THE PRESIDENCY OF DONALD J. TRUMP

The Presidency of Donald J. Trump

A First Historical Assessment

Julian E. Zelizer, Editor

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In honor of all the people whose lives were lost during the COVID-19 pandemic. May their memory be for a blessing.

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The 60/40 Problem

TRUMP, CULPABILITY, AND COVID-19

Merlin Chowkwanyun

Regular readers of the *New England Journal of Medicine* (*NEJM*) expect case reports of unusual maladies, results of clinical trials, and breakdowns of new health policy developments. But in October 2020, they got something else: a lacerating editorial on the impending presidential election. Without mentioning Donald Trump by name, it blasted his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, declaring that a "magnitude of this failure is astonishing." It pointed to a lackluster testing program, insufficient personal protective equipment (PPE) for health-care workers, and unevenly implemented isolation measures.

It went on to state that the Trump administration had ignored scientific expertise and instead embraced "charlatans who obscure the truth and facilitate the promulgation of outright lies." The journal suggested that the actions might even be criminal, charging that "anyone else who recklessly squandered lives and money in this way would be suffering legal consequences." But the election was a chance for the public to "render judgment" on a year of incompetence and lost opportunity to prevent excess death.[1] "Dying in a Leadership Vacuum" deviated from

two hundred years of journal precedent during which *NEJM* had never commented directly on electoral affairs.[2]

The October polemic was a stark tonal contrast from another *NEJM* editorial published six months earlier. Written by Harvey Fineberg, the former president of the National Academy of Medicine, it presented a six-step plan "to crush the curve" of rising coronavirus cases in just ten weeks.[3] The plan called for ramping up diagnostic testing—into the "millions"—and using hotels and convention centers to isolate mild cases and those exposed, all in two weeks. It proposed sending masks to every American and PPE to essential workers needing it. And it suggested creating a channel wherein emerging science would inform decisions like business reopenings. It would all be overseen by a "commander" who would exercise "every civilian and military asset needed." By June 6, 2020, Fineberg asserted, the country might declare a new "D-Day" and "victory over the coronavirus." Beneath the urgency was optimism. Yet months later, almost none of Fineberg's suggestions were implemented at the federal level, much less with the hyperdrive effort that he had pushed.

Public utterances by Trump instead reflected the president's erraticism, flouting of scientific expertise, undercutting of public health measures, and indifference to the gravity of COVID. For example, on March 24, as New York State reported more than 5,000 new confirmed cases—a rate that increased daily for the next few weeks—Trump mused about ending COVID restrictions by Easter so there could be "packed churches all over our country."[4] On April 17, as armed protesters swarmed the Michigan State Legislature to protest Governor Gretchen Whitmer's COVID restrictions, Trump tweeted, "LIBERATE MICHIGAN!"[5] A week later, at a press conference where the antiviral properties of UV light and bleach were discussed by other officials, Trump asked if a "disinfectant where it knocks it out in a minute" might be injected into someone, prompting public health officials across the country to warn people about ingesting cleansing products like bleach.[6] On May 18, Trump promoted hydroxychloroquine, a drug used to treat malaria and lupus, as a COVID therapeutic, claiming to have taken it himself along with zinc.[7] In mid-July, he characterized new cases in heretofore untouched areas of the country as mere "burning embers" that could be easily doused, even as the national death

toll by month's end exceeded 140,000, almost double what had been forecast by the epidemiological model the White House was most fond of invoking.[8]

Things did not change, either, when Trump himself developed a serious case of COVID and was sent to Walter Reed Hospital. A week later, he described the experience as a "blessing from God," touted the cutting-edge monoclonal antibody treatment he had received, promised it would soon be available widely "for free," and suggested Americans "get out there" and not let COVID "dominate your lives."[9] After his loss to Joe Biden, Trump lost virtually all interest in COVID, fixating on an election he claimed had been stolen.

Fly-on-the-wall books by journalists, articles in *Axios*, *Politico*, and the *New York Times*, and round-the-clock cable news documented dozens more moments like these. It is not difficult to look at this record and pin blame heavily on Trump and his headless leadership. Trump-centrism, however, ignores critical dynamics that transcended him: at lower levels of government, in the broader political culture, and in public health infrastructure. It was the collision of these features with the unique incompetence of the Trump administration that resulted in the United States' disastrous COVID outcome: thirty million confirmed cases and half a million deaths by the spring of 2021. Here, I situate Trump's inaction in three contexts: state and local autonomy, cultures of antiexpertise, and resource misallocation and inequality. It leads to what one might call the 60/40 question: If you had to apportion culpability, how much would you lay at the feet of Trump and how much at the larger social forces in which he operated?

