Trump’s greatest impact is rhetorical — and insidious

May 31, 2018

Messaging matters. Since being elected president, and perhaps well before, Donald Trump has a documented record of unethical behavior, racist discourse, and a disregard for the truth. Many Americans and much of the mainstream media continue to be perplexed that Trump gets away with this and wonder why the Republican-controlled Congress refuses to rebuke him. For those of us who study communication, the answer is obvious and more rhetorical than ideological.

Aristotle, in his famous treatise “Rhetoric,” wrote about the concept of “the available means of persuasion.” Say what you will about Trump’s incompetence and his despicable words and deeds. None of that may matter when we have a chief executive, arguably more than any other in history, who truly understands that survival and success more often than not are linked to controlling the language infiltrating the public sphere.

Not only is Trump astute about the power of language, but he has mastered the art of utilizing that power. His employment of phrases like “witch hunt” and “spygate,” and their dissemination by Trump surrogates, seems to have had an impact, being internalized and repeated by others and, as a result,
undermining confidence in the eventual outcome of the Russia investigation. Until Trump’s critics understand this rhetorical source of his influence, he may continue to escape accountability.

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