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A Lesson from Political Psychology: When VIP Treatment is a Prescription for Disaster

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Abstract. This article describes some paradoxical consequences of high-level, direct involvement of a political leader in crises and disasters.

Much has been made in Russia and beyond of President Vladimir Putin's seeming indifference to the disaster involving the submarine Kursk. A common public discourse suggests that he continued his vacation even as the Kursk sunk, as it lay immobile on the sea floor, as it took on water, as some of its crew seemed to fight for their lives, as initial rescue efforts seemed uncoordinated, ineffectual, and stymied, and as later rescue efforts proved too little too late. According to this discourse, Putin should have arrived immediately on the scene to "show the flag," direct efforts, mobilize assets, energize personnel, and feel the pain of the nation. That he did none of the above not only doomed the sailors--according to the discourse--but obviously suggested a continuation of the Soviet lack of concern for life and boded ill for a furthering of democracy, the rule of law, a free press, and the accountability of the Russian national civilian and military leadership.

Before we advocate for a Russian Bill Clinton, we should note that there is another perspective on Putin's behavior--especially on the consequences that might have occurred if he had dropped everything and traveled to the disaster site. A leader's coming to the scene of a crisis or disaster can have many negative effects. On-the-scene commanders, managers, supervisors, and their staffs must prepare briefings for the leader and the leader's staff. Appropriate accommodations must be secured. Quality of briefings and accommodations may have direct bearing on the careers of on-the-scene personnel--assuring that significant time is spent preparing for the leader's arrival. Valuable time and other assets that could best be used in resolving the crisis and managing the disaster are, thus, used elsewhere for other purposes. And the already existing political aspects of the crisis or disaster are heightened all out of proportion to the task requirements of crisis and disaster management.

Another contemporary example involves the ongoing talks in Tanzania involving former President Nelson Mandela of South Africa and numerous participants seeking to end fighting in Burundi among government and rebel forces. The impending arrival of the United States President, Bill Clinton, seemed to engender a social psychological pressure to rush to a complete agreement among adversaries. Such a pressure certainly can lead to the disruption of a constructive peace process through the eliciting of further violence to make a political point, the quitting of the negotiation process by some sides for the same purpose, or the signing of a poorly thought out and incompletely analyzed document that will beget further problems down the line. (Interestingly, similar dynamics engendered by other political leaders may well have contributed to further death and destruction in Africa--viz., in Sierra Leone and in the Congo.)

Finally, the noxious consequences emanating from the political leader can affect management of that leader's own medical crises. For example, political psychological articles have theoretically delineated the dynamics and descriptively provided anecdotal data leading to inferior medical care for august personages. Psychological elements affecting medico-political crisis managers include intense fear of making a mistake, biases to treat too conservatively or too radically, proclivities for information

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management based largely on the political, and personal attributions and emotions of the leader's immediate staff.

In conclusion, there certainly are times when the leader must be the embodiment of the collective conscious and unconscious during times of peril and when this embodiment has largely positive consequences. However, there also may be significant negative consequences. This calculus must be added to the public discourse on the leader, crisis, and disaster. (See Fisher, I. (August 26, 2000). Peace in Burundi still elusive as Africa readies for Clinton. *The New York Times*, pp. A1, A3; Janis, I. (1989). *Crucial decisions: Leadership in policymaking and crisis management*. Free Press; Pillai, R., & Meindl, J. R. (1998). Context and charisma: A "meso" level examination of the relationship of organic structure, collectivism, and crisis to charismatic leadership. *Journal of Management*, 24, 643-671; Post, J.M., & Robins, R.S. (1990). The captive king and his captive court: The psychopolitical dynamics of the disabled leader and his inner circle. *Political Psychology*, 11, 331-351; Tavernise, S., & Kishkovsky, S. (August 18, 2000). *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Valle, M. (1999). Crisis, culture and charisma: The new leader's work in public organizations. *Public Personnel Management*, 28, 245-257.) (Keywords: Crisis, Disaster, Leadership.)