

We must kill the virus and change the conversation

The old saying, "When you're up to your ass in alligators, it's hard to remember that your first objective was to drain the swamp" couldn't be more appropriate than it is today, especially when discussing a number of things that have been made evident by the spread of the Coronavirus. There are at least three big problems as I see them: 1. the obvious need to reform our healthcare system, 2. the need to de-politicize and modernize our crisis response management system and 3. the need to stop adding to our national debt. I should add one more, and that is the President's current misreading of the American people's patience and resolve.

Back on November 4, 1979, Iranian militants took 52 American diplomats and citizens hostage. For the next 444 days, until the inauguration of President Ronald Reagan, we found ourselves in the midst of a daily crisis of diplomacy and confidence. We had forgotten to 'drain the swamp' of discontent and anger towards the U.S. in the Middle East and we were paying the price for being unprepared for the retaliation that came. About four days into the crisis, the ABC News program, 'Nightline' started its coverage of the event with a regularly scheduled broadcast they called: "The Iran Crisis: America held hostage - Day XX". Americans were attracted to the program like moths to a flame and this coverage style became the template for other crises that would follow like 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, the BP oil spill and now the Coronavirus Crisis. All had three things in common: 1. the events impacted the entire country; 2. there was a hunt for those responsible and 3. they were reported on with unrelenting media coverage.

All the events required a decisive presidential response and follow-up, and depending on your politics, Presidents Carter, Bush and Obama either succeeded or failed in solving the problem and winning the support of the American people. Now it is Donald Trump's turn to show us if and how he will lead us back to a functioning economy and flatten the curve of the virus' spread amid all the finger-pointing and political spinning from his opponents. Americans have gotten used to 24/7 real time reporting of crises and this goes for presidents' approval ratings as well. A recent CNN poll showed 55% of Americans disapproved of the way President Trump is handling the crisis. This should give his re-election campaign pause, not because CNN is the gold standard for political reporting or polling, but because it would seem to illustrate a few important truths: Americans are impatient people who don't like to be forced to do anything; they are not used to being immobile for long periods of time; and they get tired of 'old news.' They also get pretty tired of hearing the same conversation over and over again.

To be specific, I believe they are getting weary of the *Trump Coronavirus Show* - that interminable 'press conference' of bad news/less bad news that dominates the airwaves every day for a couple hours. It doesn't matter that much of the information presented by doctors and health officials is important, Americans' attention spans are short, especially when they are feeling pressured by prolonged forced social distancing, the loss of their sporting events and constant threats of impending doom by flawed virus models that predicted 30-40% more deaths than are actually taking place. To be blunt, Donald Trump is overexposed. He needs to bow out of these science séances and let his team deal with it. If he doesn't do that AND change the conversation quickly AND begin to gradually open up the economy, he will lose the November election. Period.

I realize that my Republican friends will want to tar and feather me for saying so, but I believe that soon, even some of Trump's supporters will tire of hearing him stomp through the tulips with disconnected sentences and wandering platitudes. At some point, even Joe Biden's gaffs will start to look good as will his friendly demeanor that may hide a mediocre if not well-meaning hail fellow well met. So, Donald Trump, dig out your manuscript of the 'Art of the deal' and open up your scrapbook and look through them for the nuggets of good salesmanship. Remember, there is such a thing as too much exposure. Another cardinal rule is -- you should never put the salesman above the product AND you should always know when to stop selling and ask for the sale.

And while I'm at it, a word to all Trump's coaches who are busy preparing talking points for him... you had better start preparing a list of 'deliverables' (human interest stories) that give voters the impression that your administration has a heart instead of just a clipboard with lists of Personal Protection Equipment that's being sent to your 'favored' states. The competition (Americas' governors) is doing it and gaining ground in the PR war. Andrew Cuomo of New York is one, and so are the country's mayors. They know that there's an election just around the corner, and they're going to be damn sure that their constituents know that that old saw, 'I'm from the (federal) government and I'm here to help you' is about as true as 'one size fits all.'

The Trump Administration has just unleashed a ticking time-bomb in the form of 'Coronavirus Relief Checks'. Even if these checks do reach their destinations within a couple weeks, the Democrats will use their very issuance as proof positive that "Trump was just buying votes" for himself. If they DON'T arrive on time, they will accuse his administration of managerial incompetence as well as vote-buying.

That brings us to our national healthcare (delivery) system. It's not up to the task because we don't really have one. This proves Bernie Sanders' point that we can't adequately provide care - for all of the people - without one. And what about a national emergency preparedness system? We know we can call up the Army Corps of Engineers, the National Guard, Homeland Security and get FEMA engaged when it comes to natural disasters, but pandemics the size and scope of the Covid-19 virus have tested our ability to quickly mobilize across state lines and have found us wanting. I suppose we can thank our governmental structure (a republic with individual states' rights/responsibilities) for some of that, but emergencies do give the President about 136 statutory powers granted to him by the National Emergencies Act of 1976 (<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/guide-emergency-powers-and-their-use>) and previous legislation, and to his credit he has invoked some of them to combat the Coronavirus crisis. Unfortunately, he also used those powers earlier to try to get a wall built on our southern border, and for some these actions smacked of Executive Branch overreach and they are now distrustful of him. That may have made the President hesitant to invoke a national emergency in the earliest stage of the Coronavirus crisis. I just don't know.

The final point I'm trying to make is that we seem to be way too willing to add trillions more national debt with the 'CARES Act' and its follow-on proposed legislation which is, in my opinion a 'TARP' (Troubled Asset Relief Program) style giveaway program that was unsuccessful in achieving its objectives back in 2008/2009. This new debt will be with us and our children for decades to come and I'm afraid that that debt and the interest on it may well cancel out the proposed benefits to be derived from it.

Mr. Trump. You must accept the fact that your opponents - human nature and nature itself - are formidable ones. You can only tweak them at the margins and you don't have much time left if you want four more years in office. Americans are a forgiving people, but even they have a breaking point. The Left isn't standing idly by. They are already mobilizing the emotional argument for changing horses in mid-stream in November. Personally, I think it's better for you to get your boots wet now than to find yourself without a mount later on.

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