On Friday May 15 in a Rose Garden event President Donald Trump promised that there will be a fully approved vaccine available to all Americans by the end of the year. This is not a partisan matter. All of us, regardless of party preference or ideology, truly hope the President’s promise will be fulfilled.

The question is whether this actually is possible or simply a 2020 campaign ploy from the master of deflection and diversion—a
President who from day one has made COVID-19 a political rather than health issue.

To answer this question we must ponder the timing of and motivation underpinning the President’s announcement of “Operation Warp Speed.” Consider the facts. The day prior to this, Dr. Rick Bright, an expert on vaccines who the administration removed from his position as director of the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority, testified before a congressional committee.

Bright claimed how the Department of Health and Human Services ignored and rebuffed his recommendations in January to take the coronavirus seriously. He also made clear the many ways and times the President and his team mismanaged the pandemic. Is it any wonder why Trump sought an immediate rhetorical opportunity to change the news?

Moreover, the President, whose primary concern has been his re-election, became increasingly frustrated in the last few weeks with Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) and one of the lead members of the administration's White House Coronavirus Task Force.

Why?

Fauci’s statements about the timing and effectiveness of vaccines, as well as the dangers of prematurely reopening the states, have
contradicted and undermined both the President’s unsubstantiated assertions about COVID-19 and his desire to get people back to work as quickly as possible. Factoring in recent presidential approval polls and how Trump is less trusted by Americans than Fauci, it is easy to see why a public relations flack was needed—an event to deflect from negative stories and convince the public that “We’re [America] back, vaccine or no vaccine” because of proactive measures taken by the President.

As a communication scholar for more than 40 years, I have studied why rhetoric literally cannot construct reality. The thesis of my research is that facts inevitably intrude and impinge; that is the case no matter how initially persuasive one’s rhetorical attempts to create a fictitious or alternative reality may be. There is, after all a categorical epistemological difference between the “perception of reality” and “reality per se.” Given that most scientists question the feasibility of Trump’s announced vaccine timeline, as well his many unfounded COVID-19 projections, we have the ultimate test of my argument.

If I am right, the country must brace and prepare for the fact that Trump’s worthy aspirational goal will not be met. What that means is:

(1) Political leaders and the media must demand that the administration provide a specific plan and playbook for how to minimize the spread of COVID-19 as more states reopen (including measures to guarantee testing and contact tracing)—something the administration thus far hasn’t articulated, their untruthful rhetoric notwithstanding.
Governors and mayors must monitor data closely, follow the recommendations of scientists and use this to determine whether and how to reopen, as well as to pull back should there be a spike in cases/deaths.

Each of us has a personal and ethical obligation to make informed decisions about how to behave to protect the health of not just ourselves but all those around us.

Failure to do these things could be catastrophic, resulting in more preventable deaths and even worse economic problems for individuals and the nation.

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