The scab & the wound beneath

by Victor Davis Hanson

On painful realities in the age of the coronavirus.

An overriding theme of the historian Thucydides’ monumental history of the Peloponnesian War (431–404 B.C.) is the fragility of civilization. In extremis, when both the elites and masses lose their thin veneer of culture, society can turn feral quickly. During a horrific war, plague, or revolution, even a wealthy and sophisticated civilization such as that of the classical Greek city-states regresses in a second to its innate state. And what follows from these natural and man-made disasters is not pretty. Still, these calamities can be tragically instructional. Hypocrisies arise. Pretexts vanish. Fundamental but forgotten truths, easily masked in times of calm, reemerge. From Thucydides’ warnings, we can glean that even suburban elites in Range Rovers can in a day be reduced to tugging over toilet paper rolls at Whole Foods.

During the twenty-seven-year-long Peloponnesian War, Athens, the most liberal and confident of some 1,500 Greek city-states, proved the readiest to butcher prisoners and civilians. And it did so en masse at Mytilene, Scione, and Melos. Thucydides noted that during the plague of 430–29, the most virtuous of Athenians (“especially the case with such as made any pretensions to goodness”) perished along with the selfish. Indeed, their courage in abandoning social distancing to aid the infectious sealed their doom (“honor made them unsparing of themselves in their attendance in their friends’ houses”).

Throughout the savage revolution on the island of Corcyra (Corfu), honesty of language and moderation in politics were among the first casualties. And once the violence and body count mounted, extremism in thought and action followed:

Words had to change their ordinary meaning and to take that which was now given them. Reckless audacity came to be considered the courage of a loyal ally; prudent hesitation, specious cowardice; moderation was held to be a cloak for unmanliness; ability to see all sides of a question, inaptness to act on any.

The historian’s diagnosis of Corcyrean social malaise could be aptly applied to our current war being waged over vocabulary: whether it is impolite to say “Wuhan virus,” or whether we need
euphemisms like “shelter in place” for quarantine or “social distancing” for “anti-social avoidance.”

Of course, in historical terms, covid-19 may prove a rookie virus in comparison to the still mysterious infection—typhus, smallpox, or typhoid?—that wiped out one quarter of the Athenian population along with its iconic sexagenarian leader Pericles. He was the architect of the very wartime strategy of forced withdrawal inside the walls of Athens that birthed the plague in the first place and took his life.

The Athenian disease promptly revealed that the city of Socrates, Sophocles, and Euripides was all too human. The desperate threw the corpses of friends and family on the pyres of others, often while still aflame:

> sometimes getting the start of those who had raised a pile, they threw their own dead body upon the stranger’s pyre and ignited it; sometimes they tossed the corpse which they were carrying on the top of another that was burning, and so went off.

At such times, the majestic Parthenon on the Acropolis or Sophoclean tragedy in the Theater of Dionysus or three hundred triremes at the Piraeus became irrelevant. Recounting the even worse plague of 541–42 A.D. that ended the Byzantine emperor Justinian’s dreams of reconstituting the Roman Empire, the court historian Procopius describes scenes in Constantinople that come right out of contemporary New York: “During that time it seemed no easy thing to see any man in the streets of Byzantium. . . . And work of every description ceased, and all the trades were abandoned by the artisans, and all other work as well, such as each had in hand.”

Wartime and plague-stricken Athens, the most refined of cities, turned the most brutish. Rural and inward Sparta, home of the supposedly duller wits with little cultural enrichment from the wider Aegean, remained more or less true to its traditional mores, avoiding the plague and the panic that the epidemic birthed among coastal and cosmopolitan Athens. In times like these, for once it was deemed wiser to live in Sparta or in rural Utah than in the bustle of cosmopolitan Athens or Manhattan.

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Thucydides’ accounts of the plague, the savage factionalism at Corcyra, the mass executions at Mytilene and Melos, and the disaster at Syracuse all remind us that what is considered normal in calm can be rendered absurd instantly in the cauldron of panic and death. Last month I saw what seemed to be a stylishly dressed woman in a Lexus buying toilet paper from her car window in the parking lot of a local Walmart from someone who appeared homeless, a social interaction rare in healthier times.

