

# The President, the Hero: Politics of Strength, Health, and Success surrounding Donald Trump's COVID-19 Infection

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*This article examines Donald Trump's COVID infection as a media event where the President and his supporters in right-leaning media participated in a mediated performance, seeking to present their own interpretation as the dominant narrative. I trace how the President and his supporters seized on the opportunity to narrativize Trump's COVID-19 infection for the purpose of political messaging in the 2020 election. Specifically, I contextualize the ideological narratives produced by Trump and his allies within the larger context of U.S. conservatism and its relationship to the politics of strength, health, and success. I argue that the media performance by the President and his supporters looked to elevate Trump as a hero figure, with his infection representing a sacrifice that he had undertaken for the sake of the nation.*

## Introduction

With a veneer of heroism, President Donald J. Trump returned to the White House on October 5, 2020, after a brief hospitalization following his contracting of COVID-19. To celebrate his return, the President shared a video on his (now-defunct) Twitter account, which depicted the occasion with dramatic flair. Accompanied by an epic orchestral score, a helicopter soars through the air past the Washington Monument and lands on the White House lawn. There is a hint of a slow-motion effect as its wheels touch the ground, to emphasize the import of the moment. Donald Trump emerges and the music soars even higher as the President ascends to the balcony of the

White House and salutes the departing helicopter (The Telegraph 2020a). The video evokes the sentiment of a hero returning from conflict, projecting an air of both strength and sacrifice. He is portrayed as returning alone, despite the fact that his wife and a number of staff members were also diagnosed with COVID-19 at the same time.

This article examines Donald Trump's COVID-19 infection as a media event where the President and his supporters in right-leaning media sources engaged in a mediated performance, seeking to implement their own interpretation of the event as the dominant narrative. While I observe some larger trends in the reporting and commentating of Trump's infection, the main analytical focus is on the President and his supporters in order to question how they seized the narrativization of the event and rebuked the messaging of his political opponents. This kind of narrativization seeks to turn political events into acts in a melodrama, bestowing them with emotionally charged meanings often drawn from the language of popular culture (Anker 2014, 2–4). In these narratives, presidents and political leaders are given the mantle of the hero, symbolizing salvation and triumph to the nation (Alexander 2010, 63–87; Anker 2014, 187). For Trump's infection, I am particularly interested in how the event was connected to politics of strength, which has been instrumental to Trump's self-portrayal across his political career (Martin 2021; Kellner 2016, 22). I will further delineate how performing politics of strength around COVID-19 draws from larger cultural formulations of health and disease and the contingent meanings that are embedded in seeing someone as either healthy or sick (Ahlbeck and Oinas 2012; Ahlbeck et al. 2021).

Trump's COVID-19 infection and its narrativization across media is a telling example of certain ideological media dynamics that surrounded the 2020 U.S. presidential election. The Trump administration's failure in dealing with the pandemic had become one of the notable sore points of his presidency. At the time of Trump's infection, the pandemic death toll in the U.S. surpassed 210,000, with nearly 7.5 million infected (Neuman 2020). In this article, I focus on how the President and his supporters seized the opportunity to frame his COVID-19 infection for the purposes of political messaging. For this, I explore Trump-friendly media sources from different facets of what Andrew Chadwick (2013) has called the "Hybrid Media System," comprising "traditional" media as well as grassroots online media, which oftentimes feed into one another. From the more traditional right-leaning media, I explore reactions on Fox News and in the *Wall Street Journal*. In the more alternative media sphere, I have examined the right-wing site *Daily Wire* and its founder Ben Shapiro's YouTube channel, former Trump-strategist Steve Bannon's

podcast *War Room: Pandemic*, and the outputs of the prominent right-wing political cartoonist Ben Garrison. These chosen sources represent different styles and levels of media influence leveraged by right-wing sources on the topic. I have traced the specific day-by-day timeframe of Trump's infection, from the news first breaking in the early hours of Friday, October 2, to Trump's return on Monday, October 5, and the immediate aftermath on October 8 when Trump declared (without any medical evidence) that he was no longer contagious (O'Donnell 2020). This timeframe is intended to cover the immediate reactions in the media, first by Trump's supporters over the period of his hospitalization and then by the President himself upon his return.

