A Rhetorical Assessment of Kayleigh McEnany’s First White House Briefing

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On May 1, 2020 Kayleigh McEnany, President Donald Trump’s fourth press secretary, held the first official White House briefing in 417 days by someone in that position. The press corps, political pundits and the American public were curious, waiting anxiously to see how McEnany would discharge her duties.

On the one hand, from a rhetorical—nonpartisan—perspective, she did well. McEnany entered the briefing room well-prepared and armed with a vast amount of information that she proficiently read. In addition, she smoothly responded to reporter questions, avoiding Trump’s usual attacks, confusing statements, and innumerable missteps in wording. In short, it could be argued that Trump has found the perfect person to address the press on his behalf.

However, if a presidential spokesperson should be someone who gets along with, as well as is trusted and respected by the press as a person who provides useful information about the president’s actions and
thinking, then McEnany’s first briefing could be judged as less than satisfactory.

Why?

Rather than exhibiting those desired and essential traits, in my opinion McEnany performed like a skilled and slick minister of propaganda, highlighting all of the President’s themes and talking points, introducing pro-Trump stories for the media to cover, invoking the name of Anthony Fauci who is respected by the public, carefully and purposefully sidestepping anything that contradicted the President, and sounding compassionate and empathetic.

And yet all of this despite the fact that McEnany has a well-documented record of denying facts, lying and making partisan, caustic and ad hominem attacks against those with whom she disagrees—a disqualifying attribute for a press secretary. Consider the facts. In her previous positions, McEnany:

- Declared that the coronavirus would never reach American shores.
- Asserted that President Trump “doesn’t lie.”
- Provided baffling statements about the amount of time Trump golfs compared to his predecessor.
- Attacked members of the media who interviewed her.
- Was a participant in the “birther” movement, supporting the debunked claim that President Obama wasn’t born in America.

It is easy, therefore, to see why McEnany had little credibility when she promised reporters on Friday “I will never lie to you.” Her own prior ethos undermines this claim. Even her remarks at Friday’s press conference make the promise dubious. Here is just one of many examples. Whether or not it was an obvious lie, McEnany’s comments
about Michael Flynn illustrated the fallacy of “suppressed evidence”—intentionally leaving out important information which, if revealed, would contradict her claim. For instance, she took out of context and misquoted a handwritten FBI note used as a rhetorical ploy by Flynn’s attorney—something that is meaningless and likely will not change the legal outcome of the case.

As a colleague of mine astutely observed, McEnany might not “tell” a lie but, as spokesperson for the President, she might “convey” a lie and fail to make the distinction. Perhaps more vividly put, let us recall the words of George Costanza, the antihero in the hit show Seinfeld: “It is not a lie if you believe it.”

To be fair, the problem may not be entirely McEnany’s. Admittedly, there probably are many better qualified individuals to serve as press secretary. Unfortunately, Trump never would hire any of them, preferring instead someone like McEnany who speaks to an audience of one: himself.

I would be remiss in writing about McEnany’s performance without also commenting on the poor job done Friday by the White House press corps. Accustomed to Trump as an easy target, they were lazy, appearing lethargic and unprepared. Their questions were predictable, unenlightening and far from probative. To hold McEnany accountable, White House reporters will have to adapt to her rhetorical style. That means tougher and more thoughtful questions with forceful follow ups.

Whatever one’s position on McEnany and the press, surely we now can understand the significance of the Chinese curse, “may you live in interesting times.” Our political culture is at a time of danger and uncertainty. But it also may be the most creative of any time in the history of mankind.
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