**A President Unequal to the Moment**

By Susan B. Glasser

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Donald Trump in the Oval Office.

Crises clarify. The bigger the crisis, the more the clarity, which is why the **incompetence, dishonesty, and sheer callousness of the Trump Presidency have been clearer in recent days than ever before.** As the coronavirus, as of Wednesday an official pandemic, spreads, the lives of Americans depend on the decisions made—or not made, as the case may be—by a President **uniquely ill-suited to command** in this type of public-health catastrophe. In that sense, the last few weeks may well have been the most clarifying of Donald Trump’s Presidency.

In a prime-time address to the nation on Wednesday night, Trump **declared war on the “foreign virus,” blaming first China and then the European Union for spreading it, and insisting that it carried “very, very low risk” for Americans**. The starkly militaristic and nationalistic tone of the address sounded scary and ignorant and utterly inadequate at a time when the country is being radically upended, with travel halting, workplaces and schools shuttering, and hospitals bracing for impact. The “foreign virus” will not be contained or shut out by a European travel ban, which the President announced, any more than it was by a China travel ban, which he had previously decreed. It is already here in states across the nation, and experts warn that it could infect millions and kill hundreds of thousands in a worst-case scenario. Trump spoke little about that, beyond a vague nudge to Congress to pass a payroll tax cut and a warning to “elderly Americans” to be “very, very careful” and avoid “nonessential travel.” He failed to explain or even address **the shocking lack of testing of Americans**—a stark contrast to the response by other countries—and did not warn the public about or advise them on how to handle the difficult days ahead. Even the major measure that he announced, the European travel ban, required immediate clarification and correction from Administration officials who **said it did not apply to trade**, as Trump indicated in his remarks, or permanent residents. His former homeland-security adviser, Thomas Bossert, immediately panned the ban as a “poor use of time & energy.”

In short, Trump was detached from the unfolding reality of a global crisis that is unlike any in memory. I’ve watched Presidential speeches for a few decades now. I cannot recall one that was less equal to the moment.

Trump spoke from the Oval Office exactly five weeks to the day since the end of his impeachment trial in the U.S. Senate, which left him with essentially unchecked power after the Republican-led Senate voted against his removal. So much has happened since the trial, which already seems as if it happened in another era, but there is a through-line: Trump himself, **constantly conflating the national interest with his personal interest.** As the coronavirus spread and the President initially ignored, downplayed, and lied about it—even dismissing coverage of the risks as a media-inflamed “hoax”—the costs of the Senate’s impeachment decision have been cast in sharp relief. It will be a long time before we can reckon with the full damage done by an Administration **whose incompetence, disinformation, and sheer bungling in the early stages of the crisis have been at once predictable and breathtaking.**

The critics were quick to declare this to be Trump’s Katrina, Trump’s Chernobyl, even Trump’s “Pandumbic,” as “The Daily Show” named it. What is striking to me, however, is how much the last few weeks represented Trump merely being Trump. This wasn’t a situation in which the folly of the system or the depth of mismanagement was suddenly revealed to the man at the top, but a case in which the man at the top was the folly.

It’s almost unbelievable from the vantage point of the present moment, when we are in the midst of an officially designated global pandemic and a consequent economic crisis that threatens to plunge the United States and the rest of the planet into a recession, but consider how the President of the United States has spent his time since the coronavirus infection reached America in mid-January. He has:

Publicly attacked the judge, prosecutors, and jury forewoman in the case of Roger Stone, Trump’s longtime political associate who was convicted of lying to Congress and other offenses.

Fired his Ambassador to the European Union and a National Security Council adviser on Ukraine, and purged others who figured in the impeachment investigation as he fulminated to aides about “snakes” in his Administration.

Fired the acting director of National Intelligence, after an intelligence briefing to Congress about Russia’s ongoing efforts to interfere in the 2020 election.

Nominated as his new director of National Intelligence a highly partisan Republican congressman who was forced to withdraw from the exact same job last summer for inflating his résumé.

Sued, through his campaign, the Times, CNN, and the Washington Post for publishing opinion articles that he did not like.

Installed a new, twenty-nine-year-old personnel chief in the White House who had been previously fired and marched off the premises, and gave him a mandate to revamp the vetting process for Administration officials, with a new emphasis on loyalty.

