

Overcoming the Coronavirus Debacle in the United States

Written by Eugenie de Silva

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EUGENIE DE SILVA, DEC 7 2020

The United States (US) is currently approaching approximately 300,000 deaths resulting from the coronavirus. This death toll reportedly accounts for 21% of total deaths worldwide “despite having only 4% of the world’s population” (Feuer, 2020). This spotlights the current, unfortunate irony of a country whose Constitution asserts that it was ordained to “insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity” (U.S. Const. pmbl.). The general welfare of the nation is at risk due to the ineffective management of the virus under President Donald Trump’s administration. In fact, the ratings of the US reputation amongst its global partners are at an all-time low (Wike, Fetterolf, & Mordecai, 2020). Thus, it would seemingly be only logical to deduce that the continuation of the country’s current handling of the coronavirus would lead to an inevitable loss of international trust in the strength of the US. The decline of international confidence is that which should not be taken lightly. The political, economic, and overall social effects would undermine the years of progress the nation has made until this period of time. Failing to control the spread of a deadly virus would ultimately force the leaders of countries to continue to prohibit or restrict US travel; the sustained deterioration of these relationships will set the US behind many years in terms of growth.

And so, during a time of crisis, one would logically hope that a strategy would have been prepared to provide support and resolution. Of course, there may be situations wherein rapid, unexpected developments result in little time for preparation and planning. Nonetheless, the case of the coronavirus or COVID-19 outbreak was that which had been predicted several years prior to the first case within the nation. Unfortunately, as time has progressed, discussions of the topic have shifted from rational, evidence-based assessments to politically motivated inquiries pertaining to politicians, government officials, and other relevant parties. Thus, it is imperative that the following changes be made in order to lessen the possibility of more deaths, and reduce the likelihood of future economic downfall in the event of more state lockdowns

1. Directorates focused on preparing for pandemics should be reinstated
2. CDC centers and other similar health centers abroad (especially in China) should be re-staffed
3. Holistic, multidisciplinary policies on resource and strategy preparedness should be implemented (to include a heavy reliance on scientific findings)

It is recommended that the US shift from the current haphazard handling of the virus to a more structured, evidence-based process that places a primary reliance on scientific methods of evaluation. Furthermore, the ease of transmissibility of the virus has made the reopening of states ideal opportunities for more US persons to contract the virus. In fact, Dr. Robert Redfield (2020), the Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, has asserted that 90% of the US population remains susceptible to the virus (Gringlas, 2020). Hence, improved ways of handling the pandemic based on more stringent policies should be the way forward. Whilst the government will have to recognize the economic strains involved in maintaining the lockdown of a nation for many consecutive weeks, it will also be important to note that there are ideal ways to manage these issues by allowing for public interactions only with masks or appropriate face covers. This could also include the establishment of strict penalties to those who do not follow the guidelines.

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This outbreak should also be viewed as a prime lesson for the future and an opportunity for the nation to strengthen its political practices. Although warnings were issued prior to this outbreak, the country failed to heed or adequately respond. Thus, this period of time in US history should be recognized as a lesson of what not to do when faced with an outbreak of such a dangerous virus.

Coronavirus Outbreak: Beginnings, Warnings, and Failures

On December 31st of 2019, the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission in Wuhan, China reported a “cluster of cases of pneumonia” (“WHO Timeline,” 2020). According to a geneticist at the University of Cambridge, it is likely that the virus “may have mutated into its final ‘human-efficient’ form months [prior to the first cases], but stayed inside a bat or other animal or even human for several months without infecting other individuals” (Shaw, 2020). Just thirty days after this report, a thirty-five year old man “presented to an urgent care clinic in Snohomish County, Washington, with a 4-day history of cough and subjective fever” (Holshue, Debolt, Lindquist, Lofy, Wiesman, et al., 2020, p.929). Based on the patient’s travel history to Wuhan and the symptoms he displayed, the care clinic tested him for coronavirus; by January 20th, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) confirmed that the patient tested positive for COVID-19.

Whilst this may seem to be a straightforward scenario that began with a random case of an unknown virus, that unfortunately is not a factual representation. In 2018, the US Worldwide Threat Assessment was published with a component on “Health.” This section warned that a, “novel strain of a virulent microbe that is easily transmissible between humans continues to be a major threat, with pathogens such as H5N1 and H7N9 influenza and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome [MERS] Coronavirus having pandemic potential if they were to acquire efficient human-to-human transmissibility” (Coats, 2018, p.17). Although the report did not predict the details of the virus (e.g. COVID-19), it specifically mentioned the MERS coronavirus, and provided sufficient details to warn of a possible pandemic related to such viruses.

