memorial service in December for the families of the victims whose bodies were never recovered (Rosenthal et al., 2001, p. 227). However, the response from the affected families to TWA’s attempt at corrective action was mixed. One mother of a victim expressed empathy for Erickson and said, “If I were him, with all this on his shoulders, I probably would quit, too…He is a very nice man” (Gilpin, 1996). A sister of another victim, on the other hand, was unhappy with the weak attempt to compensate for the damage caused: “This is closure for TWA, not for us…They want all of us to go away. They want to buy this whole thing” (Milton, 1999, p. 292).

After the FBI investigation began to slow and no evidence of a criminal act was found, aircraft malfunction became the dominant theory as to the cause of the crash, and blame was pointed at Boeing. The company echoed TWA’s use of corrective action by instituting various
new safety regulations and programs, specifically isolating the 747 aircraft. Boeing outlined its future plans, including a fuel system maintenance program for the 747, in its official report submitted to the NTSB on April 28, 2000 (Boeing Company, 2000, Appendix E-1). The official Boeing report used bolstering and corrective action to explain the changes being made to the Boeing fleet: “Since the TWA Flight 800 tragedy, significant effort has been made to understand this accident and to implement changes to further enhance the safety on the in-service fleet…Boeing is supporting these programs and is taking appropriate action as issues surface that might further enhance the safety of the in-service fleet” (Boeing Company, 2000, p. 8). Boeing executives looked into establishing the many proposed solutions that the FAA presented to them in order to prevent another catastrophe, but did not end up instituting any major changes. Because investigators were still unable to identify a specific cause of the explosion in the center wing fuel tank, Boeing hesitated to spend the large amount of money to fix the issue as the FAA thought it should. Michel Baumeister, an attorney who represented families of the victims, expressed his dismay at Boeing’s lack of corrective action: “If they truly take corrective action, I applaud it. But based on experience, I’m gravely concerned that what they will do is simply more tests, more review and more feet-dragging. And ultimately, they will not embrace the standards of the NTSB” (Grimaldi, 1997).

After over a year of investigating leads, the FBI closed its $20 million criminal investigation on November 18, 1997 (Cobb & Primo, 2003, p. 110). In the slow months leading up to the FBI’s final report, Kallstrom used the strategy of bolstering in order to reassure the public that the FBI would not give up. In a news conference seven months after the crash, Kallstrom claimed that the FBI would continue to, “run down every lead, conduct every interview, and do every experiment necessary…We’re not a bunch of quitters. We don’t walk
away” (Milton, 1999, p. 300). By bolstering the image of the FBI as relentless and focused on finding the cause, Kallstrom attempted to give the families of victims and the general public faith in the FBI and hope that the investigation would not end until answers were found. In November, the FBI finally concluded that it had found no evidence that pointed definitively to a criminal act, only damage that Kallstrom reported was “consistent with the overpressurization of the center fuel tank, the breakup of the aircraft, the fire, and the impact of the aircraft into the ocean” (Milton, 1999, p. 335). The explosive residue found in the wreckage was determined to have come from a training session for bomb-sniffing dogs that had occurred five weeks before the crash (Hosenball, Eddy & Isikoff, 1996).

The NTSB, facing criticism for its lack of concrete evidence pointing to any particular cause after many months of investigation, also used strategies of bolstering and transcendence in order to restore its positive public image. By April of 1997, the entire 747 involved in the crash had been reconstructed and examined for evidence. James Wildey, an NTSB metallurgist, reported, “I can safely say that this is some of the most examined metal there is anywhere in the world, especially between the nose section and the aft section…every inch of that structure has been examined in great detail” (Milton, 1999, p. 306). In December of 1997, NTSB officials presented initial evidence in a series of public hearings after the FBI investigation had officially closed, stating that an explosion in the center fuel tank caused the crash but that they still could not determine what ignited the explosion. In a statement at the December hearing, Chairman Hall assured the public, “We are by no means finished. Our work will continue and we will spare no effort to determine the cause of the crash of TWA 800. I am confident that, in the process, we will learn a great deal more that will help make our air transportation system even safer” (Hall, 1997). Both Wildey and Hall reinforced the image of the NTSB as a group of hard-working men
and women who would not stop searching for the cause of the disaster until they had conclusive evidence supporting a specific reason for the explosion. Hall took his strategy one step further when he focused his attention not only on finding the cause for the peace of mind of the victims, but for the sake of making all air transportation safer in the future.

During the course of the chronic crisis stage, there were 10 major congressional hearings on TWA Flight 800. The hearings spanned many different, relevant topics such as aid for families of air crash victims, handling terrorism threats, and the role of the FBI in crash investigations (Cobb & Primo, 2003, p. 114). The crash of Flight 800, along with the recent crash of ValuJet 592 and the time-consuming and expensive investigations that followed both, established aviation safety and security as a pressing matter for the United States government. As a result, President Bill Clinton created the White House Commission on Aviation Safety and Security, led by Vice President Al Gore. This committee created recommendations for ways to increase flight safety, some of which were eventually sanctioned (Cobb & Primo, 2003, p. 111). However, the issue of airline safety became less pressing after the media attention surrounding the crash of TWA Flight 800 died down, and the lack of other major airplane crashes on American soil in the following months did not revive concerns.