Federal Inaction

Trump's executive authority gave him several tools to wield against a worsening pandemic. One was the Defense Production Act of 1950 (DPA). If invoked, the law compels corporations with manufacturing capacities to prioritize production of critical supplies for the federal government, which in turn provides capital and compensation. Though originally designed to ensure necessary production during wars, it has since been used for several other purposes, including natural disaster response and bioterrorism preparedness.[10]

In the early months of the pandemic, eighteen senators urged Trump to exercise DPA powers for federal production of PPE, ventilators, and tests that could be sent to states and municipalities. "To avoid a worst-case scenario," they wrote, required "massively scale[d] up production."[11] Joe Biden, still competing in the waning Democratic primary against Bernie Sanders, a signatory of the statement, echoed its call and faulted the administration for not setting up a strong testing program.[12] James E. Baker, a Syracuse University law professor and former National Security Council adviser, asserted that in the face of hospital equipment shortages and inadequate data about the very scope of COVID, it was time to press the DPA button. "The administration can and should move forward with the DPA's authority. There's no time to waste," he argued.[13]

One of the loudest voices was the Rockefeller Foundation, which in late April proposed a national action plan for COVID-19 testing. More testing was critical to reining in the pandemic. It would enable the quick isolation of those who tested positive and the quarantining of their close contacts. This kind of rapid testing and tracing was proving to be critical in countries that had so far controlled the pandemic, most notably South Korea and Taiwan. For the United States to do so, the foundation argued that within the next two months, the United States would have to increase from one million to three million tests per week, and within six months, from three million to thirty million. Because of the "inherent commercial uncertainties in this 10-fold production increase," the DPA could prove crucial.[14] The foundation's urgency was not surprising. When it came to care of severely ill COVID patients early in the pandemic, emergency physicians had to rely on trial and error to learn about when (and when not) to use ventilators, remdesivir, corticosteroids, monoclonal antibodies, and various methods of oxygenation. More methodical studies on efficacy would only arrive later in the year.[15] In the meantime, a test-trace edifice could preempt serious cases for which medicine could offer few certain answers; the DPA might help with that.

Trump had committed to the DPA—sort of. In March and April, he signed three executive orders "delegating authority" the law granted to his heads of Health and Human Services and Homeland Security.[16] In practice, however, the administration was slow to invoke its full

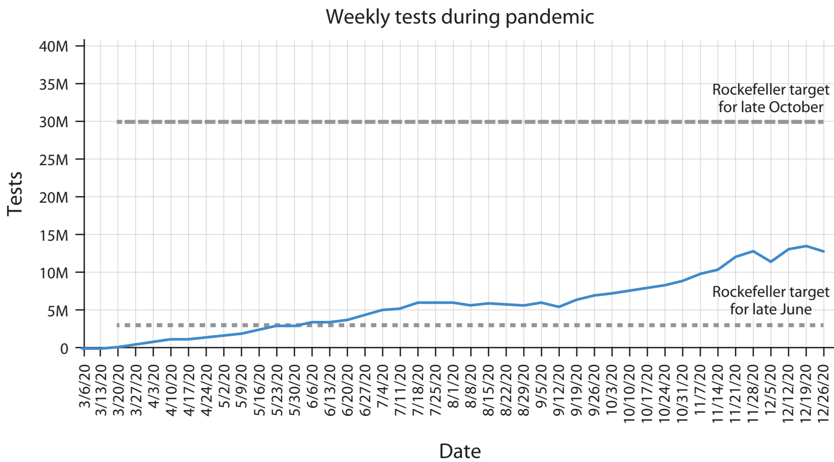

FIGURE 9. Weekly COVID diagnostic tests administered in 2020 and Rockefeller Foundation targets. Adapted from the Covid Tracking Project, https://covidtracking.com/data/download.

powers. In fact, in late March, officials boasted that they had found ways to procure tests without DPA assistance.[17] Trump endorsed a limited federal government role altogether, declaring at one press conference that it "is not supposed to be out there buying vast amounts of items and then shipping. You know, we're not a shipping clerk. The governors are supposed to be—as with testing, the governors are supposed—are supposed to be doing it." He continued: "This is really for the local governments, governors, and people within the state, depending on the way they divided it up."[18] One exception to this was Project Air Bridge, overseen by the president's son-in-law and adviser Jared Kushner. Initiated in March, Air Bridge shortened delivery times of supplies by subsidizing aerial, versus sea ship, transportation of PPE manufactured overseas. It spent $1.8 billion worth of mostly new, no-bid contracts, paying for flights and claiming the right to distribute up to half of the shipped goods through the Strategic National Stockpile. Air Bridge's efficacy remains hotly disputed. When it wound to a close in June 2020, the administration claimed it had "addressed the immediate shortfall" in PPE, pointing to 1.5 million N95 respirators, 2.5 million face shields, and 113.4 million surgical masks. Others painted a more

critical picture. An investigation by three Democratic senators pointed out that 87 percent of the goods had been gloves and, further, that the total number of N95 respirators amounted to 0.04 percent of what the administration's own estimates had said was necessary.[19]