The pernicious coronavirus tore off an American scab and revealed suppurating wounds beneath. Take the central actor of this plague, China. For much of the twenty-first century, the American establishment’s foreign policy toward China, to the degree it was even formalized, was ethically and logically bankrupt. Yet the status quo remained unquestioned, given it rested on a rare alignment of both progressive and commercial self-interests.

Of course, Americans in general have had a long romance with China. They were never colonialists in China, at least in the manner of the Europeans. Over fifteen million Chinese, our erstwhile allies, were killed in World War II, many brutally slaughtered by our enemies, the Japanese.

More recently, Mao Zedong, arguably the most lethal mass murderer of the twentieth century—perhaps a greater killer than Attila the Hun, Genghis Khan, Tamerlane, Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot combined—held an attraction for the New Left of the 1960s. His cherubic smile, worker’s cap, peasant dress, cool aphorisms, and hatred of running-dog capitalists once captivated student protestors. Even Barack Obama’s acting White House communications director, Anita Dunn, in 2009 still swooned that Mao was one of her two favorite political “philosophers”:

And then the third lesson and tip actually come from two of my favorite political philosophers, Mao Tse-Tung and Mother Teresa—not often coupled with each other, but the two people that I turn to most to basically deliver a simple point, which is, you’re going to make choices. You’re going to challenge.

More recently for the Left, China has become empathetic as the classic long-suffering “other”—as opposed perhaps to the less sympathetic discriminated-against Chinese-Americans applying to Ivy League colleges. Beijing is guilty of interning roughly one million Muslim Uighurs, all but wiping out the culture of Tibet, destroying vestigial democracy in Hong Kong, and forging a new Silk Road imperialism in Africa and Asia. This is to say nothing of their systematic patent and copyright infringement, pollution, and currency manipulation. And yet liberals have been hesitant to fault China for these legal injustices and civil rights violations.

Indeed, in the present crisis, China is now praised for its supposedly more successful reactions to the very virus that it spawned than the remedies of the Trump administration. We are learning that the Left accepts and finds politically useful the ridiculously constructed data issued by the Chinese communist government. That fact is known to Beijing, which in turn might explain why it keeps promulgating outright lies about virus fatalities that are embarrassing to all but the
American Left.

Hillary Clinton, for example, on March 27 retweeted a *New York Times* story with the headline “The U.S. Now Leads the World in Confirmed Coronavirus Cases. Following a series of missteps, the nation is now the epicenter of the pandemic.” She added her own snarky editorial quip: “He did promise ‘America First.’”

Aside from her apparent indifference to American dead and ill being used as a source of embarrassment to the American government, Clinton must have also known that the United States was *not* the leader in the world in actual deaths or cases, given that by mid-March the Chinese government had simply declared that the virus all but over in its 1.4-billion-person population, and claimed falsely that there were few, if any, new cases or deaths. Such myths were necessary to shift blame for Beijing’s culpability in spreading the virus by fraudulently claiming credit for first eliminating the contagion. Clinton further knew that in terms of deaths per million, a 330-million-person America was not “first,” given that almost all European countries, with the exception of Germany, had suffered a far higher fatality to population rate.

Chinese money has been far more influential in warping American politics than were the supposedly colluding Russians who ran some Facebook ads to stir up chaos in 2016 and may have spent a few million dollars in salting misinformation. By the time the virus abates, there may indeed be Chinese “collusion” in this election year, as the media and the Left parrot the Chinese Communist Party’s conspiracy theories and fantasies about the virus, ones deemed mutually efficacious in ensuring that the purported Sinophobe Donald Trump is not reelected. It would be no exaggeration to suggest that the Chinese communists and the American Left hate Trump equally.

The viral panic has reminded Americans of all sort of anomalies. Some 360,000 Chinese students serve as money-makers for American colleges and universities at a time of higher education’s financial crisis. Certainly, the art of charging Chinese students full freight for a college education has proved far more lucrative for campus administrators than trying to squeeze out more money from American students currently over $1.5 trillion in collective student debt. One realization of the crisis is that students can continue their courses online and at a distance—without the need of diversity and inclusion czars, and without receiving refunds for their tuition fees, which were predicated on a full, in-person college experience.

