Vice President Pence’s Evasive and Insidious Style

Richard Cherwitz

July 14, 2020

For over 40 years I taught and studied political communication. Drawing on my graduate work at the University of Iowa, much of my career’s research focused on the speeches of our nation’s leaders, as well as the persuasive power—both positive and negative—of their discourse.

As all good rhetorical critics and teachers do, I endeavored to carefully separate my partisan views from my assessment of a president’s discourse. As evidence for this claim consider the fact that as a Democrat I praised many of Ronald Reagan’s speeches and harshly critiqued several of President Lyndon Johnson’s speeches.

In several recent op-eds I have written about President Donald Trump’s messages and their dangerous consequences. However, it now occurs to me that we should spend more time analyzing Vice President Mike Pence’s rhetoric. I say this not just because he is the Vice President of
the U.S. but since he is the point person for and head of the President’s coronavirus task force.

In addition, Pence provides what might be called a “rhetorical balance” to Trump; he is the government official who diffuses President Trump’s frequently extreme, untruthful and confusing statements. Admittedly, Pence uses a softer tone, thus appearing to be more tolerant and non-punitive in responding to reporter questions.

Nevertheless, Vice President Pence is one of the most frustrating, slippery, obsequious and evasive political communicators I ever have observed. While he always seems reasonable and never attacks the media or his opponents, what I find interesting and less noted by the media and political pundits is how these qualities actually obscure the rhetorical significance and impact of Pence’s messages.

For example, I listened attentively and with an open mind to Vice President Pence at Wednesday’s COVID-19 briefing. Yet his failure to answer questions was appalling. While he “sounded” smooth, which no doubt is pleasing, refreshing and in stark contrast to President Trump, every answer — or should I say non-answer — consistently turned into little more than praise for the Administration and misleading and false statements about how the country is making more progress than what health experts and governors (both Republican and Democratic) say.

It is clear that the Vice President never will answer important questions about the coronavirus pandemic. This is especially the case when those
questions are based on facts inconsistent with the Administration’s statements or ask for explanation of silly and absurd claims made by President Trump.

Why might some not see what Pence is doing? Perhaps because from a rhetorical perspective his delivery style is so unique and arguably effective. He makes it hard for reporters to interrupt and stop him; the Vice President has a penchant for non-stop talking without taking a breath, rendering it nearly impossible to question what he says and hold him accountable — something he probably learned as a radio commentator. Moreover, his smooth presentations are full of talking points, preventing many people from seeing what really is happening.

In short, Pence’s rhetoric is more insidious and, yes, perhaps more worrisome and dangerous than the President’s.

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. He is a University of Iowa graduate with a BA in Political Science and History and a MA and PhD in Communication Studies.