Similarly, in the 2019 Worldwide Threat Assessment, the “Health” section again reported a warning about a pandemic. The assessments posited that the US “and the world will remain vulnerable to the next flu pandemic or large-scale outbreak of a contagious disease that could lead to massive rates of death and disability, severely affect the world economy, strain international resources, and increase calls on the United States for support” (Coats, 2019, p.21). Further, the report included a warning that the close proximity of humans and animals may have increased the possibility of the transmission of diseases (Coats, 2019, p.21). In fact, the document noted that the “number of outbreaks has increased in part because pathogens originally found in animals have spread to human populations” (Coats, 2019, p.21).

Intelligence reporting on the coronavirus would have likely identified the warnings shared by Dr. Li Wenliang in China in December of 2019. Dr. Wenliang posted a video wherein he warned of seven cases that he had observed to be similar to the SARS virus responsible for the pandemic in 2003 (“Li Wenliang,” 2020). Dr. Wenliang was confronted by the Public Security Bureau who had believed he was simply disturbing social order; nonetheless, these types of reports would likely have been identified by the US National Center for Medical Intelligence (NCMI) during the course of their investigation (“Li Wenliang,” 2020).

If, at minimum, the officials had only relied upon the information in the threat assessments, there would have been sufficient reasoning to ensure that the Strategic National Stockpile had a suitable number of masks in preparation for an outbreak. During the H1N1 outbreak and other crises observed in the nation, the necessary N95 respirators and face masks had been widely used. In fact, reports show that approximately “75% of N95 respirators and 25 percent of face masks contained in the CDC’s Strategic National Stockpile (~100 million products) were deployed for use in health care settings over the course of the 2009 H1N1 pandemic response” (Patel, D’Alessandro, Ireland, Burel, Wencil, & Rasmussen, 2017, p.245).

Moving forward, as a result of congressional debates with regard to funding of specific items for the stockpile, decisions were made not to replenish masks, but rather focus on other necessary resources (Brown, 2020). Accordingly, the warnings in the 2019 threat assessment were rationally grounded on such concerns as limited

Overcoming the Coronavirus Debacle in the United States

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resources to effectively deal with a pandemic. Yet, the US made the decision not to restock masks, which was in conflict with the advice of the Intelligence Community (IC) with regard to preparing for a pandemic. The justifiability behind deciding to allocate funds for other resources is not herein incorporated, since it would ultimately result in a subjective interpretation of evidence.

In November of 2019, the NCMI produced a report specifically about COVID-19 that was based on an “analysis of wire and computer intercepts, coupled with satellite images” (Margolin & Meek, 2020). Nonetheless, this report was not referred to as a priority; had the US focused on such assessments, the country may have prepared earlier to counter the introduction of the virus to the country (e.g. through travel restrictions, implementation of quarantine to prevent any cases already in the US from spreading, etc.). This also leads to an assessment of the failure pertaining to the disbandment of teams and directorates devoted to planning how to most effectively handle a pandemic.

In 2018, the National Security Council’s directorate “at the White House charged with preparing for when, not if, another pandemic would hit the nation” was disbanded (Riechmann, 2020). Similarly, in the time leading up to the coronavirus outbreak, staff was reduced “by more than two-thirds at a key U.S. public health agency operating inside China” (Taylor, 2020). Whilst the disbandment of the teams took place prior to the outbreak, the consequent actions of establishing completely new teams are herein considered another failure. In January of 2020, the White House Coronavirus Task Force was established to focus on the outbreak; however, by May of 2020, plans had already been considered to phase out the task force and reassign responsibilities to specific agencies (Restuccia & Bender, 2020). Had the original directorate, at minimum, been reinstated, those previously working on the issues would have had a solid foundation upon which to offer advice, strategies, and resolutions to the White House. The development of a new team, and the swift dissolution of that body resulted in haphazard handling of issues, whereas the directorate had a clear history upon which new investigations could have been conducted.

