Trump's effort to retain power is powered by inaccurate and nonsensical jargon

Dec. 10, 2020

Philip Bump

When I was a kid, my mom had a T-shirt on which was printed, "If you can't dazzle them with your brilliance, baffle them with your [baloney]." The shirt didn't say "baloney," but my mother had different standards for what words could be displayed publicly than does The Washington Post.

This isn't a new concept — the idea that you can bluff your way through a situation by throwing out distractions and nonsense. We've all done it, to varying levels of success. But it does seem worth noting that President Trump's arguments for retaining power heavily depend on precisely the sort of jargon and misdirections that my mother's T-shirt warned about. Had I known that American democracy might someday be endangered by the concept the shirt presented, I'd have asked her to hang on to it.

Trump has long relied on the gullibility or naivete of his supporters to generate support and contributions. That sounds harsh, admittedly, but it's hard to contest: His habit of incessantly lying about his intentions and actions depends on people accepting his claims at face value, which necessitates either endless credulousness or undue confidence in his insistence on honesty. In recent weeks, though, Trump and his allies have increasingly deployed complicated or technologically sophisticated claims and tools to mask the hollowness of his assertions about alleged voter fraud in the presidential contest.

With an excellent example of how it works, we turn to two of Trump's most stalwart defenders: official White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany (whose time these days seems mostly dedicated to bolstering Trump's false election claims) and unofficial spokesman Sean Hannity (same).

"You gave out a statistic yesterday on the quadrillion statistic in terms of, stats you gave out," Hannity said during his Fox News show Wednesday. "I listened to that and I was blown away. … Explain how you got that number."

"The stat I gave last night, which is eye-opening and truthful," McEnany replied — leveraging the technique of proving that something is truthful by explicitly stating that it is — "is that forPresident Trump to be ahead as far as he was at 3 a.m. in these four states, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Georgia, and for the vote to swing by as much as it did, the probability of that in one state is 1 in 1 quadrillion. That's one, comma, 15 zeros. To happen in all four, it's one, comma, 15 zeros to the fourth power."

This figure, she said, came from a "sworn declaration by Charles Cicchetti — who, by the way, PhD from Rutgers. Tenured professor. Expert testimony in hundreds of court cases," McEnany said. "Goes through meticulously how he used Z-scores and standard deviations from a median to come up with this number."

As any Hannity viewer knows, using Z-scores to determine standard deviations yielding likelihoods in the exponential quadrillions is a bulletproof assertion of wrongdoing. Thank you for reading this article; the case has been made. Sorry: the *truthful* case has been made.

What's that? You don't know what a "Z-score" is? Well, as it turns out, it doesn't matter.

As we explained Wednesday, the analysis by Cicchetti suffers from a fatal flaw: It's predicated on obviously false information. It's a bit like when you think you heard someone say something, and you get all ginned up about it and complain to your friends about them and stew over it for a week and then learn that actually you misheard them in the first place. Here, Cicchetti uses all of the power of his analysis to determine that it was extremely unlikely that President-elect Joe Biden could have retaken the lead in counted ballots in those states — assuming that the pool of votes both before and after this magic 3 a.m. moment were all the same. Which they weren't, as we know: The later votes were mail-in ballots that skewed heavily Democratic.

Imagine two baskets of mushrooms, one labeled "edible" and the other labeled "poison." You eat most of the first basket. Cicchetti is effectively saying that, since you weren't poisoned after eating all those mushrooms, the odds are vanishingly small you'll be poisoned if you eat all of the available mushrooms — assuming that all the rest of the mushrooms have the same characteristics as the ones you've already eaten.

Reader: Stop eating the mushrooms.

McEnany undoubtedly knew that people much better at statistics than she is had already spent most of the day laughing about this quadrillion thing. But she and her boss are hoping that Hannity viewers will credulously hear "15 zeros" and "Z-score" and nod and think that it sounds legit. And many of them will.

Over and over we see this tactic, so much so that I've already written about this once before, although without mentioning anyone's T-shirts.

