

Trump and Covid-19: The arrogance of ignorance

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A crisis, based on Herman's definition, is characterized by three elements: (1) it threatens the goals which are a high priority for the decision-making unit; (2) it compresses the time available in order to develop an appropriate decision; 3) its bursting surprises the members of the decision-making unit¹. From this definition, it is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis. From the states' response, it is evidently a complex one to manage. Both theory and empirical evidence tell us that crisis management comes hand in hand with mistakes, unknowns, lack of information... And while it is not impossible to ignore a crisis, it is essential to manage it and limit its negative impacts with planning, good

communication, rapid reaction, mobilization of the necessary resources...

As a *Washington Post* article explains: "The country has adopted an array of wartime measures never employed collectively in U.S. history — banning incoming travelers from two continents, bringing commerce to a near-halt, enlisting industry to make emergency medical gear, and confining 230 million Americans to their homes in a desperate bid to survive an attack by an unseen adversary. Despite these and other extreme steps, the United States will likely go down as the country that was supposedly best prepared to fight a pandemic but ended up catastrophically overmatched by

This Commentary is partially based on Tanguy Struye, « Essay on the decision-making process and the ideology to come of the Trump presidency », *Commentary Paper*, n°44, December 19th, 2016.

¹ Hermann, M., « Indicators of stress in Policymakers during Foreign Policy Crisis », *Political Psychology*, vol 1, n°1, Spring 1979, pp.27-46.

the novel coronavirus, sustaining heavier casualties than any other nation. It did not have to happen this way. Though not perfectly prepared, the United States had more expertise, resources, plans and epidemiological experience than dozens of countries that ultimately fared far better in fending off the virus”².

The question we ought to ask today is not whether the Trump administration could have ignored and/or avoided the crisis, or not, but whether it could have managed the crisis in a better way. To answer this question, the theoretical tools from foreign policy analysis (FPA) are quite helpful. FPA is agent-centered and studies how a decision-maker takes decisions based on his character, personality, biases, relationship with advisers...³ It takes into account the personal and professional environment of the decision-maker and its close advisors, as well as involved bureaucracies and agency. We focus in this commentary paper on the individual variable of President Trump. The coronavirus crisis demonstrates once again that the decision-making process in the White House is completely broken. This is not really a surprise when looking at the decision-making process of the Iranian, North Korean, or Syrian cases, but also decisions regarding NATO, the trade war... The reasons why the President of the US mismanages the coronavirus crisis, as well as other crises, is linked to his personality, his inner circle of advisers and finally his

leadership. Let us detail and explain these different elements.

Wishful thinking personality

Beyond his impatient, impulsive and irascible nature, his narcissism, Donald Trump seems to lack curiosity and nuance, henceforth interpreting the world in a Manichean fashion. The fact that he is not an intellectual neither underscores an incapacity to lead a country nor an impediment to understand complex reasoning. As strategist von Clausewitz observed, “the war chief needs not to be a learned historian or a publicist. Yet he must be familiar with the superior life of the state, he should correctly understand and appreciate tendencies, patterns, affected interests, issues to solve, agitating personalities; he does not need to be a subtle observer of men, a rigorous analyst of the human nature, yet he must understand the character, the thought processes and the standards, the mistakes and the specific qualities of those he must command”⁴. Both Woodrow Wilson and Jimmy Carter, to name but a couple, were considered as intellectuals; this trait did not stop them from being considered as mediocre heads of state. Conversely, neither Eisenhower nor Reagan were intellectuals, yet today they are considered in numerous works as excellent heads of the executive, mainly because they had the capacity to take quick decisions and to focus on the pig picture⁵. Trump does not fit either category. In theory Trump could be

² Yasmeen Abutaleb, Josh Dawsey, Ellen Nakashima and Greg Miller, « The U.S. was beset by denial and dysfunction as the coronavirus raged », *The Washington Post*, April 4, 2020.

³ This Commentary is limited to the role of the decision-maker, it does not deal with bureaucratic infighting between agencies, departments, the role of Congress

during the COVID-19 crisis or the lack of cooperation of China.

⁴ Quoted in Aron, R., *Penser la guerre, Clausewitz (L'âge européen) I*, Paris, Editions Gallimard, 1976, p.220.