The NTSB issued its final report for Flight 800 on August 23, 2000. It determined that the cause of the crash was an explosion in the center wing fuel tank, but did not specify what caused the explosion:

The National Transportation Safety Board determines that the probable cause of the TWA flight 800 accident was an explosion of the center wing fuel tank (CWT), resulting from ignition of the flammable fuel/air mixture in the tank. The source of ignition energy for the explosion could not be determined with certainty, but, of the sources evaluated by
the investigation, the most likely was a short circuit outside of the CWT that allowed excessive voltage to enter it through electrical wiring associated with the fuel quantity indication system. (NTSB, 2000, p. 308)

According to this conclusion, the Boeing Company technically bore full blame for the cause of the crash of Flight 800, because it was an airplane malfunction due to the design of the fuel tank and nearby heat sources that caused the explosion that downed the aircraft. However, no specific series of events could be verified based on the remaining evidence, and so the cause of the explosion in the left wing tank remained unsolvable.

**Crisis Resolution Stage (September, 2000 – December 1, 2001)**

On January 10, 2001, financially troubled TWA filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy for the third time in its long history, shortly after announcing a takeover deal with American Airlines (Knowlton, 2001). According to an article in the *International Herald Tribune*, although TWA was still ranked as the eighth largest United States carrier, it had gone “a dozen years without posting an annual profit” (Knowlton, 2001). Surprisingly, the crash of Flight 800 did not seem to be a main reason why customers were avoiding flying with the airline during the years after the crash, and thus TWA still reached the crisis resolution stage even though it could not stay afloat. Unlike ValuJet, customers did not avoid the airline due to safety concerns. In fact, the airline invested in replacing 40% of its fleet with newer jets since 1996 (Field, 2000). Instead, reasons were high fares, limited routes, dirty airplanes and an overall average travel experience, which were problems that plagued the entire U.S. airline industry (Field, 2000). On December 1, 2001, TWA flew its last flight as an independent company, and the next day was merged into American Airlines (“Last Call for TWA,” 2001).
**Analysis**

The crash of TWA Flight 800 was devastating, and led to the most extensive and costly recovery effort in the history of the NTSB (Rosenthal et al., 2001, p. 225). TWA stumbled its way through the development of its lengthy crisis, and made certain mistakes that caused their positive public image to wane. The airline suffered due to its choices of strategies and its damaging CEO presence, but ultimately the focus of the media did not dwell on TWA and so the airline was able to navigate through its crisis and eventually recover. However, the financial pressures that all airlines experienced ultimately caused its disappearance.

The prodromal stage for the TWA Flight 800 crisis was relatively nonexistent, and so the airline had little warning that it should prepare for an impending disaster. This lack of a prodromal stage was beneficial to TWA after the crash occurred, because the public had no reason to suspect that the airline could have foreshadowed the event and done something to prevent it. The prodromal stage for the crash also aided TWA’s public image because there was more focus on two other groups, the NTSB and the FAA. The crash occurred only two months after ValuJet 592, and so many Americans viewed ValuJet’s crisis as a warning sign that there was a general lapse in airline safety, which the NTSB and FAA did nothing to remedy in the short period between the crashes. Although Fink (1986) argued that a company should view competitors’ crises as prodromes for its own, the media and the public more readily questioned the government agencies in charge of airline security rather than TWA (p. 90). The NTSB and FAA had recently been involved in an investigation of a crash that also involved an explosion and fire. Since no policy changes had been made since that investigation, the public again had
reason to blame the government organizations rather than the airline for Flight 800’s fire in the cabin.

The spokesman for a company in a crisis is a crucial factor in how positively the public perceives the company to be. It is imperative that a spokesman is open with the public, empathetic to the victims, and insistent upon making progressive changes and repairing all damages caused in a crisis. TWA’s spokesman, CEO Jeffrey Erickson, was not well liked or well received at any point during the crisis situation, and TWA’s reputation suffered as a result. Erickson was publically criticized for his rigid demeanor, withholding information from the public and the families, and even lying to the mayor of New York City. Erickson also did not convey a consistent crisis management strategy, but instead used a different response in each of the very few statements that he made. For example, in one interview, Erickson used numerous strategies and at one point even argued that the families of the victims were not getting the information that they needed because of the slow rescue teams, not because of any error made by TWA. By presenting himself and therefore the whole airline as insensitive and unprepared, Erickson damaged TWA’s public reputation.