This leads to the recognition of what could be deemed as a failure with regard to the dismissal of the National Security Council’s Playbook for Early Response to High-Consequence Emerging Infectious Disease Threats and Biological Incidents. This playbook had been written in 2016 to handle such an outbreak; therefore, it is unclear whether the decision not to follow the playbook was the result of “an oversight or a deliberate decision to follow a different course” (Diamond & Toosi, 2020). If the decision to not follow the playbook were a calculated decision by the current administration, then it would seem that partisan politics was the reason. The rift between the Obama and Trump administrations may have played a role in President Trump’s decision not to use the playbook developed under former President Barack Obama. This would be a major failure on the part of the administration and would also be indicative of how partisanship goes beyond the political arena and encroaches on health and safety of the nation.

Nonetheless, a representative from the health department noted that the “COVID-19 response was informed by more recent plans such as the foundation of the National Biodefense Strategy (2018), Biological Incident Annex (2017), and panCAP (2018) among other key plans provided by the CDC, White House Task Force, FEMA, and other key federal departments and agencies” (Diamond and Toosi, 2020). It is herein posited that the unified message shared through the playbook may have been beneficial to consider, especially during this time of turmoil wherein existing strategies have clearly not been sufficient, as death tolls have continued to rise.

Trends in the Coronavirus Outbreak Response

The trend throughout the coronavirus outbreak has seemingly been to disregard the warnings presented by analysts, scientists, and researchers. The unfortunate dismissal of evidence has culminated in the current statistics of approximately 216,025 deaths at the time of writing this report (“Cases in the US,” 2020). The severity has also been proved by the fact that even President Trump contracted the virus, despite all the security measures available to a President. Even the most basic of strategies, such as travel restrictions, were not imposed in a timely manner. As a result, it is reported that thousands of individuals “flew directly from Wuhan, the center of the coronavirus outbreak, as American public health officials were only beginning to assess the risks” (Eder, Fountain, Keller, Xiao, Stevenson, 2020).

In fact, the decision to reopen most states and allow individuals to socialize outside of quarantine is another clear

Overcoming the Coronavirus Debacle in the United States

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sign of dismissal of science and warnings. The death toll continues to rise, and there are no true indications that the pandemic is coming to an end. Furthermore, the reopening has “continued to raise concerns that increased activity would put Americans at greater risk of a new surge of infections” (Iati, Berger, O’Grady, Sonmez, Kornfield, Pell, Buckner, et al., 2020). The blatant decision made by the country to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to the warnings will undoubtedly result in more deaths, and possibly an even greater issue in the case that the virus mutates over time.

By June of 2020, many states had reopened, which had resulted in a major increase in the number of coronavirus cases (Aizenman, 2020). Across the nation, reports show that there was an average of 800 deaths a day (Aizenman, 2020). Furthermore, researchers and even the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease, Anthony Fauci, have recently argued that public gatherings, such as protests, are a “perfect set-up” for the transmission of the virus (Madrigal & Meyer, 2020). Therefore, it is clear that the dismissal of warnings and the failure to adequately prepare and respond has led to the loss of many lives and will continue to do so.

The dismissal of science is further exacerbated by the continuation of the notions that wearing a mask, social distancing, or even simply agreeing with the severity of the virus are political statements. Partisan politics has become entangled in the natural sciences resulting in a devastating movement of those with certain political leanings to feel emboldened to disregard health warnings and scientific facts. A loyalty to a political party within the US may now mean that one should choose, at will, when to listen to scientists who are presenting evidence about a situation. In addition, the partisanship of the US government has led to pervasive political campaigns that use the pandemic as campaign material. Whilst the handling of such a serious health issue may be used to show citizens how a leader tackles difficult times, the scientific side of the situation should not be manipulated. The inherent subjectivity of politics should not be allowed to negatively impact how science and health are portrayed or perceived within a nation.

Undoing or undermining the years of progress within the natural sciences by allowing the nature of politics to play a role will ultimately be the downfall of a nation. A country that not only faces a deadly virus and cannot control it, but also turns a blind eye to the rational, evidence-based findings of the scientific community will unavoidably become vulnerable and more susceptible to increased death rates, lower educational standards, substandard economic growth, and questionable political integrity.

On another note, the analysis of how the US has responded to the natural outbreak of the coronavirus provides a beneficial indication as to how the country may have responded had the virus been brought to the US through bioterrorism. It is clear that the country did not have sufficient resources, plans, or protocols to handle the virus, despite numerous warnings from the IC. Therefore, the reliance on a CBRNE attack would have been the prime method for a terrorist or criminal group to wreak havoc within the country. Although there was ample time to plan and prepare an adequate strategy, the country abandoned reason and failed to carry out the necessary steps to ensure that the country would not ultimately be in the position that it currently stands.

