

In the social sciences, some models can make clean crisp predictions. Other models seem to only provide a structure to help explain how events will unfold, rather than providing a complete picture. This structure can only be fleshed out with considerable creativity and with an artistic touch. The game theory model of Chicken is one of those models that can provide structure to help us understand how our country's mobilization to combat the coronavirus will play out.

**Joe McGarrity**



In the textbook version of the Game of Chicken, two people hop in their cars and race toward each other. The driver who goes straight is considered macho and the driver who turns to avoid a crash is considered a wimp. When the participants in the game engage in banter before the contest, their words are meaningless. A driver who claims that he will never turn his steering wheel is not making a believable promise. If the driver believed his opponent was going to drive straight, he would turn to avoid the crash, since he wants to avoid a fatal accident. The best way for a driver to play the game is to remove his steering wheel and hold it up so his opponent can

see it. This driver has taken away his option to turn so his opponent will veer away to avoid an accident, leaving the driver without a steering wheel with the fame that comes from winning the game.

There is a game of chicken going on between Donald Trump and business. Trump has to decide whether to ask a firm to produce medical supplies to help the nation during the current crisis. He only wants to ask the firm if it will comply with his request. If the firm rejects him, Trump will be seen as a wimp. The firm would like to avoid making medical supplies if it will not be profitable. The firm would like to commit to claiming that they are unable to make the supplies. If Trump believed this claim, he would not ask the firm to produce the needed supplies because he would not want to be seen as being rejected.

In this game, President Trump has many advantages unavailable to either driver in the textbook example. First, Trump gets to go first. He can ask the firm publicly to make a product such as ventilators. The firm has to react to a decision that Trump has already made.

Second, the Defense Production Act allows the president to force a company to produce whatever the government directs it to make. This power is not as immense as it may seem since

the company can drag its feet and put very little effort into the endeavor. The president can make the company work, but it cannot make it work hard. Finally, and most effectively, Trump can praise companies that comply with his requests and criticize companies that refuse to follow his orders.

When Trump criticized GM for originally failing to agree to produce ventilators, the company looked unpatriotic and its reputation was being hurt in the eyes of many Americans. In the wake of the criticism, GM quickly changed course and agreed to make the much-needed ventilators. Trump's public criticism of GM ensured that GM would comply with his request.

Many Americans grow tired of hearing Donald Trump criticize others. However, in this case, his criticisms have transformed his interaction with private businesses into a game of chicken where he gets to make his move first and where his public praise or criticism ensures that businesses will back down and do what he asks them to do.

For those who do not think Trump is a strategic thinker, I offer his interactions with business over production decisions as one piece of evidence to the contrary.

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