

Coronavirus Crisis and Opportunity

President Trump has turned a public health challenge into an invitation for more temperate political discourse that his opponents will continue to scorn at their peril.

by Conrad Black



After rattling the country with his implausible bravura and rather embarrassing statements at his press conference last week, where he astounded the scientific community with the depth of his epidemiological knowledge, President Trump is now turning the corner on the coronavirus crisis.

His original performance was a bit like President Obama's in 2014 when—after having tacitly encouraged the rise of ISIS with his petulant withdrawal from Iraq and having announced that he would intensify targeted bombing and increase training

and advisory services to the defeated Iraqis—he declared, “This is American statesmanship at its finest.” It wasn’t. American presidents ought to leave those judgments to historians, in any event.

We need only imagine what the effect would have been if Franklin Roosevelt had concluded his “Great Arsenal of Democracy” Speech (1940), or John F. Kennedy his Cuba Missile Crisis address (1962), or Ronald Reagan his “Evil Empire” (1983) or “Tear Down This Wall” (1987) addresses with such a vigorous self-administered pat on the back. President Trump was addressing a nation naturally worried about a viral epidemic that had already started to penetrate our borders—worry that was being spiked by the hyena-cries of Democratic doomsayers, led as always in such reflections, by Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.).

What was called for was a plan of action, not placatory assurances apparently based on the president’s doubtless sincere belief in his scientific intuition.

Over the next few days, the White House pulled itself together and the president gave a purposeful address from the Oval Office on Wednesday, only the second of his term. It was clear from watching opposition television coverage and listening to Democratic spokespeople that they are trying to worry the issue to death, frighten the country out of its wits, escalate partisanship, blame it on Trump, and incidentally spare Joe Biden the danger of going more than seven minutes unscripted opposite Bernie Sanders.

CNN and MSNBC commentators mocked the president’s delivery, but the country will wish to follow him. The Democrats will claim Trump is blaming China and Europe, but almost 80 percent of the reported coronavirus cases in the world are in China, Iran, South Korea, and Italy.

Trump, as he has done before, is turning a vulnerability into a strength and his opponents, who in their febrile animus have no capacity to judge the appropriate level of acerbity in their opposition, have taken the bait and pre-emptively are accusing him of “towering incompetence” in the words of Schumer, (who, by his endless and mindless carping, has made himself one of the most tedious people in modern American history).

All the president really has to do is be the head of an administration doing a competent job of dealing with a difficult problem, and the administration has already crossed that threshold. The group assembled under the chairmanship of the vice president is unquestionably qualified and articulate. It is clear that the president was prescient in restricting entry from people coming from China while Schumer and Pelosi and their lackeys were simpering and puling about Trump’s “racism and xenophobia.”

With the illness ramping up in the world—200 new fatalities in Italy in one day, a revived upward spike in South Korea where it had seemed to be in decline, and is largely associated with one evangelical church, and the health minister of the United Kingdom becoming infected—the president and his administration appear to be managing effectively.

Despite the nasty relations the president has with the Democratic governors of California (Gavin Newsom), New York (Andrew Cuomo), and Washington (Jay Inslee), all three have spoken warmly about Trump’s efforts and their inter-governmental cooperation.

While the United States has been late getting testing facilities up to the mark, 4 million kits are being added this week and the country will soon have the ability to mass-test if that’s what is required. As of a couple of days ago, there were 116,000 identified cases in the world, 64,000 full recoveries, a little over 4,100 deaths and about 48,000 still

convalescing. The proportions of the outbreak and spread justify high public concern and urgent action, but not panic or defeatism.

In the United States, if the one key home for the elderly near Seattle (16 deaths) is excluded, the fatality percentage on a little over 1,100 cases is slightly over 1 percent and the average age of the deceased from this cause is 80. That makes it a little easier to target and protect the most vulnerable people. The ban on air travel from continental Europe that the president announced on Wednesday night is prudent, and a sufficiently radical measure to be indicative of the president's seriousness.

The administration seems to have addressed the concern for fair treatment of affected employees, and to be providing reliable information with full daily updates. The objective must be to develop a vaccine as quickly as possible, even if, as Trump said in his thorough eleven-minute summary, it only moderates the illness. We must also insulate as many people as possible without strangling the economy as we work to reduce the mortality rate to the minimum possible. If the measures announced don't adequately restrict the spread and protect the vulnerable, more drastic methods can be invoked.

What the administration has now produced, after a few days of not entirely elegant improvisation, should address the psychological issues, and yield results in restricting the spread of the virus. It can move in lockstep with the vice president's blue-ribbon committee of unchallengeable experts. Instead of a reenactment of the memorable book and film [*Death in Venice*](#), as a disease (cholera in that case) lays low an entire society, we should see improving techniques, effective avoidance practices, and steadily lower infection numbers and better recovery figures.

The president's economic proposals seem to require a bit of massaging, but he should be able to cooper something together.

This gang of Democrats is none-too-brave in the best of times and they will not want to stand too rigidly in the way of tax relief while the president is trying to mitigate the effects of a public health crisis that originated overseas. Much activity can be transacted without proximity between the parties, including most of education; and work requiring large concentrations of people, such as manufacturing, can be conducted at much-reduced risk.

The Democrats, as so often these last three years, have completely lost their minds in fanning Trumpophobic hysteria. Speaker Pelosi was only using her customary sense of irrational hyperbole this week in describing the reelection of the president as “the greatest existential crisis facing civilization.” This was the same considered and balanced form of public discourse that motivated her to describe the Trump tax-cut bill as “the greatest disaster in history,” and after the midterm elections to liken Trump to a skunk afflicted by gender uncertainties.

The president has already extracted two positive elements from this crisis: he can state clearly and mobilize opinion on the necessity of repatriating a good deal of commerce, including sophisticated medicine, from China. Those who were bleating about trade wars when he imposed tariffs on China will be silent as he incentivizes American industry to bring a good deal of strategic commerce back to the United States. And he has turned a public health challenge into an invitation for more temperate political discourse that his opponents will continue to scorn at their peril.

It will be hard to continue to accuse the president of incompetence, especially as America’s competitive performance against the coronavirus is almost certainly going to be better than that of South Korea or the principal continental European powers. There will be nothing remotely reminiscent of George W. Bush’s fiasco over Hurricane Katrina at New Orleans in 2005, where he arrived late, made locker room towel-snapping

jokes about being drunk in New Orleans as a student at Mardi Gras, and breezily congratulated his director of emergency assistance for a fine job when, in fact, a disaster of non-preparedness was piled on top of a natural calamity.

As usual, the window-rattling ululations of joy from the Democrats may swiftly lead to embarrassment. Donald Trump is not FDR, Ike, JFK, or even Nixon or Reagan as a figure of reassurance, but he pulled his response to the coronavirus together this week and should come through it in good health, politically and otherwise.

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