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Commentary: Language can influence how the nation views Russia probes

By Richard Cherwitz - Special to the American-Statesman



Alex Brandon Former FBI Director James Comey is sworn in during a Senate Intelligence Committee hearing in Washington, D.C., on Thursday.

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Let me acknowledge at the outset that I did not vote for Donald Trump and disagree with most of his policies and actions. Nevertheless, I take seriously the presumption that one is innocent until proven guilty — whether the charge is legal or political — and, therefore, all judgments should be based on as complete an unearthing of the facts as is possible.

I also note that my political views notwithstanding, I am a communication scholar who studies rhetoric; my interest is in the impact of language. Research shows that the choice of what to communicate and when, as well as how information is linguistically framed, can make an enormous difference. Often the public is not consciously aware of these effects, thus rendering the effects potentially more insidious.

Consider a timely example — especially timely in view of former FBI Director James Comey's revelations about his meetings with Trump and his recent testimony before Congress.

In describing the emerging information about Trump and Russia — what some call “Russiagate” — writers and political pundits frequently employ the “drip, drip, drip” language and other Watergate metrics to understand what is happening, as well as to offer predictions. I contend that this language may be inaccurate and the Watergate analogy might be misleading, having serious and unintended consequences.

The strong and persistent stream of stories about potential wrongdoing by the Trump administration is better described as an open fire hydrant. Why is this linguistic difference noteworthy? Why might rhetorical choices affect the ultimate outcome of the investigation? Because the onslaught of stories normalizes and renders less salient inappropriate and perhaps illegal behavior.

If every evening there is breaking news and if consumers of 24/7 cable news programs are inundated with incessant communication about these issues, won't the public become — if they already aren't — satiated and viewing accusations against Trump as typical rather than worthy of scrutiny?

Similarly, doesn't the sheer quantity of news stories at least give the appearance that allegations are primarily if not exclusively political calculations and hence part of a larger effort by those unhappy with the 2016 election outcome to attack and undermine the president?

While I do not subscribe to the belief that the latter characterization of the political motivation of journalists — whose credentials and track record overall are impeccable — is in fact true, I wonder if we are becoming so inoculated by media coverage — combined with the nation's existing political polarization, which prevents many from acknowledging the truth — that Trump's transgressions will be tolerated.

Is it possible, for example, that careful and vigorous efforts by professionally astute journalists to do their job and discover the truth could actually backfire and have an opposite and unintended effect, subverting and hiding rather than exposing and revealing the truth? How ironic that would be! I hope this suggestion is an unfounded worry and that we will remain a country committed to finding the truth — one that allows facts to lead us to appropriate and fitting conclusions.

This commitment, however, requires us to be aware of the effects of communication. Hence, whatever emerges from the Russian investigation, we all must practice good rhetorical criticism, being sensitive to what is communicated and what language choices are made.

Regardless of our political affiliations and initial thoughts about Trump and the possibility of collusion, it is incumbent upon us to stand back and become cognizant of how language — even when we are not immediately or consciously aware of it — makes a difference and could influence important national decisions.

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