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When Donald Trump announced on January 31 travel restrictions on foreigners entering the United States from China, he was blasted as racist and xenophobic by many of the now-withdrawn Democratic 2020 presidential candidates—most of whom eventually grew quiet or supported the measures.
His references to the “Wuhan” and “Chinese” virus supposedly proved his bias—in a way unlike China’s own use of the former adjective and the long-standing practice of labeling infections by their places of origin.

Joe Biden’s staff scrambled to explain the candidate’s earlier demagoguery surrounding the restrictions by claiming he was really outraged by Trump’s reference to a “Chinese” virus—oblivious that Biden’s attack on the measures predated Trump’s reference to the origins of the virus. Still, many wondered how and when Biden would inevitably try to square the circle of blasting Trump’s travel restrictions by later agreeing with them. And he tried just that on April 4 by insisting that he would have enacted a once racist and xenophobic prohibition even earlier by a President Joe Biden, given that he knew it likely would have saved thousands of lives. Perhaps Biden meant that he would have banned in early January all Chinese from arriving at U.S. airports and yet not called them Chinese? In sum, China, for a variety of economic, cultural, and historical reasons, was given a pass by the Left in a way that many monsters in the Middle East, for instance, have usually not been.

Corporate “conservatives” likewise have manipulated China’s special status. How otherwise could American companies so easily and without censure have outsourced key production in rare earth metals, medical supplies, high-tech military applications, and pharmaceuticals? As a result, in the post-virus world, there may be no more smears of “protectionism,” “nationalism,” and “nativism,” but rather embarrassed silence about the globalist rhetoric that veneers what is really just self-interest at the expense of one’s fellow citizens.

How could a Democratic presidential candidate, the multibillionaire corporate mogul Michael Bloomberg—for a brief moment the great Democratic hope to stop socialist Bernie Sanders and to replace an enfeebled Joe Biden—claim to Americans, as he did in a 2019 interview, that President Xi Jinping is “not a dictator. He has to satisfy his constituents or he’s not going to survive”? How could Bloomberg craft multibillion-dollar investment schemes to capitalize Chinese companies while simultaneously not allowing his own Bloomberg reporters to faithfully report stories that show the Chinese Communist Party in a negative light?

The Bloomberg viral ironies did not end there. During his campaign, his prior folk wisdom emerged in a series of embarrassing videos of past sermons. In one, he lectured an Oxford audience about the banality and rote of farming, ancient and modern, claiming that he “could teach anybody to be a farmer.” Information technology, Bloomberg insisted, required “a lot more gray matter.” During the lockdowns in Manhattan, the country did not need any more multibillionaires with brains full of “gray matter” capitalizing Chinese communist government companies, but instead needed innovative farmers—you could call them “anybodies”—to keep sending a sheltered-in-place America the most diverse, safe, plentiful, and cheap food in the world.

The apparently consensually led China touted by Bloomberg has lied about the birth, origins,
spread, and infectiousness of covid-19; sent over one million of its citizens into U.S. airports after
Beijing knew that the virus was communicable; had countless more circumvent U.S. restrictions;
 FALSELY declared that the U.S. military created the virus; threatened to cut off shipments of medical
supplies produced in China by U.S.–Chinese joint ventures; and caused several thousand
American deaths while causing trillions of dollars’ worth of economic damage.

Remember, before the epidemic,
Donald Trump was attempting to
recalibrate U.S.–Chinese commercial
relations via punishing tariffs that had
already rattled the communist government,
which was suddenly eager for a more
compliant president approved by the
Council on Foreign Relations. Perhaps Americans will come to their senses when the virus
subsides. They might not tolerate a country that harvests human organs, sells bats and live
scorpions in wet markets for medicinal purposes, and controls Iowa’s supply of ventilators,
California’s N95 particle masks, or Detroit’s ampicillin. If, in the past, the profit-minded
multimillionaire stars of the nba seemed deluded in their loud appreciation of the Chinese
communist government—and more so by their equally loud disdain for their own elected
president—in the future such appeasement will seem not just naïve, but perhaps even repugnant
or near-treasonous.

