Opinion
News



President Donald Trump, joined by Vice President Mike Pence, left, and members of the White House Coronavirus Task Force at a coronavirus (COVID-19) update briefing March 22 in the James S. Brady Press Briefing Room of the White House. (Flickr/White House/Tia Dufour)



by Jamie Manson

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Like many people who are trying to make meaning of this pandemic and the strange, new world it has ushered us into, I am listening to those who are interpreting the situation through a hopeful or spiritual lens. They tell us it's a time that invites us to see neighbors we never noticed before, and to connect and be present in new and touching ways, like singing and waving from windows.

And, yet, in the rare times I venture out of my apartment and go the stores where my neighbors are, all I hear are a chorus of jackasses.

In normal times here in the suburbs of New York City, it's hard to get in and out of a store, particularly a small business, without being singed by the fiery rhetoric of the man who lingers too long at the dry cleaners or the deli.

I call these guys the Long Island bloviators — older, white, macho men who orate at length in exaggerated and empty ways. They are typically conservative. They are almost always Catholic. They love President Donald Trump.

The fear and uncertainty of the times has made them especially hysterical.

Last weekend, as I picked up an outfit at the cleaners for an event that never happened, one of them was gesticulating wildly in front of the counter.

"Stormy Daniels! Russiaaaaahhhh!" he pontificated, overblowing his already overblown New York accent. "Now this 'virus.' They can throw anything at him. They're never gonna win!"

This weekend, I got caught in the crossfire with another one of them, trading barbs with a store owner in the hard-hit dairy aisle of a small grocery. Their enemy? New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, who had just announced that all non-essential businesses would be closed in the next 48 hours.

"He's just trying to prove a point," the customer said as the grocer defiantly insisted he would never close his store. "He wants to make Trump look bad. Good luck!"

My little ventures into the world remind me that in my apartment I'm in a bubble, surrounded by the echo-chamber of Twitter and Facebook and all of The New York Times and The Washington Post articles shared by my friends and followers.

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So it is a shock to my system when I am reminded that many of my neighbors not only believe every word Trump says, they will go to the mat for him. They will stridently argue that Trump is the victim of conspiring, liberal forces, even as this virus — which he has minimized and lied about — threatens us at our doorstep. New York is now the U.S. epicenter of COVID-19. We have been warned that, in a week's time, our hospitals will be overwhelmed and many may not get the care they need. The National Guard is being called in to build four makeshift hospitals.

The absolute blind loyalty to Trump triggers both fear and rage in me. These days, the only way I can make sense of it all is by reading about the personalities of cult leaders and those who follow them.

In an interview last year (unrelated to Trump), Janja Lalich, co-author of *Cults in Our Midst: The Hidden Menace in our Everyday Lives*, says that all cult leaders are narcissistic personalities. They are very charismatic and are given a special status by those who are in awe of them, but their charisma has a "deleterious effect" on others.

> Charismatic leaders tend to be intuitive. They're able to read people. They thrive on chaos. They'll create crisis situations. When they walk in the room, you never know if they're going to be good and kind-hearted or be mean and call someone out or create some kind of dangerous situation.

Remind you of anyone?

In an interview with The New York Times' Maureen Dowd this weekend, Dr. Anthony Fauci said about Trump, "He's a smart guy. He's not a dummy."

I wonder if this is the kind of "intelligence" Fauci sees in the president: someone who is able maintain control over peoples' minds so that, regardless of his blatant mendacity, he still manages to convince his followers to worship and protect him.

A cult leader is also a master of manipulating information, so that his followers will only trust details that come from him. This is what Trump accomplishes every time he cries "fake news" or discredits a reporter as "terrible" or "nasty." He knows that Americans have access to all sorts of information, so he has to make his followers distrust other sources.

It is little wonder that in his press conference on March 20, Trump said to reporters: "Really, we should probably get rid of about another 75, 80 percent of you. I'll have just two or three that I like in this room."

Sowing these seeds of suspicion helps convince his followers to bar themselves from mainstream news and to parrot the information they hear in the propaganda peddled by Fox News and other extremist opinionaters.

On Sunday, CNN tallied up 33 false claims that Trump made about the coronavirus in the first two weeks of March, offering both the lie and the facts to correct it. (Sadly it had to leave out his breathtaking Feb. 27 claim that the virus is "going to disappear. One day — it's like a miracle — it will disappear.")

Things have gotten so dire that Washington Post columnist Margaret Sullivan has called for the media to stop broadcasting Trump's "dangerous, destructive coronavirus briefings."

"These White House sessions — ostensibly meant to give the public critical and truthful information about this frightening crisis — are in fact working against that end," Sullivan wrote. "Rather, they have become a daily stage for Trump to play his greatest hits to captive audience members."

Americans are searching for life-or-death information, but what they get from the president is self-aggrandizement, media-bashing, and exaggeration and outright lies, Sullivan said.

If this doesn't sound like tactics of a cult leader, I don't know what does.

When they are finally confronted with truth and reality, many cults and their leaders — as we remember from the stories like that of David Koresh and the Branch

Davidians — come to a catastrophic end.

What we are seeing play out now is Trump, the charismatic leader, losing his grip on a narrative he has tightly controlled. He is scrambling under a siege of facts: creating distractions, contradicting himself, fabricating a revisionist history about his role in downplaying the crisis. He is recasting himself as a fearless leader in a time of war.

As of Friday, Trump's approval rating had risen to a staggering 55%.

If we get sick, it will be because of the sickness that is this presidency.

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