The airline also made a grave mistake by angering the families of the victims of the crash. Although recovery efforts were the first priority of all parties involved, the crash site was spread over a huge area and thus was extremely difficult to navigate. TWA withheld the passenger list for much longer than usual, and left the families of the passengers wondering if their loved ones had been on the flight. Identification of the bodies also took an unusually long amount of time, and although TWA worked to speed up the process, many of the families were unhappy with the slow response. Furthermore, TWA hosted a funeral for the families of victims who were never recovered, but it did not appease some families, and the attempt at corrective action was
considered to be superficial rather than a positive attempt at reconciliation. Many of the family members spoke to the media about their dissatisfaction with TWA, and those stories had an impact on the public’s perception of the airline as a whole.

TWA, like ValuJet, did not accept blame for the crash. Instead, Erickson assured the public that TWA was a safe airline to fly, and that providing support for the victims was more important than determining the cause. Unlike ValuJet, however, TWA’s crisis situation did not necessarily call for the airline to admit responsibility. Immediately after the crash, the most probable cause was perceived to be some type of criminal act, such as a missile or explosive device. Although the official statements suggested that there was no evidence pointing to any specific cause, the FBI was quickly brought in to help with the investigation and the news was dominated with eyewitness accounts of an unidentified flying object colliding with the aircraft. Because the investigation was so lengthy and the criminal cause captivated the interest of the public for so long, there was relatively little pressure on TWA to admit fault for the crash. The FBI investigation closed one year after the crisis began, but the NTSB did not officially state that an aircraft malfunction was the cause of the crash until four years after it had occurred. By that time, Flight 800 was largely forgotten and there was no reason for TWA to admit blame or for passengers to feel unsafe flying with the airline.

Along with speculating about a criminal act, the media focused heavily on the dispute between the NTSB and the FBI. Although the NTSB was officially in charge, James Kallstrom and the FBI immediately took control of the case. The two government groups publically disagreed about how the investigation should proceed, as well as who owned the evidence that was collected. For example, the FBI interviewed hundreds of eyewitnesses, but withheld those interview transcripts from the NTSB because they were considered to be criminal evidence
The ongoing struggle between these two organizations largely kept the focus away from TWA. The feud between the NTSB and the FBI, combined with the fact that the investigation was slow and did not produce any results for many years, was beneficial to the airline because it kept TWA out of the public eye and away from accusations of blame.

Another reason why TWA was able to successfully reach the crisis resolution stage was because of the heightened government response to the crash, and the resulting lack of pressure on TWA to present corrective actions. After any major airplane crash and subsequent investigation, the NTSB makes recommendations to the FAA regarding any changes to procedure that should be made. The FAA takes each suggestion into consideration, but uses a cost-benefit analysis to determine which could be effectively implemented; relatively few of the original recommendations are eventually applied. After the crash of Flight 800, however, the government responded with more intense corrective action measures. Aviation security was finally seen as a pressing congressional matter, and congressional hearings that spanned many different topics took place during the chronic crisis stage (Cobb & Primo, 2003, p. 114). This heightened government response served to deflect scrutiny off of one airline and place it on the entire industry, which served both to reinforce a positive public image of TWA as a safe airline, and allow TWA to take few corrective action measures. If the matter of airline safety was one of national importance that involved the President of the United States, then presumably the public did not need to be concerned with the safety of TWA, because it was already being taken care of.

TWA made certain decisions during its crisis of Flight 800 that were detrimental to its public image, such as the weak presence of CEO and spokesman Jeffrey Erickson and his interactions with the families of victims. However, the crisis situation that existed was overall very forgiving to TWA. The airline had few previous safety lapses on its record, and so was not
openly critiqued for its lack of preventative measures. In fact, the crash came so shortly after that of ValuJet Flight 592 that a majority of criticism fell on the NTSB and the FAA for not improving safety regulations for the airline industry as a whole. The focus of media attention then shifted to the criminal investigation and the many public disputes between the FBI and the NTSB. As a result, TWA was never compelled to admit responsibility for the crash. When the long investigation finally ended, passengers had long since regained trust in the safety of TWA airplanes. Due to intense airline competition and financial pressures, TWA disappeared.
Chapter 4: EgyptAir Flight 990

Progression of the Crisis

Prodromal Stage (N/A – October 31, 1999)

EgyptAir had very few prodromal warning signs for the crash of Flight 990 on October 31, 1999. In fact, the airline had a fairly clean safety record, all officers were qualified and properly certified, and the company’s fleet was generally in good mechanical condition (Langewiesche, 2001). The official NTSB report (2002) that was compiled after the crash spoke specifically about the condition of the plane: “Examination of the wreckage revealed no evidence of preexisting fatigue, corrosion, or mechanical damage that could have contributed to the airplane’s initial pitchover” (p. 52). In addition, the Command Captain and Relief First Officer had passed all proficiency checks within six months before the crash (NTSB, 2002, p. 7-8).

