

Silence in the Face of Misinformation is Complicity

Helio Fred Garcia

In May the head of the Food and Drug Administration warned that misinformation has become the leading cause of death in the United States.

The January 6 Committee hearings are making clear that misinformation is a leading cause of political division. And that it is a growing threat to American democracy.

In both COVID misinformation and the false narrative that the 2020 election was stolen, there is another common factor: People who knew about the misinformation, who saw the consequences of that misinformation playing out, and who may have been able to raise the alarm in time, eventually spoke out. But by then it was too late to prevent the harm.

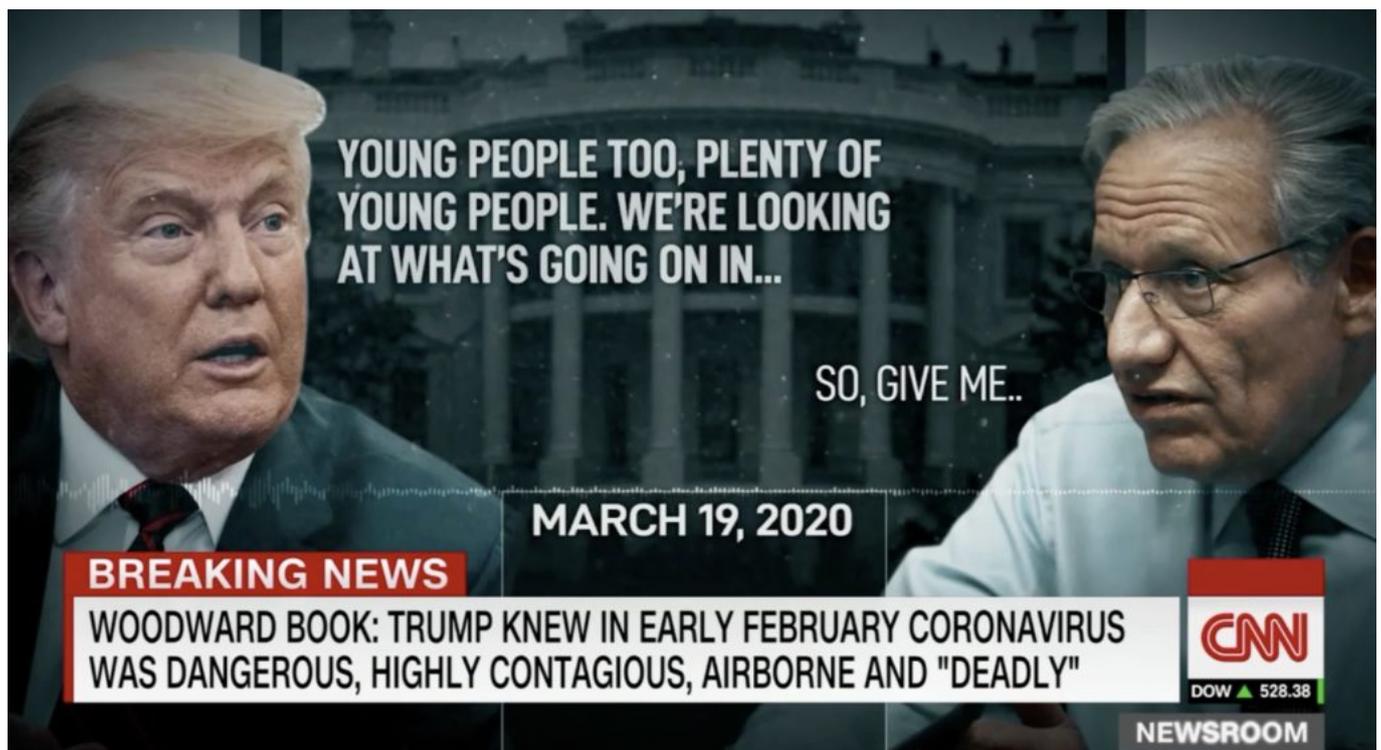
Washington Post Associate Editor Bob Woodward knew that President Donald Trump understood how dangerous and contagious COVID was and that he was lying about it.

