The Threat Posed by Having a President Who Can’t Be Trusted

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“Words matter” is more than a cliché. 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 one answer.

When faced with a serious health crisis, as is the case today, we may not be able to know whether the 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 over 40 years studied the enormous impact of language.
After listening to Donald Trump speak at his February 25th press conference, as well as his answers to reporters’ questions, I was not reassured. Although surrounded by highly regarded experts, all of whom seemed more like window dressing and played 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. 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.

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—and to make sure the President is held accountable for what he says.

*Rick Cherwitz
*Austin, Texas*