

NOV 21, 2019 OPINION

## Donald Trump Is Annihilating Truth Itself



President Donald Trump addresses the media in front of the White House this week. (Jacquelyn Martin / AP)

**Karen Greenberg** / [TomDispatch](#)

These days, witnessing the administration's never-ending cruelty at the border, the shenanigans of a White House caught red-handed in attempted bribery in Ukraine, and the disarray of this country's foreign policy, I feel like I'm seeing a much-scarier remake of a familiar old movie. The cast of characters and the headlines are different, but the thinking underlying it all is, in many ways, eerily reminiscent of

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false or misleading claims. He had lied about immigration, the stock market, the impact his sanctions and tariffs were having on the American economy, U.S. troop withdrawals from the Middle East, the size of his crowds, and [even the weather](#), which, of course, is just the beginning of a far longer list.

Still, despite the breadth of his falsehoods, the president's behavior has actually been anything but novel at a fundamental level. After all, President George W. Bush and his vice president, Dick Cheney, took this country to war based on an outright lie – that there were weapons of mass destruction in Saddam Hussein's arsenal in Iraq – a falsehood which cost the U.S. [more than a trillion dollars](#) and took staggering numbers of Iraqi and American lives, a war that has never really ended and is widely seen (as Trump and Bernie Sanders have both said) as the worst mistake in our history.

The corrosiveness of official lying has long been the subject of philosophers. Hannah Arendt, [writing](#) about the Pentagon Papers and the corrosive effects of falsehoods back in 1971, called “the right to unmanipulated factual information” basic, one “without which all freedom of opinion becomes a cruel hoax.” But it's important to note that, when it comes to the Trump presidency, there is so much more to the strategy of degrading public discourse and debasing the facts than anything as simple and straightforward as mere lying. Political scientist Kelly Greenhill has aptly termed Trump's assault on the truth “[extra-factual information](#),” pointing to “distraction, threat conflation, normalization, and repetition” as among the methods he employs to make facts anything but what they used to be.

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For Trump, lying is but the tip of the iceberg and in this he reflects far more than his own predilections.

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focus on Donald Trump's blatant and persistent lying only serves to obfuscate other no less destructive methods of deceiving the public that preceded him into the White House and helped create the conditions that make the president's lies so destabilizing.

Consider just six ways in which, in this century, imprecision and cloudiness have come to define American political discourse.

**The Recasting of Language:** The gutting of the customary uses of language and the substitution of new, imprecise replacements has, as Orwell warned, set the stage for lying and duplicity to multiply. Officials of the Bush administration, for instance, redefined basic legal terms specifically to circumvent the law. Instead of "prisoners" at their Guantanamo Bay detention center, they had "detainees." Instead of "lawful enemy combatants," they just had "enemy combatants," a term without a commonly understood or precise definition that conveniently skipped the idea of lawfulness entirely.

In her famous book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt reminded us how new "language rules" became part and parcel of the Nazi propaganda world in ways meant to confuse the public about the changing German reality. The forced imprisonment of Jews in concentration camps was, for instance, referred to as a "change of residence." In *The Death of Truth*, Michiko Kakutani reflects on Trump's version of such an "assault on language," his penchant, in particular, for "the taking of words and principles intrinsic to the rule of law and contaminating them with personal agendas and political partisanship." As examples, she notes his use of words "to mean the exact opposite of what they really mean," particularly the way he took the words of his accusers and robbed them of meaning by turning them back on the accusers themselves. For instance, Hillary Clinton "colluded" with Ukraine, not he with Russia (ditto, of course, for Hunter and Joe Biden). Words, in other words, become exactly what he cares to make of them.

**Uncertain Numbers:** Numbers, which otherwise might seem so precise, have similarly been used to create a sense of imprecision in Washington. A short trip down memory lane should remind us of some of the ways in which vagueness and imprecision were instrumental parts of the war on terror in particular. For Donald Rumsfeld, President George W. Bush's secretary of defense, numerical precision of a distinctly imprecise sort provided an effective means of refusing to offer any meaningful information to the media on the administration's illegal acts. He had, for instance, a penchant for referring to the number of detainees at Guantanamo in approximate rather than specific terms. "More than 150." for instance. sounded innocuously close to precise. but also served his purpose — creating a

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fewer than 1,000 children had been separated from their parents. As it turned out, he wasn't even close to accurate. Under Attorney General Jeff Sessions alone, [2,800 families](#) had been separated in this fashion. Only recently, a suit brought by the ACLU led to the release of government statistics showing that [an additional 1,500 families](#) had, in fact, experienced such separations.

**Willful Ignorance:** Hiding or ignoring facts has been yet another tactic integral to the deception of these years. The Bush administration, for instance, purposely disregarded then-CIA Director George Tenet's [comments](#) about the striking lack of certainty regarding the presence of nuclear and biological weaponry in Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Instead, they relied on false claims about the presence of WMDs in Iraq as the premise for invading that country.

Sometimes, Bush officials quite deliberately put their heads in the sand rather than face reality. For example, when the first accounts of the grim abuse of Iraqi captives at the American prison at Abu Ghraib in Iraq were reported by CBS News (and later even by Fox News) in 2004, [according](#) to journalist Andrew Cockburn, Undersecretary of Defense Douglas Feith "sent an urgent memo round the Pentagon warning officials not to read [such reports], or even discuss [them] with family members."