To further analyze how meaning was constructed through the performance of politics of strength around Trump's infection, I examine the ideological connotations of the used narratives in relation to the larger context of U.S. conservatism. I acknowledge that Trump's classification as a "conservative" is a topic that has generated heated debate in both domains of everyday politics and their scholarly study (Barber and Pope 2019). While drawing deeply on some historical elements of U.S. conservatism—the politics of resentment and the antagonisms of the culture wars—the President has decidedly differed from prevalent orthodoxies in other ways (Szeffel 2018; Fawcett 2020). Similarly, one can question whether Trump himself holds any genuine political ideology.

However, some scholars have highlighted the extent to which Trump has in fact conformed to and followed certain longer lineages in U.S. conservatism. For instance, political theorist Corey Robin (2018, 4) has conceived of conservatism as being primarily about reaction: the "mediation on—and the theoretical rendition of—the felt experience of having power, seeing it threatened, and trying to win it back." This approach sees conservatism as tied more to its general ideational attitude toward change—that is, both resisting further societal change and implementing a counterrevolutionary program that would return society to an imagined prior state—than the specific policy proposals it might become historically enmeshed with. In a similar fashion, Lawrence Glickman (2019, 4) has written about the importance of "elite victimization," where members of a political elite depict themselves as the suffering underdogs of modern culture. Along the same lines, Michael Kimmel (2017, 21–25) has described the reactionary animosity that buoyed Trump's political ascendancy as "aggrieved entitlement," namely, the belief of the "downwardly mobile middle class" that they are owed more than they are getting from the contemporary society (see also Kelly 2020). Thus, whether Trump is a knowing ideological actor or

not can be regarded as largely irrelevant when it comes to studying the ways in which his *actions* have channeled these basic tenets of U.S. conservatism.

Exploring the event as a form of mediated performance allows me to analyze the discrete ways in which various parties look to constitute and generate meaning through communicative actions taken in diffuse parts of the media system (Bachmann-Medic 2016, 73–74). The approach of performativity places special emphasis on the way in which cultural and political meaning is actively created by types of staging and the utterances that are made (Bachmann-Medic 2016, 75–76; Bell 2007). Thus, politics likewise becomes a matter of competing performances, which seek to instill as normative and commonsensical certain ways of understanding events (Alexander 2010). The approach draws on the linguistic theories of J. L. Austin, who has emphasized how speech can be regarded as a form of action, thus leading to the close relation between political speech and political action (Pocock 2009, 33–50; Bell 2007, 12–16). The link between everyday political action and the wider phenomenon of ideology can be forged by classifying the basic modes of performance being utilized. For instance, Michael Freeden (2009, 142) has emphasized that the functioning of ideology occurs by taking over the dimensions of expression that can be politically used around specific subjects. Ideology succeeds by embedding its own worldview within an existing facet of how certain phenomena are conceived in society.

Media serves as both the site and a participant in the performances being enacted. In the study of performativity, the stages and platforms have recurrently been seen as gaining agential quality in their own right (Leeker 2017). In the case of Donald Trump, media became a particularly contested terrain. His presidency was notorious for its open antagonism toward news media and Trump's expressed preference of alternative media platforms—the most notable being Twitter until his ban on January 8, 2021—as a means to directly reach his target constituencies while bypassing the more established media enterprises (Ott and Dickinson 2019). U.S. conservatives were historically keen to seize on alternative media developments, as it allowed them to create their own networks beyond the gatekeepers they considered to be ideologically motivated. These range from more traditional media sources, like Fox News and the *Wall Street Journal* to right-wing talk radio (Jamieson and Cappella 2010), to the entire blossoming “Alternative Influence Network” (Lewis 2018), online in the form of YouTube channels and podcasts. For this study, I have chosen a few notable representatives of both the more traditional right-wing media and the AIN who prominently commented on Trump's COVID-19 infection.

My approach here is largely chronological. I begin by examining the immediate reactions to the news of Trump's infection among his supporters. In this first step, Trump, being hospitalized, remains largely silent, the performance being instead enacted by his supporters in his absence. I explore these reactions and then use them as a platform to analyze more thoroughly the way in which Trump and his supporters employed the larger politics of health and strength. From there, I introduce Trump himself as he returned to the White House and used language—both spoken and cinematic—of heroism and sacrifice to frame COVID-19 as a personal matter rather than a collective issue facing the United States.