Whatever Air Bridge's merits, PPE shortages persisted into the year, and the facts on the ground were harrowing. Accounts spread of PPE shortages at constrained facilities across the country, with many health-care workers creating makeshift gear out of bandanas and other spare cloth, or worse, trash bags and swim goggles. One of the grimmest developments was a social media hashtag, #GetMePPE, through which exhausted hospital employees took photographs and videos documenting their plight, with some asking for direct donations on GoFundMe.com so they could purchase PPE themselves. Anecdotes were soon complemented by more systematic findings. An April survey of more than nine thousand ICU workers found that 55 percent ranked the need for adequate N95 respirators as their highest or second-highest concern; 75 percent put it in the top three.[20] Twenty percent of nursing homes surveyed between May and July reported "severe" PPE shortages, defined as only enough to last a week.[21] One in three nurses surveyed from July to August reported they were "out" or "short" of N95 respirators. Further, 68 percent said they had needed to reuse them "for at least five days."[22] Ad hoc consortiums sprang up to track PPE shortages and fulfill requests for equipment. But as valiant and impressive as these volunteer initiatives were, they were no substitute for more proactive federal purchasing and distribution needed to redirect a labyrinthine supply chain and web of economic incentives.[23]

The testing story was a bit more mixed. By the third week of June, the United States was conducting about a half million tests per day. This in fact exceeded the Rockefeller Foundation's goal of three million weekly tests by that time. But the overall progress masked challenges on the ground. Since the spring, the virus had spread geographically into suburbs and rural areas, many of which lacked tests or the capacity to administer them. And even regions that had increased testing still encountered logistic hurdles. It was not hard to find complaints of long lines or difficulty in locating testing sites. Speed of processing was also an issue. Many labs reported backlogs that prevented timely results, which were critical to any successful contact tracing effort. By one

estimate, each day of delay decreased by 10–15 percent the likelihood of successfully tracing and isolating at least 80 percent of an infected person's recent contacts.[24]

The big picture also remained troubling. Increasingly, experts reflected soberly on the sluggish start—a little more than 10,000 daily tests in mid-March, a little less than 150,000 in mid-April—and concluded that a critical opportunity to squash outbreaks before they spread widely had now passed. Instead, wrote Eric Schneider in a July *NEJM* article, a more "narrow local testing strategy" had been adopted, one primarily "dedicated to managing the care of hospitalized patients and preventing health care workers from transmitting Covid-19" but not the population at large.[25] The overall testing curve six months later was not encouraging. In mid-October, a little more than one million daily tests were conducted. The weekly number of tests, then, was short—by more than twenty million—from the thirty million weekly benchmark to which the Rockefeller Foundation had aspired.

Without federal coordination, many states had taken it upon themselves to procure tests. Back in April, for instance, Maryland employees evaluated a number of options from Korean manufacturers, eventually purchasing half a million units from the firm LabGenomics (which later turned out to have too high a false-positive rate to be used, causing a minor scandal).[26] In the summer, a bipartisan group of seven governors banded together as a purchasing cooperative.[27] The closest the Trump administration came to providing strong federal help was the procurement, in August, of 150 million so-called rapid tests from Abbott Labs.[28] These tests had one advantage over the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests that detected genetic material: their results took as little as fifteen minutes to show. But they were also less accurate when it came to detecting asymptomatic cases, missing as many as two-thirds of them.[29]

For the most part, employers, hospital networks, and municipalities acquired diagnostic equipment with little federal help, leading the *New York Times* to lament, in September, "no coherent national testing strategy."[30] Lack of federal assistance meant forgoing ambitious ideas, like that of Harvard University epidemiologist Michael Mina, to test half the entire U.S. population weekly using rapid tests mailed to Americans. Those who tested positive would remain home until

sufficient time had elapsed, and the sheer frequency of testing would make up for lower accuracy. "It would," Mina wrote in *Time*, "significantly reduce the spread of the virus without having to shut down the country again—and if we act today, could allow us to see our loved ones, go back to school and work, and travel—all before Christmas."[31] Instead, cases rose into and beyond Christmas, reaching a peak of three hundred thousand per day in the first week of January.

A rare bright spot was Operation Warp Speed (OWS), when the federal government, through the Department of Defense and Health and Human Services, incentivized rapid vaccine development. It did so by funding six pharmaceutical firms' various costs and committing to bulk purchasing of potential vaccines themselves.[32] In late 2020, two firms, Pfizer and Moderna, announced astonishing results in accelerated Phase 3 trials for their vaccines. In the study population, those who had been vaccinated exhibited 90–95 percent fewer COVID cases than those who had received a placebo. Thus, these vaccines were not only the most quickly produced but some of the most effective too.

