Coronavirus Is Making Us All Stupid

By Alex Berezow, PhD — April 20, 2020

The coronavirus pandemic has devolved into just another partisan battle. In the process, it has revealed how poorly served Americans are by their leaders and the media.

For those Americans who become infected with the novel coronavirus, symptoms include loss of smell, coughing, and high fever. For everyone else, the chief symptom is stupidity.

A national emergency that ought to be uniting the country in opposition to a viral enemy has sadly and somewhat predictably devolved into just another partisan cat fight. As usual, our collective pathology revolves around the man in the White House.

Before I go any further, I want to make four points perfectly clear.

First, ACSH is strictly non-partisan. That doesn't mean we don't have an ideology. We do. We are unapologetically pro-science and pro-technology. We also tend to favor free market solutions when possible, and as a general rule, we support freedom of choice for consumers. As a result, we have very strong opinions on science and health policy, but few opinions on which politician is best to implement them.

Second, we try not to be overtly political. Our readers and supporters (and, indeed, our own staff) have a wide variety of political beliefs, and we respect that. One way we do so is by referring to politicians only by their names, not by their political party. If somebody says something ridiculous,
it doesn't really matter if there is a D or R behind their name.

Third, when we do criticize politicians and pundits, we make sure to maintain some semblance of balance. By now, everyone should realize that neither side of the aisle has a monopoly on stupidity. That's why we have criticized comments by people on the Right (e.g., former Kentucky Gov. Matt Bevin [2], Fox News's Tucker Carlson [3]) and the Left (e.g., Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez [4], MSNBC's David Gura [5]).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, when we write an article, nobody here first asks, "How does this make Donald Trump look?" (Yes, we've actually been accused of that by someone calling himself a journalist [6].) The universe does not revolve around Mr. Trump, despite what he and his critics apparently believe. Therefore, when we write an article [7] claiming that hydroxychloroquine probably won't help treat COVID-19, that's not a veiled criticism of the president. Likewise, when we point out the objective fact that influenza kills more people than COVID-19 [8] (at this point, anyway), that's not tacit support for any of Mr. Trump's statements.

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The fact that literally everything has become political is, in many ways, worse for the country than the virus itself. It’s becoming obvious that (1) Blue America has increasingly little in common with Red America, and (2) it is difficult to tell who is acting in good faith.
On the one hand, the president’s critics are incentivized to exaggerate and even rewrite history. Some in the media, for instance, are pretending that they saw the COVID-19 pandemic coming, despite video evidence of the media claiming (as everybody was) that “influenza is worse than COVID-19.” On the other hand, the president’s supporters are incentivized to downplay the pandemic and to focus on the economy. Neither side trusts the other, complex arguments are oversimplified to the point of absurdity, and as a consequence, public health and the economy both suffer while America’s social fabric is ripped even further.

What nobody seems to understand is that America’s problems are, in part, due to a colossal failure
in leadership. To the extent that President Trump is responsible for botching a coordinated federal response -- and for having a long history of contradicting himself and his advisors over and over again -- he deserves some of the blame. But it's too easy (and for some, too tempting) to just stop there. In reality, the blame goes much further.

Consider New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, who the media and many in the public view as a great hero. According to left-leaning The Nation [11], before COVID-19 nailed his state, Mr. Cuomo was busy shutting down hospitals and slashing Medicaid payments. The publication concluded that "Cuomo helped get New York into this mess."

Our public health institutions also screwed up. The CDC put out a faulty coronavirus test, and the FDA dragged its feet on approving new ones. But the rot goes even deeper than that and further back in time. As ACSH advisor Dr. David Shlaes writes [12]:

“In spite of study after study and the writings of expert after expert over the last 25 years, we, as a society, have failed to provide for our own security in the face of a potential public health threat. We have failed to supply and maintain our strategic national stockpile, we have consistently underfunded our public health infrastructure, and we have underfunded our hospitals' preparedness.”

We Have the Government We Deserve

By now, it should be obvious that the lockdown was poorly thought through and poorly executed. The tone deafness and economic illiteracy of the “shut down everything” crowd is infuriating. This has spawned a predictable and equally infuriating backlash among those who claim coronavirus isn't a big deal and that life should return to normal immediately. What we need is leadership, but from what we've seen so far, we shouldn't expect any.

Philosopher Joseph de Maistre is perhaps most famous for the phrase, "Every country has the government it deserves." Apparently, every country also has the pandemic it deserves.

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