As the novel coronavirus spread from China across Asia and Europe and to the United States, Trump used his Presidential Twitter feed, his four campaign rallies, his trip to India, and various public appearances in February to attack by name dozens of targets, including the Supreme Court Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Sonia Sotomayor; “Crazy Nancy Pelosi” and her “impeachment hoax”; the “failed” and “sanctimonious” Senator Mitt Romney; the “puppet” Senator Joe Manchin; the “lightweight” Senator Doug Jones, a “Do Nothing Stiff”; Jay Powell, his appointee as chairman of the Federal Reserve; John Kelly, his former White House chief of staff, who was in “way over his head”; and Jeff Sessions, his former Attorney General.

The President, who **has made name-calling such a signature of his boorish public persona** that it is rarely even pointed out any more, also found time to demean the Democratic Presidential candidates running against him—“Mini Mike” Bloomberg came in for particular animus before he dropped out, belittled by the President as a “stumbling, bumbling,” “weak and unsteady” “5’4” mass of dead energy.” As criticism of his response to the virus escalated, Trump doubled down on his attack on journalists as “the enemy of the people” and targeted individual journalists by name, calling them “wacko” and talentless.

All of this he did while the epidemic spread. At the same time, Trump was claiming that the illness was being contained; that it dies in warmer weather; that it was not coming to the United States; that it was about to disappear; and that it was not very serious. Indeed, had you read only communications from the President about the spreading coronavirus, you would have been subjected to **a barrage of lies and misinformation and self-serving bombast, information that even at the time it was being said was clearly and unequivocally untrue.**

I reviewed all of the **one thousand and forty-nine tweets and retweets that Trump sent in the five weeks between his impeachment acquittal and Wednesday afterno**on, counting forty-eight that mentioned coronavirus. By far the largest number of these—twenty-one—bragged in some way about the Administration’s response to a crisis that Trump claimed was being contained because of his fast, early action to shut the “boarders” with China. The next largest group of tweets attacked Democrats or the media or both for not giving him credit, or for seeking to create panic, rather than recognizing what a good job he has been doing. It was only on February 24th that the President sent his first tweet about the illness arriving in America. “The Coronavirus is very much under control in the USA,” Trump tweeted. At the time, there were fifty-three confirmed cases in the country, a number that by March 1st had risen to more than a hundred. Just last week, Trump told Americans that coronavirus cases were “going very substantially down.”

Amazingly, these statements continued throughout this week, as the World Health Organization finally declared the novel coronavirus to be pandemic and chided nations—read the United States—for “alarming levels of inaction.” On Sunday, Trump claimed, “We have a **perfectly coordinated and fine tuned plan** at the White House for our attack on CoronaVirus.” On Monday, before the stock market crashed and a congressman who had flown with him on Air Force One had to quarantine himself, the President began the day by blaming the media and Democrats for seeking “to inflame the CoronaVirus situation, far beyond what the facts would warrant.” By the end of that catastrophic day, an unrepentant Trump appeared at a White House press conference and said, “**We have been handling it very well**” before promising a major, very, very big economic recovery proposal with no specifics. He concluded, “This blindsided the world, and I think we’ve handled it very, very well.” On Tuesday, he returned to this theme after visiting the Capitol for a private lunch with applauding Republican senators. “It will go away,” Trump said of the virus, on the day that more than a thousand cases were registered in the United States. “Just stay calm. It will go away.”

We don’t know whether this is Trump’s long-delayed reckoning, the overdue moment of accountability for a man who has escaped such reckonings his entire life. The election is not for many months. The dizzying events of just the last few weeks—the remarkable upending of the Democratic Presidential race, the hubris and foolishness of the Administration’s initial response to the virus—may be long forgotten by then.

That does not make this any less of a significant milestone in this most unbelievable of American Presidencies. On Wednesday, the respected government medical expert Anthony Fauci told Congress that the worst is yet to come. “Yes, yes it is,” he said. **Trump cannot tweet this virus away or lie it into oblivion.** The virus does not care if he gives tax cuts to friendly oil barons or bails out his own hotels with federal dollars, possibilities that have been floated in recent days. Trump may believe that only Republicans matter to his political fortunes, but he has yet to find a doctor who can insulate his base, and his base only, from the ravages of this disease. Nor will he.

Trump has spent years devaluing and diminishing facts, experts, institutions, and science—the very things upon which we must rely in a crisis—and his default setting during the coronavirus outbreak has been to deny, delay, deflect, and diminish. His speech on Wednesday night was a disappointment but not a surprise. He told us what we already knew: America is in big trouble.

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