

## A MID-SPRING NIGHT'S DREAM



6/6/2020

By DAVID KLEMENT

It was their own fault, most Americans who weren't Trumpster zealots agreed.

If only they'd worn a mask.

But Donald Trump and Mike Pence consistently refused to don the protective face coverings that

most Americans took for granted in mid-May and that even White House staff had donned when the virus began infecting those serving the president and vice president.

Health officials never determined for certain exactly how President Trump got the Covid-19 virus. It could have been from the valet (who knew American presidents even had valets? Was he like Mr. Bates helping Lord Crawley adjust his tie and jacket collar on Downton Abbey?) who had tested positive in early May. Or he could have picked it up on May 14, when he visited a medical equipment manufacturer in Allentown, Pa., again unmasked. (The irony of the possibility that he became infected while visiting a face-mask manufacturer because he refused to wear a face mask was not lost on MSNBC's talking heads but was ignored by those on Fox News.)

In any event, Mr. Trump had come down with the virus not long after that goodwill/campaign rally trip and soon had to be placed on a ventilator. At that point Vice President Pence assumed the duties of acting president, and the nation held its breath. Mr. Trump held on for three days but, considering his age (73) and less-than-perfect physical condition, he succumbed to the virus which by that point had already claimed in excess of 90,000 American lives.

As the nation mourned and prepared for a state funeral, now-President Pence took over the Oval Office and tried to reassure worried Americans that he would redirect the White House Corona Virus Task Force and put major resources behind the lackluster testing and tracing effort of which Mr. Trump had continued to boast before becoming ill. But even before he could be officially inaugurated in a respectfully

subdued ceremony, Mr. Pence too became ill. Reporters recalled that his communications director had tested positive about the same time as Mr. Trump's valet, so that was a possible source. But since he was regularly in close contact with President Trump, both unmasked, there was also the distinct possibility that Mr. Trump himself could have transmitted the virus to his successor.

Like President Trump just days earlier, President Pence was rushed to Walter Reed Medical Center where doctors did everything they could to stabilize his condition and bring down the spiking fevers that wracked his body. By day four of his health crisis, he, too, had to be intubated and placed on a ventilator. That again triggered the presidential succession process and, to Republicans' horror, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi assumed the role of acting president while the nation again held its collective breath and prayed for Mr. Pence's recovery.

While they waited, Senate Republican leaders mounted a secret campaign to override the succession line-up spelled out in Article II, Section 1, of the Constitution, arguing that it was somewhat ambiguous, and insisted that Senate President Mitch McConnell was better equipped to take over if Mr. Pence died. Covert inquiries passed through Attorney General William Barr to the clerk of the Supreme Court got a swift don't-even-think-about-it response.

Alas, Mr. Pence could not be saved. Doctors turned off his ventilator after four days of intubation, saying the virus had done so much damage to his lungs that his internal organs has simply shut down, one by one, the typical progression of the disease in its worst manifestations. Though in otherwise good physical health, at age 60 Mr. Pence fell into the demographic that health officials had been warning for months was most vulnerable to the worst effects of the virus.

President Pelosi declared June as a month of mourning, with flags lowered to half staff throughout the country. Near the end of the month, a joint memorial service for both deceased presidents was held in the rotunda of the Capitol. President Pelosi, the first woman to hold that title, spoke eloquently of her two predecessors, making no references to the bitter political battles they had waged against her party's policies or to the disastrous approach they had taken to stopping the spread of the virus and reviving the nation's crippled economy.

But she did make a promise to the millions of Americans listening to the live-streamed ceremony on TV sets, computers and hand-held devices. "We will make America **healthy** again, in both body and soul," she vowed, adapting Mr. Trump's signature slogan from the 2016 campaign in a double-entendre dog whistle that would

become the Democrats' 2020 campaign slogan.

Now, on the day after election, as President Pelosi prepared for the transition period, she took a moment to reflect on the events of the past six months that had brought her to this historic milestone. One of her first acts as president had been to appoint Anthony Cuomo, former governor of New York, to head the White House Corona Virus Task Force. As the nation's "Pandemic Czar," Cuomo had lost no time in recruiting the best minds in the scientific community to draft a comprehensive plan for testing, tracing and quarantining positive cases. He had also organized the numerous researchers seeking an effective vaccine into symptom-specific teams, each focusing on just one possible antidote to the virus, thereby cutting down wasteful duplication of efforts.

The infection rate had steadily declined, and with 75 percent of the population testing as negative by Aug. 1, President Pelosi – in consultation with the Task Force, had decided that schools and colleges could open for the fall semester. Movie and stage theaters had been cleared to operate at 50 percent capacity, which gave hope to Broadway and community theaters across the country for at least a partial fall-winter season. Most stores and restaurants also had been able to reopen at 75 percent capacity, but a great number would be permanently closed. College football hoped for a near-normal season, as did the National Football League.

