

Fintan O'Toole: Trump's illusion of immunity has been exposed by the virus



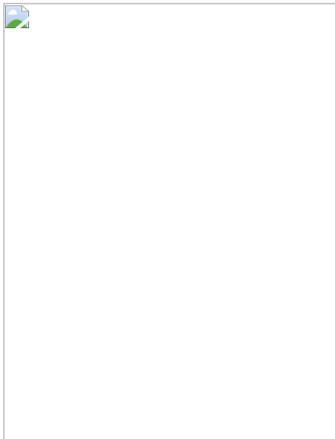
Fintan O'Toole

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“There are some who would have thought him mad. His followers felt that he was not. It was necessary to hear and see and touch him to be sure he was not.” – [Edgar Allan Poe](#), *The Masque of the Red Death* (1842)

In his admiring memoir, *Team of Vipers*, Cliff Sims, a former assistant to the US president, describes the system of authority at Donald Trump’s White House. It is that of not a managerial hierarchy but a royal court in which everything revolves around the person of the monarch: “The real org chart . . . was basically Trump in the middle and everyone he personally knew connected to him – like a hub and its spokes.”

Or, we might now add, like a coronavirus and its spikes. The org chart is now the chain of transmission.



Edgar Allan Poe: "Monarchs go mad, get dysentery, fall off their horses. As in Poe’s story, the Red Death of contagion finds them out."
Illustration: Getty

The virus targets pre-existing conditions – and one of them, we must now conclude, is authoritarianism. Being a right-wing populist head of government is, apparently, a significant risk factor. Given how infinitesimally small a subset of the population this is, it is remarkable that three of its most prominent members – [Boris Johnson](#) of the UK, [Jair Bolsonaro](#) of Brazil and now Trump – have tested positive for Covid-19.

This is not a coincidence. It is implicit in the nature of authoritarian politics. At the heart of the reactionary politics that have swept so much of the world is a notion of embodiment. The leader embodies the nation. He (it is always a he) is its authentic essence. Its values live within his bones and blood.

If power is personal, it must, as Poe wrote in that eerily resonant story, be seen and heard and touched

In authoritarian nationalism, there is always a body at the heart of the body politic – the duce, the caudillo, the führer, the Chief, the Boss, the Great Leader. (Johnson, not quite able to project this notion on his own, does it vicariously, presenting himself as the reincarnation of [Winston Churchill](#).)

Personal

Aptly, given the open misogyny of Trump and Bolsonaro, this idea reverses the great dictum of second wave feminism. It is not that the personal is political, but that the political is entirely personified. As Sims puts it, “Everything was personal to Trump – everything.” Authoritarianism always comes down to the unique, special, indispensable leader who alone can save the nation, and whose whims, desires and gut feelings are its guiding truths.

Because the leader is the special one, he enjoys the illusion of immunity. It begins as immunity from accountability, from rules, from checks and balances. But in Trump’s case, this has always extended to a deep faith, amplified by his sycophants, in a superiority that is literally encoded in his genes.

When his physician [Ronny Jackson](#) announced after Trump’s physical examination in 2018 that “he has incredibly good genes, and it’s just the way God made him,” he was echoing the claim by Trump’s spokeswoman [Sarah Sanders](#) that God “wanted [Donald Trump](#) to become president, and that’s why he’s there”. God chose Trump and gave him incredibly special genes.

But the price of having power thus embodied is that the special body must be exposed. If power is personal, it must, as Poe wrote in that eerily resonant story, be seen and heard and touched. Only those authoritarians who do not have to worry about elections (Vladimir Putin, Rupert Murdoch) can afford to retreat into isolation.

Thus, on March 3rd, Johnson boasted: “I was at a hospital where there were a few coronavirus patients and I shook hands with everybody.” What better way to show that you enjoy the immunity of the special ones than by letting the afflicted touch you? The germophobic Trump does not like to be touched – but he needs to be seen and heard.

Two bodies

In medieval theory, the king had two bodies: the body politic and the body natural. The political body was sacred, immortal, immutable and unquestionable. Only the natural body could sicken, die and make mistakes. One of the reasons for getting rid of monarchy is that, of course, the distinction does not work. Monarchs go mad, get dysentery, fall off their horses. As in Poe’s story, the Red Death of contagion finds them out.

In the president’s world, his toadies and enablers have been revelling at his unmasked ball, bidding defiance to contagion

If you build a political system around the personal charisma and uniqueness of the leader, the virus that infects the natural body – corpulent, vulnerable, exposed, all too human – immediately transmits itself to the whole political body. We’ve seen this already in Britain. Covid-19 deflated Johnson and the air went out of the entire Brexit polity that has been built around him.

Now, Trump’s royal court has been forced to discover what he so brutally denies: the truth of common humanity. In Poe’s story, the court believes it has immunity from the plague that is killing the peasants. “With such precautions the courtiers might bid defiance to contagion. The external world could take care of itself. In the meantime it was folly to grieve or to think.”

In the president’s world, his toadies and enablers have been revelling at his unmasked ball, bidding defiance to contagion. It is far too late to expect them, or Trump himself, to learn from their brush with death. They will not grieve for the thousands killed by their insouciance or think much of the harm they have done. But the American people surely will.