Some of the success was due to developments before OWS itself. Because of previous viruses—Ebola, Zika, and SARS-1—the federal government and many of the firms had long been testing novel vaccine platforming technologies, in particular the use of messenger RNA (mRNA), which stimulated antibody production by producing proteins similar to those the coronavirus used for binding to cells.[33] Already tested for safety, these components were ready to be taken off the shelf and merged into the COVID vaccine process, saving years of time. Moreover, the process was insulated by strong traditions in the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) that made it impervious to top-down political interference. In the face of public pressure from Trump to speed up the review process, Peter Marks, head of the FDA's Center for Biologics Evaluation and Research, declared he would resign if a vaccine was approved without the usual checks for safety and efficacy.[34] The composition of the FDA's advisory committees was another check and balance. They were drawn from inside the FDA but also outside of it: a mix of scientists in academia, other federal agencies, and private industry.[35]

Still, OWS itself was critical to catalyzing the process. Given Trump's rejection of other scientific findings, one could easily have

imagined him openly hostile to vaccine development. That he mostly got out of the way on this front must be acknowledged. Early vaccine rollout, however, was plagued by many of the same problems that had undermined PPE and test distribution: too much delegation and too little federal coordination. Governors and hospital care organizations soon complained publicly about receiving inaccurate information about quantities of doses and their arrival dates. In December, Brian Peters, the CEO of the Michigan Health & Hospital Association, decried poor communication from the Department of Health and Human Services, following a reduced allotment to his state. "Any delay in receipt of vaccine prolongs the vaccination process and puts healthcare workers at increased risk for contracting this deadly disease," Peters said.[36] By year's end, only two million people had been vaccinated, just 20 percent of the doses distributed and eighteen million fewer than a targeted twenty million by year's end.

Governance Battles from Below

Lack of assertive federal action was not the full story, however. Outside Washington, developments at lower levels of governance were as determinative when it came to the country's COVID fortunes, and the Trump administration's outsize media imprint obscured tensions from below. This was most apparent with stay-at-home orders and mask mandates, which closed nonessential businesses, encouraged people to stay home as much as possible, and mandated facial coverings in public.

With these types of ordinances, the Trump administration legally could do the following: use the pulpit to encourage preventive behavior (it sometimes did), mandate masks on federal lands (it did not), or purchase them for governments (it also did not). Its chief effort was a two-week initiative in March called "15 Days to Stop the Spread," which sent out postcards and operated a website with basic advice: stay at home if you can, avoid going to work if symptomatic, wash hands and don't touch your face, and eschew social gatherings of more than ten people.[37]

Trump's reach, though, was in fact circumscribed by long-standing legal precedent, which affirmed the extraordinary powers of states and municipalities to craft their own policies regulating land and water use,

noise, waste, and infectious disease control, among others.[38] In states like California, with strong public health traditions and needs, federalism was a boon. Since the 1970s, its Air Resources Board has regularly imposed more stringent standards than the federal Environmental Protection Agency itself.[39] This has enabled it to tailor air pollution control to the state's uniquely high emissions burden from automotive sources. Indeed, during the Trump administration, California initiated a lawsuit in 2018—subsequently joined by twenty-two other states—over whether it could impose its own gas mileage standards. (The protracted legal wrangling ended when the Biden administration withdrew the government's defense.[40])

States like Louisiana, on the other hand, were foils to California. For decades, state-level environmental regulators have imposed minimal standards allowed by federal law for petrochemical emissions, and when allowed to come up with their own rules, they have adopted some of the weakest in the nation.[41] As one recent report by *ProPublica* noted, Louisiana's benzene standard was "more than twice as lenient" as that of Texas, which in turn was "30 times looser than that of Massachusetts."[42] State-to-state differences in these and other matters point to one tension with twentieth-century public health and federalism. Circumscribed federal authority coexists alongside devolution to states. In and of itself, this is neither automatically antithetical nor beneficial to public health. What matters is what happens below.

COVID was a stage on which these tensions played out, as states rolled out stay-at-home orders in March and April. Those hit hardest by COVID responded with orders that were the most stringent, lasted the longest, and came earliest: Washington, Michigan, Connecticut, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, California, Massachusetts, and especially New York. California's contained blunt language, ordering "all individuals . . . to stay home or at their place of residence" unless they were critical to the state's day-to-day functioning.[43] New York's PAUSE program shut down all nonessential businesses—grocery stores, take-out restaurants, and social service and health institutions were the primary exceptions—and banned "non-essential gatherings of individuals of any size for any reason."[44] It lasted for two months, and as it ended, the state introduced strict benchmarks measuring COVID prevalence and sufficient contact tracing capacity, all of which a region needed to clear

before reopening. Michigan's order was similar. Initially slated for two weeks, it was extended multiple times, and its most stringent provisions did not end until June 1, all while attracting terrifying misogynistic vitriol, an armed protest, and even a foiled kidnapping plot of Governor Gretchen Whitmer.[45] These states were also among the first to implement mask mandates, as growing scientific evidence showed that facial coverings not only reduced spread but reduced infection for wearers as well.

