Vice President Pence’s COVID-19 Briefing—A Rhetorical Failure

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As a communication scholar who spent his career teaching students how to construct logical arguments and become persuasive speakers, I watched with great interest Vice President Pence speak at Friday’s coronavirus task force briefing, the first briefing held in nearly two months.

In view of the spiking cases of COVID-19 during the past few weeks in over thirty states, how anyone can buy Pence’s defense of what has and is being done to address the coronavirus pandemic escapes me. Contrary to his bald assertion, the facts show clearly: we are not making “truly remarkable progress” to bring COVID-19 under control, we are not “in a better place than we were several months ago,” we haven’t “slowed the spread and flattened the curve,” we are not
opening “safely and responsibly” and the federal government’s efforts are far from “successful.”

In the rosy and distorted picture he painted, Pence failed to mention that over 11 states and cities in the previous twenty-four hours had started pausing and rolling back measures to reopen—including new orders to shut bars, limit restaurant capacity, mandate masks and restrict the size of outdoor events.

If Pence were enrolled in my Argumentation class, therefore, I would give his opening remarks an "F"—and, despite what some might claim, this grade is not a partisan evaluation.

Consider some other rhetorical observations supporting my assessment of the briefing.

First, the President did not attend the event and that it took place away from the White House. This was hardly surprising, especially given Trump’s absurd and factually false comments about COVID-19 in the previous days. Nor was it surprising that the press corps was allotted an unusually limited number of questions—a mere six questions were asked before Pence took the task force off the stage. Why? The answer surely is obvious. When you cannot provide satisfactory answers, stop entertaining questions.

Second, Pence’s contention that it is better for young people to get COVID-19 unfortunately only gave youth a false sense of confidence.
Worse yet, his suggestion that young people have a responsibility to help solve the problem was astonishing and reprehensible; after all, Pence himself failed to wear a mask at the briefing and at recent rallies and events Trump refused to do so. In fact, the President has been sending out the opposite message, making clear that masks are a political symbol rather than an important means of protecting the health of others.

Finally, the task force briefing was nothing more than a public relations scam, a rhetorical flack designed to respond to recent national and state polls showing that Trump is politically in trouble with a larger number of voters. The question is: Why did Drs. Deborah Birx and Anthony Fauci choose to be a part of this spectacle, potentially undermining their credentials?

To be fair, Fauci in both vocal tone and content did try to offer a dose of reality about the country’s inadequate response to COVID-19 and reasons for this failure. Nevertheless, his and Birx’s message reaffirming Pence’s claim about responsibility was hollow, running completely at odds with Trump’s behavior and rhetoric. Bottom line: if responsibility is what we need, why does the President refuse to say so and why does his own behavior contradict this?

From a rhetorical perspective, Friday’s briefing and Vice President Pence’ performance in particular were a total disaster—full of easily demonstrated lies, omissions of publically available facts and containing no new information to document that the pandemic is being—and can be—controlled.
Most Americans, I predict, will not be reassured by what they heard and have more reasons to be worried.

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