



# A Very Political Virus: Trumpism's Ridiculous Response to COVID-19

By Alex Roberts



I can't tell for certain, but the ambulance sirens seem to keep increasing, not with the incessant wails reported in New York, but a creeping feeling that something is on the rise.

Here, in the state of Wisconsin, on April 6th, the Democratic Governor, Tony Evers, fearing the worst in light of the COVID-19 crisis, passed an executive order to postpone the primary election, which took place on April 7th. Republicans had immediately taken the order to the state Supreme Court, and over turned it, forcing people to go to the polls.

Why? To align with Trump's political desires. With thousands of absentee ballots already thrown out, the primary election (which includes a key state Supreme Court seat) is one that could be decisive in what is sure to be a controversial, close and unprecedented presidential election in the fall. President Donald Trump had backed the Republican candidate publicly, and called for the people of Wisconsin to turn out to vote for him, despite COVID-19.

In a state with controversial voter ID laws (which disproportionately affect people of colour), this has made a stark choice all the more vivid - come vote if you dare tempt coronavirus or stay home and be disenfranchised.

That's where the screw really turns here: Donald Trump didn't just learn from the example of

Kenyan election farces; he studied and plagiarised them. (It makes sense that in this context, both the Kenyan ruling political elite and the Trump campaign were clients of Cambridge Analytica, the controversial firm whose use of unethical data mining tactics during elections have been exposed by the international media.)

Shown through the lens of an increasingly horrific pandemic, such election rigging is all the more grotesque. But it will soon be swept aside as another story of power grabbing, political manoeuvring over human life and bullshit grandstanding over the public good will utterly mar the last two months of the descent into the Age of the Coronavirus. An entire state just got thrown into an accelerated timeline of potentially being a horrific hotspot for the virus; the fates of potentially thousands of lives now sealed, there will be a push to promote a political agenda.

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The political leadership of East Africa could truly stand in awe at the utter Machiavellian dumbness of this narcissistic manoeuvre - as it is truly a Stalinesque effort. The problem inherent right now in the world's "best economy" is that politics has crept into the pandemic; the divisive nature of the discourse is such that it has spiraled downwards over the last five years. The election debacle in Wisconsin perfectly encapsulates the state of things right now in the US. In the year of a presidential election, pandemic tumult and constant political punching dominate.

All things are on equal footing, all things are intertwined, as Trump has made them to be. And as anyone with eyes or outside the administration can tell, it is going terribly. By the third week of May, the US had more than 1.5 million COVID-19 cases; of these, nearly 94,000 had died from the disease. Because the country is woefully inept at testing, more than a dozen states seem to be on the upward curve.

Where to start?

Even attempting to encapsulate the last several weeks in a sprawling critique seems to point in a million directions, so let's focus and dissect three key aspects of the response to coronavirus in the US more in depth:

### **The Trump administration playing dumb while being dumber**

First, Trump and his cohort have seemingly deliberately made a once distant threat of disease exponentially worse through denial, deceit, malice and twists so moronic they mystify the mind. (You can't expect a climate denier to have the brains to handle a scientific crisis). Trump's positions, like a fish left on the counter, grow in their stench as the days continue bloodily onward. His latest in a long string of travesties find him stumbling into the idea of injecting disinfectant into the human body to "clean it" of the virus. This latest gaffe, at least, was rooted more in idiocy than in cruelty, and was almost a welcome change towards comic relief after previous actions he's undertaken. Even so, despite what he and the American far right-wing culture say, the fact is that the White House is listened to by the public, and so poison control cases went up across several US states after Trump made this ridiculous claim.

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The most important aspect to emphasise here is the outright denial that carried over for approximately six weeks (and, according to some reports that leaked memos to the White House regarding the COVID-19 threat, possibly even longer). Trump's denial of the crisis was astounding, and to be frank, is still ongoing. Often, even in the days leading into May of 2020, the stance of the White House has been to express how things are improving, although they are clearly markedly getting worse for all to see. The optics hit the American public in the same vein as the Westgate mall terror attack crisis hit Kenya's. (The fires in the mall couldn't possibly be merely burning mattresses.)