While the actions of the Relief First Officer became a major source of speculation in the acute and chronic crisis stages, it was never alleged that there was evidence before the crash that should have alerted EgyptAir as to the impending crisis. EgyptAir’s fairly clean record could have both hurt or helped it in managing its impending crisis situation. In one way, this lack of a significant prodromal stage hurt EgyptAir because it was completely surprised when the acute stage arrived, and thus did not prepare itself. On the other hand, many people were more hesitant to blame EgyptAir for the crash because of its pristine record and the unlikelihood that it could have predicted such a catastrophic event.
Acute Crisis Stage (October 31, 1999 – November, 1999)

The acute crisis stage for EgyptAir began at 1:52 a.m. EST on October 31, 1999 when Flight 990, a Boeing 767 aircraft, crashed into the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of Massachusetts and killed all 217 people on board (NTSB, 2002, p. 1). Again, the first focus of both the recovery teams and the media was to rescue any survivors of the crash. However, radar remotes showed that the airplane could have been going at or above the speed of sound, much faster than it was designed to fly and an almost certainly fatal speed (Cooper & Wald, 1999). The Coast Guard responders quickly realized that any hope of rescue was lost. Coast Guard Petty Officer Philip Dequine described finding only “popcorn-sized” debris at the scene (Cooper & Wald, 1999).

With hope for survivors gone, the task quickly turned to identifying the source of the crash and the culprit behind it.

Unfortunately, it took almost two weeks for the investigators to find and begin to analyze the black box from the plane, which contained video and data recording devices crucial to understanding the cause of the crash. This acute crisis stage was split into two parts, before and after the evidence in the black box was recovered, based on the different image restoration strategies that each organization used. Until the black box was found, the media could only speculate as to the reason for the crash. The theories were numerous and varied. One New York Times article suggested scenarios of hijackers, a malfunctioning autopilot, a broken tail elevator, and even incorrect preliminary radar data (Wald, 1999a). Another media source cited possibilities of an “act of suicide” or even the unlucky “JFK curse” (Usborne, 1999). Experts were struggling to find answers just as much as the public, and without the black box only guesswork was possible. One interviewer remarked, “At times today, the experts sounded like
the proverbial blind man trying to describe an elephant by touching a part of it, but not all” (Wald, 1999a).

Before the black box was recovered and while the investigation was based on mere speculation, EgyptAir began shifting the blame away from itself and attempting to avoid the situation completely. Immediately, the Egyptian government-owned airline officially turned the investigation over to the United States government (Langewiesche, 2001). Although Egypt had the right to lead the search because the crash occurred in international waters, it formally put the U.S. in charge in order to save resources such as time and money, and perhaps to distance itself from the investigation. The day after the start of the acute stage of the crisis, EgyptAir began to use Benoit’s strategy of shifting the blame when it officially stated that the crash was merely a “matter of fate” (“Investigators say EgyptAir,” 1999). By blaming the crash on external factors, even before those factors were conclusively identified, EgyptAir officials hoped to shift media attention away from their company and instead cited it as an “accident” (Benoit, 1997, p. 180). As the weeks passed and the lack of concrete evidence collected from aircraft debris supported theories of suicide or intentionality, Egypt’s government continued to deny responsibility forcefully. During a news conference two weeks after the crash, a senior official at the Egyptian Transportation Ministry announced that, “the evidence from the flight-data recorder had been inconclusive but the dive could be explained only by a bomb in the cockpit or in the lavatory directly behind it” (Langewiesche, 2001). While many people saw these accusations as random and unsupported, it became clear that the Egyptians were willing to blame anything or anyone else.

Before the black box was found and analyzed, the U.S. government also found itself in the uncomfortable position of possibly having to blame an important ally, and be open to charges
of being culturally insensitive to the large Egyptian population. It turned to tactics of transcendence and shifting the blame away from the Egyptian government, in an attempt to remain culturally sensitive while still truthful about the course of the investigation. Jim Hall, Chairman of the NTSB, immediately stressed that there was absolutely no evidence of an act of terrorism (Usborne, 1999). In an interview two weeks after the crash, Hall said, “The strong partnership between our countries in this investigation can only strengthen the possibility that the final cause of this tragic crash can be determined” (“NTSB to Keep Control,” 1999). Here, he diplomatically focused on the importance of determining the cause, rather than pointing blame, also serving to keep Boeing, the domestic giant, out of the target.

The second half of the acute crisis stage began when the black box was found in the wreckage and pressure shifted to the NTSB having to inform the public of preliminary conclusions while still maintaining cultural sensitivity. An NTSB official told the media that there was some evidence pointing to a “controlled descent,” shifting the blame away from Boeing and towards EgyptAir’s pilots (Langewiesche, 2001). Hall also tried to buy more time for the investigation to progress, stating, “Based on the evidence we have seen thus far, we have found no indication of a mechanical or weather-related event that could have caused this crash. We are not yet prepared, however, to state the cause of the crash and we are continuing the investigation with the assistance of the Egyptian government” (Borger & Dawoud, 2000). Here, despite the inconclusive evidence, Hall continued to shift the blame away from aircraft malfunction, while using transcendence by focusing on the ultimate goal of finding out what really happened for the safety of future flights.