Mrs. Pelosi's decisive actions and early successes as president had given Americans hope, and that was reflected in a surging stock market, which in three months had regained most of the ground lost in the pandemic-generated bull market. And it had thrown the Democratic nomination for president into an unprecedented crisis. Although Joe Biden, the former vice president, had been the presumptive nominee when the pandemic hit, many party leaders as well as rank-and-file members felt Mrs. Pelosi absolutely should replace him as the Democratic nominee. In a tumultuous convention in mid-August, delayed until the daily virus infection rate had gone into double digits, the Democrats had made her the nominee and, in a gesture that allowed Biden to save face, picked him as her vice presidential running mate. Most agreed that it was a great ticket, one that would easily trounce the Republican nominee.

Given the deaths of its two most prominent figures, the GOP scrambled in late spring and early summer to come up a slate that might have a chance against the surging Democrats. Lacking leaders with name recognition and sufficient charisma to go up against the skillful, articulate Pelosi, they had settled on House minority leader Kevin McCarthy of California, who chose as his running mate Gov. Kim Reynolds of Iowa, who had achieved some fame among the conservative base for her reluctance to close down

her state at the height of the pandemic. Political observers watched in disbelief as the Republican leadership passed over more moderate female candidates like Sen. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska or Sen. Susan Collins of Maine, who might have given the GOP a hope of appealing to independent women.

The result had been a Democratic landslide, the biggest in history. Democrats carried every state, regaining the Senate with a 60 percent majority and increasing their majority in the House by 15 percent. Down to defeat went some of the most ardent Trump backers, including McConnell, replaced by young Democrats who had campaigned on a platform of job and healthcare security for working Americans.

In the months since being thrust into the presidency Mrs. Pelosi had focused almost entirely on combatting the virus and helping Americans thrown out of work by the shutdown regain some financial stability. The Workers Produce Administration (WPA, a deliberate link to FDR's New Deal) had put many of them to work helping farmers harvest crops in year-round crop states of Florida, California and Texas and transporting them to the food banks and soup kitchens of the urban-core cities. She had tripled the number of employees handling payouts for the Paycheck Protection Program, swiftly clearing up the backlog that had prevented unemployed workers from accessing their benefits.

She had, of course, immediately replaced Attorney General William Barr, tapping California Sen. Kamalah Harris for that job but admonishing her not to pursue any corruption investigations related to Trump or his minions until after the election. She had also restored James Comey to head the FBI, and he had quickly brought back his former deputy, Andrew McCabe. The two had been working to rebuild morale among the politicized bureau staff while preparing to reopen the long-stalled investigations into Russian interference into U.S. elections.

Now, as she prepared for her second inauguration, President Pelosi put her mind to building a solid Cabinet and team of advisers who would help her achieve the ambitious agenda she had laid out for the first 100 days. One of the first calls she made was to Condoleeza Rice, asking her to consider stepping in as Secretary of State. The State Department, like the FBI and Department of Justice, had been demoralized by the politicization of their ranks under Trump. Mrs. Pelosi acknowledge Rice's calm and confident demeanor under fire, first as George W. Bush's National Security Adviser and then as Secretary of State. Adding an African American female to her Cabinet would also help boost her credibility among black women, President Pelosi knew.

Since her elevation in May Democrats had elected Congressman Schiff as acting

Speaker of the House. Now President Pelosi called on party leaders to do away with the Acting title and make him speaker for the coming term. To lead the Senate she pushed for Sen. Cory Booker, the African American senator from New Jersey who had made such a favorable impression in the early days of the campaign.

Building her team of economic advisers, she placed a call to Andrew Yang, the brilliant entrepreneur who had also made a bid for the 2020 nomination, to become chairman of the Federal Reserve Board. To lead the Treasury Department she called on Tom Stier, the billionaire former hedge fund manager and philanthropist who had help fund many a Democratic campaign in the last 10 years and who had a brief, unsuccessful bid for the nomination in early 2020.

President Pelosi was not sure about Education Secretary. She might go with Sen. Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota, who had done well in the debates leading up to the first primaries, or maybe dip into the millennial pool to choose Rep. Alexandria Octavio Cortez, the fiery Hispanic-American congresswoman from the Bronx who had created ripples in her first term. Or maybe Klobuchar for Commerce Secretary and . . . Bzzzt Bzzzt. The alarm clock persisted until a hand reached from beneath the covers and hit the stop button. The sleeper opened his eyes, yawned widely as he swung his legs out of bed, and stepped into his slippers. Just another day in lockdown, Joe Sixpack thought glumly. But what a dream!