Trump's reaction to the crisis helped spur what must be statistically the worst outbreak globally. As far as optics are concerned, his reaction can only be put alongside Bolsonaro's in Brazil and the Iranian regime's in terms of terminal dumbness, obtuse means-spiritedness and ineptitude. It is a denial of a natural disaster that I haven't seen at a leadership level since perhaps the 2011 drought ravaging northern Kenya; while the Kibaki administration and Kenya's Parliament seemed largely to sit and twiddle their thumbs, occasionally making a statement expressing their condolences, they promptly went back to bitching at one another.

On a daily basis, Trump lumbers out (despite constant efforts by Republican lawmakers to stop him), shouts mixed messages to a confused press corps, then screams at them for asking what he's talking about. The paranoia has reached levels of Daniel arap Moi in the 1980s; there are enemies within all corners, closing in, making the virus worse just to hurt him, the mounting deaths swept aside in importance so that the name of his brand not be tarnished by "haters".

Such a tone is a tonic for no one, least of all medical staff, who, despite all outward claims made by the administration, are in dire need of absolutely everything, with no end in sight. Random people are scrambling to adjust - there are weird stories of desperation and plugging in holes wherever the government fell abysmally flat. People sew masks and stockpile if they can afford to. There is mounting concern that the hospitals are so overwhelmed that people with other conditions are going ignored or skipping vital visits.

It is simply proving to be more than anyone bargained for, even for those who officially became doctors and nurses by taking the Hippocratic Oath. As an old friend, a resident nurse at a prominent Michigan hospital, told me in early March, "We're going to lose many doctors, nurses...people we already have a national shortage of. There are already conversations amongst healthcare providers, nurses, staff about what's worth the risk. None of us signed up to work in unprotected conditions. It is like walking onto a battlefield without anything, anything at all needed for the specific fight."

In the US, nurses, doctors and emergency medical technicians talk openly about going on strike, citing lack of protection - a move almost reminiscent of the series of strikes undertaken by medical workers in Kenya over employment conditions across the last several years. Even now, after months of the obvious from a multitude of voices, the Trump administration comes out and yells about its successes in the very areas that are the depths of its failure.

Think about this: over the last several weeks, Trump has ignored the virus, then fought to reopen the economy; he has blamed Democrats, yelled at the media on a daily basis, and called the virus a conspiracy to get him out of office; he has supported rebellion in several US states, encouraged primary elections to go forward and given his son-in-law (who has been cited by multiple researchers as an utter failure) a more prominent role in the COVID-19 response than any scientific expert.

All this while the high-ranking members of his party and surrounding hangers-on float ideas, such as the federal US government not owing states supplies (although states make up the US) and for states themselves to go bankrupt.

It has, for all intents and purposes, been a showing so abysmal and wrong-headed at every conceivable level that there is already talk that the last two months may have permanently crippled the GOP and will push them out of political relevance permanently as the US becomes a more diverse and younger country moving into the middle decades of the 21st century.

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It is now growing harder to see how the current administration will get its collective act together (even though it urgently needs to do so) as the virus continues to pound the US in the coming months.

### **Clear cracks in the US system**

Over the years, many friends have told me that they have wanted to go to the United States - to study, to work, to whatever. Universally, I've told them all to look elsewhere. All the flaws in the American Death Star have been highlighted by the Trump administration, including inherent societal problems, susceptibility to totalitarian blowhards, racial inequity, horrific economic disparity, capitalism's exploitative nature, and the fundamental flaws in the US system of governance itself.

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The last several weeks have proven the "far left types" (myself included) correct - although few of us could have imagined such a rapid descent. America, "the most powerful nation on Earth", is inherently unequal, terminally flawed and fetishises money to a disgusting level. There are rampant stories of businesses closing, predatory loans, and debt claims coming out of life-saving stimulus money.