Not having control of the supply of needed medical appurtenances and medicines may be the
Boomers’ version of the Greatest Generation’s waking up on December 8, 1941, and realizing that
there was nothing in the American arsenal comparable to the Japanese Mitsubishi A6M “Zero”
fighter or Type 93 “Long Lance” torpedo—and would not be for the months of hard fighting and
dying ahead. Likewise, Beijing now enjoys enormous advantages in the short term as it inventories
all the ways the American military, government, and consumers are China-dependent. Whether
China has woken a sleeping giant in the manner of the earlier Japanese, or just a purring kitten,
remains to be seen. One test will be whether we begin to recalibrate key American industries or
unleash Adam Schiff to conduct yet another congressional investigation against his nemesis
Donald Trump.

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Before the epidemic, critics of globalization could not convince our best and brightest that enriching autocracies by asymmetrical trade policies would not eventually turn China into Jackson Hole or Palm Beach. Doubters of America’s China policy complained that running up staggering American trade deficits with China would hardly lure China into the family of nations—at least in the manner of Barack Obama, who in 2014 once boasted that his new outreach initiatives with Beijing, *inter alia*, would “help affected countries to strengthen capacity-building on health and epidemic prevention so as to place the epidemic under control as soon as possible.” How has China’s envisioned “epidemic prevention” and “control” worked out?

The virus also exposed the absurdities of transnational utopianism more generally. For decades, the European Union has been held up by progressives as a model that had ossified old national rivalries and chronic European wars. The original and inspired European Common Market, in comparison, appeared to elites as a Neanderthal effort of only haphazardly integrating a few autonomous European economies. In contrast, the European Union would create an economic colossus comparable to the United States. But it would be guided by postmodern humanitarianism, sustained by wind and solar energy, and defended by heralded “soft” power. In fact, it was soon run and financed by a new Germany that increasingly sounds as we would expect an old Germany to sound.

Nonetheless, boundaries were to disappear. A common currency and common protocols would create a European new man. All-knowing, all-wise technocrats in Brussels and Strasbourg would adjudicate what exactly qualified as a banana on Crete. But then suddenly something happened to pan-European ecumenicism. The virus arrived and most of Northern Italy turned into something nightmarish, right out of Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. Spain began to suffer a viral death rate of over 2,500 fatalities per million population, as if it were the beginning of 1348 rather than of 2020.

Borders slammed and have remained shut. The much-lauded Schengen Area Agreement that had abolished all passport control and border checkpoints among twenty-five European countries—a postmodern pact often contrasted with the supposedly paranoid and premodern U.S. border wall with Mexico—was suspended in a few minutes.

What was to be the fate of so-called undocumented migrants who sought an enlightened European refuge from the horrors of Africa and the Middle East? The logic of Camus’ *La Peste* took over. Interned in Turkey and Greece, the migrants were now quarantined and treated as suspect illegal aliens that should go home to North Africa.
Did German banks step up to relax repayment schedules to their near-bankrupt Mediterranean brothers, hit hardest by the virus? In the euphemistic language of the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the notion of issuing “corona bonds” was not “the view of all EU countries.” Translated, that meant EU brother nations with cash and fewer dead were certainly not going to lend money to EU nations without it but with more dead.

The virus also exposed the absurdities of transnational utopianism more generally. Surely medical supplies such as ventilators and masks were common EU property, a humanitarian version of the common Euro that reflected pan-European brotherhood? Not quite, as the ancient creed of every nation for itself supplanted the European Convention on Human Rights before the European Union announced a transnational medical stockpile. Germany abruptly stopped all shipments of key medical supplies before later opening up exports. It tightened its borders. It turned back French shoppers who had skipped across to hoard at better-stocked German supermarkets. The virus should remind Europe that if a war ever came, any EU-abiding country that shared its arsenal and headed for the front would suffer the fate of the virtuous citizens in the plague chronicles of Thucydides and Procopius who died first.

