Trump Isn’t Appealing to Our Better Angels

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On July 4, 1776, the thirteen colonies claimed their independence from England, an event which eventually led to the formation of the United States and the Declaration of Independence. Each year on the 4th of July, also known as Independence Day, Americans celebrate our nation’s birth and heritage. It has become an occasion traditionally calling for political speeches and ceremonies celebrating the history, government, and traditions of the United States.

How sad, therefore, that President Trump on Friday chose to hijack a sacred national holiday to deliver a divisive and fear mongering speech targeted to his most ardent and zealous supporters. Rather than striking the type of unifying tone normally associated with July 4th oratory, Trump continued his rhetorical campaign to wage and stoke
the flames of an alleged culture war—something totally at odds with the principles established at the founding of our nation in 1776.

Ironically, in the shadow of Mt. Rushmore, a monument to four of America’s greatest patriots, Trump disgracefully advanced a Joseph McCarthy-like “red herring” argument attacking his political foes (including institutions like the media, businesses and schools) for trying to erase history by removing monuments emblematic of racial oppression. Worse yet, Trump failed to mention and celebrate the “Six Grandfathers” —something that constitutes yet another egregious insult to Indigenous Americans.

As has become Trump’s rhetorical modus operandi, all of this was done in an obvious effort to deflect attention from the real crises confronting the nation: the horrific economic and health consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as a host of other problems the President has failed to address and that arguably he caused or at minimum exacerbated.

Trump’s dark message was explicit 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."

In addition, the President falsely claimed: “Those who seek to erase our heritage want Americans to forget our pride and our great dignity, so that we can no longer understand ourselves or America's destiny. They would tear down the beliefs, culture and identity that have made America the most vibrant and tolerant society in the history of the Earth."
In his July 4th White House speech Trump doubled down on these divisive themes: "We are now in the process of defeating the radical left, the Marxists, the anarchists, the agitators, the looters, and people who, in many instances, have absolutely no clue what they are doing." He also advanced the factually incorrect claim that 99% of coronavirus cases in America are "totally harmless."

As a scholar of communication who has studied what Aristotle called “epideictic oratory,” one of the three branches of rhetoric, I was appalled by President Trump’s speech on Friday. Epideictic designates ritualistic speeches honoring and celebrating important moments in history. However, Trump made a calculated, limited and selfishly motivated political decision to launch his us vs them reelection campaign theme. While previous presidents more appropriately used this holiday as an opportunity to present a narrative bringing the country together, once again Trump sought the less noble path of dividing the nation by rallying and emboldening his most loyal supporters.

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

Regardless of our political views, we all should be outraged and disheartened by the President’s discourse—a speech likely written by Stephen Miller. What is needed at this precarious juncture in America’s
history is a president, like those carved into Mt. Rushmore, whose rhetoric binds the nation’s wounds by appealing to the better angels of our nature.

Let us hope that by July 4th, 2021 we will have begun the journey to reunite the country.

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