

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post on Tuesday, April 7, 2020.



Opinion

Donald Trump may not be a coronavirus expert, but it doesn't mean he's completely wrong, or that science is always right

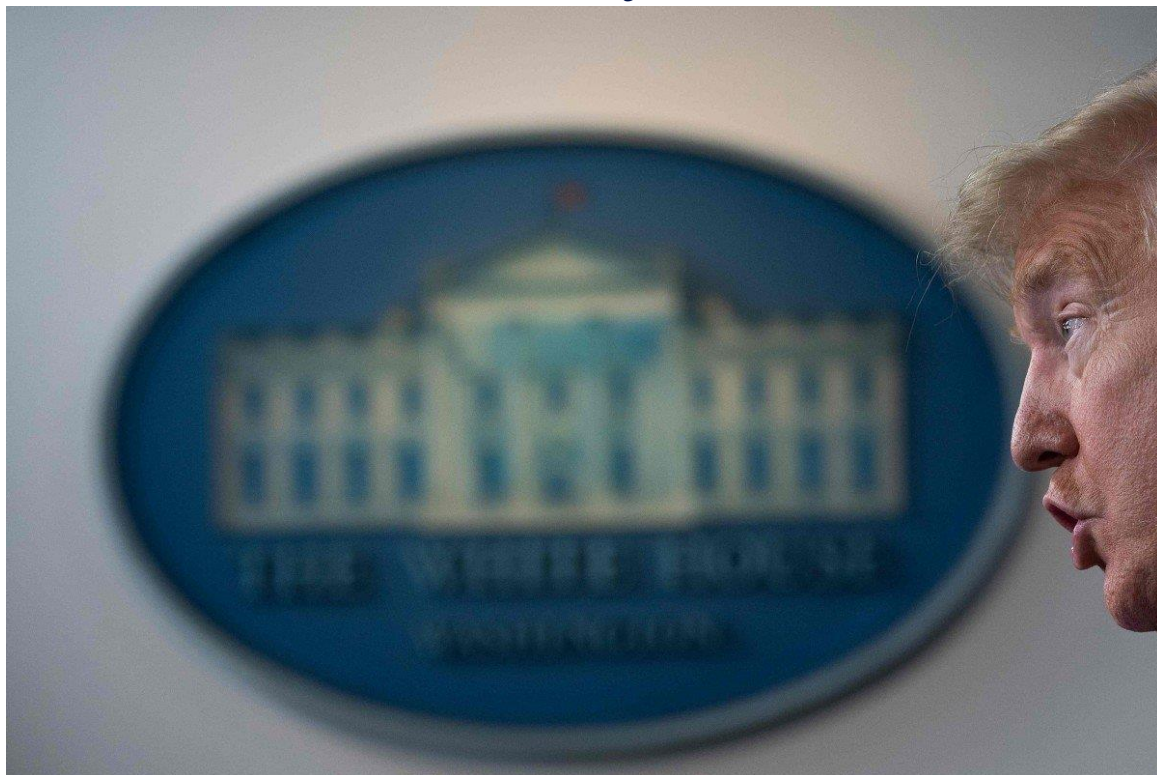


- Between the self-certain scientists and the voluble president, who should take charge during the Covid-19 crisis? To give credit where it's due, Donald Trump's wish for an end to lockdown measures is politically sound

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Published: 3:00am, 7 Apr, 2020

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US President Donald Trump speaks during a briefing on the novel coronavirus at the White House on April 4. Photo: AFP

In a sincere effort to offer a dollop of sympathy for the American president caught in the vice of the coronavirus crisis, let's start with a story about science policy and genius dolphins. It concerns the arrogance of scientists.

More than half a century ago, when the book publishing business was emboldened by larger-than-

life editors such as Simon & Schuster's Michael Korda, a short but unnerving book titled *The Voice of the Dolphins* came out – yes, from Simon & Schuster.

The fictional plot of the title story: an international panel of scientists stuns the world with a report that the complex language of chatty dolphins held in Sea-World-type captivity has been decoded; and this particular school of dolphins, with unbelievably high IQs, chirpily responds to all manner of controversial political questions posed.

