

“As the World Turns”: Donald Trump & the Prospects for Re-Electing a “Soap Opera” President

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American soap operas are serial dramas performed on television that rose to prominence in the 1950s. The term originates from the laundry detergent companies whose advertising targeted American housewives. Designed to create an emotional attachment to a devoted audience, these daily programs depict complicated interpersonal situations and melodramatic storylines, which are resolved by unforeseen circumstances, coincidences, cliff-hangers, and last-minute revelations. The soap opera genre has become so popular over the years that the term has taken on a second meaning to describe real-life events which resemble the constant melodrama and sentimentality of these scripted programs.

In many ways, the presidency of Donald Trump has looked like a modern-day soap opera, characterized by instinctive decision-making, controversial policy pronouncements, senseless arguments, outrageous lies, populist slogans, and patriotic imagery. Trump's constant braggadocio is designed to tap the emotions of the US public, improve “ratings” with his base, diminish that of his political opponents, and divide voters. Indeed, his soap opera approach – low on substance, driven by the country's mood, and based on a self-serving narrative no matter how bizarre – is designed to recreate the political conditions that saw him win the presidency in 2016.

As it was, Trump won with razor-thin margins in Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin – three key states that had previously been considered part of the impenetrable “blue wall” of traditionally Democratic-leaning states in the Midwest. This, and a narrow loss in Minnesota, demonstrated Trump's political blueprint. First, it depended on a heavy turnout of his base – mainly older, white, less-educated, rural, middle and lower class, male voters from the Midwest whose primary concerns were the decline of US manufacturing, the growing power of the federal government, the increase of federal taxes *vis-à-vis* President Barack Obama's healthcare reform, the expansion of US military commitments abroad, and the perception that US cities had become drug-ridden, crime-infested havens for illegal immigrants. Second, it required a depressed turnout for the political coalition that had previously voted for Obama – primarily women, minorities, as well as young, well-educated professionals living on both coasts and concentrated in America's cities.

Importantly, the Trump administration's success in its first three years in office were not necessarily the adoption or implementation of the president's controversial foreign and domestic policies. These included initiating a contentious trade war with China, withdrawing the United States from the Iran Nuclear Deal, and becoming the first

president to meet North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, as well as pushing for the repeal of Obamacare, imposing travel bans on certain Muslim-majority countries, and developing a draconian policy of “zero-tolerance” and family separation along the US-Mexico border. Rather, it was the *attention* these controversies gave to the president – even if they tested existing policies, past patterns of normal US government behavior, US laws and regulations, or even the moral compasses of his own top advisors. On a daily basis, Trump's soap opera has been an exercise in staying in the spotlight and “energizing his base”, knowing full well that his image as an impulsive leader and last-minute deal-maker was paramount. Predictability is by its very nature boring, so the greater the public outcry Trump created, the more he could claim success. Indeed, the sight of Trump publicly contradicting and overruling his closest advisors, members of his Cabinet, or fellow Republicans made for compelling television.

Looking to the upcoming US election on Nov. 3, it is clear Trump will again depend on dividing US voters, turning out his base, suppressing his opposition, and attacking his political adversaries. Although Trump's soap opera approach has to date allowed him to escape many of the political consequences of his provocative behavior, it has also left him particularly vulnerable to events which have required true presidential leadership (*Photo 1*).

“The Edge of Night”: The Democrats' Overnight Transformation

Heading into 2020, the president's supporters agreed that Trump's soap opera approach not only won him the White House in 2016 as

Photo 1: www.donaldjtrump.com



Imagery, no matter how whimsical, is critical for President Donald Trump to connect to his base. Here he is hugging the US flag on June 14, 2019 (National Flag Day) to demonstrate his patriotism.

an underdog against arguably one of the most experienced candidates to run for the office, Hillary Clinton, but it also allowed him to withstand the daily political challenges of Washington – even if it meant putting up with his often “over-the-top” style focused on his appearance and image. And for at least the first three years, Trump supporters could claim with some justification that he was a successful, if unconventional, steward of the US economy. On Feb. 12, the US’s three major stock indices were at or near their highest levels ever, while the US unemployment rate had settled at an historically low level, at or below 4%, for an astonishing 18 consecutive months. Appearance and image, it would seem, had taken Trump very far indeed.