Along those lines, it was seemingly a matter of luck for the US that terrorists had not devised a plan to develop a virus, infect one of their own, and use them to spread the virus through the country. Had a terrorist group made the decision to carry out such an attack, it would be unlikely that the country could have effectively handled the outbreak (unless intelligence reporting had identified and prevented the terrorist from entering the country). Therefore, this outbreak is the real-life lesson that should be used as the example of the destruction that can result from inadequate planning in the government and security services.

Conclusion

There are three key lessons that are to be derived from this analysis; each of which relate to the ways in which the US government should handle the pandemic from here onwards. The lessons are as follows: 1) Reinstatement of directorates focused on preparing for pandemics; 2) Re-staffing of CDC centers abroad (especially in China); and 3) Implementation of holistic, multidisciplinary policies on resource and strategy preparedness.

The trend in the coronavirus response may ultimately lead to the continuous rise of deaths within the nation. The

Overcoming the Coronavirus Debacle in the United States

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failure to appropriately handle the country may even lead other countries to place more stringent travel restrictions on US persons. For example, the Canadian government is reportedly “concerned that virus cells in states bordering Canada, especially Washington, Michigan and New York, pose a danger to its citizens” (Shribman, 2020). Therefore, the nation is considering extending border closures to ensure that Canadian persons are not infected by US persons. This would be a logical trend worldwide if the US is incapable of handling the outbreak in a timely manner. This could result in failed international business, trading, and support from the international community.

Therefore, the country should first focus on reinstating the National Security Council directorate, and continuing with the plan of disbanding the White House Coronavirus Task Force. The task force was established in an ad-hoc manner in response to the rapid increase of cases of coronavirus within the country. Whilst the task force may have provided support during this time, their work could be transferred back to the directorate; thus, allowing those with substantial background on the topic to engage with better strategies to move forward. Then, the country should also work to re-staff the CDC centers abroad, especially in China. Although personnel may have to undergo quarantine to work in the country, it would be useful to gain more detailed inside information from the country where the virus began. Further, it would offer an opportunity for more scientific investigations into how China has worked to resolve the outbreak.

Finally, the country should adopt an objective view of the coronavirus that takes into consideration a multitude of strategies with consultation of experts from various fields (e.g. political science, medicine, sociology, etc.). This would include making references to the National Security Council’s playbook, regardless of whether it had been created by a different administration at a different time period. Further, having the opportunity to consult with a multitude of experts would enable the country to gain a broad, integrative perspective that could result in a more pragmatic way to reopen the country without having to risk the lives of more citizens. This would allow for consultation with natural scientists and intelligence professionals who would be able to establish how the nation could have handled a biological attack that resulted in such an outbreak, similar to the coronavirus. The multidisciplinary efforts would result in structured, forward-thinking assessments that would be to the benefit of the country and the IC when considering how to counter a biological attack. Then, this may also involve changes to the congressional budgets to ensure that the stockpile would include any relevant resources for not only natural outbreaks, but also for man-made biological attacks.

Unfortunately, it may not be feasible to reinstate lockdowns for many consecutive weeks, due to the direct impact it would have on the economy. Nonetheless, the enactment of stricter penalties that discourage public interactions without masks or social distancing practices would be a prudent step forward. The suggestions to wear masks or maintain a distance of approximately six feet from others when in public should be revised to be mandated, federal public policies. It is not sufficient to allow persons to have the freedom to choose whether or not to join the effort to save the country.

Some individuals continue to refuse to wear masks all whilst knowing the possible consequences of spreading or contracting the disease; therefore, it is at this time that the government should enforce, for the public good, legal provisions that allow for the enforcement of these suggestions. Whilst the Constitution guarantees freedoms, it does not offer the freedom or right to hurt others (directly or indirectly). Therefore, if an individual is found to be socializing in public without a mask, then a fine should be given with a warning that further failure to comply with the regulations may result in larger penalties. In this manner, allowing scientists and medical practitioners to lead the country out of this dire situation would put an end to partisan politics negatively impacting the health and safety of US citizens. The politicization of science must come to an end before the country faces consequences that could not possibly be resolved without years of rebuilding.

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Overcoming the Coronavirus Debacle in the United States

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Overcoming the Coronavirus Debacle in the United States

Written by Eugenie de Silva

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About the author:

Eugenie de Silva is an adjunct professor at Walters State Community College in the department of public safety and a doctoral researcher at the National American University. Her research focuses on strategic security with an emphasis on race and ethnicity.