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## A golden age of bad faith arguments emerges from Trump's White Hole

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In our current Golden Age of bad-faith arguments, this week's nonsense has to be the highest expression of a terrible art form: Republican senators — actual elected senators from states that definitely exist — are arguing that the president did not, in fact, use the word “shithole” to describe the entire continent of Africa.

No, no, no, that's all wrong. Total lies. Fake news.

. . . But he might have actually said *shithouse*.

“There is internal debate in the West Wing,” the Associated Press reported, about which term Trump used. (If nothing else, the workplace chatter at the White House these days is about what you'd expect.)

And so, remarkably, we are now expected to believe that the president's slur against Africa was not simple, bald-faced racism but actually a strongly worded (but not-at-all racist) remark about, of all things, variations in international plumbing standards. Some African nations — places from which many legal immigrants come — still make prominent use of outhouses. Unlike, as the president reportedly noted, Norway.

And what are the toilets like in Norway? White, probably.

Obviously, no one could claim in good faith that the president was actually discussing infrastructure in the developing world. But good faith, long under attack in political discourse, is today an endangered species.

Bad faith is how the president's remaining supporters can claim with straight faces that they can't see racism in wishing for more immigrants from one of the world's whitest nations instead of from some of the world's blackest. It's how the Marco Rubios of the world can again and again rebuke the president who mocked him as “Little Marco,” and then turn around and do nothing to rein him in.

Bad faith is how we arrived at a travel ban that barred visitors from largely Muslim countries in the name of preventing terrorism, even though such a ban would have prevented exactly zero deaths since at least 1975, [according to CATO Institute research](#). “We must keep America SAFE!” Trump wrote on Twitter in June after the Supreme Court upheld the ban. But safe from what?

And bad faith is how an alarming 42 percent of Republicans — and a disturbing 17 percent of Democrats — have come to consider accurate reporting casting a politician or political group in a negative light to be “fake news,” according to a new [Gallup-Knight Foundation survey](#).

On Wednesday, Trump had planned to announce his Fake News Awards — “those going to the most corrupt & biased of the Mainstream Media,” he wrote on Twitter. By Tuesday, the White House was downplaying the awards as just a “potential event,” raising the devastating possibility that the Fake News Awards were themselves fake. If the awards do eventually come off, how many true and accurate news stories — the work of good journalists trying honestly to get at the truth — will the president blast as fake? (And who will host? James Woods or Scott Baio?)

One of the most resilient aphorisms of political discourse is what’s known as Hanlon’s razor: Never attribute to malice that which is adequately explained by stupidity. For most of modern history, this has been a pretty reliable rule. No longer. We’ve been asked too many times to believe obvious falsehoods to believe in honest mistakes.

But honesty is in short supply, and it’s impossible to dive into shitholegate and see anything that looks like a mistake. Republican Senators Tom Cotton of Arkansas and David Perdue of Georgia initially said they couldn’t recall what the president said in that immigration meeting. But they also told the White House they’d heard him say “shithouse,” according to a Washington Post report citing three White House officials.

But here was Perdue on television over the weekend: “I’m telling you he did not use that word,” he told George Stephanopoulos, “and I’m telling you it’s a gross misrepresentation.” Only in bad faith can one claim that “shithole” is a gross misrepresentation of “shithouse.”

Even if Trump *did* say shithouse, that doesn’t make the initial story — which accurately reported meeting participants’ recollections — “fake news.” And plainly, both versions are equally offensive and steeped in racism, as evidenced by the chorus of online @\$\$houses chiming in to agree with Trump’s characterization.

There are plenty of places for reasonable and even unreasonable disagreement these days. But instead we return again and again to the inane, indefensible utterances of powerful people saying things they can’t possibly believe.

Fake news? More like fake views.