The primary analysis of the black box was announced at the NTSB news conference. The voice recording from the black box showed evidence that the Relief First Officer, an Egyptian
man named Gameel Al-Batouti, was in control of the plane at the time of the crash and may have spoken some type of prayer in the last minutes of the flight (Langewiesche, 2001). NTSB translators announced that the officer repeated the words “I rely on God” almost ten times as the airplane descended (Langewiesche, 2001). This evidence, combined with radar data that showed that the aircraft descent had been controlled, pointed more definitively to the pilot acting deliberately. At the news conference, Jim Hall said that the accident “might, and I emphasize might, be the result of a deliberate act…No one wants to get to the bottom of this mystery quicker than those investigating this accident, both here and in Egypt, but we won’t get there on a road paved with leaks, supposition, speculation, and spin. That road does not lead to the truth, and the truth is what both the American people and the Egyptian people seek” (Langewiesche, 2001). Again, Hall and the NTSB employed transcendence. During this conference, the NTSB also announced its intent to turn over the investigation to the FBI due to the possibility of a crime (“Continuing the Investigation,” 1999). While U.S. officials continued to step on eggshells, this transfer of power to the FBI enabled the NTSB, and its regulated Boeing to be distanced from the crash and was a clear sign that they believed the pilot could be at fault.

EgyptAir and the Egyptian government did not respond well to the decision that the FBI would become involved in the investigation. In fact, “the Egyptians were outraged,” and they immediately went on the offensive (Langewiesche, 2001). The Egyptian government began to directly attack its accusers, using another one of Benoit’s strategies. First, it pointed out that “the NTSB lacked the cultural sensitivity to understand what was on the cockpit voice recorder,” which led the organization to misinterpret the Relief First Officer’s last words (Langewiesche, 2001). It also claimed that the U.S. government was using the Egyptian pilot as a scapegoat to disguise its own problems and responsibility in the crash (“Batouty Clan Stands United,” 1999).
Lastly, the Egyptian delegation “started to loudly criticize the performance and intentions of Boeing, the FBI, and the entire NTSB” (Langewiesche, 2001). Even after evidence pointed blame on their employee, the Egyptians obfuscated their responsibility for the crash, by attacking the motives of the very people they put in charge of the investigation in the first place.

The NTSB news conference and the Egyptians’ aggressive response marked the end of the acute crisis period. After the announcements made at the conference, the general public lost interest in the case, the media became less involved, and the long process of compiling the NTSB report began with lengthy investigations by the NTSB, FBI, and the Egyptian Civil Aviation Authority (ECAA). Just as Fink (1986) designated, the “damage control” part of the crisis was over, and it was time for the longest phase to begin (p. 23).

**Chronic Crisis Stage (December, 1999 – May, 2001)**

The chronic stage of EgyptAir’s crisis primarily involved three parties: EgyptAir, Boeing, and the ECAA. The strategies each of these groups used during this stage could be found in their testimony and submissions to the NTSB and the FBI, who worked together to complete an official report about the causes of the disaster. EgyptAir, the first organization to make submissions to the NTSB, continued to use strategies of blatant denial, shifting the blame, and attacking its accusers. In its April 28, 2000 presentation, its representatives stated, “The suicide scenario is not consistent with data and facts of [the EgyptAir Flight 990] accident…the relief first officer did not deliberately cause the accident” (NTSB, 2002, p. 46-47). Instead, EgyptAir blamed Boeing for aircraft malfunctions that resulted in the crash. It reported, “An analysis of the facts and of the elevator control system’s design indicated that malfunctions in two PCAs on the right elevator may have precipitated the airplane’s dive” (NTSB, 2002, p. 48). Here, the
Egyptian representatives are directly accusing Boeing of unsuitable maintenance that led to the crash.

Boeing, which remained almost silent during the acute crisis phase, submitted its statement to the NTSB on October 31, 2000. Boeing considered and tested various failure scenarios, and was unable to find any condition that “(1) matched the data recorded by the [flight data recorder] or (2) resulted in a condition that was not recoverable by the pilot” (NTSB, 2002, p. 49). Here, Boeing also employed the strategy of denial based on its own tests, as well as shifting the blame by implying that any properly trained pilot would have easily remedied any malfunction that may have occurred. In its response to Boeing’s submission, EgyptAir moved from strategies of shifting the blame and denial to directly attacking Boeing’s tests and intentions. EgyptAir reported to the NTSB that, “Boeing’s engineering simulator did not provide an accurate model of real aircraft performance. Boeing often ignored the more reliable ground test results. Boeing’s selective use of test data resulted in inconsistent conclusions. Boeing’s conclusions regarding crew actions are erroneous” (NTSB, 2002, p. 50). EgyptAir clearly did not admit any fault in the crash, as Benoit suggested was essential to restoring a company’s image. Instead, the company continued to deny any responsibility and refocused all its attention on blaming the Boeing airplane.