## **When the News First Broke**

The news of Trump's COVID-19 infection broke in the early morning of October 2, 2020. Immediately, various figures across the right-wing media sphere were already looking to set the stage and the basic narrative tropes for the coming script. One example could be found on the conservative talk show *Varney & Company*, hosted by Stuart Varney, for the cable news channel Fox Business Network under the larger Fox News umbrella. On the show, Fox News contributor and political strategist Steve Hilton—himself the host of the program *The Next Revolution* on Fox News—suggested that due to the President's "resilience," the risk should be minimal, and that he could become "a metaphor for the recovery of the country" (Varney & Company 2020). This displayed the early workings of a narrative trope that would emerge and recur throughout the weekend: that Trump's infection was not just a question of individual health but symbolic of the struggles faced by the nation more broadly. The merging of the health of the President with the health of the nation was made concrete by the fact that he now faced the same illness that had brought the country to its knees. It also invoked an old form of heroic symbolism. Michael Rogin (1987, 4–5) reflects on this in relation to President Ronald Reagan's recovery from an attempted assassination, relating it to the medieval theology of the "King's Two Bodies," where the body of the king and the "body politic" become merged (see also Kantorowicz [1957] 2016).

Having forged the symbolic connection between the well-being of the President and the nation, Hilton proceeded to identify the future antagonists. He suggested that the responses he had seen on other media sources and social media had been "revolting" and "ghoulish." The reaction that Hilton cited by name was that of journalist Carl Bernstein, who had argued the same morning on

CNN that Trump's infection came as a result of his own recklessness and negligence (Varney & Company 2020; Regan et al. 2020).

Thus, Trump's supporters seized on a prevalent ethical dilemma plaguing those commenting on the issue in the more liberal-leaning media: to what extent could the event be seen as Trump facing the consequences of his own actions—or inaction? The *Los Angeles Times* summed up the debate with a headline: "When Reagan Was Shot, Country Rallied Around, But He Hadn't Spent Months Downplaying Assassins" (Wilber 2020). *New York Times'* opinion columnist Frank Bruni (2020) admonished his own pettiness of having thought first about karma upon hearing the news, and *POLITICO's* John F. Harris (2020) suggested that Trump's COVID-19 infection seemed like a type of cosmic joke. For the *New York Daily News*, Leonard Greene sought to delineate between the personal tragedy of the disease and the infection's political significance:

Anyone who has ever wished this dreadful disease on President Trump is wrong. Period. Grow up. But now that the president, and his wife, have tested positive, now is the proper moment to observe how much in life is about timing—or what some might call karma, or just the cyclical nature of going around and coming around. (Greene 2020)

These kinds of sentiments marked the early response across much of the more liberal-leaning news media, as some grappled with the complex emotions of learning that Donald Trump—whom they considered responsible for the awful COVID-19 response of the United States—had contracted the disease. Trump's supporters used these media stories to demonstrate the moral failings of his opponents and the media at large. Along these lines, the editorial board of the right-wing leaning *Wall Street Journal* (2020) argued against the "karma explanation," claiming: "The shame is that America's media have peddled the fiction that every new Covid case represents a failure of policy. Their line now is that Mr. Trump's infection is karma because he didn't take the disease seriously enough." To respond to the news in any way other than sympathy was presented by the right-wing media as a moral failure. Meanwhile, COVID-19 was detached from the realm of politics. It was suggested that it was "fiction" to relate infections to failures in policy, formulating coronavirus as a natural event that merely occurred.

There had been a distinct dissonance between Trump's prior public declarations regarding the coronavirus and his private sentiments. This dissonance was what his critics noted in their

responses to his infection and what also fueled the media performances enacted by his supporters and himself. For instance, Bernstein's statement, which many of Trump's supporters found to be morally inappropriate, was based on the contrast between the President's general anti-mask politics and his personal demand that people around him wear masks (Regan et al. 2020). This likewise links to a general surface-level disconnect between Trump's policy approach toward the pandemic and his status as a known germaphobe, who reportedly dreads the possibility of getting sick. In March 2020, when the coronavirus was first making inroads in the United States, CNN even projected that Trump's germaphobe tendencies might *help* his White House in preparing for the pandemic (Liptak, Collins, and Diamond 2020). With the disconnect between Trump's personal stance toward disease and his publicly facing persona projected through the media, and with his supporters valorizing his "resilience" in the media, his infection became linked to the general politics of health as they had been deployed by Trump in the past.

