

Policy 360 – Episode 108 – A Wartime President?

Judith Kelley:

By March 22nd there were almost 45,000 confirmed coronavirus cases in the US and over 500 deaths. And on that day, President Trump announced in a press conference that the whole country was at war against an invisible enemy. And he said that he considered himself a war time president.

Donald Trump:

I mean, it's a number of people have said it, but, and I feel it actually, I'm a wartime president. This is a war. This is a war. Different kind of a war than we've ever had.

Judith Kelley:

It's now been over a month since Trump's press conference and the number of confirmed coronavirus cases in the US has more than doubled. And the number of confirmed deaths from coronavirus as I'm saying this is almost 60,000. I'm Judith Kelley, and I'm the Dean of the Sanford school of Public Policy at Duke University and my guest today, wrote an OpEd in which he compares Trump's leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic to the leadership of two American wartime presidents. Bruce Jentleson is the William Preston Few distinguished professor of public policy and political science here at the Duke Sanford School of Public Policy. And he has held positions as foreign policy advisor to politicians, including Al Gore and Bill Clinton and he studies foreign policy statesmanship and leadership. Welcome Bruce.

Bruce Jentleson:

Thank you. Good to be with you.

Judith Kelley:

The wartime metaphor, Bruce, has been used in different context, the war against drugs, the war on poverty and so on. Is this how Trump is using the term now? And how accurate is Trump's wartime metaphor? Is the nation at war?

Bruce Jentleson:

Yeah, it's a good question. Well put. Even if we think about war as in the use of military force, what we consider war and kind of like a war has gotten muddled over the years. We've had no declarations of war, on conflicts we've been having troops in Afghanistan, Iraq for almost two decades. And there are many times in which presidents use it, like the examples you cited, as a way of trying to communicate that the country needs to come together with an overriding sense of national purpose in a crisis emergency. And there are dangers to that. Sometimes that metaphor can be used to do things that are abuses of power. But this situation, I think it really can have a useful purpose to think about sort of the functional equivalent of war in terms of national focus and mobilization.

Judith Kelley:

What are some effective markers of a wartime leader if Trump is a wartime leader now?

Bruce Jentleson:

Yeah, in the article you mentioned, I went back and looked at Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt, arguably our two most effective and successful wartime presidents. And FDR also has the Depression, which was another functional equivalent of war in terms of a crisis. And probably the starting point

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really has to be a sense among the American people that their president is being straight with them about the threats that are posed and the challenges we face. There's always some secrecy and information management that's necessary, but any sense that there's a manipulation by a president for their own political interests or dishonesty, really takes away from the sense of candor. You have to have that candor while you're also being confident to say, "We face a real challenge here and I'm not pulling any punches. It's really a difficult situation but we can do it and I'm here as your leader to provide you the confidence that we can, while you can have confidence also that I'm going to be straight with you and tell you the truth about it."

Judith Kelley:

Well get back to questions of truth in a second, Bruce, but I just wanted to go back again to this notion of war, what is it that using a wartime metaphor enables the precedent to do that, say just going about normal business does not enable him or her to do?

Bruce Jentleson:

I think it creates particularly in our system, a greater sense of national purpose in the sense that some powers you are allowed by law, there's an emergency powers, regulations are on the books. There's what's been talked about a lot, the so called Defense Production Act of 1950.

Judith Kelley:

There are actually legal things you can do if you declare that you're in a time of war.

Bruce Jentleson:

That's correct. But it's also, I think the way that people pay attention and to mobilize. I actually, when my mother passed away in 2008 at almost 80 years old and I was going through her papers and I found she still had a letter from 1944 when she was a teenager in Scranton, Pennsylvania, thanking her for growing her victory garden. And when you go back and you look, this was a message from President Roosevelt at the time that we're all in this together. People would grow these little gardens even in northeastern Pennsylvania and it supplied at one point, 40% of the produce that the country needed. That can be very usefully used. And as we said before, it can be abused. And that's why we have to be very careful about how a particular president goes about it.

Judith Kelley:

You were talking about truth and candor and as you said in your article, you focus on Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt, but talk about Lincoln and how he wielded the truth during times of conflict.

Bruce Jentleson:

Yeah. Of course we have this old reputation of Honest Abe, which biographers show, actually it goes back to some things he did as a young man, even out of politics. But when he ran for the presidency, he made it very clear what his candidacy was about. And in his inaugural address in 1861, he said that his intention was to preserve, protect and defend the union. And even when the battles were going the Confederacy's way, he didn't do much sugar coating for the people. Same thing about FDR, going back to the Great Depression in his famous, the only thing you have to fear is fear itself, which he carried forward after the attack on Pearl Harbor was devastating for the United States. It was a surprise and wiped out an enormous part of our Navy. And he told the people that this is a difficult situation and very difficult situation and we need to pull together. I believe we can, but it's going to take a lot.

