

# Rethinking “Commander-in-Chief” in American Leadership in Relation to COVID-19

Whether or not we had doubts about the moral character and management ability of Trump, today we can testify to the gravity of his silliness, racism, ignorance, ...

By [Barbara Nimri Aziz](#)

Global Research, March 22, 2020

Region: [USA](#)  
Theme: [History](#)

*Ask Americans who's commander-in-chief, most will respond: our president. Citizens only think about this just before a presidential election every four years when their final, 'supreme criteria' of U.S. leadership is raised: "Does she or he have it:– namely the wisdom (or courage, or resolve) to control the nuclear (war) button?"*

It's a vague term whose specifics are not publicly explored; but I think we can agree it's singularly associated with military conflict.

I haven't heard the term commander-in-chief applied to other heads of state, but some variety of it doubtless exists, where a military officer heads a government as Egypt and formerly Pakistan today. Notwithstanding Americans' first president was a general– [one among 12 who became president](#) (of 26 American presidents who'd served in the military).

(Joe Biden, although never a military officer, is clearly projecting this 'commander-in-chief image' in debates, invoking his presence in 'the situation room', etc. He understands war, he assures the public.)

Leadership was an underlying issue during recent primary debates. They're essentially over now, eclipsed by the growing pandemic where the focus of leadership has rightly turned to management and moral vision.

Surely our current unprecedented crisis reveals it is time to reconsider the concept. My point here is not Trump's capacity, but the general underlying American criteria for the nation's person-in-charge.

Crisis strategists admit this pandemic is a 'war', even invoking 911 when Americans perceived they were under siege. (Although– with the exception of immigrants who've fled conflicts, by-and-large generated by American bombardments and sanctions on their homelands—most really don't grasp the realities of siege: economic, diplomatic, medical, cultural or military.)

Now a major health, social and economic crisis—a catastrophe, not to be too alarmist—has arrived in the name of COVID-19.

Whether or not we had doubts about the moral character and management ability of Trump, today we can testify to the gravity of his silliness, racism, ignorance, ugliness, meanness

and misplaced priorities. It is far, far more serious that we could possibly have imagined. It forces us to scan the horizon for leadership.

A resident of New York State I'm most closely following the response to this crisis by our governor. (I fervently hope other governors are acting similarly to Andrew Cuomo.) See [this](#). Because, the more I hear from Cuomo day-after-day, the more I feel (along with neighbors, family and friends overseas as well as in the U.S.), we have a profound example of the kind of leadership needed at this moment.

In his presentations Governor Cuomo exhibits no commander-in-chief attitude, but rather that of a capable manager, also someone with –dare I say?—emotion and compassion, approaching that of a ‘father figure’. Perhaps his presence reminds us of President Roosevelt’s legendary [fireside chats](#).

Post-pandemic changes are inevitable. Friends talk about their offices and companies, their universities and hospitals rethinking long-term goals to offer different and better service; one talks about perceiving her neighborhood differently, seeking a new family dynamic, rethinking how we educate our children.

Likewise we need to seriously rethink the concept of commander-in-chief. America’s criterion for presidency is redundant. It is neither a humane concept, nor a relevant one in times of nationwide social crisis. Also absent from this concept is emotion, compassion and morality.

Although not hitherto a particular admirer of Andrew Cuomo, I now perceive him not only as a brilliant manager but also a person with the apparent morality required at this moment. Maybe other governors whose work I am not following are acting likewise. (And please don’t cynically rejoin that Cuomo is working with his eye on the White House in 2024. We’ll talk about that later.)

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*Barbara Nimri Aziz is a New York based anthropologist and journalist. In addition to books on Tibet and Nepal, she is author of “Swimming Up the Tigris: Real Life Encounters with Iraq” based on her work in Iraq and the Arab Homelands. For many years a producer at Pacifica-WBAI Radio in NY, her productions and current articles can be found at [www.RadioTahrir.org](http://www.RadioTahrir.org)*

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