## **Trump and the Politics of Health**

Performing health was an important part of how Trump had set himself apart from his political adversaries. Already in the 2016 election, Trump had attacked Hillary Clinton via claims that she was ill and seeking to hide it (Kellner 2016, 82–83). Trump returned to the strategy in the 2020 election: less than a week before his infection, he had mocked Biden during a debate for his habit of wearing a mask: "I don't wear a mask like him. Every time you see him he's got a mask. He could be speaking 200 feet from it, and he shows up with the biggest mask I've ever seen" (Macaya et al. 2020). While Trump affirmed that he had nothing against masks when needed, his response called attention to Biden's strict adherence to wearing one. Both the conjured situation (Biden speaking to someone so far away that there was no chance of infection taking place) and the magnitude of Biden's reaction (the size of his mask as the "biggest") were used to depict the candidate's fear of the virus as comical and overblown. Trump's political performance drew on the narratives of both strength—him not needing a mask due to his health and vigor—and individualism—his deciding the need for a mask on case-to-case basis, as opposed to Biden's more collectivist adherence to group logic.

This was a sentiment that the right-wing commentator Ben Shapiro shared and elaborated on in his YouTube video responding to the news of Trump's infection. Shapiro argued that people on the

right had a practical approach to safety measures regarding COVID-19, while people on the left were prone to a form of magical thinking:

. . . where you're immune to the disease if you're protesting for racial justice, where if you run around and virtue signal about wearing a masking a hundred feet from other people, this somehow makes you immune to the disease, . . . there is this sort of talismanic worship of particular modes of discussing this disease. (Shapiro 2020)

Shapiro depicted a gap between people having policy discussions about the best practices for tackling the COVID-19 situation and the President's left-wing critics, whom he saw as engaged in a form of superstition where the disease was so thoroughly politicized that correct political causes were enough to deter its spread (Shapiro 2020).

Shapiro linked the COVID-19 debate to the concept of "virtue signaling," which in the right-wing media sphere has arisen as a common phrase used to dismiss the political convictions of their ideological opponents. The concept sees the exclamation of political or social ideals as a collectivist form of peer pressure and intragroup communication, where individual's politics do not stem from genuine convictions but rather from a desire to be seen as righteous by one's peers (McClay 2018). Without using the phrase directly, this was essentially the bulk of Trump's criticism toward Biden's use of a face mask: that it was not motivated by genuine concerns or needs of the occasion, but rather masks were used as a communicative tool to demonstrate Biden's adherence to a specific ideological position, symbolized in the usage of masks. It drew on a much larger phenomenon of the COVID-19 era, where masks—or, more specifically, often the refusal to wear one—became virulent political actions of ideological symbolism in themselves. As noted by Jack Bratich (2021, 258), the anti-mask sentiments (seemingly) paradoxically combined individualist notions of freedom with collective antagonisms: the right to not wear a mask was grounded in individualist rhetoric but often expressed within an *us vs. them* framework that was deeply collective.

The specific symbolisms of COVID-19 merged with the larger history of Donald Trump's politics of health. Already during the early parts of his first campaign, Trump released a letter from his physician which called his "physical strength and stamina [. . . ] extraordinary" and declared him "the healthiest individual ever elected to the presidency" (Brait 2015). Years later, the author—Dr. Harold Bornstein—admitted to CNN that Trump himself dictated the letter to him (Marquardt and

Crook 2018). In the sphere of right-wing media, the imagery of Donald Trump as a virile, resilient, and healthy were being reproduced by commentators in response to the news of his infection. For instance, Fox News ran an interview of White House coronavirus adviser Scott Atlas, who called him a “super vigorous man” and said he had “never seen anyone with more energy and more vigor, at any age, but particularly at his age” (Singman 2020).

