

MARK HELPRIN: A STRATEGY FOR THE U.S.

# NATIONAL REVIEW

## THE BATTLE OF COVID-19



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system of government in this country remain wholly relevant—yes, “even” during a pandemic. It is as true today as it was three months ago that the United States is home to an extraordinary patchwork of people and places, and that these people and places require different governance. It is as true today as it was three months ago that the most efficient way to glean political information is to place oneself as close to the source as is possible. And it is as true today as it was three months ago that our trust in our institutions is linked inextricably to their proximity to us. These are extraordinary times, yes, and we

I have never been fond of Louis Brandeis’s famous suggestion that federalism allows the states to serve as “laboratories of experimentation” because I have always recoiled at the implication that there is a “correct” answer that might be divined by one polity and then applied equally to all the others. The purpose of federalism is not to allow the arbiters of taste to tinker until they find a solution and then to export that solution universally, but to allow citizens who have differing conceptions of the good life to live peacefully together under the same flag. And

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are witnessing the government take extraordinary measures. But it is a blessing that these measures are being taken by people who are of our communities. The best way to learn a language is to immerse yourself in it, not to read a book about it. So it is with politics. As a rule, local officials comprehend the language and tone of their localities in a way that faraway experts simply cannot. “I need you to stay inside for a while” sounds a lot less threatening from a guy with an accent similar to your own.

And it sounds even *less* threatening when coming from the guy who lives down the road. So relentless has been the focus on whether this official or that official has given this order or that order that we have largely ignored just how much spontaneous self-organizing has taken place over the last month. I have watched with mild irritation as the governor of Florida has been criticized in the national press for waiting until April to issue a stay-at-home order, the apparent assumption of his critics being that until the order was finalized we Floridians were living it up with abandon. Rest assured that we weren’t. Where I live, the restaurants closed a month ago, the beaches and the malls closed three weeks ago, and the liquor store has had a “Don’t panic-buy” warning in its window since the end of March. By the time that Governor DeSantis made it official that we are expected to stay in our houses, I wanted to ask him, “Sure, as opposed to what?”

yet, I have thought of late that the coronavirus outbreak represents a happy exception to that objection. Indeed, here the word “laboratory” applies quite literally. All of us, irrespective of background, wish to see the end of the pandemic. Where we may differ is in *how* we aim to do that, and in what measures we deem appropriate given our circumstances. New York City, by its nature, will require different rules than will rural Wyoming. States with beaches will inspire different behavior than will states with landlocked plains. Texas, as ever, is a different place from California.

The federal government has a real role to play in this crisis. It must remain firmly in charge of our immigration policy, of our foreign policy, of interstate air travel, and of all the other areas that cannot practically be divided by 50. It can borrow money, which makes it an ideal purveyor of monetary relief measures. It can serve as a central coordinator between the states, in such cases as they wish to act in concert with one another. And it can get out of the way by lifting many of the restrictions that, little by little, its agencies have inflicted upon the country over the last century or so. It should not, however, be regarded as a panacea or a scapegoat. It has a job to do, and it must do that job well. Beyond that, it must be seen as what it is: one cog, in a larger machine, with a flawed human being at its control panel.

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# Who Should Lead Us?

*The crisis should make us question our assumptions on that*

BY JOHN HILLEN

**A**s a leadership professor who has served as a senior government official or CEO through several crises, I’ve been asked a number of times recently to “grade” our leaders during the coronavirus pandemic. I sometimes run through principles of good leadership in a crisis and try to match them to the conduct of our leaders (over-communicate, be realistically optimistic, bring order to chaos, lead from the front, represent all stakeholders on their terms, plan for both the short and the long term, demonstrate grit, pivot when needed, etc.). The general verdict? A mixed bag.

After a few rounds of this, I realized that this parlor game misses the bigger leadership lesson for our nation. What the coronavirus crisis reveals is that popular elections will always deliver a random sampling of leadership competence in our top officials. We *hope* that politicians elected for one set of reasons turn out to be good at a different job in a crisis, but it’s really a lottery.

