

Home Alone at the White House: A Sour President, With TV His Constant Companion

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Katie Rogers

April 23,
2020



WASHINGTON — President Trump arrives in the Oval Office these days as late as noon, when he is usually in a sour mood after his morning marathon of television.

He has been up in the White House master bedroom as early as 5 a.m. watching Fox News, then CNN, with a dollop of MSNBC thrown in for rage viewing. He makes calls with the TV on in the background, his routine since he first arrived at the White House.

But now there are differences.

The president sees few allies no matter which channel he clicks. He is angry even with Fox, an old security blanket, for not portraying him as he would like to be seen. And he makes time to watch Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's briefings from New York, closely monitoring for a sporadic compliment or snipe.

Confined to the White House, the president is isolated from the supporters, visitors, travel and golf that once entertained him, according to more than a dozen administration officials and close advisers who spoke about Mr. Trump's strange new life. He is tested weekly, as is Vice President Mike Pence, for Covid-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus.

The economy — Mr. Trump's main case for re-election — has imploded. News coverage of his handling of the coronavirus has been overwhelmingly negative as Democrats have condemned him for a lack of empathy, honesty and competence in the face of a pandemic. Even Republicans have criticized Mr. Trump's briefings as long-winded and his rough handling of critics as unproductive.

His own internal polling shows him sliding in some swing states, a major reason he declared a temporary halt to the issuance of green cards to those outside the United States. The executive order — watered down with loopholes after an uproar from business groups — was aimed at pleasing his political base, people close to him said, and was the kind of move Mr. Trump makes when things feel out of control. Friends who have spoken to him said he seemed unsettled and worried about losing the election.

But the president's primary focus, advisers said, is assessing how his performance on the virus is measured in the news media, and the extent to which history will blame him.

"He's frustrated," said Stephen Moore, an outside economic adviser to Mr. Trump who was the president's pick to sit on the Federal Reserve Board before his history of sexist comments and lack of child support payments surfaced. "It's like being hit with a meteor."

Mr. Trump frequently vents about how he is portrayed. He was enraged by an article this month in which his health secretary, Alex M. Azar II, was said to have warned Mr. Trump in January about the possibility of a pandemic. Mr. Trump was upset that he was being blamed while Mr. Azar was portrayed in a more favorable light, aides said. The president told friends that he assumed Mr. Azar was working the news media to try to save his own reputation at the expense of Mr. Trump's.

Hogan Gidley, a White House spokesman, disputed that the president's focus was on his news coverage, but said in a statement that "President Trump's highest priority is the health and safety of the American people."

Aides said the president's low point was in mid-March, when Mr. Trump, who had dismissed the virus as "one person coming in from China" and no worse than the flu, saw deaths and infections from Covid-19 rising daily. Mike Lindell, a Trump donor campaign surrogate and the chief executive of MyPillow, visited the White House later that month and said the president seemed so glum that Mr. Lindell pulled out his phone to show him a text message from a Democratic-voting friend of his who thought Mr. Trump was doing a good job.

Mr. Lindell said Mr. Trump perked up after hearing the praise. "I just wanted to give him a

little confidence," Mr. Lindell said.

The Daily Briefings

The daily White House coronavirus task force briefing is the one portion of the day that Mr. Trump looks forward to, although even Republicans say that the two hours of political attacks, grievances and falsehoods by the president are hurting him politically.

Mr. Trump will hear none of it. Aides say he views them as prime-time shows that are the best substitute for the rallies he can no longer attend but craves.

Mr. Trump rarely attends the task force meetings that precede the briefings, and he typically does not prepare before he steps in front of the cameras. He is often seeing the final version of the day's main talking points that aides have prepared for him for the first time although aides said he makes tweaks with a Sharpie just before he reads them live. He hastily plows through them, usually in a monotone, in order to get to the question-and-answer bullying session with reporters that he relishes.

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The briefing's critics, including Mr. Cuomo, have pointed out the obvious: With two hours of the president's day dedicated to hosting what is still referred to as a prime-time news briefing, who is going to actually fix the pandemic?

Sign up to receive an email when we publish a new story about the coronavirus outbreak. Even Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, one of the experts appointed to advise the president on the best way to handle the outbreak, has complained that the amount of time he must spend onstage in the briefings each day has a "draining" effect on him.

They have the opposite effect on the president. How he arrived at them was almost an accident.

Mr. Trump became enraged watching the coverage of his 10-minute Oval Office address in March that was rife with inaccuracies and had little in terms of action for him to announce. He complained to aides that there were few people on television willing to defend him.