The first proposal from the talkative dolphins is for immediate global nuclear disarmament, so goes the story by émigré physicist Leo Szilard (1898-1964), who was especially famous for his glittering achievements in nuclear engineering and weapons development.

Other amazing ideas seemingly spout forth from the dolphins, whose policy views, remarkably, echo precisely those of the scientists asking the questions. So you get the idea.

Half a century later, I still adore the ingenious plot of the story, but its basic assumption troubles me too. Implicit in Szilard's ironic tale is the conviction that the policies of scientists, if religiously followed by politicians and the public, would solve many of the world's problems.

It is precisely this sense of scientists' superiority that one gets from the press briefings on the pandemic at the White House, hosted by the voluble Donald Trump, but with recurring guests Anthony Fauci and Deborah Birx, the scientists and rock stars of the White House coronavirus task force.

With self-certainty – though devoid of the sinuous charm of chirpy dolphins – the duo put up more graphs than economists and throw out more varying figures than annuity salesmen.

Poor Trump looks on, shifting the centre of his weight back and forth, as if expecting to hear from an overbearing high school counsellor that his bad grade in chemistry means summer school.

Reclaiming the podium, he lends his weight to various declamations, trying to regain presidential gravity, but then veering off in a confusing start-stop flight path to here and there, sometimes to unrelated matters.

And yet, those watching want him to go on as long as he wants – oh, the White House press corps, hardbitten, sadistic and vengeful, watching him and waiting to witness, at some dramatic point, a presidential collapse.

Trump, to be fair, is no physicist: uncertainty principles are alien to this politician's basic instincts. He is sad to see his "beautiful" American economy being eaten up by little things he cannot lash out at, or even understand. For this is the day of the viral locusts, and he hates what they are doing to his economic growth charts.

The president's repeated wish is for this agony's end, well before the end of time, and the end of the lockdown of our lives so we can get on with what remains of them. Trump is right to think that proper scientific judgments are not automatically correct political ones.

The problem is that Trump doesn't have the bandwidth to articulate such a nuanced position. Governance in this technocratic age is really hard; not everyone has the tool kit for it. Trump is best at selling condos, not concepts.

He is, then, a sort of stumbling rebel – restlessly looking for definitive (if annoying) ways to stand apart. “Our country wasn't built to be shut down,” he says.

“This is not a country that was built for this.” But true rebellion must be founded on a set of principles. Trump doesn't have time for that: he wants to get us back to work even if the time is not exactly right, and to experiment with drugs on people before their safety can be 100 per cent guaranteed.

This is less evidence of unhinged incompetence than of unnuanced thinking. As French physician and philosopher Georges Canguilhem (1904-1995) would insist, rebellion is an ethical matter. It must lead us to higher levels of reason and conceptuality. True heroism must be founded on universal principles, not personal agenda, not ego.

For all this, an unsettling worry lingers: should we wish politicians to all but abdicate when it seems as if this is precisely the moment for scientists to take charge? For many of us, after these past weeks of languorous lockdown, this is the pertinent question.

In a coronavirus primary, sure, my money would go on top health officials Fauci and Birx – not Trump. But what if the scientific consensus is (innocently) wrong, and the diagnosis of the plague incomplete or even flawed – what if the ameliorative or curative measures, advertised as the way out of the crisis, turn out to lengthen the lockdown rather than relieve it?

About two weeks ago, Trump insisted to reporters during a White House briefing that “America will, again, and soon, be open for business. Very soon. A lot sooner than three or four months that somebody was suggesting.”

Has science – as magnificent as it can be – never been wrong in a big way? Is the scientist automatically as smart and wise as the genius dolphin?

Let's keep a measure of social distance from that conceit. Just as the president admits he is “not a doctor”, our brilliant scientists must admit they are not genius dolphins but sometimes fallible humans. We all have to work with whatever we have.

Tom Plate, Loyola Marymount University's Distinguished Scholar of Asian and Pacific Affairs, has taught all his university classes over the internet during the past few weeks