

## The Trump Flu?

Every plague gets a nickname. There's the Antonine Flu, the Plague of Justinian, the Black Death, the Russian Flu, the Spanish Flu, the Asian Flu, the Hong Kong Flu, and the Swine Flu, to name a few. These names reference the leader in charge (e.g. Roman Emperors, Marcus Aurelius Antonius and Flavius Justinianus), plague symptoms (e.g., large, blacked lymph nodes), the plague's initial location, or the plague's vector.

The name Covid-19 (the novel coronavirus) is too technical. So, we'll naturally come up with an easier, more fitting name. President Trump wants to call it the China Flu. But Covid-19 has become a far bigger problem in the U.S. than in China. We now have four times the number of cases and three times the number of deaths, with these differentials rising daily. The reason we have the worst outbreak in the world has everything to do with the President's inactions. Hence, Americans, at least, may start calling Covid-19 the Trump Flu.

The President and his administration [first learned of the virus on January 3](#). The President claims China understated what was happening. But since when would anyone, let alone the President of the United States, trust what China says? Moreover, our intelligence services were [warning the President starting in early January about a pandemic](#). A full month later, on February 2, the President finally banned flights from China. During that month, [430,000 people arrived from China](#), many surely infected. And since his February 2nd "ban," another [40,000 people have reached our shores from China](#), many, if not most, without being put into two-week quarantine and many, if not most, subject to no real medical screening.

But the principal reason 352,626 Americans have, so far, contracted Covid-19, 10,392 have, so far, died, and tens of thousands more are projected to die isn't primarily due to the President's initial huge mistake. It lies with his second massive blunder — letting each state conduct its own Coronavirus policy.

President Truman had a sign on his desk — "The Buck Stops Here." President Trump's motto is "The Buck Stops There." He repeatedly says the federal government is simply a "backup" to the states. This is an absolutely absurd proposition. It permitted each state to run its own quarantine policy, letting infected, if often asymptomatic people from a quarantined state enter a non-quarantined state and spread the infection. It's also forced the states to bid against each other to buy critical supplies, including ventilators. From day one, the President should have secured all available supplies and distributed them where most needed. Also, from day one, the President should have invoked The Defense Production Act and ordered every company in the country who could make critical medical supplies to do so as quickly as humanly possible.

There is no Defense Production Act available to states. And there is no way for responsible states to compel irresponsible states to change their behavior. A good example is congregating on beaches. Massachusetts just closed all state beaches. Georgia just opened all state beaches.

Absent a sensible, coordinated, uniform national policy, states are starting to seal themselves off to keep away "foreigners" from other states. This will limit, if not destroy interstate commerce and make it even more difficult to restart the national economy.

The President, back in early February, should have ordered the entire nation, apart from essential workers, to shelter in place for three weeks and used the

military to enforce his order. At that time, the prevalence rate (share of infected Americans) was extremely low. So he could have ordered [highly efficient group testing of all Americans](#) after the three weeks — testing to be conducted by the military and repeated each week. He should also have required group testing of all passengers on all planes and boats landing or docking in the country.

Group testing has started in Germany and Israel. It involves testing large numbers of people collectively by placing all their swabs together in one container of preservative solution and testing the mixture. If the test proves negative, everyone in the group is cleared with a single test. If the test is positive, the group is split in half and both halves are tested. Continuing in this manner will identify exactly who is infected and who is not and do so based on remarkably few tests.

Such a group-testing protocol would have readily and safely permitted the release of virtually all Americans from quarantine. Had the President taken such steps, our economy would now be operating at near normal capacity with everyone who was infected either in the hospital or at home (together with their household members) under government-supervised quarantine. Far more important, thousands of Americans who died would likely still be alive.

Routinely testing all Americans, giving those testing negative green bracelets that turn red after a week, and permitting those with green bracelets to go back to work, frequent restaurants, go shopping, etc. is not too late to initiate. Indeed, it should be started today. The longer we wait, the harder it will be to implement group testing. Waiting means a higher share of the population will be infected when the testing finally begins. This will reduce the number of

people we can efficiently test in a group and, thus, require a larger number of tests each week — tests that are in very short supply.

The President's own nickname should be Too Little Too Late. Everything he has done in this crisis has been far behind the eight ball. He first downplayed the virus and led the public to ignore its threat. Then, when the epidemic erupted, as predicted, he waited weeks to recommend, but not order, social distancing. Then he refused to invoke the Defense Production Act until political pressure mounted. As a result, life-saving ventilators will likely be produced weeks after they are most needed. Then he suggested the economy could be opened by Easter, implicitly telling the public they could relax their vigilance. Then he downplayed the need for masks until he started to take them seriously, yet still refused to wear one publicly.

The common theme is that the President seems frightened to death of compelling the public to do anything. Maybe he's scared it will cost him votes in November. But the lives of tens of thousands of Americans hang in the balance. He won't be able to blame their deaths on China, the states, and the cities. The buck will stop right where it started — on his desk.

There are only four end games to this plague. There's a vaccine, which will likely take over a year. There's herd immunity, which will entail most people getting the virus, which means a massive number of deaths. There's clearing people who were infected via an antibody test, but this too requires letting most people get infected. And there's group testing everyone every week. Encouraging everyone to return to work at the end of April without group testing — the President's apparent plan — would represent his third colossal mistake. It will produce another terrible outbreak.

The President's failure to actually lead, as opposed to holding self-congratulatory press conferences, is why the Trump Flu may be the name that sticks. On the other hand, if the President finally picks up the ball and runs with it by ordering the military to organize universal, repeated group testing, it will be his finest hour. In this case, Covid-19 will come to be called the Trump Flu not because President Trump wasted American lives and destroyed the economy, but because he rose to the challenge and saved tens of thousands of Americans as well as their livelihoods.