The United Nations did little more than pass resolutions praising itself for its singular efforts to control the virus. In the key first weeks of the outbreak, when the death and destruction might have been somewhat contained, the UN medical appendage, the World Health Organization, proved little more than a Chinese megaphone. Indeed, it helped spread the contagion rather than arrest it. The organization’s director-general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, assured the world that there was little threat from the Chinese virus. Director Tedros is not a medical doctor, a first for the who. He had no international health management experience. His chief recommendation might have been that he was non-Western and had come to the UN post from his government sinecure as a health minister in Ethiopia, itself perhaps predicated on his past service in the Tigray People’s Liberation Front.

Tedros’s résumé may help explain why the UN mouthpiece so readily assured the world that the virus was not transmissible between humans, that it was largely already contained by China, and that Donald Trump’s all-important January 31 travel restrictions stopping foreigners from entering the United States from China (a heavy contributor both to the who and to Ethiopia) was not just unnecessary but would “have the effect of increasing fear and stigma, with little public health benefit.”

Prior Trump initiatives now seem prescient. Donald Trump’s controversial efforts in the pre-virus days to call out China for systematic Chinese mercantilism and serial cheating and lying, to secure U.S. borders, to issue travel bans on countries that had no quantifiable passport
control, and to greenlight experimental and off-label drugs for near-terminal patients proved requisites for the policies he quickly enacted to fight the spread of the virus. Most of Trump’s initiatives were initially blasted by the very foreign and domestic censors who soon quietly advocated adoption of them.

So the virus confirmed what many Americans had long suspected at home as well. “Trump Derangement Syndrome” was no longer a Republican talking point, but was exposed as a psychosis with real consequences for the entire country. In the initial weeks of January, when Trump was told by the who, the Centers for Disease Control, Dr. Anthony Fauci, and most foreign and American leaders that the virus, like the earlier Chinese-born sars virus, was containable, the President, like they had at times, compared it to a bad flu. But by January 31 he had reversed course earlier than many of his future critics, rejected the earlier insistence of experts that xenophobia, racism, and chauvinism, and not the virus, were the real enemies, and issued travel restrictions—the one step that stopped some fifteen to twenty thousand Chinese nationals from arriving daily into the United States, including on direct flights from ground zero in Wuhan. Altogether over a million Chinese had arrived in October, November, December, and January. After the restrictions were enacted, many more found ways to enter the United States on connecting flights from non-embargoed nations in Europe and Asia.

No matter. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi claimed Trump’s response to the virus had been “deadly” and later added, “As the president fiddles, people are dying.” At about the same time, she tried to delay passage of a joint congressional bailout bill intended to keep endangered small business and the unemployed afloat as she scrambled to insert funding for the Kennedy Center and Planned Parenthood.

By the end of March, Pelosi was hinting about desires for something akin to impeachment 2.0 and a commission similar to the 9/11 investigation. Such a Star Chamber would supposedly find Trump criminally naïve in not reacting earlier to the epidemic. In that context, perhaps the coronavirus was supposed to do what the Twenty-fifth Amendment, the Emoluments Clause, Stormy Daniels, the Mueller “dream team,” and impeachment had not—derail the Trump presidency before the November 2020 election.

On the Alinskyite assumption that progressives project their own vulnerabilities onto their opponents, it was quickly noted that Pelosi herself, almost four weeks after the Trump travel restrictions, had visited San Francisco’s Chinatown, indeed as late as February 24, to encourage Americans to come there and shop: “That’s what we’re trying to do today is to say everything is fine here. Come because precautions have been taken. The city is on top of the situation.”

The whines of other Trump critics—such as the New York Mayor Bill de Blasio—that Trump was late to the anti-corona effort, at least in comparison to their own performances, are not to be believed either. De Blasio in mid-March, six weeks after the Trump travel restrictions were
announced, had urged New Yorkers to go out and enjoy the city: “If you love your neighborhood bar, go there now because we don’t know what the future holds.”

Pre-virus, some suspected that the entire agenda and energy of the American Left was focused on destroying the Trump presidency at any cost and by any means necessary. During the epidemic this was confirmed, and this hatred was shown to have national consequences. When evidence prompted Trump to let the public know that old drugs like hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin were often efficacious in treating particular patients infected with coronavirus, reporters sought to persuade Americans that such off-label uses had no utility and were dangerous—even if they had to stoop to find someone unhinged who drank fish-tank cleaner, clearly marked unfit for human consumption, to prove that a non-potable chloroquine derivative cleaning agent provided confirmation of “Dr.” Trump’s malpractice.