Depictions of Trump as a virile and imposing figure of great physical strength have also been recurring features of media produced by his supporters. The most prominent example of this can be found in the works of pro-Trump cartoonist Ben Garrison, whose comics often circulated on both pro- and anti-Trump media platforms in the wake of significant events (Barnes 2017). As a recurring stylistic feature of his comics, Garrison depicts Trump as a statuesque figure of impressive physique contrasted to his frail and decrepit opponents—whether they are Democrats or insufficiently pro-Trump Republicans (see, for example, Butters 2017). In 2019, Garrison depicted the conflict between Trump and Mitt Romney, who had publicly criticized the President, by drawing the two as boxers. The frail-looking Romney is shown launching a flurry of blows against the muscular and broad-shouldered strongman Trump, who appears completely unaffected by the assault, not even needing to make any effort to defend himself (Garrison 2019). Garrison returned to the boxing theme in his reaction to the news of Trump’s COVID-19 infection in 2020, when the match between a muscular and athletic Trump and a badly bruised, trembling Biden is interrupted by an image of the coronavirus dressed as a referee. Within Biden’s boxing glove one can see the outline of a horseshoe, showing that Biden had attempted to cheat but still became easily outpowered by Donald Trump. In the textual accompaniment to the comic on Garrison’s webpage, the artist claims that Trump will “beat Covid like he did Biden” (Garrison 2020). Yet Garrison also voiced doubt about the news, claiming that the timing was suspicious. Hence, Garrison’s comic depicts the coronavirus as a potentially malicious agent, with its malice pointed directly at Trump in the image, intending to save Biden from a sure defeat at Trump’s hands.

Similar messaging was employed by the President’s former advisor Steve Bannon’s podcast, *War Room: Pandemic*, in the aftermath of Trump’s infection. The hosts downplayed the severity of the situation and focused on the so-called “mass hysteria” induced by the media surrounding the announcement: “This is all just the complete hair-on-fire. . . This is the reason we have the problem with the Democratic base and why they have to steal this election after November 3rd.

'Cause of the mass hysteria they go through every day. This is how they traumatize their base" (*War Room: Pandemic* 2020). Bannon argued that the media's response to Trump's infection was reflective of a larger pattern of traumatization being inflicted on the U.S. population by media, both traditional and social. Going forward, Bannon described the moment as just the newest stage in an ever-evolving conflict between the "agents of chaos" and Donald Trump, whom Bannon claimed symbolized "stability, grit, determination, and resolve" (*War Room: Pandemic* 2020). One of Bannon's co-hosts went even further, suggesting that the President's opponents had been eagerly waiting for him to get ill to use it in their campaign. Meanwhile, another host projected that through his vigor and stamina, Trump could help people across the U.S. overcome the fears of coronavirus implanted into them by the media, the Chinese government, and the Democratic Party (*War Room: Pandemic* 2020).<sup>[1]</sup> In these narratives, Trump was transformed into a paragon of both vigor and stability.

Persistent across the discussions I have examined so far is the creation of antagonisms and conflict. Not only is Trump depicted as a paragon of health, but this is given a relational quality, either in terms of the unhealthiness of his political opponents or the expectations of his critics. By projecting Trump's quick and easy recovery, his supporters envisioned a political victory as much as a medical one. At the center of this narrative is the conjured image of a "Leftist," built by combining liberal-leaning media responses by figures like Bernstein with right-wing projections of who they imagine their opponents as being—Bannon's "agents of chaos." This conjured villain of the narrative is enjoying the news of Trump's infection, but will be defeated by Trump overcoming the virus. These themes resonate with Corey Robin's observations that conservatism has historically often been enamored with the "soul of violence," even when protesting the fact:

The sublime is most readily found in two political forms: hierarchy and violence. But for reasons that shall become clear, the conservative . . . often favors the latter over the former. Rule may be sublime, but violence is more sublime. Most sublime of all is when the two are fused, when violence is performed for the sake of creating, defending, or recovering a regime of domination and rule. (Robin 2018, 61)

The quote illuminates the general media politics around the 2020 election, but specifically regarding Trump's infection. Trump's campaign had originally been regarded by his supporters as a counterinsurgency against a corrupted establishment that had replaced the timeless and honorable old regime. In 2020, this fight was still ongoing. For his supporters, Trump was the

means of transferring power back to those who felt they had been unseated from their rightful positions of power (Kimmel 2017). Casey Ryan Kelly (2020, 3–4) suggests that Trump’s political rhetoric can best be analyzed through the concept of *ressentiment*: “bitter indignation that one has been treated unfairly [. . .] in which a subject is consumed by emotions and affects such as ‘revenge, hatred, malice, envy, the impulse to detract, and spite.’” It is a rhetorical strategy which gains pleasure from defeating one’s enemies. Kelly links this political style to Robert E. Terrill’s (2017, 499–500) argument that Trump represents the nullification of the ethos of “reciprocity and mutual sacrifice” that are instrumental to the fostering of civic citizenship. That is, Trump’s political rhetoric elevates self-interest to a virtue and denies the value of looking after others. Dissimilar people are given no other roles except that of an enemy.

