

From the early 20th century until now, leaders of democracies have been confronted with deadly epidemics. The US had Yellow Fever, Cholera, and the 1918 great Spanish Flu. (This is the one that President Trump stubbornly miscalls the 1917 flu.)

Every president took these epidemics seriously, and followed the best advice of health services to mitigate the damage. They cared about human life. That is what leaders do, don't they?

Today's pandemic is giving us a different picture: populist dictators and wannabe dictators seem to be working from the same playbook. They share common traits: concern only for themselves, maintaining popularity, increasing their power, and avoiding blame.

Deny or belittle epidemic. China led the way in this, initially hushing up any information about this new virus, punishing the doctor who tried to alert the country. Once this cat was out of the bag, the Chinese authoritarians then, without opposition, shut down the province that was the epicenter. They resorted to brutality if any citizen resisted their orders to lock down. They then did a very responsible thing: permitted their scientists to unscramble the DNA of this new virus and publish the results to the world, in the hope of developing a vaccine.

Boris Johnson, Britain's Prime Minister. Mr. Johnson, a bleached hair clone of Donald Trump, denied the danger of this epidemic and tried to look manly by ignoring it. He tried letting it play out, putting his country's economy before their population's infections. Since only the elderly seemed threatened, the country could afford to lose a generation of grandparents. This was a reasonable price to pay.

Johnson himself contracted the disease and nearly died from it! The nation's health services were so overwhelmed by the sick and dying that Johnson belatedly had to do what he should have done at first: order shelter at home and work to develop a vaccine. Britain is second only to the United States in the percentage of people with the disease (that we know of without proper testing) and their death toll.

Donald Trump. Using the same playbook as Boris Johnson, Trump ignored the warnings of his health services and national security experts, publicly downplaying the danger. He was compelled by the lethality and speed of contagion of this new virus to stop saying that it would "miraculously go away" when spring came.

Trump cares much more about how he looks to his base and getting reelected than he does about the sick and dying. But he runs the risk of winding up like Johnson: infected by his valet and the Vice President infected by two aides who are now testing positive.

Trump publicly belittles "testing" and makes no apology for not using his power to produce tests, yet we now know that he and his VP are tested daily. They matter, not the rest of us, who do not know our status. Although he is assuredly exposed, he refuses to wear a mask, endangering others. Wearing a mask protects others, not a concern of his.

Vladimir Putin. Using the same playbook, Putin has denied the danger of this pandemic and, since he controls the press, has covered up the numbers. Russia's pandemic has gotten so dire that his coverup no longer works. Three Russian doctors recently threw themselves out of hospital windows, infected and in despair. There is scarcity of protective gear, ventilators, and even common medicines. But Trump has secretly sent ventilators and scarce protective gear to his friend, Putin, whom he seems to owe.

Real Dictators. Brazil's pandemic denier, President Jair Bolsonaro, tried to hide the statistics. Now, with thousands of confirmed cases, he is shutting down one Brazilian city. The death toll is burgeoning.

Hungary's dictator, along with denial and suppression of the press, has found a scapegoat: immigrants. The same with Philippine President, Duterte, who is using this emergency to grab more power. He, Trump, and others like him attack the press, remove judges, and fire experts who try to tell the truth.

Happily, Trump is only an aspiring dictator. The press, congress, and voters will have the last word.

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