



Leading in a Time of Crisis

A Watson School Study Group Facilitated by President Ivan Duque

Fall 2026

Overview

This study group offers Brown students the opportunity to learn first hand the process of decision-making under pressure in a middle-income democracy directly from a former head of state. Across four sessions, President Duque draws on his own experience — and on the wider record of leadership in Latin America and beyond — to explore what it means to lead often under uncertainty when choices are hard and the stakes are the highest.

Format & Logistics

- **Audience:** Open study group for Brown students, no prerequisites; participation only.
- **Format:** Four sessions, each of two hours; short pre-readings (1–2 per session).

Dates

- **Session 1** — Tuesday, October 13, 2026, 10:00am-12:00pm
- **Session 2** — Wednesday, October 14, 2026, 10:00am-12:00pm
- **Session 3** — Monday, November 2, 10:00am-12:00pm
- **Session 4** — Wednesday, November 4, 10:00am-12:00pm

Session 1 — The Challenges of Leadership: “Turn a Dream into a Purpose”

Tuesday, October 13

- President Duque’s overarching reflections on leadership: purpose, character, values, preparation, personal discipline, and the transition from aspiration to responsibility.
- Balancing competing interests, forming and trusting a leadership team, managing political pressures, and maintaining integrity under sustained scrutiny.
- Explore the difference between holding authority and exercising leadership, and how a leader preserves long-term purpose while adapting tactics.

Readings:

- Richard Nixon, *Leaders* (1982/2014 edition), Preface and Chapter 1.

- James and Wooten, *The Prepared Leader*, Chapter 3, “The Nine Skills of Crisis Management.”
- **Recommended:** *Darkest Hour* (2017) – optional film for discussion of judgment, conviction, counsel, and decision-making under existential pressure.

Session 2 — The Venezuelan Migration Crisis: “Do What Is Right, Not What Is Popular”

Wednesday, October 14

- Colombia’s decision to maintain a humanitarian and integration-oriented approach amid one of the largest displacement crises in the region, culminating in the Temporary Protection Statute.
- Explore humanitarian responsibility, domestic political pressure, economic and security concerns, international burden-sharing, public opinion, and the tension between short-term popularity and long-term national interest.
- Private-sector lens: migrant employment and formalization, recognition of skills and credentials, entrepreneurship, financial inclusion, and the business case for integration.

Readings:

- John Otis, “Colombia’s President on Amnesty for Venezuelans: ‘We Want to Set an Example,’” NPR, March 3, 2021.
- International Crisis Group, “Broken Ties, Frozen Borders: Colombia and Venezuela Face COVID-19,” April 15, 2020.
- Migration Policy Institute, “In a Dramatic Shift, the Americas Have Become a Migration Region,” April 11, 2023.
- **Recommended:** “Why Colombia’s President Should Change Course on Venezuela,” *Americas Quarterly*, June 10, 2019.
- **Recommended:** Podcast (Spanish): “Diez años de respuesta a la crisis migratoria venezolana,” *Tres Respuestas con Iván Duque*, August 20, 2025.

Session 3 — Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic: “Study History and Be Prepared for the Unexpected”

Monday, November 2

- Colombia’s response to COVID-19: acting under scientific uncertainty, building an expert team, coordinating government, communicating risk, expanding social protection, procuring vaccines, and deciding when and how to reopen.
- Explore the trade-offs among public health, economic activity, employment, education, and social cohesion as an acute emergency became a prolonged crisis.
- Private-sector lens: supply chains, essential industries, employer responsibility, worker protection, and public-private coordination during a nationwide emergency.

Readings:

- John M. Barry, *The Great Influenza*, Introduction and selected chapters on the initial outbreak, scientific uncertainty, public communication, and government response.
- James and Wooten, *The Prepared Leader*, Chapter 4, “Making Decisions Under Pressure.”
- “President Iván Duque: Colombia’s COVID-19 Response and Strategies Moving Forward,” Atlantic Council, April 14, 2020.
- AQ Podcast, “Grading Iván Duque’s Pandemic Politics,” Americas Quarterly, July 1, 2020.
- **Recommended:** *Contagion* (2011) – optional film.

Session 4 — Dealing with Civil Unrest and Political Pressure: “Act for All, Not for the Poll”

Wednesday, November 4

- The 2019–2021 protest cycle and the 2021 National Strike: legitimate protest, violence and disruption, public-order responsibilities, police conduct, human rights, dialogue, negotiation, and political pressure.
- Examine timing and framing of policy decisions, crisis communication, public trust, the role of social media, and how leaders separate peaceful dissent from criminal conduct without delegitimizing grievances.
- Private-sector lens: responsibilities of major employers during social unrest; employee safety, continuity of operations, community relations, and the consequences of corporate silence or advocacy.

Readings:

- Barbara W. Tuchman, *The March of Folly*, Preface and Chapter 1, "Pursuit of Policy Contrary to Self-Interest"; selected excerpts from Chapter 2.
- "Protests in Colombia Derail an Important Tax Reform," The Economist, May 6, 2021.
- "Why Colombia's Protests Are Unlikely to Fizzle Out," BBC News, May 2021.
- **Recommended:** "UN Rights Office Urges Colombia to Reform Policing of Protests," UN News, December 15, 2021.
- **Recommended:** Henry M. Paulson Jr., *On the Brink*, selected excerpts on decision-making under pressure, negotiation, and maintaining confidence during systemic crisis.
- **Recommended:** *Too Big to Fail* (2011) – optional comparative film on public-private crisis management.