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Communication scholars know that what isn’t said is as important as what is said. Case in point. After Tuesday’s Senate hearing on the administration’s coronavirus response, it was clear that we shouldn’t have expected the public health officials explicitly to undermine the President. While they didn’t lie, these experts deflected questions pertaining to the President’s performance. They know Donald Trump and understand the importance of remaining on his task force. Hence, the witnesses were rhetorically cautious.

Bracketing the question of whether they are Vichy scientists and should have been critical of the President, American citizens and the media should read between the lines, drawing inferences from what these experts didn’t say—ferences relevant to the issue of whether this administration will effectively deal with the pandemic going forward.

For example, consider the wording of their responses to questions about contact tracing (as opposed to testing alone), comparisons between the U.S and other nations that have done a better job of reducing deaths from COVID-19, and whether President Obama is responsible for the current predicament. Their answers to these questions illustrated how inferences are an essential part of holding Trump’s feet to the fire. A close reading of the hearing shows just how
incapable and unwilling our President has been to address the crisis, even if the public health officials don’t—perhaps can’t—use that language. We need to be smart in what we take away from this hearing and how that may impact the nation’s ability to minimize COVID-19 related fatalities.

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