⁵ Max Boot, « A Blind Man? No, This President is Clear-eyed », *Los Angeles Times*, January 13, 2004.

classified in the category of leaders with a simple cognitive approach, thus able to take fast decisions. Yet taking decisions swiftly means having good instincts and keeping oneself informed. President Trump has and does neither. Simple cognitivism (seeing things in black and white) can be an advantage during a crisis because decision-makers who see the world in such a manner will take quick decisions.

Despite his own self-definition as an instinctual/intuitional person, Trump is in fact a wishful thinker, basing his decisions not on facts and reality, but on what he wishes reality to be. Case in point: Trump took much longer than most world leaders to acknowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic crisis was, in fact, a crisis. Various leaders in politics or within the private sector rely on their intuitions to make a decision. For R.S. Larsen, former CEO of Johnson & Johnson: "Sometimes taking time to thoroughly analyze all the given options is impossible. You have no other choice than to rely on your gut feel"⁶. This statement joins the point of view of another CEO, Richard Abdo, for whom: "decision must be taken quickly. This means that we need to do our best with the relevant information at our disposal and let intuition guide us"⁷. This last quote is interesting because it highlights that intuition should be grounded in doing "our best with the relevant information at our disposal". Being instinctual means being alert, curious, and accumulate information, a behavior that has completely eluded president Trump during this crisis. His many tweets on denying the danger

⁶ Quoted in Collectif, *La prise de décision*, Paris, Ed. Organisation (Collection Harvard Business Review), 2002, p. 209.

of the pandemic are excellent illustrations of wishful thinking.

"The Coronavirus is very much under control in the USA. We are in contact with everyone and all relevant countries. CDC & World Health have been working hard and very smart. Stock Market starting to look very good to me!"
-- February 24, 2020

"The Fake News Media and their partner, the Democrat Party, is doing everything within its considerable power (it used to be greater!) to inflame the CoronaVirus situation, far beyond what the facts would warrant. Surgeon General, 'the risk is low to the average American.'"
-- March 9, 2020

"So last year 37,000 Americans died from the common Flu. It averages 27,000 and 70,000 per year. Nothing is shut down, life & the economy go on. At this moment there are 546 confirmed cases of CoronaVirus with 22 deaths. Think about that!"
-- March 9, 2020

Additional examples include:

- a few weeks ago, when asked when he wanted the country to reopen: "I would love to have the country opened up, and just raring to go, by Easter. Why Easter? I just thought it was a beautiful time, a beautiful timeline."

- the case of the number of ventilators for New York: "I have a feeling that a lot of the numbers that are being said in some areas are just bigger than they're going to be," he said. "I don't believe you need 40,000 or 30,000 ventilators. You go into major hospitals sometimes, and they'll have two ventilators. And now, all of a

⁷ Quoted in Collectif, *La prise de décision*, Paris, Ed. Organisation (Collection Harvard Business Review), 2002, p. 209.

sudden, they're saying, 'Can we order 30,000 ventilators?'"⁸.

-hydroxychloroquine: President Trump defended hydroxychloroquine as a treatment for COVID-19 without any evidence the drug is effective. For example on April 5 : "What do I know, I'm not a doctor. But I have common sense".

By denying the facts, ignoring the many reports from the intelligence community and experts, the president lost many weeks to prepare for the pandemic. Yet, the degradation of the situation in Europe during the 3 to 4 weeks before the outbreak's center of gravity shifted to the US was providing a real-life experience of what the COVID-19 pandemic looked like when downplayed at first.

Trump's wishful thinking, combined with his high confidence and tendency to risk-taking, reinforce his cognitive biases. The larger the self-confidence of an individual with simple cognitive complexity *vis-à-vis* a (perceived) complex analysis of events, the more the decision-maker tends to be guided by a cause or an ideology. Hence, he does not hesitate to (re)interpret facts and the environment according to his vision of the world. The obvious risk of this approach is to advance blindfolded, the decision-maker refusing to acknowledge, and adapt to, nuances and ambiguities⁹. Hence, Trump cherry-picks information by eliminating those that do not correspond to his core beliefs.

⁸ Quint Forgey, Matthew Choi, « Trump downplays need for ventilators as New York begs to differ », *Politico*, March 27, 2020. See also « Trump Says States Are Lying About How Many Ventilators They Need to Fight Coronavirus », *Vice*, April 4, 2020.