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Bruce Jentleson:

And so they had the confidence that when those presidents told them things were starting to go their way, that they were being honest with them rather than somehow, oh I'm up for reelection and I got to figure out how to give a nice sweet message here.

Judith Kelley:

The difficulty or the balance is that at times you maybe have to be careful about just how much of the truth the population can digest or can handle at a given time. And yet, if you are not completely forthcoming, that may take away from your ability to be trusted later on. Is that what you're saying?

Bruce Jentleson:

That's right. That's the essence of leadership. I think people that go into difficult corporate settings or difficult settings in other institutions would have the same, in a generic way, the same kind of challenge. We're faced with difficult problems. Mikhail Gorbachev had that in the Soviet Union in which the profundity of the problems we faced, yet he had to give people the confidence that they could meet them. Ultimately they ran, six, seven years later, that kind of ran out. But it allowed him to do the things he did, which were extraordinary for the five, six, seven years of his first part of his presidency.

Judith Kelley:

What about FDR? How would you contrast him to Lincoln's approach to being truthful?

Bruce Jentleson:

One of the great biographies of FDR, James MacGregor Burns, this is the great story and it's called the Lion and the Fox. And FDR had both. And so he was, the fox was, he was a shrewd politician, but it didn't carry over to somehow that he wasn't being honest as a leader in Pearl Harbor. In fact in his inaugural address back in 1933, in the middle of the Great Depression, still the worst economic situation this country has ever faced. We'll see where our current one goes. He said that, "I'm going to address you with the candor that I know you people expect." And the fireside chats were as much about communicating information. It's really a certain amount of handholding, very different age of technology, but arguably as effective as any technology. People would hear his voice. Estimates were 70% of the country would tune into these.

Bruce Jentleson:

In the late thirties when the Depression wasn't as bad he had kind of not given as many. And then he ratcheted them up again during World War II. And so he had that sense of reassuring. He also, as did Lincoln, communicated that he was president of all of the people. We sometimes forget how intense the opposition to FDR was in certain parts of the country. And there've been some good political science studies that showed that World War II, sort of the differences, the political differences among people's views of him faded away because they believed in him as a leader and he helped make that happen. And that was a very important way of trying to bring the country together.

Judith Kelley:

But Bruce, when we talk about being truthful and being candid, being transparent so that you can be trusted, how much more difficult is that in a situation where the facts on the ground are not necessarily clear? We have such big uncertainty estimates around even how we expect the virus to unfold. We have

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incomplete information about it as how it has already unfolded. We're still in real time trying to process data to get an accurate picture. And so how do you position yourself from a truth perspective when so much is not known and so much is uncertain?

Bruce Jentleson:

I say two things. One is to go back to war. There's the fog of war and even though we won World War II and the Union won Civil War, even if you read the newspapers of the day, there were many times where there was uncertainty, incomplete information, lots of bases for fear and concern. In some ways it's still comparable. Another comparison though is look across the world at other countries also dealing with COVID-19. Angela Merkel in Germany whose popularity was fading 30 some percent has gotten to 70% because people believe that she was going about this in effective way as the leader of the country.

Bruce Jentleson:

Scott Morrison in Australia. As you know, I was in Australia with a visiting professorship when all this happened and when I got there and December, the country had gone through the bushfires in which his leadership was widely criticized. Well he stepped up and the country now has very few cases. Dealing with the same uncertainties, the same travel issues, but mobilizing the government as in effect, head of the government. And you can look at different countries that have done well on this and you can see same situations, but let's just say a much higher quality leadership about what it means to be a crisis leader in other countries than we've seen in ours.

Judith Kelley:

You mention Australia so it's hard not to leap to New Zealand where Jacinda Ardern has performed quite admirably in seeing the same increase in approval ratings and yet she's not had necessarily any better access to information. How would you reflect on how somebody like her has performed at a time like this and in terms of the principle of truth?

Bruce Jentleson:

Yeah, New Zealand is even closer to wiping things out and we had actually spent a couple of weeks in New Zealand in February and it's interesting talking to people there. I had a great impression of her from the way she handled the terrible massacres at the mosque in Christchurch back in March of last year. And what some new Zealanders were telling me was she was still popular, but her party wasn't. That they respected that, but she hadn't delivered that much on certain things that are part of being prime minister. Well she has totally stepped up. Was very honest with the country, would do her Facebook sessions wearing her sweatshirt from home and there too, she set the goal of wiping out the cases. Now it's a smaller country, but again, a lot of uncertainty. But it had a public health system. And so in some ways you've got liberal, Jacinda Ardern, conservative Scott Morrison, Angela Merkel centrist, it's not about which part of the spectrum they're on. It's really how they exercise the powers of leadership.