The solution, aides said, came two days later, when Mr. Trump appeared in the Rose Garden to declare a national emergency and answer questions from reporters. As he admonished journalists for asking "nasty" questions, Mr. Trump found the back-and-forth he had been missing. The virus had not been a perfect enemy — it was impervious to his browbeating — but baiting and attacking reporters energized him.

"I don't take responsibility at all," Mr. Trump told White House correspondents in answer to

one question.

His first news conference in the briefing room took place the next day, on a Saturday, after Mr. Trump arrived unannounced in the Situation Room, wearing a polo shirt and baseball cap, and told the group he planned to attend the briefing and watch from a chair on the side. When aides told him that reporters would simply yell questions at him, even if he was not on the small stage, he agreed to take the podium. He has not looked back since.

When Mr. Trump finishes up 90 or more minutes later, he heads back to the Oval Office to watch the end of the briefings on TV and compare notes with whoever is around from his inner circle.

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The New Pecking Order

That circle has shrunk significantly as the president, who advisers say is more sensitive to criticism than at nearly any other point in his presidency, has come to rely on only a handful of longtime aides.

Hope Hicks, a former communications director who rejoined the White House this year as counselor to the president, maintains his daily schedule. His former personal assistant, Johnny McEntee, now runs presidential personnel.

Ms. Hicks and Mr. McEntee, along with Dan Scavino, the president's social media guru who was promoted this week to deputy chief of staff for communications, provide Mr. Trump with a link to the better old days. The three are the ones outside advisers get in touch with to find out if it's a good time to reach the president or pass on a message.

Mark Meadows, Mr. Trump's new chief of staff, is still finding his footing and adjusting to the nocturnal habits of Mr. Trump, who recently placed a call to Mr. Meadows, a senior administration official said, at 3:19 a.m. Mr. Meadows works closely with another trusted insider: Jared Kushner, Mr. Trump's son-in-law and de facto chief of staff.

"They have been really confined and figuratively imprisoned," Matthew Dallek, a political historian at George Washington University, said about presidents who have kept close to the White House in times of crisis.

While many officials have been encouraged to work remotely and the Old Executive Office Building is empty, the West Wing's tight quarters are still packed. Mr. Pence and his top aides, usually stationed across the street, are working exclusively from the White House,

along with most of the senior aides, who dine from the takeout mess while the in-house dining room remains closed. Few aides wear masks except for Matthew Pottinger, the deputy national security adviser, and some of his staff.

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The Day Ends as It Began

As soon as he gets to the Oval Office, the president often receives his daily intelligence briefing, and Mr. Pence sometimes joins him. Then there are meetings with his national security team or economic advisers.

Throughout the day, Mr. Trump calls governors, will have lunch with cabinet secretaries and pores over newspapers, which he treats like official briefing books and reads primarily in paper clippings that aides bring to him. He calls aides about stories he sees, either to order them to get a world leader on the phone or to ask questions about something he has read.

Many friends said they were less likely to call Mr. Trump's cellphone, assuming he does not want to hear their advice. Those who do reach him said phone calls have grown more clipped: Conversations that used to last 20 minutes now wrap up in three.

Mr. Trump will still take calls from Brad Parscale, his campaign manager, on the latest on polling data. The president will in turn call Mr. Meadows and Kellyanne Conway about key congressional races.

The president's aides have slowly lined up more opportunities to keep him engaged. Last week, a small group of coronavirus survivors were led into the White House, and Mr. Trump took one of them to see the White House physician. Then Mr. Trump hosted a celebration of America's truckers on the South Lawn.

After he is done watching the end of the daily White House briefing — which is held seven days a week and sometimes goes as late as 8 p.m. — Mr. Trump watches television in his private dining room off the Oval Office. Assorted aides who are still around will join him to rehash the day and offer their assessments on the briefings. Comfort food — including French fries and Diet Coke — is readily available.

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Lately, aides say, his mood has started to brighten as his administration moves to open the economy. His new line, both in public and in private, is that there is reason to be optimistic.

“And at the end of that tunnel, we see light,” Mr. Trump said in the Rose Garden last week.

If he is not staying late in the West Wing, Mr. Trump occasionally has dinner with his wife, Melania Trump, and their son, Barron, who recently celebrated his 14th birthday at home.

By the end of the day, Mr. Trump turns back to his constant companion, television. Upstairs in the White House private quarters — often in his own bedroom or in a nearby den — he flicks from channel to channel, reviewing his performance.

