

## Political Rhetoric Has Consequences

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“Words matter” is more than a cliché repeated by politicians and pundits. In addition to being well documented by research in the academic discipline of communication, this is an axiom that has real resonance and describes what is transpiring in our current political culture.

The question that must be addressed is: What is the problem with having a President of the United States who is chronically uninformed about critical issues confronting the country, will not listen to experts, incessantly lies and does everything to put the emphasis on his own political successes rather than the security of the nation? Unfortunately, the inevitable coronavirus pandemic may provide an unhappy answer.

When faced with a serious health crisis, as clearly is the case today, we may not be able to know whether the administration's story is complete and accurate, that everything possible is being done to make plans for keeping the country safe. I raise this concern not as an anti-Trump partisan but as a citizen worried about our wellbeing and as a scholar of rhetoric who for more than 40 years studied the enormous—sometimes negative—impact of language.

After watching Donald Trump speak at his February 25th press conference, as well as hearing his answers to reporters' questions, I was not reassured. Although surrounded by a group of highly regarded experts, all of whom seemed more like window dressing, playing a subordinate role, the President's discourse was incoherent and he did not sound like a leader in full command of the situation.

Since Donald Trump's election in 2016 I have written dozens of op-eds—many appearing on these pages—arguing that a large number of his supporters do not seem to care that the President is untruthful. I predicted that these people will continue to ignore and tolerate his lies

until they feel tangible consequence of those lies. Why is this noteworthy?

In his Wednesday press conference about the outbreak of coronavirus, the President lied about the state of the health threat, contradicted his Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) experts as well as what he himself said, and blamed the Democrats and the media for what he incorrectly alleged was an overreaction to this crisis.

To make matters worse, President Trump put Vice President Pence in charge of the coronavirus threat rather than a health expert. Beyond knowing nothing about this issue and being a science denier, Pence's delay in responding to an HIV crisis in Indiana resulted in the death of many—according to an epidemiologist who studied what happened. In addition, government health officials and scientists must now coordinate all statements and public appearances with Mike Pence.

Let me be very clear: I do not wish anyone to suffer pain, even if self-inflicted. I truly hope, therefore, coronavirus won't be one of the consequences I alluded to in my op-eds. If it is, that will be a horrible price to pay for blindly following the most dangerous President in American history.

Words do indeed matter. It is time for all Americans, regardless of political party preference or ideology, to acknowledge this. Understanding this, however, is insufficient. As patriotic citizens

interested in protecting the security of the nation, we must make sure the President is held accountable for what he says.

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