The NTSB released the first draft of its official report on April 19, 2001 after extensive investigation with the FBI. It summarized that, “The probable cause of the EgyptAir Flight 990 accident is the airplane’s departure from normal cruise flight and subsequent impact with the Atlantic Ocean as a result of the relief first officer’s flight control inputs. The reason for the relief first officer’s actions was not determined” (NTSB, 2002, p. 67). Thus, the NTSB put direct blame for the crash on the deliberate actions of the Egyptian relief first officer. Although the
Egyptian government perceived this conclusion as extremely culturally insensitive, the NTSB defended its conclusion by emphasizing that its goal was, first and foremost, to discover the cause of the crash.

The Egyptian government was not done contesting the cause that the NTSB had declared. In a direct response to this conclusion, the ECAA became involved. Instead of accepting the NTSB report’s conclusions, the ECAA attacked the NTSB and its reasoning, saying that the “investigation was marked by procedural irregularities and the failure to follow accepted accident investigation standards” (Egyptian Civil Aviation Authority [ECAA], 2001, p. 3). The Egyptian government, which had willingly turned the investigation over to the U.S. government immediately after the crash, was unhappy with the way the NTSB and the FBI had analyzed evidence and come to a conclusion. Later in its report, the ECAA stated, “It is obvious that the NTSB has not done the type of professional accident investigation expected by the Egyptian Government when delegation was convened in November 1999” (ECAA, 2001, p. 43). Its 43 page response to the NTSB’s report highlighted all the wrongdoings of the NTSB, as well as reiterated Egypt’s stance that the mechanical failure of the aircraft could not be easily dismissed and in fact was the probable reason for the crash.

The chronic stage of the EgyptAir crisis ended in May of 2001, after the response of the ECAA was submitted to the NTSB. None of the various theories posited by EgyptAir or Boeing was proven conclusively. Because the NTSB had officially placed blame on the flight’s Relief First Officer and he died with the crash, there was no longer a living perpetrator who could be questioned or blamed. After this point, the only question that remained in the eyes of the general public was if the pilot’s actions were intentional, and there was no way to ever know. The NTSB released its final draft of the official report on March 13, 2002, but little had changed from the
first draft and thus it was received with little media attention or pushback from the other actors (NTSB, 2002).

**Crisis Resolution Stage (June, 2001 – May 7, 2002)**

Fink (1986) writes that the crisis resolution stage comes when the seemingly infinite chronic stage finally ends and the company or person involved is “well and whole again” (p. 25). EgyptAir reached this stage in May of 2001, about 18 months after the acute stage began. The NTSB had officially named the pilot as the cause of the crash, and thus the general public was no longer concerned about the safety of EgyptAir flights, nor was it the object of anger and blame. During this year-long resolution stage, without any fear about the safety of the airline, EgyptAir regained sales and remained the second largest commercial airline in Africa (“Egypt Air,” 2009). As Fink (1986) writes, however, “crises historically evolve in cyclical fashion” (p. 25). Airlines, as with other types of companies that regularly deal with inherently dangerous activities, do not have the luxury of not having to face a crisis for long periods of time. In the case of EgyptAir, another crash occurred on May 7, 2002, almost exactly a year after the hype surrounding Flight 990 had died down (“EgyptAir Crashes Again,” 2002). This crash killed 14 people, and began another crisis period for EgyptAir that once again tested EgyptAir’s crisis management skills.

**Analysis**

EgyptAir was relatively successful in its crisis management in the wake of the crash of Flight 990. The environment surrounding this crash was delicate, as it involved two dissimilar countries in a dispute over who was to blame for the loss of 217 lives. However difficult the
political environment, there were several factors that benefitted EgyptAir, as well as a clear, consistent crisis management plan that allowed the company to eventually reach the crisis resolution stage and regain trust from flyers.

Although the crash of EgyptAir Flight 990 killed 100 Americans and occurred very near American soil, the crisis situation was unique in that it involved both the United States and Egyptian governments. The aircraft landed off the coast of Nantucket Island in Massachusetts, but was far enough from American soil that it was technically in international waters, meaning that the Egyptian Civil Aviation Authority was in charge of the official investigation. However, the ECAA turned the investigation over to the NTSB because of the extensive resources that the U.S. government would be able to provide in order to find the cause of the crash. After the NTSB determined that the FBI should become involved due to the possibility of a deliberate act, the Egyptian government reversed its decision and the ECAA launched its own investigation of the crash that contradicted the conclusions of the American organizations. The U.S. government could never directly attack the airline for causing the crash, because any accusation against the state-owned EgyptAir or its employees became an accusation against an important ally. Tensions emerged between the two nations, because the American government did not want to accuse Egypt of an act of terror before it was definitively proven, and the Egyptian government was furious that its ally would make such bold accusations. This political controversy actually helped lessen the public pressure against EgyptAir in America, because U.S. investigators and government officials wanted to remain diplomatically sensitive and as a result were less harsh in placing blame for the crash on the airline.