## Trump Emerges

So far, I have largely focused on the immediate reactions to Trump’s infection by the pro-Trump media, from Fox News to YouTube to podcasts. Trump himself was largely vacant in the early moments, receiving medical treatment and finally being hospitalized over the weekend at the Walter Reed Military Medical Center in Maryland (Baker and Haberman 2020). Over the weekend, the medical reports showed conflicting news about the President’s health, until on Sunday evening he suddenly emerged from the hospital in a motorcade to greet his supporters, who had gathered outside (Alper and Sullivan 2020). According to interviewed officials, Trump wanted a display of strength (Dawsey, Leonnig, and Knowles 2020). While even Fox News had previously expressed a hope that Trump would use the moment by “toning down his routine” and showing “seriousness and empathy” (Stirewalt 2020), Trump opted for the path of spectacle and performance. After the fact, Fox News anchor Sandra Smith’s interview with Trump surrogate Mercedes Schlapp showed some of the discord regarding Trump’s media performance even in right-wing media environments. While Smith admonished Trump’s “irresponsible” messaging regarding the infection, Schlapp depicted Trump as a first-hand survivor and a fighter, as opposed to Joe Biden, whom she claimed was advocating “surrender” (Wilstein 2020).

Performing health and strength in the presidential office is not a phenomenon related only to Trump, of course. The most notable instance of this was the case of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who consistently performed health to the public in order to mask a disability caused by polio. As observed by Davis W. Houck and Amos Kiewe (2003, 9), this act of concealment had “nothing to

do with polio per se but with how the public attributed meaning to that affliction". It was assumed—likely correctly for the time—that the public would not accept a disabled president. Still, the office has hardly been held by paragons of health, with John F. Kennedy, for instance, being heavily medicated for much of his presidency (Blumenthal and Morone 2010, 15). Moreover, in the aftermath of Reagan's attempted assassination, the nation was shown a pre-taped appearance (Rogin 1987, 4). Beyond these specific ailments, presidential political rhetoric particularly around elections has often involved the performance of heroism:

Heroes rise above ordinary political life, and the narratives we spin about them allow us to understand how they are able to do so. Stories about heroes create meaning by looking back to the past from the present and by projecting the plot's next act into the future, all at the same time. In their earlier lives, heroes were tested and suffered, usually on behalf of something greater than themselves. In the present, however, their suffering and their causes will be redeemed. (Alexander 2010, 64)

Trump's emergence from his COVID-19 infection and the political performance surrounding it suggest at least an attempt to live out this manner of a heroic tale. The motorcade ride in many ways set the tone for Trump's return, culminating—as referenced in my opening—with the Twitter video showing Trump's triumphant homecoming in highly cinematic tones. The video in particular can be read as a highly produced, performative attempt to instill popular cultural meaning in the event. According to a CNN report, Trump was seen reshooting his entrance to the White House, without a mask, seemingly to ensure that multiple takes of the moment would be available in the editing of the video (Burnett 2020). In this sense, Trump—especially due to his roots in show business—can be seen as a producer figure who choreographed his return to express a certain sense of cinematic heroism. This drew on representations of the U.S. presidency that began to proliferate during the 1990s, where the President became an action star who tackled issues head on (Lawrence 2003, 223–30). This kind of portrayal, fundamentally about *being seen* as the hero, is a performance aimed toward creating a specific kind of image in the minds of potential onlookers, and follows Trump's larger trend of using popular cultural meaning-making in crafting his political narratives (see Kanzler and Scharlaj 2017).

Everything from the soundtrack to the chosen angles for the video served to distance the event from the very real tragedy taking place across the nation. Thus, COVID-19 was turned into a moment of personal triumph for Trump. Furthermore, the President's own messaging was built on

the groundwork done by his supporters in the media during his hospitalization. For instance, Fox News' Greg Gutfeld had previously already argued that Trump's infection was a patriotic act, which resulted from having "put himself on the line" in the "battlefield." As Gutfeld argued, "He didn't hide from the virus. The reason he didn't hide from the virus is he didn't want America to hide from the virus" (Baker 2020). Gutfeld's take is among the more explicit examples of the metaphor of wartime used to explain Trump's infection, depicted as the result of a heroic sacrifice, laying oneself on the line and going to the battlefield. A few days after his return, Trump tweeted a video where he claimed that his COVID-19 may have been a "blessing from God" (The Telegraph 2020b). He credited his recovery to an experimental antibody therapy from Regeneron Pharmaceuticals Inc., which he called a "cure." In the video, he highlighted how he himself had suggested that he would undergo the treatment, again employing the narrative device of laying himself on the line.