Updated April 11, 2020

When will this end?

This is a difficult question, because a lot depends on how well the virus is contained. A better question might be: “How will we know when to reopen the country?” In an American Enterprise Institute report, Scott Gottlieb, Caitlin Rivers, Mark B. McClellan, Lauren Silvis and Crystal Watson staked out four goal posts for recovery: Hospitals in the state must be able to safely treat all patients requiring hospitalization, without resorting to crisis standards of care; the state needs to be able to at least test everyone who has symptoms; the state is able to conduct monitoring of confirmed cases and contacts; and there must be a sustained reduction in cases for at least 14 days.

How can I help?

The Times Neediest Cases Fund has started a special campaign to help those who have been affected, which accepts donations here. Charity Navigator, which evaluates charities using a numbers-based system, has a running list of nonprofits working in communities affected by the outbreak. You can give blood through the American Red Cross, and World Central Kitchen has stepped in to distribute meals in major cities. More than 30,000 coronavirus-related GoFundMe fund-raisers have started in the past few weeks. (The sheer number of fund-raisers means more of them are likely to fail to meet their goal, though.)

What should I do if I feel sick?

If you’ve been exposed to the coronavirus or think you have, and have a fever or symptoms like a cough or difficulty breathing, call a doctor. They should give you advice on whether you should be tested, how to get tested, and how to seek medical treatment without potentially infecting or exposing others.

Should I wear a mask?

The C.D.C. has recommended that all Americans wear cloth masks if they go out in public. This is a shift in federal guidance reflecting new concerns that the coronavirus is being spread by infected people who have no symptoms. Until now, the C.D.C., like the W.H.O., has advised that ordinary people don't need to wear masks unless they are sick and coughing. Part of the reason was to preserve medical-grade masks for health care workers who desperately need them at a time when they are in continuously short supply. Masks don't replace hand washing and social distancing.

How do I get tested?

If you're sick and you think you've been exposed to the new coronavirus, the C.D.C. recommends that you call your healthcare provider and explain your symptoms and fears. They will decide if you need to be tested. Keep in mind that there's a chance — because of a lack of testing kits or because you're asymptomatic, for instance — you won't be able to get tested.

How does coronavirus spread?

It seems to spread very easily from person to person, especially in homes, hospitals and other confined spaces. The pathogen can be carried on tiny respiratory droplets that fall as they are coughed or sneezed out. It may also be transmitted when we touch a contaminated surface and then touch our face.

Is there a vaccine yet?

No. Clinical trials are underway in the United States, China and Europe. But American officials and pharmaceutical executives have said that a vaccine remains at least 12 to 18 months away.

What makes this outbreak so different?

Unlike the flu, there is no known treatment or vaccine, and little is known about this particular virus so far. It seems to be more lethal than the flu, but the numbers are still uncertain. And it hits the elderly and those with underlying conditions — not just those with respiratory diseases — particularly hard.

What if somebody in my family gets sick?

If the family member doesn't need hospitalization and can be cared for at home, you should help him or her with basic needs and monitor the symptoms, while also keeping as much distance as possible, according to guidelines issued by the C.D.C. If there's space, the sick family member should stay in a separate room and use a separate bathroom. If masks are available, both the sick person and the caregiver should wear them when the caregiver enters the room. Make sure not to share any dishes or other household items and to regularly clean surfaces like counters, doorknobs, toilets and tables. Don't forget to wash your hands frequently.

Should I stock up on groceries?

Plan two weeks of meals if possible. But people should not hoard food or supplies. Despite the empty shelves, the supply chain remains strong. And remember to wipe the handle of the grocery cart with a disinfecting wipe and wash your hands as soon as you get home.

Can I go to the park?

Yes, but make sure you keep six feet of distance between you and people who don't live in your home. Even if you just hang out in a park, rather than go for a jog or a walk, getting some fresh air, and hopefully sunshine, is a good idea.

Should I pull my money from the markets?

That's not a good idea. Even if you're retired, having a balanced portfolio of stocks and bonds so that your money keeps up with inflation, or even grows, makes sense. But retirees may want to think about having enough cash set aside for a year's worth of living expenses and big payments needed over the next five years.

What should I do with my 401(k)?

Watching your balance go up and down can be scary. You may be wondering if you should decrease your contributions — don't! If your employer matches any part of your contributions, make sure you're at least saving as much as you can to get that "free money."