EgyptAir had essentially no prodromal warning stage before the crash of Flight 990. In fact, EgyptAir had experienced very few crashes since its formation in 1932. With such little
forewarning about the risk of a crash, the public was more willing to exonerate the airline by blaming the crash on another party, or labeling it as simply an accident. Although the word “accident” is often mistakenly used when discussing a crisis, the word implies that no precautionary measures could have been taken to prevent the situation from occurring, and thus is not an accurate word to describe most crises. In the case of EgyptAir Flight 990, the crash came as such a surprise to the airline and the general public that, even though it was concluded that it was a deliberate act, the crash was largely labeled as accidental. Although the lack of warning signs could have also been a detriment to EgyptAir, because the crash came unexpectedly and thus EgyptAir was caught unprepared to respond, it ended up being an advantage because after the media coverage subsided the public’s confidence in flying with the airline was quickly restored.

The acute stage of EgyptAir’s crisis had two distinct parts, before and after the black box containing a recording of the cockpit was found and analyzed. In the two weeks that it took to recover the black box and proceed with the investigation, EgyptAir had time to formulate a crisis management strategy. During this period, the airline used strategies of shifting the blame and forceful denial of responsibility. After the recording was analyzed, a deliberate act became a possible cause, and the FBI was brought in to investigate, EgyptAir was actually fortunate to be able to maintain the same image restoration strategies that it had been using since immediately after the crash. The airline, led by the Egyptian government, continued to deny responsibility and attack its accusers even more aggressively than before the new evidence had been revealed. Instead of focusing its argument on an aircraft malfunction, EgyptAir refocused its energy on attacking the political insensitivity of the U.S. government. Interestingly, this tactic did not hurt the public perception of the airline, but instead shielded it from criticism. Because there was no
American group that wished to offend the Egyptian government, by attacking its American accusers EgyptAir actually defended itself from being attacked in return.

EgyptAir, like ValuJet and TWA, did not accept responsibility for the crash. Instead, the company completely denied that the airline was at fault, first focusing its blame on Boeing and a faulty aircraft, and then shifting media attention surrounding the crash to the political insensitivity of the United States government. However, it was never imperative for EgyptAir to claim responsibility for the crash. While an EgyptAir employee was ultimately found to be the cause by the NTSB, the airline itself was insulated from its pilot’s actions, escaped the majority of the blame and was never forced to retract its statements of denial. Anger over the crash rested on the single man who caused it and did not transfer to the airline. There appeared to be no need to blame EgyptAir for the pilot’s actions, especially because the motive behind those actions was never determined. Interestingly, EgyptAir defended its pilot throughout the stages of the crisis, and thus could have easily also been blamed when he was eventually identified as the cause. However, EgyptAir was fortunate enough that the media and public isolated the man from his employer and did not regard the airline as responsible or unsafe because of one man’s deliberate actions.

The airline also presented a transparent and consistent response during the development of the crisis, and made very few statements that reduced its credibility in the eyes of the public. EgyptAir’s representatives maintained strategies of simple denial, shifting the blame, and attacking their accusers, mainly focusing their energy on Boeing and a faulty aircraft. Although Boeing was never implicated in the crash and thus EgyptAir’s arguments were unsupported, the consistent approach served the airline well. The company did not have to face any documents or information contradicting its assertions of its strict safety standards, and thus presented a much
more honest image to the public, regardless of its refusal to claim responsibility for the crash. Although the first relief officer who caused the crash was an employee of EgyptAir, the airline had followed all appropriate safety procedures for its employee and thus no one doubted the systems in place. Because EgyptAir is a state-owned company, the Egyptian government also stepped up to defend the airline. This government support may have added some credibility to the strategies that EgyptAir employed, and probably made people less likely to refute their claims and blame the airline.

The uncertainty that surrounded the EgyptAir crash of Flight 990 also served to help the airline reach the crisis resolution stage. Speculation regarding the cause of the incident has never been fully settled. Even after the black box was recovered and analyzed, the parties involved had sharply opposed, but credible, versions of what happened, and no concrete evidence proved which side was correct. Although there was some data to support that the first relief officer was at fault, that evidence was not particularly strong. Consequently, EgyptAir’s denials were sufficient to escape blame for the accident. Even after the NTSB officially blamed the relief pilot 18 months later, his motives were not determined, no tie to his employer was established, and the public quickly lost interest in blaming the airline.