⁹ Hermann, M. « Assessing Leadership Style Trait Analysis », in Jerold Post, (dir.), *The Psychological Assessment of Political Leaders (with profiles of Saddam Hussein and Bill Clinton)*, Michigan, The University of Michigan Press, 2003, pp.192-193.

Ultimately, by adopting Barber's typology, one witnesses the rise of an "active-negative" presidential style. The "active-negative" style highlights hyperactivity which never meets an acceptable degree of personal satisfaction. This type of decision-maker reflects an impulsive, impatient and sometimes aggressive personality.¹⁰

The importance of the inner circle

Each president in office decides how to structure his administration. Indeed, presidents enjoy substantial leeway in the organization of the White House's staff and on how it is integrated in the decision-making process. Consequently, the structure and the decision-making process vary from one president to another. Furthermore, the leader's personality impacts the decision-making structure, not only through the choice of advisors and the organization of the process, but also by establishing certain rules: the degree of tolerance to contradictory debate, the type of admissible advisors, etc. The personality, character, style and political experience of Donald Trump have inevitably affected the structure and the dynamic of the advisors' group, its efficiency, as well as the quality of the decisions¹¹.

It is interesting to look back at what T. Preston wrote about President Truman, since it appears relevant to understanding the faults in Donald

¹⁰ Barber, J., *Presidential Character (Predicting Performance in the White House)*, New Jersey, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1992, pp.8-11.

¹¹ Preston, T., « Following the Leader: The Impact of U.S. Presidential Style upon Advisory Group Dynamics, Structure, and Decision », in P. t'Hart, E. Stern et B. Sundelius, *Beyond Groupthink, Political Group Dynamics and Foreign Policy-making*, Michigan, The University of Michigan Press, 2000, pp.192-193.

Trump's decision-making process: "Although Truman saw the world in 'black-and-white', absolute terms, he was surrounded by advisers like Marshall and Acheson who brought much more nuanced, complex views to the inner circle. As a result, Truman's tendency toward impulsive, decisive decision making in the absence of broad policy debate was compensated for by expert staff who slowed the process down and injected careful policy deliberations into the discussions"¹².

Where Truman surrounded himself with competent and experienced staff, Trump surrounds himself with inexperienced and, as they have proved to be, little qualified advisers, Secretary of Defense Esper, National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien for example. Many lack the experience in Washington and/or in their job because of the high turnover imposed by President Trump¹³. As some have said, the adults have left the room. Many of these advisers are yes-men or -woman. In the COVID-19 crisis management, advisers can be divided into 5 categories: (1) the Nepotists (his family/Kushner as the new coronavirus Tsar¹⁴); (2) the Spineless (many Republican congressmen close to the president); (3) the Political Climbers (Meadows, Conway, Pence, who is also a coronavirus Tsar¹⁵); (4) the Ideologues ("Religious conservatives", Navarro, Hannity); and finally (5) the Damage Controllers

(Dr. Fauci, Azar) who try to go against the tide. The four first categories all have one factor in common: to please the president and be loyal. Indeed, under the Trump administration contradictory debate is almost impossible and advisers are supposed to reinforce and confirm the President's perceptions, resulting in groupthink. If we look at Link and Glad's typology, instead of being Reality Testers (taking into account political goals and not the psychological wishes and desires of the decision-maker; not taking into account the personality of the leader and realize the objectives), the Trump advisers are Bolsterers (supporting the decision-maker's role psychologically; pleasing and feeding his ego; hiding from the president critics about him; risking reinforcing characteristics that could endanger him). In addition, as George developed theoretically, Trump calls on his advisers not for advice but to (1) satisfy his cognitive needs; (2) get an emotional support, before making an important decision; (3) gain their understanding and support, even though their opinion will not be considered; (4) acquire greater legitimacy in the public opinion and the Congress; finally, (5) coordinate and disseminate information to the departments and agencies.

Concerning hydroxychloroquine for example, Trump sided with Navarro¹⁶, Hannity¹⁷ and

¹² Preston, T., *The President and his Inner Circle: Leadership Style and the Advisory Process in Foreign Affairs*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2001, p. 264.

¹³ Furthermore, many high-level jobs are not even filled.

¹⁴ Adam Cancryn and Dan Diamond, « Behind the scenes, Kushner takes charge of coronavirus response », *Politico*, April 4, 2020.