The very governmental system has shown itself to be labyrinthine, a truth only accelerated by capitalism, Trumpism and, let's face it, the modern Republican Party.

Take medical care, where is an ugly Catch-22 at play. People are broke, and the American medical system is the most expensive in the world. People need healthcare and tests, but the fear of the cost often outweighs the fear of a deadly virus. The one thing that could correct the economy (testing) is avoided because of the state of the economy (both before the crisis and into it).

States compete against each other to get supplies while the government sells off its supplies to companies in order for the companies to sell them back to the government for distribution to the states. All this is happening while the government is questioning whether the states really need the supplies, and possibly favouring some states that favour Trump and his cronies politically. It is the kind of nightmarish inaction that would even make Kafka stir in his grave.

The medical system itself has been brought to its knees. Walking around a few weeks ago, I saw two ambulance crews going into houses, all wearing masks, every one of them looking well beyond their breaking points.

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This, in a well-to-do city with several prominent functioning hospitals run by competent individuals. This is not the case in all US states and cities, but the most glaringly obtuse responses are coming from Republican-held legislatures.

An inherent problem in the US is that smaller states skew Republican votes, hold equal power in the Senate, and elect increasingly bigger idiots and inept climate sceptics while carving up districts to benefit their own hold on power. This has proven true in South Dakota, where the Republican Governor, resistant to social distancing, has seen an outbreak of more than 500 cases in a single pork processing plant.

It has also rung true in Florida, where Governor Ron DeSantis, himself a loyal Trumpian, resisted calls within his state to close down because the state with the high geriatric population could be hit catastrophically. Instead he waited for Trump's go ahead, even as White House press conferences repeatedly turned into unbalanced, unhinged name-calling sessions while Trump himself denied the true impact of the virus and prematurely called for the economy to reopen. DeSantis has since given a "stay-at-home" order and ordered that World Wrestling Entertainment be continued as an essential service, alongside grocery stores, banks, hospitals, and the fire department.

It inherently means that while some states (such as California, Ohio and Washington) reacted with preemptive speed and some (like Maryland, New York and New Jersey) have risen to the challenge admirably after it began to spiral, other states may keep up the perpetual game of whack-a-mole indefinitely through their own failings.

In many of these states, particularly those with large black communities (New York, New Jersey, Michigan), the disparities have grown even more stark. It is a discrepancy in standards that can almost be compared to the lack of resources afforded to Western Kenya; there are some areas of focus, but if you're not of a certain set, a constant less will be your systemic truth.

This has become all the more clear in the American situation. Ugly reports have seeped out about black and minority individuals being less likely to receive coronavirus testing, care or access to the same medical treatment as whites. In turn, this has led to minority and lower class communities being slammed by this virus disproportionately, sometimes at shocking rates. In hardest hit New York City, some reports show people of colour dying at double the rate of white people.

It has also shown the true insidious nature of the political divide under the Trump administration. From powerful corners on the right, there have been ideas floated to defund Democratic states for reasons that are still unclear beyond the spectrum of unbelievable political pettiness. Take Trump's Twitter gem on April 27th: "Why should the people and taxpayers of America be bailing out poorly run states (like Illinois, as example) and cities, in all cases Democrat run and managed, when most of the other states are not looking for bailout help? I am open to discussing anything, but just asking?" The irony that states like Illinois are also American is an irony that may or may not be lost upon the Republican Party.

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large corporations.

There seems to be something tectonic happening, although it is yet to be seen if it will prove to be beneficial or harmful to the public good after the scourge of COVID finally recedes.

## **Trump sinks the world**

The final key takeaway: that in this globalised world, Trumpism in the Age of Coronavirus may be gasoline poured onto the fire of a worldwide catastrophe in bizarre ways that are only beginning to be spelled out now, but which could have dire ramifications globally, including in East Africa.