Judith Kelley:

You also talk about the importance of presidential compassion and self sacrifice during times of war. And we just mentioned the New Zealand prime minister being there at home and being very relatable. And how would you think about these elements of self sacrifice and compassion? What does that mean at a time like this?

Bruce Jentleson:

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They're so important because they say, I'm relating to you and not just as your leader, but as a human being. Empathy is an extraordinarily important quality. We used to joke that Bill Clinton would do, I feel your pain too much, but there is a truth there. And to the certain extent it was a part of his success. There has to be a sense that you get it as a person and you can't come through programming. It's not your communications person isn't going to be able to do that unless people know authenticity in times of crisis and they don't. The shared sacrifice part is very important.

Bruce Jentleson:

All four of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt's sons were in the war and Abraham Lincoln's sole surviving son Robert, while he gave him a post working for General Grant that wasn't on the front lines, nevertheless he sent his sole surviving son to be part of the effort. And when you share sacrifice with people, Nelson Mandela being willing to spend 27 years in prisons, it gives you an authenticity as a leader that is just so important to people. And that, from your own family but also the compassion you convey that I get it. And when at the end of the day, I turn off the lights and think about how my family's doing just like you do.

Judith Kelley:

What does self sacrifice mean though, at a time like this? How would a leader demonstrate self sacrifice now?

Bruce Jentleson:

Look, as I say in the article, I don't think it's a partisan comment to say that our president has not been exercising these qualities of leadership. Including things like making sure there were tax benefits in some of the bills that Congress passed for the Trump organization. And that's not exactly self sacrifice and there's just not a sense of empathy. Again, he's got grown children and a young child so it's not so much that he needs to send somebody out there on the front lines, but there needs to be a sense, and you could even do it, Abraham Lincoln wrote a famous letter that biographers cite to the daughter of someone who died in the war and it was a personal letter and he'd go to the hospitals and talk to the workers.

Bruce Jentleson:

Now, it's a little more dangerous now, but that can be done. There could be an effort to do some sort of engaging directly with our first responders and our healthcare workers that even if there was a small element of risk in it, would show you're willing to run it and that that element of risk could well be managed, to make sure the president stays healthy. There are so many ways to do this in this current situation.

Judith Kelley:

Bruce, if you go back to the wartime metaphor, a lot of times in war is sort of an us versus them mentality. We're fighting against somebody and we define ourselves against that other group. But when the enemy is invisible, how does a leader widen the base to the entire nation? And how is that going in the United States?

Bruce Jentleson:

Yeah. I think, the Churchill notions and having the Nazis, in some ways you can point to the enemy. And there's been frankly some of that counterproductive to call this, label this the Wuhan virus and the

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Chinese virus. I think this is really, if you think about it, there has never been an issue in the history of this country and arguably in many parts of the world, which has affected so many people on a daily basis in their daily lives. Even after 9/11, which was a real shock to the American system, not everybody in the United States woke up and said, "I wonder if terrorism is going to happen in my hometown today?" But there's not a part of the country that doesn't at least think about, hmm, what's this doing? That's an enormous opportunity without necessarily being able to point to a Hitler or whatever to mobilize people.

Bruce Jentleson:

People get it. What a shared threat is and what being in the same boat is. There's a lot of intelligence out there and common sense that doesn't have to be manipulated just by a bad guy. It can be, we all have a problem, a big problem, and we're in it together more than we ever have before. You can write the speeches and think of the things you could do if you were really to take advantage of this an opportunity to bring the country together.

Judith Kelley:

Right. If you got called right now and were asked to advise, given where the country is now, is there a way forward to pivot? Is there a way that we can accomplish these things now together?

Bruce Jentleson:

Create initiatives that people can do at the individual and community level that would have them doing their equivalent of my mother's teenage victory garden. And cultivate that and make it a national effort and do all those sorts of things. That'd be one to reach the people. Second would be, all of the public health specialists say the most important thing in the short term is testing and contact tracing. Why not have these returning Peace Corps workers and America Corps workers and all our graduating seniors, who are going to have trouble finding jobs, enlist them in ways to have the person power, in jobs that are not just make work jobs that would create a national effort to create the capacity, the infrastructure to start to move the economy back towards some operation. And make it a national effort. Make that a value thing. There are plenty of, recruiting a lot of unemployed people you could do.

