Many Americans worry about whether our leaders at the state, local and federal levels—and especially our President—will reflect more clearly the seriousness and magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic in their policies and rhetoric.

Some, like me, also are concerned that the President seems far too concerned about his own popularity, using the daily coronavirus briefing as more of a campaign speech or what might be labeled his “innocence briefing.” It is hard to fathom that almost half the country continues to support him and what appears each day to be his less than thoughtful and fact based approach to this extraordinary health crisis.

The question is: Will the country survive this pandemic with as a few fatalities as possible?

Perhaps I am naïve but, at the end of the day, the answer depends in part on whether and how the media and photojournalists do their job: to share, no matter how graphic and difficult to view, the horrific reality of what’s happening on the ground. From a rhetorical perspective, the
more we “see” the better the chances are that those who are cavalier and uninformed will be shocked into a nonpartisan rationality and become accountable.

It frequently is said that a picture is worth a thousand words.

This oft repeated adage is more than a cliché. Several years ago, Lester Olson, Cara Finnegan and Diane Hope, scholars in communication, wrote a book entitled, Visual Rhetoric: A Reader in Communication and American Culture. They and their contributors present a critical perspective that links "visuality" to the academic discipline of rhetoric, helping readers unpack the meaning of visual images in American history, as well as understand the persuasive force of imagery. This research is especially timely and informative today.

For example, photos during the Vietnam War had an enormous political impact, leading CBS News anchor Walter Cronkite, regarded as the nation’s most trustworthy voice, to declare to an audience of millions on February 27, 1968 that the United States cannot win the war. Daily photos of body bags also helped persuade the country that it was time for American boys to come home.

Similarly, I think—though cannot prove—that photos and videos showing the shocking reality of the consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic in New York and soon many other states ultimately will be what holds our leaders’ feet to the fire.

Put simply, while visual rhetoric may not significantly decrease President Trump’s popularity among his base, which in some ways is a political irrelevancy, it might produce policies and behaviors that will help us emerge from the pandemic with a lower death toll than now is expected.
As I have written in numerous op-eds and letters published on these pages since Donald Trump was elected, it is reasonable to assume that the President’s supporters will back his policies until they personally see and feel the consequences of what he has said and done. Only then will people acknowledge that Trump’s alternative reality on the COVID-19 pandemic is not our nation’s reality. At some point, we will learn the hard way that a President, no matter how rhetorically proficient, cannot conceal the truth on vitally important issues—that visual rhetoric is more powerful than words.

*Richard Cherwitz is the Ernest S. Sharpe Centennial Professor Emeritus in the Moody College of Communication and Founder of the Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium (IE), University of Texas at Austin.*