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Trump's Megalomania and Boris Johnson's Incompetence Have Only Increased in COVID Pandemic



Photograph Source: The White House – Public Domain

The US and UK are the nation states that have performed worst in the world in coping with the coronavirus pandemic. Americans and Britons make up more than a third of the 300,000 people worldwide who have died from Covid-19. They have paid the ultimate price for their governments' slow and incompetent response to the spread of the disease. Both countries have obvious points in common that explain their excess fatalities: Donald Trump and Boris Johnson are nativist demagogues skilled in winning elections, but not in

coping with real crises as opposed to the ones they invent or exaggerate. Their critics had long predicted disaster if either man became national leader and this has finally happened. I had thought that Trump and later Johnson were safer than they looked so long as they avoided real crises. I was thinking primarily of wars, probably in the Middle East, in the case of Trump. But for all his verbal belligerence towards Iran, he has stopped just short of a full-scale military conflict over the last three years.

In the case of Johnson, I believed that he would muddle through and, if there was a true crisis it would be to do with a no-deal Brexit. This seemed unlikely because he has a track record of carrying out U-turns and retreats while announcing famous victories: this week the government quietly admitted that there would indeed be border checks between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, though Johnson had repeatedly denied conceding this as the price of last October's withdrawal agreement with the European Union.

It was the pandemic that turned Trump's and Johnson's character and behavioural flaws into lethal failings that have since killed many people. Both had risen to power by skilfully exploiting nativist fears and ambitions and scapegoating foreigners at home and abroad. They had become like a pair of conmen who have been successfully peddling lies and fantasies, but who must suddenly grapple with a highly-dangerous reality.

In Graham Greene's novel *Our Man in Havana*, an amiable British businessman selling vacuum cleaners in pre-Castro Cuba bamboozles MI6 by inventing a string of well-paid secret agents. He passes off his scaled-up drawing of a vacuum cleaner as a mysterious weapon of mass destruction. As an accidental conman, he believes that he is safe from trouble because neither his agents nor the secret they have discovered actually exist, but because there are those who believe his imaginings, he unexpectedly has to deal with a dangerous reality in which real people begin to die.

Trump and Johnson are both like Greene's conman in that they suddenly had to deal with a real crisis instead of a fictional one. Unsurprisingly, they have been manifestly incompetent in doing so with the result that their highly-developed countries lead the world in the number of deaths. In dealing with the all-too-real lethal coronavirus, they have not only done worse than powerful well-resourced states like Germany and South Korea, but also worse than poor and weak ones like Slovakia in Europe and Kerala in India.

Neither leader has risen to the challenge. Instead, it is the most negative and damaging aspects of their personalities that have become more pronounced under pressure. Trump was always self-obsessed, mendacious and authoritarian, but he has visibly turned into a ranting megalomaniac in the last five months.

Johnson, for his part, was always a shambolic opportunist, at one moment aping Shakespeare's Falstaff and, at another, Winston Churchill in 1940, but it is the present catastrophe that made his poor judgement and contempt for facts such a lethal combination.

Trump's performance is the more extraordinary: for long he denied the seriousness of the outbreak, refused to coordinate measures against it, publicised crackpot ideas on how to cure it, ignored or dismissed experts trying fight the virus. The government scientist, Rick Bright, once in charge of the critical task of developing a vaccine against coronavirus, testified this week before congress about how he was sacked because, among other reasons, he refused to endorse an anti-malaria drug favoured as an antidote for Covid-19 by Trump without any scientific evidence.

The main US public health institution, the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), once played a crucial role in combating malaria and polio. But today it is led by Robert Redfield, a Trump appointee, who once controversially headed the Pentagon's response to HIV-Aids in the 1980s. When Trump horrified doctors in April by suggesting that coronavirus victims inject themselves with disinfectant, the CDC showed the degree to which it had been cowed into submission by contenting itself with reasserting that consumers should read the instructions that come with the medicine.

Because half of Americans – and a higher proportion in the rest of the world – have always thought of Trump as a crackpot, the moment that this transformed into dangerous mania has not had the impact it might have had otherwise. Even so, it is extraordinary to watch Trump – like that Roman Emperor who claimed to have conquered the sea – boast of great American victories over the virus.

Johnson's political approach has always been a muted and cosier version of Trumpism, adapted to British political conditions. Both men are political campaigners of proven effectiveness. plugging into nativist fears and ambitions. In contrast to Trump's divisiveness, Johnson specialises in appeals to national unity and support for the NHS,

yet the consequence of having these two leaders in office during the pandemic has in both cases been a great number of people dying.

What Trump's terrifying megalomania has achieved in the US is being replicated in the UK by the drip-drip of government incompetence and poor decision-making: the slow response to the onset of the epidemic, the lack of equipment, the famously inadequate number of tests. Daily press conferences were at first seen as a sign of government openness, but it has since become apparent that the confident-looking ministers and health officials did not know how many people were infected or had died.

Foolish decisions led to the shifting of 15,000 untested elderly patients from hospital to care homes where they inevitably infected others. Heroic but untested carers and nurses became the unwitting carriers of the disease to patients and each other. Much of this was obvious to anybody with common sense which was why so many seriously ill people decided not to go near a hospital and have died at home.

In the first half of March government policy was based on establishing herd immunity on the assumption that 60 per cent of the population would be infected. But the inadequacy of the information on which they were taking life-and-death decisions was exposed this week when the Office for National Statistics published a survey showing that coronavirus is less infectious than supposed and only 0.27 per cent of the population have got it.

Trump's lust for power has inflicted a far worse epidemic on Americans than would have happened otherwise; the incompetence of Johnson's Brexiteer administration has done much the same in Britain.

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