

Trump's Greatest Challenge Now

Leadership in crises is preeminently what presidents do and the effectiveness of their responses to crises largely determines how they are evaluated in history.

by Conrad Black



President Trump faces the greatest challenge of his very eventful life, and also an immense opportunity to silence his detractors. Not since Charles de Gaulle faced a prolonged general strike in France in 1968 has the leader of a large Western democracy faced something so closely approximating an insurrection as the situation President Trump faces now.

Fortunately, as de Gaulle demonstrated, in such circumstances there is almost always overwhelming support for the legitimate government as long as it restores order with no more force than is necessary and in the impartial national interest.

In May 1968, after a month of chaos, de Gaulle addressed the

nation for less than five minutes. As he had calculated, by this time the avarice and prudence of the French bourgeoisie had asserted themselves and he won the greatest electoral victory in 175 years of Republican French history. The French take inexplicable pleasure in tearing up paving stones and hurling them at the police and engaging in general disorder and revolutionary sloganeering—but not for long.

President Trump's challenge is less complicated—apart from the declining but still lingering pandemic—as public opinion is almost unanimous in opposition both to police brutality and mob violence. He has a precious opportunity and absolute duty to speak for the whole nation and to act decisively.

Virtually every single aware American is disgusted by the video of the Minneapolis policeman holding his knee on the neck of George Floyd for nearly 10 minutes, ignoring pleas from Floyd and advice from onlookers. At least 95 percent of Americans deplore the wanton violence, desecration, barbarity, and severe economic damage done mainly to minority small business owners, on the fraudulent pretext of protesting the apparent murder of Floyd, an African American, by a criminally insouciant white police officer grossly abusing his position.

The president spoke eloquently from Cape Canaveral on Saturday, repeating his condemnation of Floyd's death, before there was any reason to believe that violence would erupt on the scale that it has. The leaders and former leaders of liberal Democratic America were taken by surprise by the eruption of the violence. Their early spokesmen, including former President Obama and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) uttered the usual hackneyed platitudes and recriminations about Trump failing to unite the country and being somehow responsible for the homicide by a policeman in one of America's liberal Democratic citadels (Minnesota).

They did their best to incite the inference that Trump was indifferent to racism, and flirted with the usual Democratic

bunk about systemic racism; at least 80 percent of white Americans strongly disapprove of racial discrimination. As rioting erupted, the earnest youthful Democratic mayor of Minneapolis, Jacob Frey, and his police chief abandoned a precinct building on Friday night and enabled the mob of hooligans who evidently had no more interest in the fate of George Floyd than they did in global warming, to trash the police station and burn down nearly 200 businesses. It was a shameful debacle.

The rioting spread and intensified throughout the country, and the great majority of the violence occurred in cities governed by left-wing Democrats who obviously hadn't the remotest idea either how virulent the nihilistic Left was in their communities nor how to instruct the police to contain and deter it.

Joe Biden, for once, was considerably more astute than his former chief and issued a statement suitably deploring the murder of George Floyd but failing to imply, as Obama had, that the incident and police mistreatment of African-Americans generally lent any justification whatsoever to the havoc wrought in more than a score of American cities in succeeding days.

Public opinion is overwhelmingly united on the issues involved and in its desire for clear leadership from the president. By Monday evening, he will have waited long enough for public impatience to ripen without waiting so long that he appears ineffectual.

He may be expected to take the following steps:

- The president should offer the Armed Forces to enforce curfews and ensure the arrest and detention of all lawbreakers to all local governments that need them. President Eisenhower demonstrated how overwhelming the authority of professional soldiers is in times of civic

disturbance when he had the 101st Airborne Division integrate Central High School in Little Rock Arkansas in 1957.

- President Trump should promise special compensation for those who lost their businesses or other important assets in the current violence.
- Since thousands of people have been taken into custody in the many cities where there have been disturbances, President Trump should ensure that those arrested are the hooligans rather than conscientious protesters. And those hooligans should be interrogated comprehensively so that all the organizers of Antifa and other subversive organizations are identified and can be brought to justice.

His designation of Antifa as a terrorist organization is correct. For once, the tendency of American justice to convict virtually all accused people regardless of guilt may be relied upon to decapitate these sociopathic and seditious organizations and deter impressionable malcontents who might have been tempted to join or emulate them.

- The president would be correct to emphasize that the coronavirus shutdown has greatly contributed to the financial vulnerability of those victimized by the riots and has probably aggravated the level of discontent upon which the rioters fed for a time. The country was actively reopening anyway, and Trump can acknowledge that the whole test and trace system which is being established and in which the Democrats have invested such high hopes for containing the COVID-19 threat is clearly unworkable and incapable of anything more than a marginal impact on the level of ultimate infection. Fortunately, only those with challenged immune systems are in serious danger, and even they face quite promising odds (only one in 800 of those over 65 perish from the virus in the United States.). The fatality rate for the 80 percent of young and middle-aged people who

have been shut down for two months and shouldered such immense inconvenience is statistically insignificant (one in 13,000) and the sooner they return to their normal occupations the better. would be appropriate for the president to recommend that that process be accelerated.

- A national code of conduct for law enforcement officers including severe penalties for undoubted racist discrimination should be imposed and where it is not adopted voluntarily by states and municipalities the failure to accept this high standard of conduct should be publicized and fiscally penalized. All municipalities of 100,000 people or more should be financially assisted by the federal government in establishing riot control and deterrence systems that are a great deal more effective than the Keystone Cops bumbling that was much in evidence in many American cities this past week.

If the president makes these points or similar ones—with no hint of partisanship, nor any self-praise—he will speak for a united country in hostility to police discrimination and brutality, to mob violence, and to undue delay in reviving the normal commerce and social interaction of all who were not vulnerable to the pandemic. And for the first time, he will have solid public opinion behind him.

Leadership in crises is preeminently what presidents do and the effectiveness of their responses to crises largely determines how they are evaluated in history. President Trump is a good executive and has no fear of assuming responsibility for decisive action.

This ghastly sequence of events has shaken the country and embarrassed it in the world—it is not true that there is systemic racism in the country. The United States has demonstrated convincingly that there is little prejudice against minorities. It must not allow the savagery of an unrepresentative fringe of violent troublemakers to demoralize

it or distract or deter it from returning as quickly as possible to the full prosperity that is the best assurance of a contented society.

The appalling Floyd killing must be used in a way that sharply reduces the likelihood of any such outrage occurring again. All this is now within the president's grasp.

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