These states stood in contrast to states such as Texas, Florida, Iowa, and Georgia, where governors repeatedly flouted the seriousness of COVID, mirroring Trump. Iowa governor Kim Reynolds did not even implement a single blanket order, instead drawing up weekly lists of businesses throughout March that would be closed. By late April, most of the restrictions were lifted, though some were left at 50 percent capacity, with Reynolds remarking that "we must learn to live with COVID virus activity without letting it govern our lives."[46] Reynolds would not implement a mask mandate until a sudden surge in November 2020 that stretched many of the state's hospitals to the brink.[47] Similarly, Georgia governor Brian Kemp, one of the last of forty-two governors who had implemented stay-at-home orders, announced he would lift restrictions in less than a month, even as cases were rising elsewhere in the country. Kemp remarked, "I felt like the negative effects of not having our economy starting to open up was beginning to have the same weight as the virus itself."[48] Kemp, too, did not implement a mask mandate.

The most flagrant of the governors was Florida's Ron DeSantis. Like Kemp, he was one of the last to institute a stay-at-home order and business restrictions. And like Kemp, he lifted most of them in less than a month, though he kept on the books a capacity restriction at bars and restaurants. As he did so, DeSantis met with Trump at the White House, where he boasted, "You look at some of the most draconian orders that have been issued in some of these states and compare Florida . . . Florida's done better," before pointing to the state's low COVID mortality.[49] The situation looked markedly differently three months later in July, however, as Florida experienced a sudden COVID surge. Its total hospitalization numbers peaked in the third week of July at nearly ten thousand cases, half of New York's April apex but

hardly anything to approach cavalierly. Still, in September, DeSantis lifted restrictions entirely. He allowed bars and restaurants to open at 100 percent capacity and, further, *prohibited* local governments from imposing restrictions of more than 50 percent.[50] Two months later, in the last week of October, Florida experienced a daily increase in cases that soon cascaded into a second surge that peaked in mid-January with the highest daily confirmed case count the state had yet experienced.

Local developments below the state level were consequential too. In Georgia, officials in a number of cities repudiated Governor Kemp, most prominently Atlanta mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms.[51] In addition to criticizing Kemp for a hasty reopening, Bottoms tested the powers of local government by issuing a series of executive orders that restricted large public gatherings and intermittently closed down dining rooms and restaurants, even after Kemp allowed them to operate at full capacity in June. Bottoms also implemented a mask mandate. Because these local actions ran counter to the state's, Kemp filed a lawsuit against Bottoms that was subsequently withdrawn. To observers' surprise, Kemp in August then allowed local mask ordinances, though the move came with caveats; they would apply mainly to government buildings and only private businesses "if the owner or occupant . . . consents to enforcement."[52] Still, Kemp's partial retrenchment affirmed Bottoms's assertion of local power. In Florida, local officials were less assertive than their mayoral colleague in Atlanta. But they also exercised as much autonomy as possible, with Miami-Dade County allowing restaurants to open at only 50 percent capacity and imposing a mask mandate that withstood a legal challenge filed by a travel agent.[53]

Resistant localities did not just defend public health measures, though. They could also undermine them. California, home of some of the strongest initial measures, saw a groundswell of resistance to them by May, especially in politically conservative Orange County. In Huntington Beach, fifteen hundred people gathered to protest ongoing business restrictions.[54] The county sheriff, Don Barnes, told its board of supervisors, "We are not the mask police—nor do I intend to be the mask police." "I think what we have seen repeatedly throughout the community is Orange County residents acting responsibly," he added.[55]

Perhaps bowing to pressure, Governor Gavin Newsom announced in mid-May, just two weeks after the first protests, that California would lift restrictions on restaurants. It was the start of California's divergence from northeast counterparts' early successes in mitigation. The anti-restriction effort would haunt Newsom throughout the year, culminating in a recall effort in early 2021. For those opposed to restrictions, he became a symbol of an overreaching state. (Newsom did himself no favors, of course, when he was photographed at a posh restaurant without a mask.) For those in favor of them, he earned derision for frequent changes in his position. Still, even in states that brought the virus under significant control, local cracks were constantly appearing. In New York, that included parts of Brooklyn, and later Staten Island, residents angrily resisted mask wearing, continued holding religious gatherings, and flouted bar and restaurant restrictions.[56]

These dynamics went beyond Trump and underscored how much public health action—far before COVID—was determined at the level of state and municipal government. Federalism was a mixed bag. In spite of Trump, many governors, county heads, and mayors were able to implement effective restrictions, even with a lack of federal assistance—material and rhetorical—that would have made the effort much more smooth. And conversely, because of Trump, many other elected officials were emboldened by a federal government and president whose approach was similarly hands-off and dismissive of the COVID threat. Throughout 2020, Trump regularly chimed in from afar with insults for states with restrictions and applause for those that accelerated economic reopening.