EgyptAir effectively used Benoit’s image restoration strategies to manage the crisis it found itself facing after the crash of Flight 990. The airline remained consistent and transparent in the face of intense media and government scrutiny. EgyptAir was able to maintain its positive public perception and remain profitable because the environment surrounding the crash supported the strategies that it chose to use. Although EgyptAir made unfounded accusations against Boeing, the airline remained credible, supported with the ties that it had with the Egyptian government. Even after the EgyptAir employee was officially found responsible for the
crash based on evidence from the flight recorders, the tense political situation between the two countries kept the NTSB and the FBI from making harsh accusations against the airline. Instead, all the anger for the crash was focused on the one man who committed the act that brought down the aircraft. Because it was never definitively determined why the first relief officer committed the crime, there was no reason to tie the crime to the Egyptian government and create unnecessary political conflicts. Instead, the deceased officer was found guilty, the two governments moved forward amicably, and EgyptAir continued to remain profitable and operate as usual.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

When analyzed using Fink’s stage analysis theory and Benoit’s image restoration strategies, the crashes of ValuJet Flight 592, TWA Flight 800 and EgyptAir Flight 990 present three starkly different crisis situations. The ValuJet crisis began with a clear prodromal stage, due to the many concerns about the safety of the low-cost airline. The airline’s spokesman made poor crisis management choices throughout the development of the crisis, and eventually ValuJet’s tarnished image and resulting financial difficulties forced it to merge with AirTran before reaching the crisis resolution stage. TWA also made poor strategic choices in the aftermath of the crash of Flight 800, including appointing an unpopular spokesman. However, the airline was able to successfully reach the crisis resolution stage and restore public confidence in its safety due to the heavy media attention on the criminal investigation. EgyptAir representatives used effective crisis management strategies for the politically tense situation that it faced, and as a result the airline made it successfully through to the crisis resolution stage and made a full recovery from the scrutiny it faced in the aftermath of its crash. The companies involved in all three of the crises used many similar image restoration strategies, including simple denial, shifting responsibility to others, attacking accusers, transcendence, and to a more limited extent corrective action and mortification.

Through the analysis of these three crashes using the crisis communication theories, certain characteristics of airline crisis situations emerge that explain why TWA and EgyptAir were successful in completing Fink’s stages and fully recovering from their crises, while ValuJet was forced to disappear after only one year. While each crisis situation has its own unique intricacies that effect how well different strategies are received by the public, there are certain
features that can help or hurt an airline. One important factor in successful crisis management for an airline is whether or not it experiences a significant prodromal stage. ValuJet was blamed for obviously ignoring safety for years prior to the crash of Flight 592, and was not able to overcome its poor record. TWA and EgyptAir, on the other hand, experienced relatively minor prodromal stages. Although Fink suggests that companies should always assume that a crisis is impending, these two airlines received little media blame for not preventing the crash because there were no obvious precautionary steps that either could have taken.

Transparency and consistency are also important to an airline’s response in the aftermath of a crash. Although it is possible to successfully overcome a crisis without maintaining either organizational transparency or a consistent response, such as in the case of TWA, these strategies can serve to accelerate crisis resolution. Throughout its crisis, EgyptAir remained completely transparent. Even though EgyptAir officials denied responsibility, they retained good credibility. The airline did not have to face any evidence contradicting its claim that it upheld strict safety standards. On the other hand, time after time ValuJet officials had to retract their claims of innocence due to emerging, contradictory evidence. ValuJet appeared untrustworthy, and was never able to regain flyers’ confidence.

The main focus of the media after an airplane crash is also a crucial characteristic of the crisis situation that determines how well the airline involved is able to recover sales and restore a positive public image. After the crash of Flight 592, the media focused heavily on ValuJet because of the quick determination of the cause of the crash. The airline buckled under the intense scrutiny and increased pressure from the government, and could not recover. On the other hand, after TWA Flight 800 attention was given to the criminal investigation and the possibility of a missile attack, furthered by the many eyewitnesses who shared their account with media
outlets. As a result of this diverted attention, TWA escaped scrutiny and blame. Similarly, a bulk of the media focus after EgyptAir Flight 990 surrounded the tense political situation between the U.S. and Egypt. Consequently, U.S. government officials were delicate in placing blame on the airline, and there was little pressure from the public for EgyptAir to admit blame of institute corrective action.

This analysis serves to show three different crisis situations that can result from equally devastating airplane crashes. Many of the strategies that each airline used were helpful in moving that airline towards crisis resolution and restoring a positive public image, while other strategies were damaging. Ultimately, the unique characteristics of each crisis situation led to different results. ValuJet’s tainted safety record forced the airline out of business, TWA regained trust of passengers but was bought out due to intense airline competition, and EgyptAir successfully recovered from its crisis and continues to thrive.
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