Before his return to the White House, Trump had tweeted his advice to the nation: "Don't be afraid of Covid. Don't let it dominate your life" (Wulfsohn 2020). On Fox News, the tweet was praised on *Tucker Carlson Tonight* by Alex Berenson, author of the COVID-skeptic *Unreported Truths about COVID-19 and Lockdowns* (2020). Berenson decried: "For too long we have let this virus—and the media's hysteria around it—to dominate us" (Wulfsohn 2020). Both Trump and Berenson used the same phrasing of "domination" to describe the impact of COVID-19 on the U.S. population. In the politics of masculinity used by Trump, it has been a point of importance for him to portray himself as the "alpha male" who dominates his opposition through aggression and bullying (Ott and Dickinson 2019, 45). In this gendered performance, to dominate is to succeed as a man, while to be dominated is to fail (Kimmel 2017, 170–79). Using this language of "domination" around COVID-19 brought it into the narrative framework of "man-versus-nature," where the masculine hero exerts his will over his circumstances and surroundings.

Berenson further appealed to national pride: "This country—we put people on the moon! We're the first manned flight in 1903. What has happened to us that this rather dismal virus has scared everyone to death?" (Wulfsohn 2020). This essentially transformed disease and health into issues of will. The pandemic could be handled by altering the way one viewed it. This seemingly simple suggestion contains deep ideological resonances. One of the core issues driving ideological conflict in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been the question of individual will versus circumstances: to what extent do prosperity, success, and health derive from the choices

an individual has made instead of their societal circumstances (Katz 2001, 341–59; de Coning and Ebin 2022). The most explicit combination of these is the evangelical doctrine of “prosperity gospel,” which sees economic success and good health as the results of moral virtue—an ideal that helped align U.S. evangelicals behind Trump and his general ethos of business success (Fea 2018). In a similar way, the presidential rhetoric of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s had already instilled in the heart of U.S. conservatism a sense of unfettered personal liberty, unburdened by obligations (Rodgers 2011, 15–40). Framing COVID-19 in terms of will and personal choice turned it from a collective tragedy requiring communal sacrifice and interpersonal obligations into a matter of personal empowerment, which the recovery of Donald Trump reflected and inspired.

## Conclusion

In the cycle of the 2020 U.S. presidential election, Donald Trump’s COVID-19 infection presented him and his supporters with both an opportunity and a threat. On the one hand, it was a chance for his campaign to garner sympathy, to demonstrate his health and strength, and to highlight the moral faults of those who expressed conflicted feelings about the situation. On the other, the very fact that Trump contracted COVID-19 could be seen as a failure on his part. This was something that the President seemed unwilling to accept. If there is one thing that has epitomized Trump in the public sphere, it has been his formulation of his entire identity around success. In this worldview, failure brings shame. Thus, the President’s infection had to be presented not as a failure but as either a symptom of or a path toward success.

The mediated performances enacted by Trump and his supporters around his own coronavirus episode reflect this basic need for success. Drawing on deep ideological reservoirs of how strength, health, and success had been formulated around U.S. conservatism, these performances located Trump as a hero who had sacrificed his health for the nation. After a short hospitalization in a choreographed performance, he returned as a hero, all signs of weakness and lingering disease having been swept aside. This basic narrativization emphasized larger tendencies in both Trump’s reelection campaign and in right-wing political messaging at large: Trump facing the disease and overcoming it were symbolic both of the nation surviving the pandemic and Trump’s political victory over his ideological enemies. The hero narrative constructed would not have been complete without the right-wing media system constructing the image of a villain to be defeated,

which was not as much the coronavirus as the imagined “Leftist” rejoicing at the news of Trump’s infection.

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All links verified November 20, 2022.

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## Notes

[1] *War Room: Pandemic* repeatedly referred to the coronavirus as the “CCP virus” and thus routinely engages in the kind of anti-China rhetoric described by Henna-Riikka Pennanen in this issue.