

Breaking Down the Political Fallout from Coronavirus

After a shaky start, Trump is hitting his stride, as is the nation.

by Conrad Black



Evaluating the political impact on the election campaign of the coronavirus pandemic is obviously hazardous, but not fruitless or impossible. We can see from the Chinese experience, although that government has lied about every other aspect of the problem, that the incidence and impact of the disease are finally abating. The administration must not let China off the hook on its duplicity and negligence in exporting the coronavirus to the world, misleading the world about its impact, and finally claiming a great administrative success and purporting to engage in the extension of a humanitarian "Silk Road" to other countries of medical supplies. But it can also cite evidence, which is generally corroborated by observers in China and the revival of Chinese industrial exports, that the illness has turned the corner in that country and that the temptations of unlimited panic that

afflict the stock exchanges every other day are unjustified.

A preliminary vaccine was tested in Seattle on Monday, and the testing fiasco, which was compounded by Health and Human Services Secretary Azar's promise ten days ago of four million tests last week, very few of which occurred, seems to be getting off the launch pad this week. This has been frustrating, but tests aren't a cure, and those who test negative today may be infected tomorrow; they are useful in determining whom to quarantine. Given that the United States has, thanks to the president personally, acted more quickly than China or Western Europe to take avoidance measures in international travel, and can learn from the failures as well as the successes of the Chinese, it should be possible to ensure that the coronavirus is in decline in the United States by early summer. If a week is proverbially a long time in politics, it's an eternity in communicable diseases.

The challenge for the administration, now that the private sector is rumbling into action as in the war mobilization of 1941, which startled the world by its undreamed of productivity (e.g. 125,000 aircraft and ten million tons of ships a year), will be to protect the vulnerable (elderly and infirm), flatten the rise of the illness, and avoid the complete collapse of the economy, as occurred for at least two months in China. The president, after an uneven start, is now speaking clearly and sensibly and behaving like the proven executive he is; scientists are foremost in the committee chaired by the vice president and in the press briefings conducted by both men.

The president's political instincts, which have been demonstrated to be acute on many occasions, seem to have come to his rescue as he steadily raised his game from dangerously flippant assurances and dismissals of "the flu," to self-compliments on his scientific insight, to his somewhat awkward Oval Office address (though the content was unexceptionable), to crisp, professional group appearances where fluent and

learned specialists do most of the talking and the president has a precise grasp of the basic points and of who does what. As long as that continues to be case, and as long as the American national performance in dealing with the coronavirus appears to be competitive with that of all other countries, Trump should be safe politically. No one can blame him for the origination of the problem, and it is undisputed that he acted presciently in closing air traffic from China in January and from Europe last week. These were his decisions, and the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, Joe Biden, declared when Trump imposed the air-travel suspension with China that it was an act of "racism" and "xenophobia." If need be, Biden can be forcefully reminded of that fact. Polls show support for the president holding steady, having, presumably, absorbed his uneven performance in the early stages of the crisis.

At the press briefings, the president has responded personally and with commendable grasp of the subject even to the most formerly hostile reporters from the most antagonistic media outlets. In group and individual conversations with governors, he has been direct and forthcoming, and he has been praised even by such an implacable adversary as Governor Gavin Newsom of California. Trump grasped early enough that this was such a serious matter that there would be no public toleration of rank partisanship, a lesson that Nancy Pelosi picked up fairly quickly, at least in her public comments, but apparently not the incorrigibly tawdry Democratic Senate leader, Chuck Schumer. He grinds on, proffering cheap shots to empty Senate benches as if on autocue and oblivious to the clangorous tone of such comments in these circumstances.

On present form, the president is professional, focused, and courteous, giving straight answers to questions and following the advice of the country's foremost authorities in relevant medical and public-health areas, and the response to the emergency is ramping up very quickly – at this point, faster

than the new incidences of the malady. After being left in the gate on testing, with all samples sent to Atlanta for evaluation, the president has promised free testing for all Americans, with 250,000 tests this week, a million next week, and a vertical upward curve beyond that. Such a trajectory will put the U.S. medical authorities ahead of all other countries in epidemiological self-awareness within a few weeks.

The results at this point, because of inadequate testing everywhere, contain many anomalies, but the United States has shown a mortality rate of slightly under 2 percent of identified cases, which goes down to almost 1 percent if the state of Washington (which had a severely infected home for the elderly) is removed. This gives the U.S. a better record than any advanced country that has handled the same issue seriously and whose figures may be considered reliable, except Germany, with .2 percent fatalities among 40 percent more cases reported than in the U.S. with a quarter of the American population, and South Korea, with less than 1 percent fatalities in twice as many cases as the United States and a sixth of its population. Competent U.S. spokespeople are cautiously hopeful that stockpiles of ventilators and enhanced intensive-care facilities, now being hastily built up in anticipation of a spike in cases, will be adequate, and that there will be no recourse to what amounts to rationing and triage, as has occurred in Italy, China, and Iran.

And there seems to be bipartisan support for remedial economic measures to assist the defenseless commercial victims of this nightmare, including the travel and hospitality industries and many small businesses. This may furnish an opportunity for the administration to slide in more tax reductions, which can be justified in producing a vertiginous rebound on the upside of a steep-V recessionary plunge and return, but would also be a gratifying legacy to this crisis on Election Day, provided the country is well on its way back to normal by then. The Chinese

example, even discounting for the habitual mendacity of the Xi government, indicates that this could certainly happen within the more than seven months that remain before the election. As not infrequently happens, the best is emerging in American political leadership and in the political system itself in a crisis that unites the country. Apart from Schumer's whining and carping, all the senior officeholders in both parties are speaking for the public interest, and it is becoming. It need hardly be emphasized that it is a medical problem that vastly transcends partisanship. But those who were rubbing their hands in renewed slavering expectation that Trump would finally blow himself up are apt to be disappointed yet again.

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