Regardless of their personal qualities or backgrounds, elected political leaders are often uniquely ill suited to lead in a crisis—they always feel the pull of political temptation, they have limited tools at their disposal, and their temperament and training may be a poor match for the moment. Politics is their craft, and the ultimate political measurement, almost the sole standard for judging their success or failure, is *Were you reelected?*

The temptation to “never let a crisis go to waste” is overwhelming. On both the right and the left, everyone with a theory of government is maintaining that the coronavirus crisis proves his point. Those with seniority or power take the opportunity to commit spending or policy to their

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goals. They have few other tools to use. As Trump's wrestling with private industry over producing ventilators and masks has shown, the governmental tools available to politicians are limited in a country that is still largely private and commercial.

Political temptation will color any president's crisis management. Even our most sainted presidents made profoundly political decisions during national crises. In 1942, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt pleaded with a skeptical General George C. Marshall about his controversial decision to invade North Africa. "Please make it before Election Day!" Roosevelt instructed Marshall. When the military failed to meet that goal, for logistical and operational reasons, Roosevelt's press secretary lashed out at the Army chief of staff, telling him, "You almost lost us control of Congress by the delay."

So, too, with some of Lincoln's wartime decisions, and where does one even start with Lyndon Baines Johnson and the Vietnam War?

Temperament is also an inherent issue. The successful crisis leader is magnanimous in outlook and broad-minded and nondiscriminatory in his stakeholder management, accepts responsibility, and doesn't play or tolerate the blame game. The best ones are composed—even serene in their disposition—and in their decision-making find a balance between decisiveness and measurement. At times our most visible leaders in this crisis—President Trump, Governors Andrew Cuomo and Gavin Newsom—have struck these chords.

At other times, often within the same press conference, these officials and others have descended to petty political bickering, finger-pointing, and naked political positioning. It is not clear to me that they fully know when they depart from one realm of leadership style and go into the other.

There is nothing inherently wrong with politicians as a class or as individuals, and they tend to be skilled at their craft. Some have extraordinary backgrounds. At question for us is not their personal character but rather whether their craft and the way it is practiced is a good training ground for the executive competencies and temperament that one needs to be a good leader in a crisis. In the Army we said, "You will fight as you train."

There is, of course, a chance that leaders elected for a certain job in a certain

setting will turn out to be effective at an entirely different job in a different setting entirely. It is also possible to reduce the element of chance. What if we as a nation were able to do what most institutions do to have the right leaders in the right place at the right time? A popular election to pick political leaders who then must lead in crisis is probably the third-worst way to select a good executive in a crisis—trailing only birthright and seniority. To paraphrase the old Irish joke, if it's great crisis leaders that we are after, one might not want to start from here.

In commerce, education, nonprofits, entertainment, the military, and other institutions, we *select* rather than *elect*. Stakeholders sketch out the executive skills, competencies, and backgrounds they would like to see in their leaders, given the relevant setting and the goals they wish to achieve, and then select the best match. It's not a perfect process, but psychometric testing and other deliberate methods have helped hone and focus it.

A democratic election is of course a kind of selection. But the selection criteria we exercise as voters have but a peripheral connection to the qualities and attributes we may want from leaders in a crisis. In electing leaders, we rarely make our decision based on the premise of the Hillary Clinton campaign ad about that 3 A.M. phone call. As for elected officials themselves, as *Wall Street Journal* columnist Daniel Henninger has noted, "no national leader plans to be in a position like this."

Plato cautioned against popular election for leaders, advocating a public-leadership-selection model perhaps seen in its modern form in the rigorous training and meritocracy of Singapore's leaders.

For their part, the American Founders had no interest in Plato's ideal city-state leadership solution, but they obsessed over the problem he raised, seeing a bad track record for popularly elected leaders through history. James Madison made strong appeals to the people to virtuously select or accept Plato-style wise leaders. The effect of a republic, as opposed to direct democracy, would be to "refine and enlarge the public views, by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country, and whose patriotism and love of justice, will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations."



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Other Founders were more overtly dismissive of direct democracy—perhaps foreseeing the situation that Luke Wilson portrays in the 2006 satiric film *Idiocracy*. The worry over the passions of the mob and the vices of the people, and the ability of politicians to play on them, led to a design for the federal government that subjected only about half of the new federal government to popular election. In the end, the Founders sought to limit—through federalism, the Constitution, and republicanism—the power of popularly elected leaders.

