

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post on Tuesday, March 24, 2020.

Opinion

How Donald Trump's incompetence breeds coronavirus denial in the US



- When students on spring break rebel against social distancing measures, it may be because the US administration does not inspire trust
- Although Trump fancies himself as a 'wartime president', he doesn't quite understand the enemy he is up against

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Illustration: Craig Stephens

Adept moral leadership at the top, whether in Washington or Hong Kong, is central to any serious public health strategy. As the poet W.B. Yeats wrote in 1919, “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world...”

Some 100 years later, here we are, all of us more or less in the coronavirus crisis together, even as many of us have all but ankle-braceleted ourselves to our homes.

We are socially distanced in the extreme – spaced out by this new world order. The erosion of the authority of Donald Trump's presidency proceeds apace, the poignancy heightened now by the unexpectedly higher stakes.

In the United States last week, young college students on spring break blatantly ignored or rebelled against the social distancing recommendations of the authorities by crowding beaches or jamming public parks.

But there may be more to this than adolescent irresponsibility. It may be that the system of governance, to many young (as well as some older) Americans, lacks sufficient credibility and trustworthiness. In effect, incompetence could breed “corona criminals”: felony plague-spreaders.

With the Trump administration in power, the credibility issue is not just at the forefront, it has been thrust into the spotlight by the public health crisis. The almost daily pandemic task force briefings from the White House have brought both informative ups and embarrassing downs: Anthony Fauci, respected National Institutes of Health immunologist, telling it like it is, and Trump telling it like it isn't.

Fauci's comforting command of the issues and facts notwithstanding, the White House show frequently paled in comparison with other briefings – especially the densely factual seminars by Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York, who memorably said: “We are all first responders.”

Good work seems to mark some European and Asian presentations. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, prior to her own self-quarantine, addressed her nation in a speech widely admired for her grip on facts and reality.

In Asia, the governments of Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen are shepherding their publics through the crisis with clarity and competence. The practice of governance may not be as deep as pilot wave theory, but it takes brains as well as guts to get thing right. The coronavirus, said Lee, “is going to catch fire in many countries, and take a long time to burn out”.

The presidency of the United States remains an important position no matter who holds it, and US decisions can affect the world. While it makes little sense to exaggerate the deficiencies of the incumbent president, as the US media is wont to do, his intellectual shortcomings have become an increasing worry.

Confirmed Covid-19 cases

Total

349,451
cases

16,018
deaths

96,665
recovered

based on the WHO's Covid-19 situation reportsincludes presumptive cases*
Sources: WHO and health authorities

One suggestion for Trump: let others do the talking when a technical or medical point needs to be made; perhaps allowing yourself to become prisoner of your health advisers is not such a bad idea. Although the notion of being a “wartime president” appeals to your macho sensibility, you are not the best general against an enemy you can neither see nor clearly understand. Until relatively recently, you denied that a major coronavirus crisis was in the making. How can that be forgotten?

Nonetheless, many of us are doing what we are being told to do. The medical and public health authorities

command enormous respect. But this is generally less the case with the political authorities, most certainly in the US. There appears to be no potent vaccine against the epidemic of lying or blundering. In some parts of the world, this would seem true the higher you go; it may even be truest, in some places, the very highest you go.

How to objectively assess leadership qualities is the timely subject of a hot new book by the clear-thinking American academic Joseph S. Nye, Jr. The Harvard professor's latest opus, *Do Morals Matter? Presidents and Foreign Policy from FDR to Trump*, offers wisdom in his evaluation of 14 presidents since 1945.

A fair man, Nye recognises that a White House occupant has a tough job even in the best of times, and he is no political assassin. Of Trump, he says that "it is too soon to assess the benefits and thus do a balanced net assessment". But he notes that the incumbent president's lack of respect for institutions and truth has "produced a loss of soft power".

"Soft power", the term that Nye coined, describes the balm in any system that does not rely as heavily on compulsion and punishment as other systems.

A government that inspires little trust in this time of crisis endangers public health. We note how its representatives, assuming the mantle of governance, pose before all-absorbing and transmitting TV cameras. Officials speak in the instructional voice that we, the public, have conferred on them either by active consent or passive forbearance.

The idea is to follow their instructions, or bad things will happen. We either trust that their intentions are honourable, that their incoming data is accurate and that their comprehension as well as use of it is both realistic and proportional to the threat, or we ignore them entirely – and openly rebel. Incompetence of any sort, from any ideological side, can cut the cord of trust.

Trump lacks the credibility to lead this war in the US, much less the world. This is the grave political plague of the moment, and it is serious: a civic coronavirus that may even be contagious globally, rule by blowhard incompetence. It's no wonder he keeps dubbing it the "Chinese virus". His idea of the best defence is often an obnoxious offence.

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