

Trump's Leadership in Pandemic Paves Way to Reelection

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by Conrad Black



One of the characteristics of the coronavirus pandemic in the United States is its unique political explosiveness. In order to deal effectively with it, President Trump has had to show a good deal of dexterity, which his always numerous and vocal critics have assailed as incoherence, or insincerity.

He has had to be at the head of public opinion, failing which his political capital would erode overnight and he would have no capacity for moral leadership in a crisis where the head of the government must retain it to be effective. He is slightly

like the French Second Republic populist leader Alexandre A. Ledru-Rollin, who famously is alleged to have said: "I must follow the people because I am their leader."

At the outset, the president was roasted for being anti-science, for ignoring scientists and experts, epidemiologists, and just winging it on his own intuition. He dealt with that by effectively taking over the public relations part of what is officially Vice President Pence's task force, and becoming virtually joined at the hip to its two leading and uniformly respected specialists, Drs. Deborah Birx and Anthony Fauci.

Both have praised the president's executive decisions and have assured the press that President Trump listens to them and follows their advice.

The president has done an excellent job of mobilizing the private sector, kicking around companies that he thought were being sluggish (General Motors) or were profiteering abroad at the expense of the safety of Americans (3M), and he invoked the National Emergencies Act and ignored silly tweets from the Democratic hecklers on the sidelines such as Hillary Clinton, and explained the law generally only needed to be referred to for targeted companies to comply; not to be specifically enforced. Again, he left his critics talking to themselves.

It is generally recognized that his experience as a businessman (the first serious businessman ever to hold that office) has been of great value in marshaling private sector collaboration—something that was especially helpful in getting Abbott Laboratories to move swiftly in developing a test that could be administered anywhere by almost anyone and produce results in 15 minutes. This shut down the next wave of criticism that had become audible: that the president should carry the can for the backward testing facilities and antiquarian methods the country possessed.

Well into March, all tests had to be sent to Atlanta for

evaluation and could only be made in hospitals by appointment. This was obviously completely unacceptable for a pandemic and Abbott Laboratories rendered a great service as well as producing a valuable product that the president could take some credit for and in any case enabled him to dodge this bullet.

Fauci and others have been at pains to emphasize that the president's suspension of direct flights from China on January 31 and from Europe on March 11 has saved a large number of American lives, and a cautionary shot has been discharged across the bow of the Democrats with recollections of putative presidential candidate Joe Biden and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) calling the suspension of flights from China "hysterical and xenophobic," and "racist."

Trump has admirably mobilized the natural desire of Americans to rise to a national challenge, part of which is generally a rallying behind the leader, as long as the leader knows how to lead.

After a slightly discordant start, and a March 11 address from the Oval Office that drew mixed reviews, Trump has done well. He has conjured up the "invisible enemy," called himself a "war president" and he has risen in the polls. He has evidently exuded the aura of an energetic, highly focused chief executive and has buried the hatchet with political enemies in the states and some cities and exchanged generous laudations with California Governor Gavin Newsom, New York's Andrew Cuomo, and even New York City's unfeasible mayor Bill de Blasio.

(His Honor won the prize for [the dumbest comment](#) by an American official on pandemical matters in the last week with a threat to close "permanently" any church that dared to hold a public service—would he turn the mighty cathedrals of St. Patrick and St. John the Divine, and the comparably grandiose Riverside Baptist Church and Temple Emanu-El, into bowling

alleys when the crisis passes?)

In the last 10 days, there has arisen the concerns that the president signaled from the beginning about economic damage, but which he subordinated to the experts' call for a total shutdown and through the original period of mobilizing public sentiment and proclaiming, as is the American habit, "war," (drugs and poverty have had their wars too). But the president has warned not to make the cure worse than the disease and absorbed the initial clangor from Democrats and the Left generally for a prolonged shutdown, doubtless relishing the unpopularity they assume would accrue to the president for the horrible economic depression this self-strangulation would generate.

The basic problems are that as of Monday morning the country has more than 1,000 newly unemployed people for every coronavirus-related fatality (whose average age is still almost 80). The Left have fired their opening javelins about the inability to cost out life, and all lives are infinitely valuable and so forth. But this raises the second problem, that whenever the shutdown ends, the virus will not have been eradicated or have ceased to exist and there inevitably will be some instances of its recurrence.

Unless the malaria treatment being tested in New York (hydroxychloroquine) is effective and is successfully distributed throughout the country, or there is a crash program to inoculate tens of millions of people with some antibodies from those who have had and survived the illness, the population will not be markedly less vulnerable than it was when everyone was locked down in March.

At some point, the country is going to have to redouble the protective segregation of the immune-challenged population and everyone else will have to take their chances with the

coronavirus to some extent. On what we have seen, the survival rate, among the whole population, if the vulnerable elderly and infirm groups are exempted, is over 99.5 percent.

The president undoubtedly judged public opinion correctly in accepting the advice of his professional experts in approving a continued closing of the country to April 30, by which time testing of hydroxychloroquine (it has been effective in some cases against the coronavirus) and possibly the dissemination of antibody vaccinations and elemental medical supplies such as face masks will have occurred. But it is likely that then or two weeks later, the president will have ridden the wave to a new crest where public impatience to get back toward normal and the recognition that America will have to face this virus someday and not hide from it like (self-impooverished) moles.

The economic argument will be irresistible and he will have to start the normalization period, perhaps in stages and preferably with the agreement of his scientific and epidemiologic panel. Since the Democrats want a shutdown for months, for evidently discernible motives, they will have difficulty claiming Trump should never have shut the country down to begin with. There is no reason to believe that the death rate will skyrocket, even though it will not be possible to contain the number of infections as they are now. The Fauci-Birx formula of flattening the curve will have been followed and achieved and will have reached the point of diminishing returns.

In the meantime, the president may be able to get his infrastructure bill through, keeping the last of his main campaign promises. (These were building a southern border, lowering taxes, deregulation, new trade agreements, a constitutionalist judiciary, building up the military and pushing the NATO allies into paying their way, reducing poverty and violent crime, eliminating unemployment and oil imports, and delivering the country from the oppressive inanities of the Green Terror.) It will be a considerable

record if the economy comes back quickly, and with the antiviral stimulus package, it will be on steroids.

If Trump can also believably present himself as the man who balanced boldness with economic realism and extracted the best possible result from this very difficult public health crisis, the Democrats will be storming his barricades very forcefully. Joe Biden's task then, will not really be getting to the White House, it will be internal Democratic damage control.

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