Attorney General Bill Barr knew that Trump's "Stop the Steal" narrative was, in his own words, "bullshit," and that Trump was told so. So did many in Trump's inner circle, whom campaign manager Bill Stepien referred to as "Team Normal," in contrast to "an apparently inebriated Rudolph Giuliani" and his minions. None of these people spoke out until well after the January 6 attack.

And Trump continued the lies, even to today. And Americans continued to die.

Duty to Warn?

This dynamic raises a moral, ethical, and civic question: When does a public official or public figure have a duty to warn? At what point should civic leaders, public officials, and even engaged citizens sound the alarm when leaders are behaving in ways that put lives and civic order at risk?



For example, on February 7, 2020, before a single American had died of COVID, Trump told *Washington Post* Associate Editor Bob Woodward that he knew that COVID is airborne, transmitted by breathing, and more deadly than the flu.

This was a turning point moment in the pandemic: a moment when a responsible president would share that news with the American people so that they could begin to understand the risks and take precautions. And a moment to begin a whole-of-government public health response to address those very real risks. But Trump did not. Instead, he lied to the American

people about what he and the government knew about the virus. And Americans started to die.

On March 19, 2020, when 265 Americans had died of COVID, Trump repeated to Woodward what he knew about the dangers of COVID, and added that even young people can get it. In addition, Trump told Woodward that he was intentionally playing down the risks. Trump continued to lie to the American people, and Americans continued to die.

Trump's firehose of COVID misinformation in the spring and summer of 2020 had at least two effects. First, Trump failed to emphasize the need to take basic public health measures, such as masking, distancing, testing, and contact tracing. Instead, he focused on miracle cures, on discrediting science and scientists, and on disparaging those who challenged him. Second, many of his followers and others believed the misinformation and acted on it, including failure to trust science and scientists. Their belief in the misinformation has persisted well beyond Trump's presidency to include refusal to get vaccinated or to wear masks.

The World Health Organization has long warned about the dangers of misinformation:

"Misinformation costs lives... Misinformation can circulate and be absorbed very quickly, changing people's behavior, and potentially leading them to take greater risks. All this makes the pandemic much more severe, harming more people and jeopardizing the reach and sustainability of the global health system."

CORONAVIRUS MISINFORMATION:

Quantifying sources and themes in the COVID-19 'infodemic'

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comprehensive study of COVID misinformation. It reviewed more than one million articles with COVID misinformation published in the first six months of the pandemic. It found that Trump was directly quoted in 37 percent of all instances of misinformation. But when the researchers included Trump misinformation that was retold by others, they concluded that he was responsible for fully 50 percent of all misinformation statements about COVID.

The study concluded that Donald Trump was “likely the largest driver of the COVID-19 misinformation ‘infodemic.’”

It further noted that,

“These findings are of significant concern because if people are misled by unscientific and unsubstantiated claims about the disease, they may attempt harmful cures or be less likely to observe official guidance and thus risk spreading the virus.”

We saw just this phenomenon play out in the summer of 2020.

And in all that time, Woodward said nothing.

Then, on August 14, Woodward finally said something. With the launch of his book *Rage*, Woodward released recordings that revealed what Trump had told him. By then 167,000 Americans had died of COVID; more than one thousand Americans died that day alone. And pandemic response had become thoroughly – and seemingly irreversibly – politicized.

In *Rage* Woodward asks, “Who was responsible for the failure to warn the American public of the pending pandemic?”

Woodward is right to ask the question. And he should look in the mirror.

From both a moral and ethical perspective, I believe that Woodward shares some culpability here. He knew when the death rate was low that Trump was privately acknowledging the

severity of the virus and its form of transmission, but publicly saying the opposite. In doing so, the president was putting American lives at risk. But even as the death rate soared, Woodward kept silent until the release of his book in mid-August.

When does the duty to warn overtake the journalistic convention of storytelling? Or the commercial possibilities of a best-selling book? Before any fatalities? At 256 fatalities, as in mid-March? At 167,000 fatalities, when he launched his book?