The New Antiexpertise

Public opinion polls repeatedly showed majority support for restrictive measures and mask wearing.[57] But a sizable percentage of the population remained antagonistic. Casual internet browsing quickly uncovered rants about true hidden agendas behind COVID control or bizarre videotaped fights in shopping malls where unmasked protesters harassed staff and other patrons. They added up to rejection of COVID's seriousness and of the means required to combat it. It is not hard to view Trump as the major tailwind in this kind of thinking. Even before COVID, Trump had been fond of conspiracies and

falsehoods; his presidential campaign, after all, had been rooted in pushing "birtherist" narratives about Barack Obama's true national origins. And more recently, his Twitter account had retweeted material associated with QAnon, a theory that alleged pedophilic government agents were actively undermining his presidency.[58] This is to say nothing of his podium antics throughout COVID.

Trump's proclivities explain some of his COVID rejectionism. But it also has roots in deeper cultural currents, datable to a larger 1960s and 1970s backlash against once-hallowed institutions, medicine and science among them. Much of this skepticism, of course, was welcome. The women's health movement, best exemplified by the book *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, overturned misogynistic assumptions in medical knowledge and spotlighted pervasive gender inequality in the profession itself.[59] HIV/AIDS activists self-educated and criticized the usual ways clinical trial membership was determined and the glacial approval process for experimental drugs on which their lives depended.[60] Groups like Science for the People and the environmental justice movement collaborated with nonprofessional citizen scientists both in framing overall questions—including ones scientists had missed—and in collecting data, leading to what the sociologist Phil Brown has dubbed "popular epidemiology."[61] In these cases, antiexpertise eventually made for better expertise.

Yet this democratizing impulse came with more than one underside. One was the rise of a billion-dollar alternative therapeutics industry, some of which lacked the oversight of traditional regulatory agencies.[62] Another was a plethora of unsubstantiated, if understandable, narratives about the dangers of products like genetically modified foods.[63] More dangerous medical conspiracism came in the form of HIV dissidence, which rejected the scientific consensus that AIDS was caused by the virus. Though it originated in the United States, dissident thought traveled and was embraced by South African president Thabo Mbeki, who from 2000 to 2005 banned distribution of antiretrovirals to expectant mothers, with disastrous consequences for HIV control.[64] Perhaps the most high-profile—and alarming—development was a renewed resistance to vaccination, propelled initially by a retracted 1998 study, based on false data, that purported to show links between vaccination and autism. Its author subsequently became a hero of the movement, which depicted him as a martyr muzzled by the medical

establishment.[65] Infectious diseases long thought to be under control, like measles and whooping cough, instead resurfaced in periodic outbreaks as pockets of parents refused to vaccinate their children. Rejection of mainstream medicine grew alongside a rejection of mainstream science, especially that which showed the alarming rise of human carbon use and its effects on climate.[66]

Democratic currents were not the only contributor to the crisis of expertise of the past few decades. Unsettled disagreements within several public-facing expert fields—energy, economics, environmental risk, statistics, psychology, medicine, and public health—all chipped away at the notion of a united expert front, diminished public confidence, or at the very least, simply sowed confusion.[67] Within public health, nutritional research became an especially common (and well-deserved) target for jokes about contradictory advice on the harmfulness of salt, fats, and red meat, often issued in the public sphere by researchers wedded to defending their own pet paradigms.[68] But the problems extended into other areas. In breast cancer, fierce debates occurred over the need for mastectomies if BRCA genes were found in women, the wisdom of various aggressive treatments, and whether age forty or fifty was the right time for mammograms to start.[69] Various fields also confronted growing internal skepticism around the uncritical use of dominant statistical frameworks and the inability of researchers to replicate many common research findings.[70]

Whatever the sources, unified expertise frayed alongside the growth of a new internet-anchored media ecology. In the Trump era, there existed thousands of Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, Instagram feeds, YouTube channels, subreddits, and websites promoting beliefs like the above—and others. Many were well subsidized and had the aesthetic of professionally produced material. To the untrained eye, the popular National Vaccine Information Center website, run by an antivaccination group, looks as though it might be a university or even government site.[71] Not all of these digital materials were produced by uncredentialed amateurs, either. Many carried the imprimatur of heterodox physicians and scientists. The internet had made it possible for antiexperts to obtain data on their own, interpret the information the way they wanted, and easily shop for confirmatory experts and virtual communities that could reaffirm their a priori beliefs.