Despite seeing the US economy continue to expand and grow since the Great Recession, however, Trump still could not fully capitalize politically. According to polling since January 2017 assembled by *Real Clear Politics*, Trump’s job approval rating never rose above 47.2%, reaching a peak on March 3, 2020. Otherwise, Trump’s job approval rating has settled at between 37% and 47%, revealing a consistently low, yet still firm, level of support, attributable to his loyal base energized by his constant feed of controversy. Similarly, Trump’s disapproval rating has been consistently high, but unspectacularly so, rarely falling below 50%, revealing the limits of public anger with respect to Trump’s steady diet of political chaos, policy U-turns, and petulant tweets over the past three years (Photo 2). Even though the Democrats won back control of the House of Representatives in the 2018 midterms, they also could not completely capitalize in the highly partisan environment with the Senate remaining firmly in control of the Republicans and Trump’s political allies.

In any event, former Vice President Joe Biden joined a field of over 20 Democratic hopefuls of widely varying political backgrounds and positions to try and unseat the president. Of all the candidates who ran for the Democratic nomination, Republicans quickly realized that Biden had the image, experience, and Washington credentials to seriously challenge Trump in 2020. As Obama’s vice president, Biden

was very much perceived as a political moderate with the broadest potential appeal to voters, especially African-Americans who notably did not turn out in large numbers for Clinton in 2016. These characteristics seemed to negate concerns about his age (77) and penchant for verbal gaffes during public appearances.

As such, Trump hoped to discredit Biden using his soap opera tactics. In 2019, he ordered the withholding of already-appropriated US foreign military aid to Ukraine in order to compel that country’s newly-elected president to open an investigation into Biden’s son, Hunter. Trump’s strategy was to simply associate the Biden family name to vaguely-described and unsubstantiated foreign corruption. To some extent, Trump’s smear campaign may have worked even though it triggered the president’s impeachment. Biden struggled badly in the Iowa caucus and New Hampshire primary for the Democratic nomination. At the same time, Trump was hoping to run against the progressive, self-described Democratic Socialist senator from Vermont, Bernie Sanders, as a means to portray *all* Democrats as extreme liberals. Indeed, when Sanders won a resounding victory in the Nevada caucus on Feb. 22 to become the Democratic frontrunner, a *CBS News* poll on the very same day indicated that 65% of Americans believed Trump would win re-election.

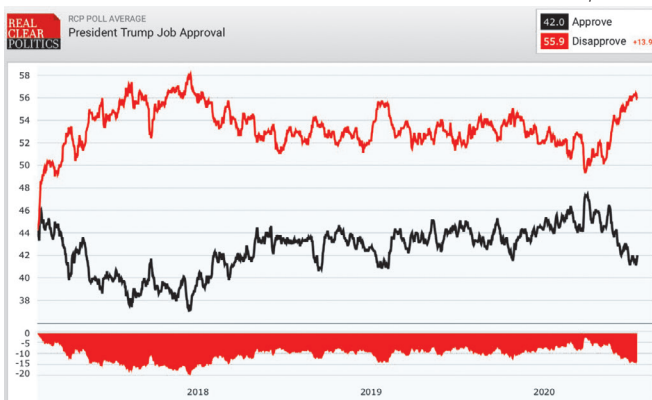
With Sanders ascendant and Biden floundering, February 2020 may be remembered as the zenith of the Trump presidency. The populist Republican president was at the edge of a re-election campaign against a Democratic opponent easily painted as too liberal for American voters in the midst an unusually strong US economy that had reach an historic record of growth and expansion. On Feb. 29, however, Biden pulled off a stunning victory in the South Carolina primary. The strong endorsement by South Carolina Congressman Jim Clyburn had energized the state’s African-American community to turn out massively for Biden, allowing him to win 48% of the Democratic popular vote, well ahead of Sanders who came in a distant second with only 20% of the vote.

Biden’s victory in South Carolina redirected the entire trajectory of the Democratic primary race. This continued when two of his moderate opponents for the nomination, Senator Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota and Mayor Pete Buttigieg of Indiana, quickly dropped out and endorsed Biden. Three days later, on March 3, Super Tuesday, when 15 states and territories held their primaries, Biden won the lion’s share of delegates, putting him on a solid path towards the nomination. Almost overnight, Biden went from political “has been” to the presumptive Democratic nominee, with Sanders eventually suspending his campaign on April 8.

