



## Donald Trump's health: A new front in the right's long war against reality

**Why has the White House obfuscated Trump's medical condition? Because the right thinks it can make its own reality**

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Last Sunday morning, the medical team supervising President Trump's care at Walter Reed Medical Center returned to the microphones to address misinformation they had divulged the previous day. The president's physician, Dr. Sean Conley, admitted he had obfuscated the fact that Trump had been administered oxygen and explained his misleading statements by saying he was "trying to reflect the upbeat attitude" of Trump and "didn't want to give any information that might steer the course of illness in another direction..."

This bizarre episode capped off a truly strange weekend in which the condition of the president of the United States of America, the most powerful man in the world, was puzzled over as one conflicting account after another battled for precedence. It was reminiscent of the propaganda-laden crises of authoritarian states and failed nations, times in which leaders were either perfectly healthy or functionally dead and crises either under control or raging unabated.

The disturbing truth is that this seemingly inexplicable moment is the result of a decades-long war over the very nature of reality within America. I had struggled to understand this before writing "[American Rule: How a Nation Conquered the World but Failed Its People](#)" and finding that modern American history has been dominated by this conflict and the Republican Party's insistence on constructing an alternate reality to aid in its consolidation of power.

It is no accident that the Republican Party has evolved into Trumpism. After decades of manipulation, including the vilification of academics and experts and an all-out onslaught on science, it was sadly inevitable for the GOP to reach the point where even the medical condition of the president is subject to relentless propaganda and subjective pseudo-science.

In the post-Vietnam era, this project was best summarized by William E. Simon, a businessman who served as Richard Nixon's secretary of the Treasury, who wrote in his influential 1978 book "A Time for Truth" that liberals had so dominated cultural conversation with their array of academics and experts that it was necessary for conservatives to create their own "powerful counterintelligentsia." This followed on the heels of the civil rights, free speech and antiwar movements that found purchase on college campuses and among academic circles in the 1960s and '70s. What followed was a backlash against the academy itself and a desperate attempt to forge an alternate establishment that would protect Republican power and capitalist interests.

This would lead to the creation of an army of right-wing think tanks like the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute, bodies that offered opinions troubling scientific and academic consensus

while preparing pundits to challenge experts in the public arena. Corporate and private donations were mobilized to tempt experts into espousing anti-establishment views. Even while major corporations internally distributed their own studies of scientifically-proven threats like climate change and carcinogenic products like cigarettes, large-scale discrediting operations were undertaken to inject doubt in the public mind.

To assist this effort, the American right founded a powerful media operation that began with print and moved to the airwaves with talk radio, cable news and eventually websites and social media networks dedicated to proliferating misinformation. With the death of the FCC's "fairness doctrine" in 1987 — a rule that had guaranteed equal time to opposing viewpoints in the media — the right was free to construct a self-sustaining, impenetrable alternate reality its supporters and adherents could reside within, beyond the reach of experts, science or even a passing conflicting opinion.

There is a line to be drawn from Simon's urge to push "non-egalitarian" voices in order to protect Republican and moneyed interests to our peculiar moment. The reliance on politically favorable opinions and personally advantageous pseudo-science has given room to misinformation, disinformation and the proliferation of conspiracy theories that "feel real" to people while existing solely as weaponized narratives.

It is this war on science and expertise that gave rise to attacks on scientists urging the wearing of masks, and to the "miracle cures" of hydroxychloroquine, UV light and household cleansers, not to mention the empty promise by a president — who had been caught on tape admitting he knew better — that a generational pandemic might simply solve itself, saying, "One day, it's like a miracle, it will simply disappear."

But with more than 214,000 deaths so far during the coronavirus pandemic and the disastrous consequences of climate change as evident as the flaming maelstroms on the West Coast — not to mention an ailing president who is either all better, improving or gravely ill, or maybe all three at once — it is time to recognize the manipulation that has occurred and the necessity to move beyond a war on objective reality. As perhaps even President Trump's partisan doctors could be made to admit, propaganda simply does not exist at the microscopic level.