COVID was no exception, and the digital world spread a number of erroneous assertions, some of which the president actively repeated: that the virus was no worse than the flu; that in fact flu cases were being tabulated as COVID ones; that hydroxychloroquine could easily ward it off; that masks were ineffective; that an increase in testing in fact accounted for increases in confirmed cases; and that it was all a trojan horse for increasing political control. In the early days of the pandemic, a video titled "Plandemic," starring microbiologist Judy Mikovits, claimed that novel coronavirus was a laboratory-made virus and that hospitals and pharmaceutical companies (along with Bill Gates) had a stake in inflating severity to collect reimbursements and profiteer off vaccines. It was among the first, too, to float hydroxychloroquine as an effective COVID remedy and suggested that the annual flu vaccine increased one's COVID vulnerability. The video's reach was astounding. Before its removal from YouTube, it had been viewed, by one estimate, eight million times.[72]

Similar viral videos followed. In late April, two urgent care doctors from Bakersfield, California, distributed a recording of themselves. In it, they applied positivity rates from the five thousand COVID tests they had conducted locally to both Kern County and the entire state, and claimed COVID had already infected millions and in fact was not doing much harm. Because it was no worse than the flu, there was no reason to continue social distancing or stay-at-home orders. The video was tweeted by the celebrity entrepreneur and billionaire Elon Musk, who remarked, "Docs make good points." The dubious statistical analysis led to opprobrium from the two main emergency care organizations, though by then the video had been viewed millions of times before being yanked by YouTube.[73] In July, a group calling itself America's Frontline Doctors held a taped press conference in front of the Supreme Court to sound another message against stay-at-home orders while promoting hydroxychloroquine and zinc. It was viewed by an estimated fourteen million people.[74]

These were not just internet curiosities but seeped into White House statements and decision-making. Trump repeatedly promoted hydroxychloroquine throughout the summer, calling it a "game changer," even as evidence of its nonefficacy mounted. One of its biggest boosters on the White House's Coronavirus Task Force was an

economist, Peter Navarro, who wrote a July 2020 *USA Today* op-ed denouncing Anthony Fauci for his refusal to endorse hydroxychloroquine use because of insufficient data.[75] The inflammatory piece was titled "Anthony Fauci Has Been Wrong about Everything I Have Interacted with Him On."

By fall, Trump had marginalized Fauci and Deborah Birx, the two infectious disease experts on the task force. He substituted instead Scott Atlas, a conservative radiologist whom he had first seen on Fox News. Atlas questioned mask use, discouraged testing of those with no symptoms, and endorsed accelerated reopening and laxer restrictions for all but the highest-risk populations, a strategy that had been deployed without success in Sweden.[76] Atlas's ideas hewed closely to those who pushed for reaching "herd immunity" via mass infection of lower-risk populations. In October, they gained additional currency when a group of epidemiologists and physicians signed what they called the Great Barrington Declaration. It advocated "Focused Protection"—that is, "allow[ing] those who are at minimal risk of death to live their lives normally to build up immunity to the virus through natural infection." The declaration closed by advocating the end of remote work and the opening of "restaurants and other businesses."[77] Unlike the viral videos that had circulated in the earlier phase of the pandemic, the declaration was spearheaded by three extremely accomplished scientists whose prestigious affiliations were prominently flagged: Martin Kulldorff (Harvard), Sunetra Gupta (Oxford), Jay Bhattacharya (Stanford). It was a notable variation on antiexpertise: experts invoking their expert reputations to bolster an antiexpert position.

These currents had their most damaging effect on the integrity of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Documents obtained by a Democratic House subcommittee and *Politico* showed repeated meddling by deputies in Trump's Health and Human Services (HHS). Even before Atlas's arrival, Paul Alexander, a young "special assistant," advocated for HHS review of the CDC's *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, the agency's scientific journal, which he accused of "trying to hurt the President." Alexander declared, "The reports must be read by someone outside of CDC like myself, and we cannot allow the reporting to go on as it has been, for it is outrageous . . . Nothing to go out unless I read and agree with the findings how they CDC, wrote

it and I tweak it to ensure it is fair and balanced and 'complete.'" He pushed herd immunity strategies aggressively, including the opening of on-campus colleges, though he ultimately did not succeed in getting them adopted. He did manage, however, to delay by one month a *Report* article that cast doubt on hydroxychloroquine's efficacy. Equally alarming was the CDC's August revision of a testing guidance, pushed by Atlas, which recommended that those without symptoms no longer needed to be tested, despite the now-accepted knowledge that asymptomatic people could easily spread the virus.[78] All the above actions raised the question of why somebody obsessed with highly visible "wins" like Trump would embrace policies almost certain to worsen COVID numbers. But it misses that the hands-off approach—and the flouting of scientific judgment undergirding it—was an end unto itself, one that roused a political base primed to cheer him on.[79] It did not help, either, that health officials were internally divided about various issues: early on, the helpfulness of masks; midway, whether protests might spread COVID; and later, if schools should be reopened.