“Days of Our Lives”: Ignoring a Looming Crisis

If Trump was disappointed that his Democratic challenger would be Biden instead of Sanders, as events would prove, he had little time to worry. Like an extravagant villain making its dramatic

Photo 2: www.realclearpolitics.com



Trump’s Job Approval ratings through July 15, 2020, Real Clear Politics Poll Average.

entrance in a complicated soap opera storyline, the coronavirus disease or Covid-19, which originated at a wet market in Wuhan, China, hit the US. On Jan. 20, 2020, the US confirmed its first case of Covid-19. Two days later, Trump downplayed the risk in an interview, commenting, "It's one person coming in from China. We have it under control. It's going to be just fine."

Indeed, Trump has consistently underestimated the coronavirus threat, going so far as to praise President Xi Jinping's handling of the outbreak in China in early 2020. And while he stopped some flights from flying directly from China to the US beginning on Jan.

30, Trump was looking forward to celebrating the results of his "tough" negotiations for Phase 1 of their bilateral trade deal that would help his re-election. Trump also stayed on the campaign trail to accuse Democrats of creating another "hoax" and for "politicizing the coronavirus". At a rally in South Carolina, for example, he implored the crowd to ignore the "fake news" that was circulating to make him look bad, while discounting the seriousness of the coronavirus with a misleading comparison to the seasonal flu which on average kills approximately 35,000 Americans each year. On Feb. 27, he noted "We have done an incredible job. We're going to continue. It's going to disappear. One day – it's like a miracle – it will disappear."

Meanwhile, a growing and very public disconnect developed between the Trump administration, which took a casual approach to the global spread of the highly contagious and deadly coronavirus, and the US government's scientific community, which grew increasingly alarmed at the developing health crisis. On Feb. 26, two starkly different messages were played to American audiences. On the one hand, as the number of cases of infections in the US was rising and significant death tolls were being recorded overseas, White House Economic Adviser Larry Kudlow tried to calm US markets in a television interview stating that the virus had been "contained" and that it was pretty close to "air-tight." On the other hand, Nancy Messonnier, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases, came out with a strong public warning of the inevitable outbreak of the coronavirus in the US, observing "It's not a question of *if* this will happen but *when* this will happen and how many people in this country will have severe illnesses ... Disruption to everyday life might be severe." Global markets roiled at the increasingly bad news coming from Asia and Europe.

The coronavirus appeared to have left the US relatively untouched at that time. On March 5, there were 206 confirmed cases, with only 11 deaths reported. These initial cases were relatively contained and tied to an infection in a nursing home in Seattle. Trump, meanwhile, remained in full campaign mode. In public statements, he continued to talk up the US economy which he claimed had become the strongest ever in history, while putting a positive spin on his administration's handling of the pandemic. Indeed, he floated a number of theories minimizing the coronavirus' threat to Americans,

accusing the World Health Organization (WHO) of dispensing inaccurate information about the outbreak, and suggesting that even those with the virus would be safe going to work. He observed in an interview, "Now, and this is just my hunch, and — but based on a lot of conversations with a lot of people that do this. Because a lot of people will have this and it's very mild. They'll get better very rapidly... They don't even call a doctor." On July 8, just over four months later, the US recorded its three millionth positive test for the coronavirus, and registered over 132,000 deaths, accounting for nearly one quarter of total confirmed cases and total deaths globally. These rates have continued to increase despite Trump's repeated self-serving claims to have "saved millions of lives."

"I Am Not a Doctor, but I Play One on TV"

These famous words by many actors from US medical dramas used in television commercials since the 1980s to sell everything from over-the-counter medicines to health insurance exemplified the growing dissonance between Trump's marketing approach to the coronavirus and the grim reality facing the US. In the four months between the beginning of March to the beginning of July, Trump responded to the coronavirus as he had responded to previous crises during his presidency – by minimizing their seriousness, disparaging his critics, appeasing his base, and declaring success. In true soap opera fashion, Trump avoided taking responsibility for his slow response to the pandemic, and shifted blame to the previous Obama administration for supposedly leaving the US unprepared and later to China for originating the virus. He also criticized certain state governors who did not follow his lead in downplaying the crisis, contradicted the guidance of key members of the scientific community, and encouraged the quick re-opening of the US economy despite the likely spread of the deadly virus.

