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## This is Trump's Daily Show.

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Like plenty of other Americans stuck in their homes these days, I find myself riveted to President Trump's daily briefings on the coronavirus.

That's not simply because I find the briefings entertaining on some level and terrifying on another, although I do. (More the latter than the former.) It's because, if you carefully watch what's going on in the briefing room, you can start to understand why Trump retains the support of a strong plurality of the electorate, and why even the current crisis may not quickly erode it.

If you haven't watched Trump's daily show, here's how it works. Sometime around 5:30, when the normal American workday used to end, the president dramatically enters the briefing room, flanked by a rotating posse of career politicians and government experts.

Trump then starts with my favorite part of the briefing, which is the recitation of the day's talking points. What I love about this is that Trump doesn't even make a pretense of having seen the actual content before this minute.

Rather, he reads from the document haltingly, his head buried in the text, his shoulders lurching violently with the effort of trying to pronounce some of the words. And then, after reciting each point, he looks up and offers some bit of commentary or surprised reaction, in much the same way my mother mutters to herself while reading the morning paper.

FEMA will be sending 6,000 masks to states where the crisis is most acute. [Pause.] Huh. That's a lot of masks. Many, many masks. Just incredible. We're doing an incredible job, really amazing.

And so on.

Then, when he's finished reciting and reacting, the president takes questions. Sometimes he calls on reporters by name, although often he'll interrupt himself to ask, "Where are you from?," as if he suspects they may be a plant.

About once a day, he does the whole "fake news" bit, or goes off on a tangent about how the previous administration left him such a morass. These riffs seem less like responses to any specific questions than tracks on a shuffled playlist.

At one or two points during the Q&A, Trump will invite one of the experts to answer, almost as if he's honoring some kind of equal-time provision. He'll say something like "I don't know, that's what I think, but maybe you want to say something."

With any other president, the goal of these briefings would have been to demonstrate mastery of the machine. Trump has his moments of managerial lucidity, but mostly he seems to be going for something else -- a sense that he's coming to all of this as cold as we are, and we just wouldn't believe how complicated it all is.

There's something profound on display here, whether Trump understands the nature of his own appeal or not.

The modern presidency, at least going back to the election of Jimmy Carter in 1976, is essentially the same story told multiple times, with only slight variations: An outsider comes to Washington promising to reform or dismantle a governing apparatus in which large numbers of Americans have lost all faith, and eventually ends up another symbol of a capital gone awry.

The popularity of every president comes down to the question of how long he can retain the status of outsider. Because once the

president is considered a part of the system, he has to own its myriad failures, just like the guy before him. Inevitably, he disappoints the very people who sent him there.

But no president has put as much distance between himself and the government he controls as Trump has, and no one has managed to pull off the illusion for quite this long.

When you watch these daily briefings, you have the visual sense that Trump, like some guy we plucked from the set of his erstwhile reality show, isn't really running the government so much as trying just to comprehend and corral it.

The journalists in their seats and the careerists onstage are barely playing supporting roles in the tragicomedy. Mainly, they're props, put there to remind us that Trump is merely one man taking on a dysfunctional system of kowtowers and devious eggheads.

My guess is that this, more than anything else, explains Trump's staying power. Some large number of voters don't yet hold him responsible for the erratic response to the virus, because they don't hold him responsible for government, period.

More than three years after he took office, Trump is still their guy, doing his damndest to rein in a corrupt and broken bureaucracy.

Can that last? Probably not. Just as Carter earned strong marks from the public in the beginning of the Iran hostage crisis, only to watch it sink his presidency, chances are Trump won't come through this ordeal without having to shoulder the blame, too.

But watch his briefings and admit this much: When it comes to playing the oblivious outsider, he's doing an incredible, incredible job.

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