The Fraud About Election Fraud

One of the surprises in the January 6 Committee hearings is that then-Attorney General Bill Barr, who for 22 months had been sycophant-in-chief for Trump, eventually told truth to power.

After the 2020 election Barr told Trump that the Department of Justice had investigated all the claims of voter fraud and concluded that there was none. To his credit, on December 1, 2020 Barr told the Associated Press that,

“Justice Department has uncovered no evidence of widespread voter fraud that could change the outcome of the 2020 election.”

This led to an immediate denunciation from Trump attorney Rudy Giuliani. And, as Barr later recounted to ABC News reporter Jonathan Karl, this was the beginning of the end of Barr’s relationship with Trump. The president felt personally betrayed by his attorney general. At a later White House meeting, according to Karl’s reporting,

“The president, livid, responded by referring to himself in the third person: ‘You must hate Trump. You must hate Trump.’”

Barr testified to the committee:

“I made it clear I did not agree with the idea of saying the election was stolen and putting out this stuff, which I told the president was bullshit. And, you know, I didn’t want to be a part of it. And that’s one of the reasons that went into me deciding to leave when I did.”



But Barr is no hero. His resignation letter began by noting how important it is for all levels of government

“to do all we can to assure the integrity of elections and promote public confidence in their outcome.”

This opening sounds as if Barr was about to tell truth to power again. But he didn’t. Instead of using the letter to address the issues of actual election integrity and voter confidence, he reverted to obsequious praise. He commended the president for his “unprecedented achievements,” especially “in the face of relentless implacable resistance.”

Trump read the letter in Barr's presence, and commented, "It's pretty good."

Barr left government service and said nothing more in public before the January 6 attack.

And it wasn't only Barr. Not one of Trump's former inner circle – who knew that Trump's election fraud misinformation was delusional, dishonest, and dangerous – spoke up.

And in the month following Barr's resignation, Trump's "Stop the Steal" became the rallying cry for supporters to come to Washington for a "wild" day. And it became his supporters' justification for attacking the Capitol, engaging in what Capitol Police officer Caroline Edwards described as hours of "hand-to-hand combat" that left several police and Trump supporters dead, and many with physical and other injuries.

And "Stop the Steal" became the justification for those attacking the Capitol to publicly call for the assassination of Vice President Mike Pence and members of congress, including Speaker Nancy Pelosi. The call to "Hang Mike Pence" was not only inspired by Trump. When Trump was told about it, he replied, "maybe our supporters have the right idea. Mike Pence deserves it."

Barr eventually spoke at length with ABC News reporter Jonathan Karl, whose *Atlantic* profile was published in June 2021, and whose book *Betrayal: The Final Act of the Trump Show*, was published in November, 2021. And Barr testified privately to the January 6 Committee on June 2, 2022.

We have seen this pattern throughout the Trump presidency. Former confidants, cabinet secretaries, and other senior officials realize the dangerous game the president is playing, and step away. And they eventually get around to sharing what they knew. But long after the damage had been done.

The French philosopher Voltaire warned, "Those who can make us

believe absurdities can make us commit atrocities.” And misinformation is not merely information that is factually incorrect, but the intentional articulation of absurdities – as Attorney General Barr said to Trump, of “nonsense.” Trump is not alone in peddling absurdities with dangerous consequences, but he is the exemplar of such absurdities. His followers seize on the misinformation, and act on it, to catastrophic effect.

Silence in the presence of misinformation that risks life, health, safety, and civic order is complicity.

In presidential scandals it is common to ask What did the president know, and when did he know it? But in the era of misinformation, an equally important questions is, What did the people around the president know, when did they know it, and why didn't they warn us about it when it would have done some good?



About the Author: Helio Fred Garcia is the president of the crisis management firm Logos Consulting Group. He teaches ethics, crisis, leadership, and communication at New York University and Columbia University. He is the author of five books, most recently *Words on Fire: The Power of Incendiary Language and How to Confront It*. His next book is *The Trump Contagion: How Incompetence, Dishonesty, and Neglect Led to the Worst-Handled Crisis in American History*.