Divisive, Fear Mongering

July 11, 2020

President Donald 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 Fourth of
July oratory, Trump rhetorically stoked the flames of an alleged culture war.

In the shadow of Mount Rushmore, a monument to four of America’s greatest patriots, Trump advanced a Joseph McCarthy-like “red herring” argument attacking his political foes for trying to erase history by removing monuments emblematic of racial oppression.

Trump’s message was dark 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.”

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.

What made Trump’s speech insidious is that embedded in his ad hominem attacks were references to heroes including Martin Luther King, Elvis Presley, Muhammed Ali, Louis Armstrong, among others — whom a wider audience might find palatable. Moreover, in sharp contrast to previous rally speeches, the president sounded sane; his speech was delivered with a cool, calm demeanor, lacking the usual silly talk and strange nonverbal gestures. From a rhetorical perspective we witnessed a wolf in sheep’s clothing: Trump’s dark side attempting to present a message potentially appealing to a less extremist audience.

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