But we're not going back in history to a Senate elected by state legislatures or to changing our system, which has become increasingly democratic, even if popular election has only a random chance of putting the right executive in the right job during a crisis. So what can be done to help better align the tasks at hand in a national crisis with the executive skills and experiences of those who lead during it? How can we find nonpartisan and experienced executives with the right competencies not just to advise but to have the two kinds of power that matter most in public governance—budget authority and legal authority? Senator Chuck Schumer wants a military czar. *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman has suggested a national-unity cabinet, which would really be nothing more than an exercise in political balancing that would not meet the lack of executive fit and talent.

A better model might be something like the example of Bill Knudsen in World War II. In 1940, there was hardly an elected politician in America at any level who knew how to wage a world war against multiple enemies, with new technology and methods, and to supply the Allies with most of their materials. But they knew where to find that talent. FDR recruited Knudsen, the head of General Motors, to direct war production for the U.S. He was made an instant three-star general and given full authority to create what became known as the “arsenal of democracy.” He was one of many leaders who had that experience during the war.

An executive-talent model could work today if we were to be creative in taking advantage of the leadership talent and executive experience in the country. And to remind all our political leaders that we don't need politics from them right now, we need leadership.

# What Is the Value of Public Education?

*Now seems like a good time to ask*

BY FREDERICK M. HESS

A WEEK after COVID-19 prompted the closure of Virginia's schools, my five-year-old's Montessori teacher started doing 30 minutes of Zoom with the class on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings. The content is nothing to write home about. The teacher reads a story, talks a bit about daffodils or frogs, and might celebrate a kid's birthday.

But, you know what? The first morning, Grayson was utterly transfixed. He shyly extended his hand to touch his teacher's face on the iPad. He giggled when she said good morning to him. He bounced as he pointed out each classmate in his or her little Zoom box. Watching this, I found myself choking back tears.

Humans are social creatures. A primary task for schools is to help ensure that socialization takes a productive, healthy direction. That's been widely recognized at least since Plato first sketched his fascist fantasy of schooling in *The Republic*. Even before the coronavirus, schools have been taking on more and more of this burden as civil society has atrophied, with schools asked to play the role once more widely shouldered by churches, Boy Scout troops, and 4-H clubs.

But socialization is hardly the only purpose of schooling: Schools are also, of course, the places where we expect youth to learn the knowledge, skills, and habits needed to be responsible, autonomous citizens. Lots of adults in a community—from cousins to coaches—may be able to mentor a kid or provide a shoulder to cry on. Few, outside of educators, are prepared to coherently teach algebra, biology, or Spanish.

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Schools have always struggled to balance these two missions. Indeed, one can read the story of American education as one of tension between the social and the academic.

Benjamin Rush, signatory of the Declaration of Independence and founder of Dickinson College, may be the poster boy for this distinction. In his “Plan for the Establishment of Public Schools and the Diffusion of Knowledge in Pennsylvania,” Rush called for a free school to be established in every Pennsylvania township and for universal education to be provided at public expense.

But Rush's aim was not universal learning—which he feared would breed dissatisfaction among the lower classes. Rush cautioned, “Should [learning] become universal it would be as destructive to civilization as universal barbarism.” He insisted that basic literacy and numeracy was enough; his primary concern was “to convert men into republican machines” programmed for the demands of commerce and self-government. In other words, his primary interest was to socialize citizens, not educate them.

Now, from the vantage point of 2020, it's clear that Rush was wrong about universal learning. In the information economy, education and knowledge are the handmaidens of opportunity—even if it's also true that this state of affairs has been transformed by employment law, corporate hiring departments, and colleges into a protection racket requiring would-be workers to purchase expensive pieces of (now-virtual) parchment. But don't let all of this distract from the larger point—which is that schools are social as well as academic institutions.

In recent years, the socializing mission of schools has faced a two-pronged assault. First, over the decades, attacks by the Left on norms and the American project have yielded school systems disinclined to set forth a muscular vision of personal or civic responsibility. Lawsuits have left schools leery of exerting firm discipline. Disputes over everything from Christmas to parenting have left educators defensive and prone to political correctness. And critiques of America's “racist” past have left schools loath to teach history or civics in ways that might appear unduly prideful or patriotic.

And then came 21st-century school reformers, who got so enamored of their