Almost daily, the reactions to the virus revealed how surreal pre-virus America had insidiously become. On March 28, the governor of Rhode Island announced that the state’s law enforcement officers would stop cars, check license plates, and knock on doors to ferret out citizens who had come from New York State—a type of surveillance of U.S. citizens that has rarely been applicable to millions of aliens who have entered and resided illegally in the United States. Because of worry about overcrowded jails and infectious prisons, some criminals throughout the nation were given early parole—even as our elite erupted in a fight over whether to allow gun stores to remain open. Rumors abounded that those without any prior firearm experience were among those inquiring how to buy handguns. Despite claiming to be the watchdog of American civil liberties, it was the Left that hammered Trump to employ the Defense Production Act to nationalize American companies by fiat. Mostly Democratic mayors urged strict surveillance of shelter-in-place compliance and threatened stiff fines for offenders, sometimes to be ratted out by snitches.
What has made the U.S. reaction to the virus so different from the response to the 2009 H1N1 epidemic that eventually infected 60.8 million, hospitalized 274,304, and may have killed 12,469? Why did we not similarly shut down the country during the bad flu season of 2017–18 that had killed more than 60,000 Americans, put nearly a million in the hospital, and may have likewise infected over 60 million? The answer? Lots of both logical and illogical reasons. The coronavirus was, we were reminded ad nauseam, not influenza. It was more contagious and could become more lethal.

Perhaps. But when one excepts health workers of all ages who were subject to enormous and repeated initial viral load exposures at work, along with those over the age of sixty-five with concomitant pulmonary, diabetic, cardiac, or malignant complications, the toll of covid-19 may in the end prove comparable to, or less than, some of the totals of 2009 and 2017–18.

What terrified the world in general, and America in particular, were media-driven reports of occasional excruciating symptoms and sudden death among a small percentage in good health that overshadowed the fact that the majority of the infected had mild or few symptoms. News blared about the less than 0.5 percent of the infected non-elderly who died and ignored the 99.5 percent under sixty-five who had recovered. The media hyped models that showed biblical plague rates of death in the coming weeks, never returning to such prognostications when they were proven fallacious if not hysterical a few weeks later.

So there was also initially not just little data about the infection, but awful data. Modelers worked only from known cases and supposedly known deaths to terrify the world with projections of 3 percent death rates of the infected and predictions of two million Americans and a half-million Britons to die. In truth, those already recovered from the virus, or carrying it without symptoms, were likely much more numerous than those who felt ill or were exposed enough to request testing and had proved positive. Moreover, even the numerators in the arithmetic of death were never uniformly defined, since no one seemed to know how to calibrate deaths from or deaths with the virus. Yet in the Thucydidean logic of panic, it made sense for the media, for some on the front lines of medical care worried about supply shortages, and for politicos to count those who died with toxic help from covid-19 as dying only from it.

Issues such as prior herd immunities established earlier than the falsified dates of the outbreak supplied by Beijing also likely invalidated the initial tabloid warnings of experts. By April, some increasingly appeared more like astrologers than statisticians. Modeling had consequences. For example, on March 12, the Ohio Republican Governor Mike DeWine and Dr. Amy Acton, the director of his state’s health department, declared on shaky grounds that one hundred thousand Ohioans probably were at the time infected (e.g. 1 percent of Ohioans “has it”) at a moment when there were five known cases, under a theory known as “community spread.” If one were to collate the then-current lethality rates per known cases of infection—which Acton admittedly did not
do—such a staggering number of those **actively** infected would imply for the state’s more than two million residents over sixty-five that about two thousand five hundred were perhaps already doomed. The governor and his director also warned that cases were likely to double every six days in Ohio before peaking in late April or May. As I write in early April, twenty-four days later, Ohio has reported a total of 4,043 known cases and 119 reported covid-19 deaths. The doomsday scenario suggested more than 1.6 million infected Ohioans (one hundred thousand doubling four times) and perhaps forty thousand dead or dying (at a 2.5 percent rate of known cases). That was with no social shutdown, a now-unverifiable proposition since Ohio swiftly moved to enact a lockdown.