By the end of March, sobering projections began to be published that approximately 100,000-200,000 Americans would likely die from the coronavirus, even with the US government's social distancing guidelines in place. The Trump administration had advised (though did not require) Americans to stay home and avoid social gatherings through April. Most importantly, though, Trump was unwilling to enact a nationwide plan for testing, contact tracing, and treating affected citizens. Instead, responsibility for stay-at-home orders or even mandating the simple act of wearing of masks, believed to reduce the spread of the virus by as much as 80%, was delegated to the individual states, leaving the federal government to take a backseat role and focus solely on developing a vaccine (*Photo 3*).

In the meantime, over 50 million Americans filed for unemployment benefits between March 20 and July 23, breaking all-time records, while the US unemployment rate quickly rose to 14.7% by the end of April before settling back down to 11.1% in June, levels not seen since the 1930s. Moreover, real gross domestic product decreased in the second quarter at an unprecedented annual



Photo 3: Official White House photo

The politicization of wearing a mask. On May 21, 2020 Trump participated in a tour of a Ford auto plant converted to make hospital ventilators in the key swing state of Michigan and refused to be photographed wearing a mask during his visit.

rate of 32.9%. To be sure, Congress and Trump deserve credit for quickly passing record-breaking legislation to handle the economic fallout of the pandemic. On March 27, the president signed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act), the third stimulus package totaling over \$2.1 trillion in federal aid paid directly to US families and businesses across numerous sectors to tide them over until the economy could return back to normal.

Beyond this, however, Trump did very little to support the states or set an example as leader to break the cycle of coronavirus transmission. Whether it was his daily television briefings offering contradictory advice on the need for social distancing, his promotion of hydroxychloroquine (a drug normally used to treat malaria) as a treatment for Covid-19, offering up dangerous quack therapies such as ingesting disinfectant, encouraging protests by his base against Democratic governors, or even refusing to simply wear a mask in public, Trump was clearly playing politics. A poorly attended campaign rally in Tulsa on June 20, Trump's first in over three months, demonstrated just how out of touch the president had become to the magnitude of the public health crisis. He repeated his absurd claim that the extraordinarily high number of positive cases in the US was simply the result of the US being the world leader in testing, telling the crowd that he had asked his scientific advisors "to slow the testing down, please". If any further evidence was needed that Trump was focused on November 2020, it came when his administration announced on July 6 that the US submitted formal notice to withdraw from the WHO, the main international coordinating body addressing the coronavirus pandemic.

"One Life to Live": Reigniting a Culture War

Under these politically combustible conditions, on May 25, a black man named George Floyd walked into a convenience store in Minneapolis to buy a pack of cigarettes using a \$20 bill the cashier

believed to have been a counterfeit. Police were called to the scene. Floyd was quickly taken into custody and handcuffed, when he then fell to the ground. Three policemen immediately fell on him with their bodyweight, including the lead police officer who knelt on Floyd's neck for a full seven minutes and 46 seconds. As Floyd was lying face down under the restraint of police, in pain and pleading that he could not breathe, several bystanders recorded the incident that spread across social media like a wildfire. Floyd was pronounced dead one hour later.

The killing of Floyd marked a turning point in the civil rights movement and captured so perfectly the systemic racism endemic to many police forces around the country. On the one hand, this and other similar high-profile cases vividly showed police taking matters into their own hands to subdue a largely helpless black man who complied with police instructions. On the other, it demonstrated a US legal system that shielded police, and in some cases absolved them, of their responsibility "to serve and protect" *all* citizens.

As a result, the Black Lives Matter movement organized widespread protests in the wake of Floyd's death. With a haphazard response to the coronavirus pandemic and a US economy reeling, Trump sought to "flip the script" by latching on to the issue of "law and order", demonizing certain protestors, and initiating a culture war to energize his base. In several statements and tweets, he represented the protesters as an unruly mob simply aimed at violently overturning the US political system, when in reality the overwhelming majority of nationwide protests were peaceful and orderly.

Things came to a head on June 1, when Trump delivered a speech from the White House Rose Garden anointing himself as the "law and order president". Attorney General William Barr then ordered the peaceful protest that was occurring at nearby Lafayette Square to be tear gassed and forcibly cleared so the president could have images of himself taken in front of St. John's Episcopal Church holding a Bible and flanked by his key military advisors (*Photo 4*). In addition to encouraging US law enforcement to be forceful with protestors, he announced his firm opposition to the removal of Confederate statutes that had become targets of the protests and other public symbols associated with America's racist past.

