For more than 40 years I taught and studied political communication. Much of my research focused on the speeches of our nation’s leaders, as well as the persuasive power—both positive and negative—of their discourse.

In several recent op-eds I have written about President Donald Trump’s messages and their dangerous consequences. However, it 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 but since he is the point person for 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 the President’s extreme statements and offers a softer as well as more tolerant, non-punitive response to reporter questions.

Here are a few observations.
Vice President Pence is one of the most frustrating, slippery, obsequious and evasive political communicators I ever have observed. He always has a moderating tone and never attacks the interviewer or his opponents. What I find interesting and less noted by the media and political pundits is how these qualities obscure the rhetorical significance and impact of Pence’s rhetoric.

For example, after watching Vice President Pence last Sunday morning on several network news shows, as well as regularly viewing his performance during the daily coronavirus briefings, it is clear that he never will answer important questions about the availability of testing, the lack of federal coordination, meeting the needs of the states and the President’s inflammatory messages—all matters of concern to the public. Hence, while he “sounds” smooth, which no doubt is a pleasing, refreshing and stark contrast to Trump, every answer—or should I say non-answer—he gives consistently turns into little more than praise for the President, misleading and false statements about how all is good and how the country is making far more progress than what the health experts and governors (both Republican and Democratic) say. Put simply, Pence may be speaking to an audience of one: the President.

Moreover, his delivery style is unique, making it hard for interviewers to interrupt and stop him; the Vice President can talk non-stop 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. In many ways, therefore, Pence’s discourse is more insidious and, yes, perhaps more worrisome and dangerous than the President’s.
Some may find this an odd claim about the Vice President’s rhetoric. However, based on my research and that of other scholars of rhetoric, sometimes the less noticed patterns of communication and less obvious observations about those patterns turn out to be the most rhetorically salient. That is why we carefully should consider my contention about Pence. Perhaps a metaphor will make this point more vivid. In response to a recent social media post, a friend of mine poignantly noted: Pence’s delivery is un-Trump but his message is the same—the melody is different yet the lyrics are the same.

Cherwitz is the Ernest A. Sharpe Centennial Professor Emeritus in the Moody College of Communication, The University of Texas at Austin