¹⁵ Amy Davidson Sorkin, « Mike Pence and the Farce of Trusting Donald Trump on the Coronavirus », *The New Yorker*, March 13, 2020.

¹⁶ Quint Forgey, « 'Doctors disagree all the time': Navarro drags Fauci feud into the open », *Politico*, April 6, 2020. (« Although Navarro has no medical experience, he went on to assert that 'doctors disagree about things all the time', and forcefully defended his credentials as sufficient for him to weigh in on the scientific deliberation over the drug. 'My qualifications, in terms of looking at the science, is that I'm a social scientist. I have a Ph.D.', he said. 'And I understand how to read statistical studies, whether it's in medicine, the law, economics or whatever' «).

¹⁷ Sean Hannity, « Gov. Cuomo, stop denying New Yorkers hydroxychloroquine », *FoxNews*, April 5, 2020.

Giuliani¹⁸, who have no expertise but reinforce his wishful thinking, instead of listening to Dr. Fauci or Secretary Azar¹⁹.

This is clearly not what we should expect from advisors. Advisors are supposed to convey knowledge, information, assessments and predictions on complex issues and, as A. George established (a) advise the decision-maker on his goals and priorities; (b) formulate operational programs that is to say, concrete action to achieve planned aims; (c) assess those programs; (d) coordinate them with the various institutions; (e) make predictive analysis; and, eventually, (f) have expertise skills. The relation between the president and his advisors is of utmost importance in the decision-making process. It is at the core of the process, and determines to a great extent the way in which information is analyzed and understood. In the Trump administration, this relation is clearly dysfunctional. The result is a team of bystander advisors who reinforce Trump's ignorance and wishful thinking, instead of providing a strong relay of information and counter-arguments to help the crisis management. The consequence of this lack of well-informed advisors performing their role, as Harwood writes, is that: "Instead of accepting responsibility for the administration's laggard, chaotic response, Trump has launched a full-scale attempt to shift blame onto others, including China and the

media. Instead of crisp action and clear lines of command, Trump has offered indecision, changing his positions on guidance to the public and routinely undermining his own health experts"²⁰.

Complete absence of leadership

On March 13, President Trump declared: "I don't take responsibility at all". On March 16, he stated: "I'd rate my response to coronavirus a 10". This is not what is expected from a leader: President Truman used to say "the buck stops here". As the leader, the president is expected to accept the ultimate responsibility for all decisions. Trump has instead accused former president Obama, the Center for Disease Control, the Democrats, China, European leaders, the Republican and Democratic Governors, the media... There has been an obvious vacuum of leadership of the US President, not only within the US but also on the world scene. Again, this is a far cry from efficient crisis management. During a crisis, leadership can make a difference. The daily press conferences are a good illustration of the complete absence of leadership: most of the time they have been about the president's ego-trip (praise, adoration), spreading misinformation and contradicting experts²¹. At no time was a discourse of unity pronounced (quite the opposite, as he drove the country

¹⁸ « Giuliani, a familiar voice in Trump's ear, promotes experimental coronavirus treatment », *The Washington Post*, April 5, 2020.

¹⁹ Jonathan Swan, « Scoop: Inside the epic White House fight over hydroxychloroquine », *Axios.com*, April 5, 2020 ; Yasmeeen Abutaleb, Josh Dawsey, Ellen Nakashima and Greg Miller, « The U.S. was beset by denial and dysfunction as the coronavirus raged », *The Washington Post*, April 4, 2020 ; Samuel Lovett, « Coronavirus: Trump stops his top medical expert Fauci from answering question on untested treatment », *The Independent*, April 6, 2020 ; Philip Bump, « The most

prominent voice at coronavirus briefings is the least trusted one », *The Washington Post*, April 2, 2020.

²⁰ John Harwood, « Trump's coronavirus mismanagement again undercuts his CEO image », *CNN*, April 5, 2020.

