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OPINION

Failure, not just to communicate, is the problem

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With public approval lodged for months around 41 percent and facing a midterm election anticipated to be a seismic disaster, President Biden has endured an almost Pavlovian response from consultants, strategists, academics and party leaders — sharpen the communications, hone the message and sell it to the American people.

From Barack Obama (a winner) to Hillary Clinton (a loser), the advice has been: “We have a story to tell, go tell it.” The two are not the only voices tumbling incessantly from cable TV talk shows and op-ed pages — all singing from the same partisan hymnal. It’s the iconic line from “Cool Hand Luke” uttered by the southern chain gang warden just before his prisoner is gunned down: “What we have here is a failure to communicate.”

Pinning the dismal election outlook — a loss of upwards of 40 seats in the House — on a messaging failure has become the default position. It’s simple, portrays its proponents as insightful strategists to be heeded, and doesn’t require any substantive thought.

Several years ago, a similar scenario was posed to Clinton campaign operative Paul Begala. Asked to account for a gap between rhetoric and performance, Begala responded succinctly and devastatingly direct: “The Titanic didn’t have a communications problem; it had an iceberg problem.”

In other words, it is performance that matters, not sloganeering and political spin.

With Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris at the helm of their administration's Titanic, they guided the ship into one iceberg collision after another while assuring the American people to ignore the vessel taking on water.

Consider their messaging:

- The withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan was a resounding success.
- Inflation was transitory, wouldn't last long and only afflicted the wealthy.
- The \$2 trillion Build Back Better infrastructure proposal would cost "zero dollars."
- The surge of illegal immigration across the southern border wasn't a serious issue.
- Gas prices exceeding \$5 a gallon is the fault of Russian President Vladimir Putin.
- Responsibility for unprecedented increases in violent crime in large cities belonged to his predecessor.
- The COVID-19 pandemic is behind us.

The Titanic sails on, though:

- Inflation reached 8.5 percent, the largest increase in 40 years, and is expected to continue.
- The Department of Homeland Security estimates that up to 20,000 immigrants will stream across the border daily with the repeal of Trump-era restrictions.
- Build Back Better — the centerpiece of the administration's legislative agenda — lies in ashes.
- The military withdrawal from Afghanistan left American troops dead and Afghans who aided the U.S. stranded at the mercy of the Taliban.
- Gas costs rose to \$4 a gallon in the months before Russia invaded Ukraine, after the administration assurances the amount of oil imported from Russia was negligible and shutting it down would have no impact.
- As homicide rates soared in cities across the country and video highlights of smash and grab burglaries of high end establishments dominated TV and internet sites, the administration insisted overall crime had declined.
- The administration's premature declaration of victory over COVID was followed by an outbreak that sent hospitalizations and deaths to previous levels.

It is not, as strategists and consultants insist, a failure to communicate, but a skeptical and deeply discontented public that sees for itself the chasm that has opened between reality and deception. Americans are reminded every day the administration's Titanic is clanging off one iceberg after another while the captain and first mate insist all is well and can be explained away easily.

Only the willfully naïve and terminally gullible accept the Administration rationales, explanations that are patently absurd and highlight the massive disconnect between the administration's rhetoric and the everyday experiences of Americans. It is, perhaps, overly harsh to accuse the administration of deliberate lying; rather, it is an effort to disguise a politically damaging landscape by concocting a narrative insisting the situation is less worrisome than it appears.

Biden's occasionally erratic performances, though — forgetting names and events and uttering remarks only to be rescinded later — undermine public confidence in him as a spokesperson. Biden's Titanic — built to be unsinkable — lies on the seabed beneath the North Atlantic. Biden's may come to rest on the floor of the Potomac.

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