In true image-conscious fashion, the president presented his case that the protestors and those who do not support his "law and order" agenda (read Biden and the Democrats) were aiming to "erase" US history and the country's accomplishments wholesale. During an Independence Day celebration at Mount Rushmore below the gaze of four of America's more popular presidents whose faces are carved into the side of the mountain, Trump's not-so-subtle imaging to the nation was designed to frighten voters that the very future of American civilization depended upon his re-election. With refrains of "Four More Years" from the partisan crowd, his message was unmistakable:

Photo 4: joebiden.com



Trump's much criticized photo-op of June 1, 2020. After declaring himself the "law and order president", the administration cleared a peaceful Black Lives Matter protest near the White House in order to photograph the president holding the Bible in front of St. John's Church.

"In our schools, our newsrooms, even our corporate boardrooms, there is a new far-left fascism that demands absolute allegiance ... This left-wing cultural revolution is designed to overthrow the American Revolution. In so doing they would destroy the very civilization that rescued billions from poverty, disease, violence, and hunger, and that lifted humanity to new heights of achievement, discovery, and progress. To make this possible, they are determined to tear down every statue, symbol, and memory of our national heritage. Not on my watch."

"As the World Turns": an End to Trump's Soap Opera?

On Nov. 3, Americans will be heading to the polls to vote in perhaps the most consequential election in several generations. While Trump cannot be blamed for the coronavirus that originated in China, his personal handling of the US response has clearly exacerbated the public health crisis and its economic fallout. His trademark approach to politics as a form of entertainment with his heavy doses of melodrama and unpredictability may have finally met its match with the coronavirus. Indeed, Trump has already laid the narrative groundwork to challenge a loss, tweeting that increased mail-in voting due to the pandemic would result in "the most rigged election in history".

Normally a political challenger for the presidency would be out on the campaign trail holding an endless stream of rallies to win over voters and raise money. Biden, however, has remained largely confined to his home in Delaware. He has only left his home to go out in public – wearing a mask – in small, but important, gatherings such as offering condolences to the family of Floyd.

This strategy of "laying low" and allowing Trump to "occupy the spotlight" has served the Biden campaign well so far. According to *Real Clear Politics*, poll averages through July 19 showed Biden leading Trump by almost nine percentage points nationally, and between 6% and 7.7% in the three key swing states of Wisconsin,

Michigan, and Pennsylvania. Meanwhile, since becoming the presumptive nominee, Biden has raised more than \$187.9 million for the second quarter of 2020 compared to Trump's \$146.1 million. Both circumstances are unusual for an incumbent president. Indeed, Biden should feel pretty good that his poll numbers have risen and fundraising has taken off with relatively little effort.

US elections, however, are never won during the summer. Trump, Biden, and the leaders of both parties need look no further than the summer of 2016, when Hillary Clinton appeared to have a comfortable lead in the polls and had raised much more money than her opponent. Rather, the results of November 2020 will depend upon the enthusiasm each candidate can generate come election day. As such, America's "soap opera" president has a unique advantage with a proven track record for connecting emotionally to his supporters and attacking his Democratic opponent, whom he has effectively marketed as "sleepy".

Yet, Trump does not seem to understand that 2020 is not 2016 as voters face the twin challenges of an out-of-control virus and civil unrest not seen since the 1960s. Like any good American soap opera, Trump will continue to ignite political passions with controversial policy pronouncements, redirect America's attention to an emotional cultural war by stoking racial divides, offer inflated hope for miracle cures and vaccines to Covid-19, and trust American voters to develop a sort of collective amnesia to his presidential foolishness and maladministration. Given this and the mounting death toll from the coronavirus, it is hard to see the election being little more than a referendum on Trump's disastrous handling of the pandemic.

If the world is indeed turning away from the US, it is because its president has succeeded for so long in not acting presidential and because the coronavirus has exposed his "soap opera" presidency for what it is. While this moment in history calls for uniting Americans in common cause to address the pandemic that has so deeply and disturbingly defined the US in 2020, Trump has demonstrated he is uniquely unqualified to see the simple and relatively inexpensive solutions that have succeeded so well in other countries. Instead, Trump has squandered the one, essential resource all government leaders covet dearly and which trillions of US taxpayer dollars in economic stimulus was meant to buy – time. The US could hardly do much worse should Biden win in November. Until then, America and the world must stay tuned. **JS**

[The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect any policy or position of *Japan SPOTLIGHT*].

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