²¹ « This president does not have the capacity to listen to, synthesize, and internalize information that does not immediately serve his greatest needs: praise, fealty, adoration ...He will not allow facts that are at odds with his narrative to pierce his magnetic field of deception ». (Peter Wehner, « The President Is Trapped », *The Atlantic*, March 25, 2020).

further apart), nor was there any compassion, reassurance, guidance, direction to coordinate the states and the federal levels²²... Contrary to 9/11, there has been no “rally ’round the flag” effect. While one could have expected from a President who is a businessman to be well-versed in leadership or management²³, only the president’s wishful thinking has taken the lead. Sometimes circumstances reveal leaders. At other times, they reveal the lack of leadership, probably because, as Jean-Luc Lagardère explained: “leadership is the encounter between talent and circumstances”²⁴. Arguably, talent has been irrevocably absent in the present case.

The lack of leadership is also visible on the international scene. In the past, US administrations have built coalitions, rallied states against a common threat, but the Trump administration chose to go alone and not to lead²⁵. The Trump administration is in a logic of dominance, “non-legitimate imposition of will”, instead of a logic of authority, in which the “legitimacy of rule and rules is accepted”²⁶. As Lord Acton wrote, “power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely”. If a leader is empowered by others, he needs to behave in concordance with these others’ expectations and values. In practice, many leaders “lose their focus on others”. Power makes leaders “feel less dependent on others, freeing [them] to

shift [their] focus away from others to [their] own goals and desires”²⁷. This can lead, as Keltner explained, to four consequences: lack of empathy, self-serving impulsivity, disrespect, and narratives of exceptionalism (to not play by the rules)²⁸. The United States under the Trump administration has become a toxic leader on the global scene: “leaders who engage in numerous destructive behaviors and who exhibit certain dysfunctional personal characteristics (...) inflicting some reasonably serious and enduring harm on their followers and their organizations”²⁹. Disavowing partners and allies, as President Trump has done, has already exacted a heavy toll on American prestige, reputation and reliability³⁰. Furthermore, Trump lost the narrative by corrupting the power of American discourse. If, even before Trump’s presidency, the liberal international order was already weakened and collapsing and the position of the United States in world affairs declining, it has accelerated under the Trump administration, and even more so during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

As Boi, Kuipers and Oversdijk have identified, the main question during crisis management is: *Did those charged with crisis management responsibilities do everything they could to facilitate an effective response to the crisis at*

²² No real use of the Defense Production Act.

²³ For an example of what President Trump should have done, see A. Friedman and C. Krulak, « What Trump Needs To Say », *Project Syndicate*, April 3, 2020.

²⁴ Laurent Choain, « Quand les circonstances révèlent les leaders », *Harvard Business Review*, March 19, 2020.

²⁵ In defense of the administration, nobody took the lead on this matter (Russia, China, EU). Instead of uniting, world powers are squabbling.

²⁶ Stewart R. Clegg, David Courpasson, Nelson Phillips, *Power and Organizations*, London, Sage Publications, 2006, p. 106.

²⁷ Dacher Keltner, *The Power Paradox, How we Gain and Lose Influence*, Penguin, Random House, UK 2017, p. 101.

²⁸ Dacher Keltner, *The Power Paradox, How we Gain and Lose Influence*, Penguin, Random House, UK 2017, p. 101.

²⁹ Jean Lipman-Blumen, *The Allure of Toxic Leaders*, Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, 2005, p. 44.

³⁰ See for example : Hannah Sellinger, « Stealing masks and stockpiling hydroxychloroquine — what America has become during this epidemic is deeply worrying », *The Independent*, April 6, 2020.

*hand?*³¹ Let us recap the US administration's response to COVID-19: No. The president's wishful thinking, his indifference to complete and relevant information, the absence of leadership, his personality and the composition of his inner circle was a recipe for disaster. Trump wasted precious time in managing the crisis of COVID-19 in the US. For too long he ignored the crisis, thinking, and tweeting on 28 February that, "like a miracle, it will disappear". Crises do not disappear, but they do require sound and effective management. Inevitably, the pandemic was going to fall into that category, but the human, social, and economic cost could have been reduced with proactive and efficient crisis management. Instead, Trump's handling of the coronavirus pandemic will no doubt become a case study on what not to do in crisis management theories. Finally, the coronavirus has also shown on the international scene the limits of Trump's America First: no leadership, no legitimacy, no empathy, no empowerment, no authority, no vision, no strategy, no narrative... no nothing.

³¹ Arjen Boin, Sanneke Kuipers and Werner Overdijk, « Leadership in times of crisis: A framework for assessment

», *International Review of Public Administration*, 2013, Vol. 18, No. 1, p . 81.



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