

By [Masha Gessen](#)

There is no direct parallel between the coronavirus pandemic and the Kursk submarine, but, as sometimes happens with President Donald Trump and Putin, there is a similarity of spirit. Both Presidents stayed silent when they should have been speaking. (Putin vacationed; Trump golfed.) Both offered false hope and accepted no responsibility. Both blamed other countries (Russia briefly embraced the theory that an American submarine had collided with the Kursk), and both blamed their predecessors for destroying a system that should have saved people.

But there is more. The most striking aspect of Putin's failure to accept responsibility for the Kursk disaster was his retreat into bureaucratism. It was a preview of the twenty years since (and possibly the next twenty). Putin's use of bureaucratic language is a means of misleading the public and deflecting responsibility, but it also offers an insight into his understanding of government. He saw himself as a figurehead who might get in the way of people doing their work, and seemed unaware that his job was to lead the effort. Perhaps as a result, the Russian Navy and government were overcautious, rejected foreign help, and didn't even respond to the S.O.S. signals from the submarine.

I don't usually think of Trump as a bureaucrat. In many ways, he seems the opposite of one—he favors snap decisions, and sweeping ones, and he abhors regulation. But he and Putin share a toxic combination of imperiousness and laziness, a kind of high-handed lassitude. They like to be in charge, but they can't be bothered to take charge. They disdain competence but somehow assume that other people's competence will fix whatever it is that needs fixing. As his relentless campaign against government has shown, Trump sees the American system of government as a giant bureaucracy. The government, under Trump, has been partly dismantled, partly corrupted, and partly allowed to churn along, in part because he didn't feel like paying attention. But, in a crisis, when churning along will not do, the government cannot function without a leader; or at least its proper functioning is severely delayed, as it struggles to adapt to the idea that the leader—who in other respects is something of a control freak and in all respects is terrifying—isn't going to lead.

My colleague Robert P. Baird has traced why testing for the coronavirus has not been widely available in the United States, laying out a succession of contradictory and confusing events. The test was delayed not only by human error but by rules that had unintended consequences; by a reluctance to make decisions; and, most of all, it seems, by a system's inability to recognize its own failings. In this age of anti-bureaucratic government, it was a story of bureaucratic failings. This is not actually surprising: Hannah Arendt called bureaucracy "the rule of Nobody." Trump, who rejects all responsibility, is this Nobody now. And we are all in a submarine at the bottom of the sea, banging out an S.O.S. signal.