Bruce Jentleson:

And third, frankly, get away from this blaming internationally. Even if we had the most perfect policies in the world, that would be necessary but not sufficient. There has to be an effective World Health Organization. There has to be cooperation with other countries. In the 2008 financial crisis, everybody came together in what was called the Fellowship of the Lifeboat and suspended other differences. The WHO has plenty of flaws, but the way to fix them is not to bash them or tell them you're not to give them money, it's to figure out ways to make it more effective. And so have a sense that we're all in this together internationally. At the same time that each of us is focusing on our own country. Those would be three messages that my colleagues and actions my colleagues can add to. But those are the three that I'd emphasize.

Judith Kelley:

You mentioned the WHO and in your book, *The Peacemakers*, you profiled Gro Harlem Brundtland, who is the former prime minister of Norway, and she was the director general of the World Health Organization. And during her time with the World Health Organization, she worked on pandemic

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prevention after the SARS outbreak in China. And so I'm wondering if any of the lessons that you learned about Brundtland's style can be applied to the situation now?

Bruce Jentleson:

Yeah, it's a really good example of her leadership in a couple respects. In November 2002, SARS breaks out and China did simply what it did at the beginning of COVID, it was reticent. It didn't share the information, it was very hard for the international community. She'd worked directly with the Chinese leaders and found a way for them to both save face, but start cooperating with the international community. That's diplomacy. And I think right now we're, each side is doing it's blaming the other. China's doing some false propaganda about the United States. We're doing it back to China. But we're in this together and there could be a way saying, "Look, some of the vaccine testing now is happening in China, some is happening in the US, some is happening in Europe."

Bruce Jentleson:

And what she did was she found a way to do the diplomacy for saving face and for everybody being better off by working together. She also had this quote as she was leaving office that was one of those quotes. She said, "We live in a sea of microbes and this pandemic prevention is not if, but when." And as we've seen in the years since, COVID is the worst, but it's not the only time the international community has been faced with a very serious public, global public health problem.

Judith Kelley:

Bruce, does it make it better or worse that this is all happening in an election year?

Bruce Jentleson:

It shouldn't. If you're frankly, if I was advising a president, I would say, "That's all the more reason to do a great job." Because whatever the issues were that people didn't like you before other than people that will never ever, ever like you, you can show that you did what is the most important thing in any national leader which has help the country in a time of great need. And do it in a way that brings the country together. Lincoln's second inaugural was malice towards none and charity towards all which was his open hand to the South, which unfortunately he couldn't deliver on because he got assassinated. I actually think election year could make it even more incentive to do well. It's not at all necessary that that politicizes this. It really could give you a basis for transcending that as the national leader.

Judith Kelley:

You get a memo from the White House saying, "Bruce, give us your one piece of advice for the president." What would you say right now he should do?

Bruce Jentleson:

I think the testing is the most important because it's there's this old expression from the old English poet and author William Blake, about a grain of sand through which you can see the world. The single most important thing for us to do, to begin to get the economy running again, not only single, is the testing and the contact tracing that will give us a degree of confidence that we can maintain a balance between the risks we take in opening up and the benefits. And so as a policy matter that would be the most important thing. But I could probably fit on that memo too, to be empathetic and some of the other qualities that have to be communicated by the president as well.

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Judith Kelley:

The end of the day, you have to be truthful, candid, empathetic, compassionate and all these things. But it all has to be layered on top of good policy analysis.

Bruce Jentleson:

Yeah, you have to be effective. You have to show that you're in charge of your government. Again, what Governor Cuomo does is he shows, he defers to his experts and so people think that you're running things. It's not about your ego and you're listening to the experts. But ultimately you are the crucial decision maker, coordinator, communicator and there are different styles out there. Governor Hogan in Maryland is sort of a bland personality but is doing it his way. Governor Newsome is kind of quieter. Governor Cuomo's, has that, I can say this as a New Yorker. He has that New York verve to him. There are many different ways to do this. In the studies, *The Peacemakers* book on leadership, I push back against the notion that leaders are born. It's really a question of the person and the moment coming together. Even Churchill was a failure at many things he did before leading the country in World War II. A lot of options here, not just one model that would fit the situation.

Judith Kelley:

Thank you so much for joining me today, Bruce. Bruce Jentleson is the William Preston Few distinguished professor of public policy here at the Duke Sanford School of Public Policy. His book is called *The Peacemakers*, and it inspects various cases of leadership from the 20 century statesmanship. We'll have a link to his book at our website, policy360.org. And Bruce, congratulations to you because this year you received a big award from the Duke Alumni Association for undergraduate teaching.

Bruce Jentleson:

Yeah. It's enormously gratifying as you know that, it's really the most important thing we do among many important things as professors, and the fact that it was a nomination by students and decided by students gives it a really, very, very special place in my heart and my mind.

Judith Kelley:

Well, thank you so much for your efforts, both in teaching and research and being with us here today. We'll be back soon with another conversation. I'm Judith Kelley.