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Trump at Mt. Rushmore—More Divisive Rhetoric

Sadly, on Friday President Trump hijacked a national holiday to deliver a divisive and fear mongering speech targeted to his most zealous supporters. Rather than striking a unifying tone normally associated with July 4th oratory, Trump rhetorically waged and stoked the flames of an alleged culture war.

In the shadow of Mt. Rushmore, a monument to four of America’s greatest patriots, Trump advanced a Joseph McCarthy-like “red herring” argument attacking his political foes (including institutions like the media, businesses and schools) for trying to erase history by removing monuments emblematic of racial oppression. He also failed to mention and celebrate the “Six Grandfathers”—yet another egregious insult to Indigenous Americans.
All of this was done to deflect attention from the real crises confronting the nation: the economic and health consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well many other problems the President has failed to address and that arguably he caused or at minimum exacerbated.

Trump’s dark message was explicit and unsubstantiated: "As we meet here tonight there is a growing danger that threatens every blessing our ancestors fought so hard for. Our nation is witnessing a merciless campaign to wipe out our history, defame our heroes, erase our values and indoctrinate our children." He asserted that there exists a "far-left fascism" which is the "very definition of totalitarianism."

As a scholar of communication who has studied what Aristotle called “epideictic oratory,” one of the three branches of rhetoric, I was appalled by Trump’s speech. Epideictic designates ritualistic speeches honoring and celebrating important moments in history. However, Trump made a calculated, limited and selfishly motivated political decision to launch his reelection campaign. While previous presidents typically used this holiday to present a narrative bringing the country together, once again Trump sought the less noble path of dividing the nation by rallying and emboldening his most loyal supporters.

What made Trump’s speech insidious is that embedded in his undocumented ad hominem attacks were references to heroes including Martin Luther King, Elvis Presley, Muhammed Ali, Louis Armstrong, among others—who a wider audience might find palatable. Moreover, in sharp contrast to previous rally speeches, the President aurally sounded sane; his speech was delivered with a cool, calm demeanor, lacking the usual silly talk and strange nonverbal gestures. In short, from a rhetorical perspective we can see a wolf in sheep’s clothing: Trump’s dark evil side attempting to present a message potentially appealing to a less extremist audience.
Regardless of political ideology, we all should be outraged and disheartened by the President’s discourse. What is needed at this precarious juncture in America’s history is a president, like those carved into Mt. Rushmore, whose rhetoric binds the nation’s wounds by appealing to the better angels of our nature.

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