We Can Still Unify Against COVID-19

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The rhetorical example of President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) offers insight into our current and needed response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Let’s start with the historical record. On December 8, 1941 FDR delivered his “Infamy” speech to a joint session of Congress, asking for a declaration of war on Japan. Within an hour of the speech, a formal declaration of war was passed and the U.S. officially entered World War II.

FDR’s address is regarded by scholars of rhetoric as one of the most famous of all American political speeches. The speech was far more than a personal response by the President; it was a collective statement on behalf of all Americans in the wake of a heinous attack. As many communication researchers and historians have suggested, FDR’s speech crystallized and channeled the response of the nation, fostering a unified resolve to defeat the enemy.

Arguably, America may never have rallied and won the war in the absence of FDR’s decisiveness—something made possible by the
rhetorical tone of his address to the country which, via passive voice, portrayed America as the innocent victim.

Not surprisingly, at warp speed the nation unified, converting private industry into a tool of war. Instead of manufacturing appliances and other products for personal consumption, for example, the United States in a remarkably short period of time began building implements of war—including tanks, planes, ships and other armaments. Put simply, the war became a national priority.

When I started teaching political communication in 1979, FDR’s speech became one of the first rhetorical artifacts my students analyzed.

So why is this example timely in 2020 and more than a professor’s recollection?

On March 17 New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio poignantly and astutely invoked FDR’s name and used World War Two/Great Depression rhetoric to claim that it will take a Federal response to mobilize the nation, as well as provide the resources and plans to address the health and economic crisis we now face with the COVID-19 pandemic.

I concur. State and local efforts, no matter how aggressive and thorough as many of them have been, cannot possibly accomplish the enormous undertaking of responding to the coronavirus. States and cities don't have the wherewithal—and never have—to fight wars. It will take an FDR-type New Deal, along with the military, to produce the medical products and build the infrastructure needed to minimize the projected fatalities and suffering.

It also will require Federally-administered programs and initiatives to feed, provide jobs and meet the financial needs of those in need. Unemployment is already predicted by the U.S. Treasury Secretary
Steve Mnuchin to be around 20%. So let’s be sober and honest: This Federal recovery will cost trillions of dollars and will force us temporarily to ignore the effect of an increased deficit. But as was the case during World War II the survival of the country demands it.

Sadly, we don’t currently have an FDR in the White House—and it is hard to imagine President Donald Trump understanding and doing what is necessary. Moreover, the current occupant of the White House lacks FDR's personal temperament, discursive demeanor and rhetorical sophistication. He seems incapable, therefore, of reassuring the nation that we will use all the necessary tools to successfully fight this war and rally the nation.

While others don’t have the rhetorical advantage of the President’s bully pulpit, I am optimistic that the country’s citizens, as well as Republican and Democratic political leaders, will rise to the occasion in a bipartisan fashion—that together we will mobilize the nation in the war against COVID-19. We have done this many times throughout our history and again will do so now.

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