For another example, McEnany and Hannity also talked about the affidavits the campaign had obtained, sworn statements — offered under penalty of "perjury!!!!" Trump allies will note breathlessly — that document perceived improprieties in vote-counting and other aspects of the campaign. The existence of these affidavits is intentionally blurred into a claim that they constitute credible, useful evidence. Why, these individuals swore under oath! That's proof of fraud!

In the immortal words of Jules Winnfield: Allow me to retort!

Here is a PDF document that you can print out and have notarized. It articulates that you read this article and either do or do not do not believe that there was rampant fraud in the 2020 presidential contest. Find a notary, swear to the accuracy of the affidavit and sign it in the

notary's presence in the space provided. Once you do: Voilà! Evidence for or against rampant electoral fraud in the election.

That someone swears to something does not mean that what they are swearing to is accurate, nor does it mean that inferences they draw are valid inferences. Ask a little kid who thinks they saw Bigfoot on the roof if they'd attest to that under oath, and they would probably be more than happy to do so. It does not mean that Bigfoot was on your roof, though it also does not mean that he wasn't. To determine if Bigfoot was there will require a bit more evidence than this one particular document.

This use of technical tools and language is rampant through the effort to overturn the results of the presidential contest. A number of examples can be found in assessments of the use of electronic voting machines to record and tabulate ballots.

In New York state, where I live, votes are cast by filling out a bubble sheet that is then taken to a scanner that records the indicated choices. Many electronic voting machines, such as those made by Dominion Voting Systems, mix up the order: A choice is made on the screen and stored, while a paper record of the vote is generated and verifiable by the voter. It's the same thing, really, just a bit more neatly packaged by Dominion than what New York does.

So when Georgia audited its votes, it was comparing the paper record to what the machines recorded. Since the machines aren't connected to the Internet, poll workers have to manually remove the vote totals from the devices on portable storage devices, and in a few counties, some of those devices hadn't been included in the total. Otherwise, though, the totals matched the paper records.

But because a lot of people's eyes glaze over when presented with technology, there's been an active marketplace of allegations about how these Scary Computers, which are maybe Somehow Linked to Communists, might have sent results over to Europe, where the tallies were manipulated for Biden. It's like a bad Andy Rooney bit, this grumpy hand-wringing about how there are now computer chips involved in determining who voted for what. Trump himself has claimed that you can "turn a dial" and skew the results, which is a bit like saying that you can go into Capital One Arena and change the scoreboard to say whatever you want. Which, technically, you can — but there are a lot of people who were watching the game and who can point out that the score is wrong. You can even go back and check the tape, if you really want to.

The best — meaning funniest — attempt to use techo-scariness to imply that something untoward happened with the voting machines comes from an "expert witness" for attorney Sidney Powell. Powell, you will recall, was offering accusations about the election that were so wild that Trump himself was like, hmm, maybe this is a bit much, which is like having William Shatner ask you to scale it back a little.

The expert witness, who Powell suggested should be granted the pseudonym "Spyder" for some reason (though they then forgot to redact his name in their court filing), presented a lengthy affidavit using all sorts of fancy-sounding tools to detail what sorts of servers from what countries connected to Dominion's domain.

Cato Institute senior fellow Julian Sanchez walked through the document, which he summarized eloquently as being "crazier than a bag of cats." The upshot is that the analysis by "Spyder": 1. doesn't show that any voting machines were actually connected to the Internet, 2. implies incorrectly that Web servers connecting to one another is evidence of nefarious activity and 3. fails to actually link any of this to fraud.

"Somehow people whose eyes glaze over as soon as you say 'DNS' look at this think it's some kind of real evidence of something," Sanchez wrote. "And then they give these charlatans money."

Just so you know, "DNS" is computer-speak for "Z-score."

But that point from Sanchez is the key point, the throughline to all of this. The effort to convince the public that the election was rife with fraud relies heavily on the public not understanding that technical-sounding things don't actually suggest that fraud exists. Trump's effort to convince people that the results of the election should be tossed appears to be crystallizing around the idea that so many people *believing* there was fraud is reason enough. And to get them to believe that, he and his allies are feeding them a steady diet of garbage wrapped in terminology cribbed from the glossaries of college textbooks.

What I'm trying to say, I guess, is that I am not dazzled by the Trump campaign's brilliance.