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Little has been reported about the way that the scientific models factor in the effect of common-sense social distancing and increasing herd immunity, both of which have been effective in slowing the virus’s spread. Instead, the American people are treated to worst-case scenario predictions that don’t factor in the reality on the ground. Meanwhile, off-label drug treatments, new medical protocols, and plain old experience in handling patients—with news of far more rapid introductions of effective new drugs—are continuing to offer hope of a swifter-than-predicted recovery. Sophisticated statisticians oddly seem unsophisticated in failing to account for the human mobilization and response to warnings of mass death—which they had helped encourage, perhaps on the logic that the pessimist is never faulted.

After all, if a public health official errs on the side of caution in times of plague, she saves lives; if she is right in implying mass casualty over the next twenty-four days, she is prescient. In contrast, the optimist is proven correct only because of the pessimist’s bleak warning that changed behaviors, but if wrong is tantamount to a murderer. If an optimist had countered on March 12 that even in the unlikely event that 100,000 were infected in Ohio, many of them would not even know it, and never need hospitalization, she would have lost either way: only Acton’s warning had prompted action which later *made* the optimist’s skepticism look warranted.

Another contributor to the ongoing hysteria has been the idea that China has lied about the origins and nature of the virus, which has only led to paranoia. There are legitimate questions to be asked about the virus’s origins, given the presence of a Chinese military level-four virology lab proximate to ground zero of both the sars and covid-19 viruses.

**Then** there was the elephant in the room of Donald J. Trump and the 2020 election. In America and the world at large, the media has reported on the spread of the virus in terms of Trump’s own reaction to it. Various internet global clocks of infections and deaths by country and state ticked hourly, as if scorecards to assess relative efficacies. For a cynic, the subtext of the entire...
reportage, here and abroad, was that the more America might become terrified of a Spanish flu–style wipe-out, the longer the shutdown was required, the more the economy sank into recession, and the more it was unlikely to recover its lost robustness before the November election, and thus the more likely the coronavirus would at last appear as the coup de grace where all other blows to Trump had failed. The co-generators of international news, Europe and China, were both invested in seeing Trump discredited and defeated, and the result was the strange collusory effect of American media progressives quoting chapter and verse both Chinese communist propaganda and European Union pontifications.

The media has not hesitated to call coronavirus the “Trump virus,” while Scott Stringer, the New York City comptroller, said that Trump had “blood on his hands.” This besmirching was joined by willful misrepresentations, such as that Trump had called the viral outbreak a “hoax,” when he clearly was referring to the lie that he had done nothing to combat the epidemic. Trump supposedly in its initial appearance had uniquely downplayed the new coronavirus as a mere flu, when most at the time, from the who to the cdc, was urging us not to panic, given the virus would likely resemble a bad flu year. Again, it is still not clear whether the coronavirus in fact will prove more lethal than, say, the 2017–18 flu outbreak.

Trump, in his alleged climate-denialist fashion, was again reportedly at war with “science,” when in truth he and his administration have encouraged almost all the suggestions of his advisors Drs. Fauci and Birx such as social distancing, sheltering in place, and the wearing of masks in public places. Those two doctors are now under suspicion from the Left that they have become enablers of the Trump agenda.

Had Trump not been president, had he not just been impeached, had he not previously galvanized resistance to Chinese mercantile piracy, had China not lied about the virus, had it not originated in Wuhan, had it not been a new sort of virus, had we not yet been in a globalized world of instant communications and cheap and easy intercontinental travel, had the media not been 90 percent negative in its prior reporting on Trump, had it not been an election year in 2020, and had Trump’s popularity not spiked but crashed during the epidemic—then the hysteria might have been prevented, and the United States might have reacted with care and concern but without the veritable destruction of its economy and the human damage that it entailed.

But those were too many “had nots.” Epidemics and the reactions to them, ancient and modern, do not allow much margin of error. And so it has been too in our time of plague.

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