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### Silence of the Trees: Willful Ignorance

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# Silence of the Trees: Willful Ignorance

A Column by Evan Barrett

May 15, 2020

“If a tree falls in a forest ... does it make a sound?” While an interesting philosophical query about perception, in the real world it doesn’t take the sound to know that trees have fallen. The fact that they are laying on the ground should be evidence enough.

These thoughts came to mind this morning when I listened to President Trump’s irrational nonsense about COVID-19 testing and its relationship to the number of documented coronavirus cases and deaths in the United States. The President is calling for the American people to practice willful ignorance of the facts. Of course, there is nothing new to Trumpian denial of facts and assertion of an alternate reality (or as Trump counselor [Kelly Ann Conway asserted on the third day of the Trump administration](#), there are “alternative facts”).

But let’s look at what the President himself said yesterday, a day when the [United States passed 1.4 million in confirmed COVID-19 cases and nearly 86 thousand confirmed deaths](#). By the way, most public health experts, scientists and statisticians say those [numbers are underreported, including White House Coronavirus Task Force member Anthony Fauci](#). And the actual numbers continue to grow each day, much to the consternation of the President.

But here is [what President Trump said](#): “So we have the best testing in the world. It could be the testing’s, frankly, overrated? Maybe it is overrated? ... And don’t forget, we have more cases than anybody in the world. But why? Because we do more testing. When you test, you have a case. When you test you find something is wrong with people. If we didn’t do any testing, we would have very few cases. They don’t want to write that. It’s common sense. We test much more.”

Now there is so much misleading and false information we can download from that statement, in keeping with the more than [18,000 documented instances of falsehoods since Inauguration Day](#). But let’s focus on the call to willful ignorance built into the President’s stunningly faulty logic.

[Former White House Press Secretary Joe Lockhart crystallizes the illogic quite well](#): “Let me see if I understand his [Trump’s] logic. If you don’t test, there would be fewer cases ... ergo, the testing causes coronavirus. Glad he straightened that out.”

Well, the number of coronavirus cases (and deaths) is not caused by testing, it is revealed by testing. The cases and the deaths are reality, Mr. President, reality. Like the trees that silently fell to the forest floors, COVID-19 numbers are real. Count them up and weep.

The numbers cannot be willed away, just as the virus cannot be willed away. Denial does not change reality. You, may not like the numbers, Mr. President, but they are real. And each of them is an American with family, relatives and friends who are impacted by their suffering and, often, death. The numbers are about them Mr. President, not you.

The President's fixation on numbers is a continuum and it reveals a presidential concern about political perception, not human suffering and death. And it reveals a desire to lower the numbers not by concerted governmental action to actually fight the pandemic, but to lower the numbers by rhetorical device because they are politically inconvenient.

Remember the instance over the docking of coronavirus-infected cruise ship, the Grand Princess, which remained off the coast of San Francisco. [On March 6<sup>th</sup>, the President said](#) he'd rather have the people stay on board the ship because the arrival of more infected people would raise the case count of the United States: "I'd rather have the people stay. I would rather — because **I like the numbers being where they are** — I don't need to have the numbers double because of one ship ..." (emphasis added).

It is patently clear that this president wants us to buy the "alternative facts" that we are not suffering through a pandemic. We are asked to believe in the silence of the trees: just because they are laying on the forest floor does not mean that they fell. We didn't hear them. He is calling on us to be willfully ignorant of the facts because the facts are inconvenient to his quest for another four years.

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*Evan Barrett lives in historic Uptown Butte after retiring following 47 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is an award-winning producer of Montana history videos who continues to write columns and commentaries and occasionally teaches Montana history.*

(700 words in the body)