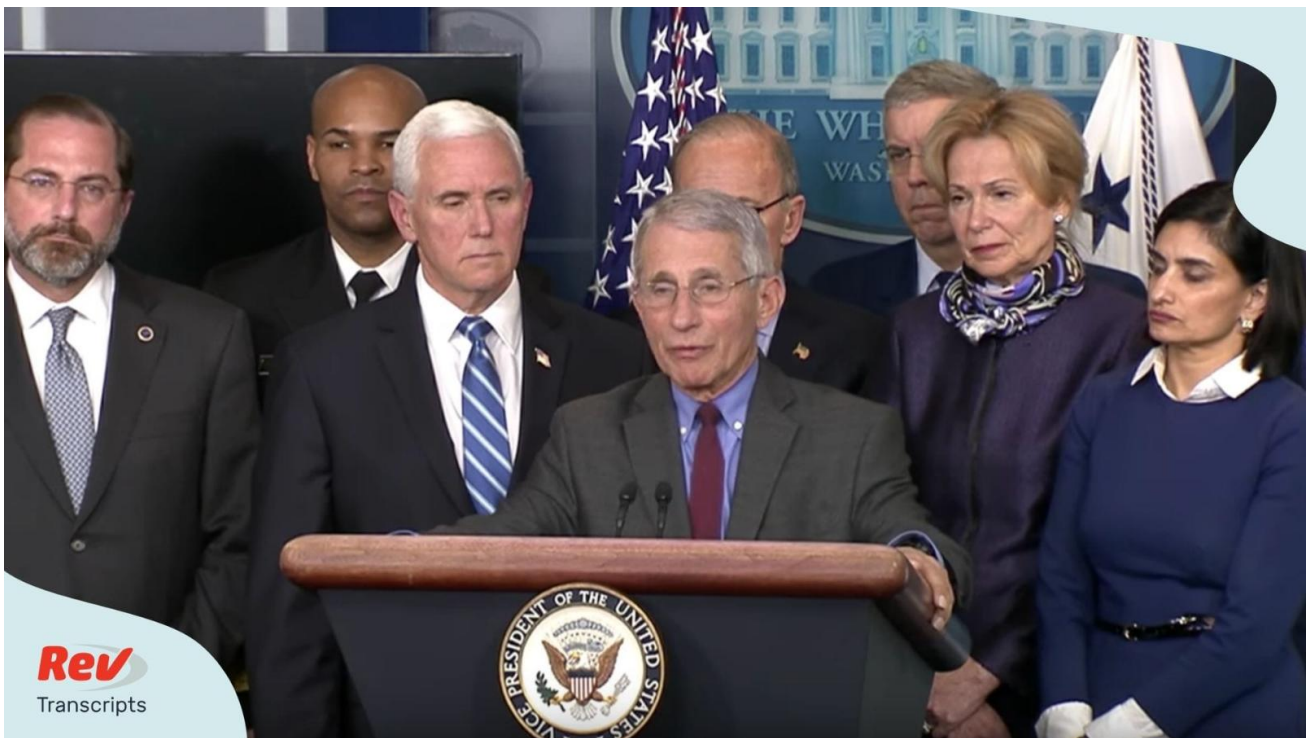


The Greatest Fear Is Fear Itself

President Trump is the first serious businessman to be president and undoubtedly is a talented executive. He still has an opportunity to turn this to account politically, by approaching the crisis with no regard to politics, other than to lead the country through this challenge.

by Conrad Black



The combination of concerns about the spread of the coronavirus and the upheavals in the world oil market has shaken public confidence and created a susceptibility to panic, to which, as usual, investors were the first to succumb.

In the United States, the antics of the Democratic politicians and media grasping at straws more desperately than ever to try to prevent the long-unthinkable reelection of the president, have exacerbated the problem. So, unfortunately, has the president's effort to minimize the problem, an impossible task

given the uncertain extent of the danger and the fear-mongering of the president's enemies.

In the United States, as the chief of state and head of government are the same person. There is no one else to stabilize opinion and get the country focused on measures to address and resolve the problems, notwithstanding the commendable and apparently well-organized efforts of Vice President Mike Pence and his collaborators. Because it is such a contentious political atmosphere, where the president's election was so tenaciously contested, and his own personality is at times bombastically counterproductive, he is not the optimal source of the sort of placatory and reassuring crisis address that came more naturally to some of his predecessors.

Franklin D. Roosevelt's first inaugural and his subsequent fireside chats generally win the gold star for carrying the country with him out of the Great Depression. But President Truman's leadership of opinion to combat Soviet aggression in Europe and Korea, though less mellifluous than Roosevelt's addresses, was effective.