More recently, upon the release of the Mueller Report, President Trump expanded on this strategy, applying it to himself when he [boasted](#) that "I have not seen the Mueller report. I have not read the Mueller report. I won. No collusion, no obstruction."

Unabashedly choosing to bury his head in the sand in a similar fashion, Republican Senator Lindsey Graham told the media that he [wouldn't read](#) the transcripts of witnesses at the initial closed Congressional impeachment proceedings when they were made public. "I made up my mind... There's nothing there." Several Republican senators, including Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, have similarly [said](#) that they won't be watching the House impeachment hearings, claiming they have "better things to do."

**Withholding Evidence:** In addition to ignoring facts and embracing ignorance, withholding evidence has been one obvious path to blunting awareness. From the first Abu Ghraib [photos](#) to today's [military commissions](#) at Guantanamo, evidence of torture has, for instance, been purposely withheld or misrepresented. Likewise, the Trump administration has consistently [withheld](#) documents and records about its migrant detention system and the methods used in it, as illustrated by a determination to

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typically stored for coordination, finalization, and distribution to Cabinet-level officials.”

**The Destruction of the Record:** A fifth tactic meant to confuse and enable governmental lying in these years has been the destruction of the facts themselves. Worse than linguistic sloppiness, omissions, and willful ignorance has been the actual destruction of potentially incriminating documents. (We, of course, only know about examples of this that have come to light.) The Bush administration pioneered such tactics. We know, for instance, that Jose Rodriguez, director of the CIA’s National Clandestine Service, [destroyed](#) tapes of sessions with war-on-terror prisoners in Agency “black sites” around the world in which so-called enhanced interrogation techniques (acts of torture) were used. Prosecutor John Durham, who is now tasked by Attorney General Barr with looking into the origins of the Mueller Russia investigation, was [asked](#) by Bush Attorney General Michael Mukasey and then Obama Attorney General Eric Holder to look into the destruction of those tapes, only to conclude that there wasn’t enough evidence to pursue charges.

Under Trump, a strategy of destroying government records has evolved into one of not creating such records to begin with. In [2017](#), for instance, the National Security Archive and Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington filed a suit charging the Trump administration with [violating](#) the Presidential Records Act (PRA) by using an encrypted application designed to delete the contents of the president’s email messages. This [May](#), the two groups, along with the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, filed a complaint against the White House for violating the PRA and the Federal Records Act by failing to create records of conversations with foreign leaders. Last month, the plaintiffs intensified their efforts by [asking](#) a judge for an immediate injunction to require the White House to preserve the records of all calls with foreign leaders.

**Spreading Conflicting Facts:** Trump and his team have added a new layer of confusion to all of this by making the spreading of contradictory stories a normal part of everyday life in Washington. The impeachment hearings are a case in point. Potential administration witnesses say one thing one day, only to contradict it without blinking soon after. Acting White House Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney, for instance, [said](#) that there had indeed been a “quid pro quo” in Trump’s dealings with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, only to retract his statement hours later. Gordon Sondland, the U.S. ambassador to the European Union who became a key figure in the Ukraine negotiations, first claimed that there was “no quid pro quo,” only to later [revise](#) his testimony. “I now recall” otherwise, he acknowledged, in a supplemental declaration issued three weeks later. Military aid had, in fact, been withheld pending a

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## The New Norm in Washington

Of course, neither George W. Bush nor Donald Trump invented such methods of compromising truth and facts, but in recent years this has become something like the new norm. Through the centuries, as Orwell and Arendt made clear long ago, the connection between the integrity of language, the validity of facts, and the strength of any country has been acknowledged. The Greek historian Thucydides, [writing](#) about the Peloponnesian Wars thousands of years ago, associated the gutting of language with the dissolution of the state. “Words had to change their ordinary meaning and to take that which was now given them. Reckless audacity came to be considered the courage of a loyal ally... moderation was held to be a cloak for unmanliness; ability to see all sides of a question, inaptness to act on any.”

Historically, the degradation of words has gone hand in hand with the undermining of stability for which the accepted meaning of things remains essential. Armed with the integrity of words, knowledge can be shared among a citizenry, otherwise chaos becomes the order of the day. In his farewell to the nation, George Washington, himself an [admirer](#) of the classical thinkers, tied such diffusion of knowledge, the means by which the government could “give force to public opinion,” to the strength of the republic.

Today, in Donald Trump’s Washington anything goes, linguistically speaking. Sadly, words are more important than we as a nation seem to believe. They are the bedrock on which facts are built and facts are the bedrock on which nations stand in order to make decisions. The Trump administration has little respect for the integrity of words, no respect for educating the public with the facts, and every intention of clouding the space between fact and fiction, certainty and uncertainty.

Perhaps the best strategy for finding our way forward is to hold one another accountable, first and foremost, for the very words we use.

*Karen J. Greenberg, a [TomDispatch regular](#), is the director of the [Center on National Security at Fordham Law](#), as well as the editor-in-chief of the CNS Soufan Group [Morning Brief](#) and the foreign-policy blog Vital Interests. She is the author and editor of many books, among them [Rogue Justice: The Making of the Security State](#) and [The Least Worst Place: Guantánamo’s First 100 Days](#). Julia Tedesco helped with research for this article.*

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