At the same time, antiexpertise went beyond Trump. A culture of antiexpertise and tensions between scientific experts themselves had existed for decades before him. Trump may have rejected scientific expertise in a particularly flagrant way, but he was enabled by a milieu that long predated him.

Resource Allocation and Deeper Inequality

There is a final context to consider: resource allocation and entrenched inequalities. COVID emerged after three decades of budgetary stringency, originating in the recessionary climate of the 1970s, which has long forced state and local health departments to do more with increasingly less. A CDC report published at the turn of the century surveyed three thousand health departments and found major infrastructural deficiencies: e-mail systems that did not work, outdated laboratory equipment, and heads without advanced degrees.[80] In 2004 and 2005, the Trust for America's Health (TFAH) conducted a similar examination of budgets. Its big takeaway was delivered by Shelley Hearne, its executive director, in a Congressional hearing where she stated bluntly that "the nation's public health system" was "being stretched to the

breaking point."[81] The TFAH's report noted that more than a third of states had cut their budgets in the past year.[82]

These trends continued over the next decade. Budget windfalls, when they did come, were typically earmarked for very particular functions, like bioterrorism (shortly after 9/11), Medicaid, and tobacco control funds. A year before COVID, TFAH conducted another analysis. It found that the CDC's Prevention and Public Health Fund, created by the Affordable Care Act to fund on-the-ground initiatives, had its budget cut by between one-third and two-thirds each year "and used to pay for other legislation." Even more alarmingly, at the local level, a fifth of health departments reported cuts in 2017, and 23 percent in 2016.[83] In 2020, the Kaiser Family Foundation, working with the Associated Press, published a similarly sobering report that found spending for state and local public health departments, per capita, had declined by 16 percent and 18 percent, respectively, part of long-term trends that had left "a skeletal workforce for what was once viewed as one of the world's top public health systems."[84] The consequences were not hard to see. Throughout the pandemic, governments struggled to support testing sites, surveillance to monitor the outbreak, health education, and enforcement of COVID rules. Small health departments were particularly strapped. Many used dated cell phone technology and paper records and did not have epidemiologists on staff. While a more proactive federal effort would have surely blunted the worst of these infrastructural deficiencies, it would not have erased them entirely.

Perhaps the most sobering aspect of the COVID pandemic was patterns of disease that reflected durable fault lines of inequality. Although COVID could theoretically hit anybody, its distribution was decidedly nonrandom. The earliest evidence of this came just a month into the pandemic, when data showed disproportionate COVID prevalence among Black and Latinx Americans. It was likely the result of a few factors: pervasive residential segregation that concentrated respiratory hazards in minority neighborhoods; cohabitation in substandard housing; accumulated stress response effects from racial discrimination; and concentration at the lower rungs of the occupational ladder. Other preliminary analyses showed a similar effect for people of low income, with one analyst commenting that "those who because of the nature of

their jobs and their financial circumstances have to work outside of the home, and their families, are more likely to become infected and die."[85]

Then in November, the journal *Nature* released one of the most systematic analyses to date of COVID inequalities using cell phone tracking data to trace the precise hourly movements of almost one hundred million people from their homes to various destinations. Overlaying these data with COVID rates, the researchers identified four overwhelming predictive factors for higher probability of COVID: racial minority status, socioeconomic disadvantage, frequent mobility, and movement to "places of interest" with high numbers of people, such as restaurants and grocery stores.[86] It was not hard to see that many of the anonymous statistical points in the study were low-wage service workers who regularly commuted to jobs where they were often underprotected and around many people. Another analysis by researchers at the University of California–San Francisco found that workers in the food and transportation sectors and those in "manufacturing" reported "excess deaths" during the pandemic period of 39 percent, 28 percent, and 23 percent, respectively, with increases for Black, Latinx, and Asian workers of 36 percent, 28 percent, and 18 percent.[87] Given how bound up occupational position and race were in areas with large nonwhite populations, these results painted a blunt picture of how race and class forces were working when it came to COVID risk. Alas, it was also an unsurprising one. It upheld two centuries of research that showed most diseases disproportionately hit society's most marginalized.[88] And it showed that underlying and entrenched inequalities, Trump or no Trump, still shaped much of the virus's fallout.

It was a reminder that future historians who narrate President Trump's COVID leadership will have to analyze his destructive habits of mind and his administration's abdication of duty at several junctures. But they will have to do so with an eye toward what happened in the states and localities below him, in the cultural milieu around him, and in the fractured society that preceded his political ascendance. They will have to confront, in other words, the 60/40 question.

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