Dwight Eisenhower, with the prestige of his office supplemented by his stature as a victorious World War II theater commander, always enjoyed almost universal support on matters of national security. John F. Kennedy was very effective and much-admired in the Cuban Missile Crisis. Lyndon Johnson rallied the country well over civil rights but lost most of his political capital in Vietnam. Richard Nixon extricated the United States from Vietnam very skilfully and triangulated great power relations with China and the Soviet Union with consummate effectiveness, but his administration unraveled over the absurd and inexplicably bungled Watergate affair.

Ronald Reagan, a formidably persuasive and uplifting orator (his opponents tried to downgrade him to a "good communicator"), rallied the country to the initiatives that

ended the Cold War satisfactorily. There has not been a great deal of inspiration from the White House since; the Bushes were not overly articulate, and Bill Clinton and Barack Obama are very fluent, but not great phrase-makers and didn't deal with such challenging crises as most of the presidents between Roosevelt and Reagan.

Rooseveltian confidence from Trump will be lampooned by the anti-Trump media and the Democratic leadership, who have tried feverishly to convict him of criminal offenses he didn't commit (and weren't crimes anyway). Democratic Senate leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) last week attempted physical intimidation of Supreme Court justices over abortion, shaking his fist at the Supreme Court building, and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) has been gratuitously insulting to the president many times—comparing him, among other unflattering reflections, to a skunk with emasculated manhood.

President Trump is correct that it is pointless to try to engage with them until after the election, when it will be determined who retains their positions. I suggest that the president consider a plan of more precise action to address the coronavirus crisis and share it with the former presidents, Bush, Clinton, and Obama, and President Carter (if his health permits), and leave it to Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) and House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.) to see if anything can be done on a bipartisan basis in the Congress. They have at least agreed on funding, albeit with the usual bickering and backbiting, which is not the tenor public discourse requires at this time.

The president has not succeeded in easing concerns by downplaying the danger, and marching about clinics in a partisan hat like a bulldozer driver is effective in many challenges, but this one has to be dealt with by amassing a pan-political coalition. Former presidents are the most credible group to assist and surely they would be willing to do so. The response to the virus must be pitched on a

nonpartisan, national interest basis. Schumer, Pelosi, and most of the snarling media would be obliged to take such an approach seriously.

It won't do just to say it's only the flu, everything is under control, and 99 percent of us will survive. In addition to the recent strenuous efforts to get the ability to test for the virus more widely deployed and accelerating much faster than new cases are identified, some arrangements should be assembled for elderly people; even if it involves using specially sanitized paramilitary vehicles to provide special transport for their urgent needs, and to work with local health and social service organizations to provide for special home delivery of groceries.

Any plausible and serious program to help shelter the most vulnerable segment of the population would go a long way to allaying fears. Most people can live with the somewhat increased possibility of a nasty flu, we've all been through something close to that before, but losing parents or grandparents needlessly is a prospect that scares and angers millions of people. The president's enemies are whipping up this fear and they must be countered with a believable plan to shame them into stopping their terror campaign.

The fate of the cruise liners being held offshore faintly resembles the tragic voyage of the liner St. Louis in 1939, carrying Jewish fugitives from Germany and barred from port after port, and it must be stopped. Bring them promptly into port, screen everyone, and act efficiently and sensibly. This ghastly series of nightmare cruises makes the whole world appear helpless, cowardly, and callous and incites public unease.

To be effective and believable, a policy of containment by the United States will require that every person entering the country be screened. This obviously will require some time but personnel should be recruited now, probably from among the

armed forces, and the necessary apparatus distributed to them as a maximum priority. The country should learn every day that the percentage of arriving people being tested and quarantined where necessary is increasing sharply. The president was correct in acting early to deny entry to people coming from afflicted areas.

We can't believe Chinese or Iranian reports of the state of the virus in those countries, and Iran has a less developed public health system. But we can learn from Italy and South Korea, advanced societies and friendly states. There should be provisional arrangements in place for conducting school and university activities online, and drastic steps to sanitize continually in all branches of public transit and transport, especially aircraft.

There is no need for this in the United States now, but the country should know that if the incidence of the virus goes past a certain threshold, whole areas will be sealed, as is being done in Italy, where the army, special police, and railway security are supervising all rail traffic out of approximately one-quarter of the country.

South Korea is more instructive: it is closer to the Chinese source of the illness, and has reported a decline in incidence in the last few days, and a lower fatality rate—less than 1 percent—than any other seriously afflicted country. This presumably means they are giving special protection to the elderly. The key is to be proactive, move quickly, as America has always done in a crisis: clear, unheroic, nonpolitical leadership.

President Trump is the first serious businessman to be president and undoubtedly is a talented executive. He still has an opportunity to turn this to account politically, by approaching it with no regard to politics, other than to lead the country through this challenge. The nation has come through many worse trials; this one is only complicated by its

unknown extent and the venomous political climate.

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