The virus has already shifted from the West down and into the Southern hemisphere, with the level of consequence yet to be seen. While some credit must be given to the swift action taken in many African countries (such as closing borders and reinstating Ebola protocols), the reaction of some governments has taken on a definitively Western tint: doing what works for them while simultaneously ignoring the economic realities in their own backyards.

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China, of course, has borne the brunt of the blame, and perhaps in the long term, ensured the nation's dominance over global influence (especially in sub-Saharan Africa, a focus of Beijing).

Given this, the failings of countries such as the US should be looked at as a warning. Where society fails to protect, advantage shall be taken, and swiftly. Just this month, the US cut off funding to the World Health Organization (WHO), a UN body where US contributions constitute approximately 20 per cent of the budget. Make no mistake about Trump and his ilk – he abandoned us Americans, and, as his recent cut in funding to WHO showed, he won't think twice about abandoning the rest of the world too. There will be no gestures of international goodwill coming from the Trump administration, something that is leading to feelings of unease within spheres of the diplomatic community. It can be seen already, with valuable protective equipment being intercepted from going abroad; those ugly protectionist and isolationist instincts are taking over.

This move just proves that the ugliness of Trumpism is, unfortunately, not localised within US borders; there is no quarantining this administration. Such isolationism and xenophobia will get downright dangerous when (for instance) a global pandemic, a historic economic crisis and a once-in-a-century locust swarm hits the East African region simultaneously with full force in the coming months.

On top of this, the Trump administration's policies have helped to undercut the already stretched-thin medical systems of the developing world. In Kenya, for instance, a major pillar of funding for blood donations and subsequent transfusions has already been cut. It is unlikely to be restored under a Republican White House.

In times of crisis, the failings of this White House will become starker. In the years to come, it may come to light that the mishandling of this crisis by the Trump administration accelerated the economic and health ramifications of COVID-19 and spiraled the global system further on its downward trajectory. If the West has been brought to its knees, the United States seems hell-bent on sinking itself lower, swamping the world as well.

Once the US industrial machine finds footing and produces the needed testing, masks, ventilators and medication (it will, despite the Trump administration, not because of it), the White House will surely rapidly pivot to “these must be kept to protect us”, the same shortsighted dumbness that will both kill people by the tens of thousands in the developing world, and serve to perpetuate the virus once it circulates around the global channels again, inevitably circling back into America, which, when led by such an inept head of the federal government, will be “totally unaware, because it is *your* fault anyway” and the cycle will continue until a vaccine is developed or Trump is finally cast out of the White House.

The latter option, while knocking on every piece of wood within reach, is becoming increasingly viable. In that same bastardisation of an election in Wisconsin – the one that was blatantly rigged and dangerous – Jill Karofsky, the Democratic candidate for the Supreme Court, landed an improbable victory, and a massive one. Winning by more than 150,000 votes and a margin of more than 10 per cent (which is much higher due to factors such as voter suppression and the throwing out of ballots) in the swing state of Wisconsin, which narrowly went for Trump in 2016, gives hope that a rational person can get back behind the wheel of the White House as early as January of next year. It may be an early indication that Trumpism has overstayed its welcome in the time of corona, and that a more sensible America may emerge again.

Even so, while there may be some glimmer of better heads coming to the table in the US, this is far from certain. The fear is that the damage to the world from a single man with bad hair may be irreparable.

This is the truest shame of the US side of this initial chapter of coronavirus: that it has truly shown the goodness of the people of the country who as individual citizens and communities have largely reacted admirably, at times even heroically, to meet the challenge head on. Their efforts couldn't have been wasted on a worse leader. What progress they make locally gets undercut nationally.

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As Trump and his cronies continue to cast blame, ban immigrants and defund international health organisations, there may be a truly long fight ahead. It may become a situation akin to an unruly drunk desperately trying to break everything just to ruin the vibe of a party as he is forced out of the gathering.

If nothing else, this crisis proves that the American model is an utter failure. Anyone who wishes to emulate its foray into neoliberalism will wind up in a similar ruin.

And the ambulances will continue coming.

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