

Making Sense of the Covid-19 Era

by [Sarah Dillingham](#) (April 2020)



Bad Premonition, Kasimir Malevich, 1928

March has been a difficult month for optimists. It began on a tenuous note, as ominous signs of a worldwide [Covid-19](#) pandemic [began to take shape](#) and the stock market [dipped](#) in late February. But as news and opinion, consistently lacking nuance, [pivoted](#) from early [coverage downplaying](#) the significance of the novel coronavirus to broadcasting [catastrophic predictions](#)—and stock markets inevitably [plummeted in response](#)—two competing narratives have emerged which attempt to navigate and organize a tsunami of conflicting, ever-changing information.

The predominant position, amplified by repetition and an iterative sense of urgency across governments and private institutions, is that people across the globe must hunker down in quarantine for an indefinite period of weeks or months, until the monstrous threat of global pandemic is contained. Popular among proponents of this view is the complimentary idea that the severity of the pandemic is [President Trump's fault](#), and was largely within his control to contain. Excessive concern over the economic impacts of such sweeping action constitutes [greed](#).

As recently as a week ago, before Covid-19 case rates in the U.S. began to visibly surge in earnest but following a cascade of state-[declared economic shutdowns](#) and shelter in place orders, economists began to [sound alarms](#) at the runaway economic impacts. “What is happening is a shock to the American economy more sudden and severe than anyone alive has ever experienced,” [Annie Lowry warned](#) in the Atlantic. Certainly the graveness of these warnings is not hyperbole; all of the stock market gains of the Trump presidency have

been lost in a single month amid [record-high unemployment claims](#). The potential severity of this impact inspired a competing narrative: a growing number of specialists, including two Stanford University professors of medicine, began to openly pose the question: [Is the Coronavirus as deadly as they say](#)? Does it warrant these extreme and potentially devastating policies of containment?

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Humanity has seen pandemic events before, but never in an era so completely saturated by such a dizzying degree of novelty and constant waves of data, from which we must continually separate wheat from chaff. Predictably, the Covid-19 narrative one accepts as valid seems to track fairly consistently with [political orientation](#), much like the cultural Rorschach tests of 2019 which now pale in comparison. But the dual perspectives and concerns raised about the Covid-19 pandemic are not mutually exclusive, and can be reconciled in a cohesive interpretation of our current predicament. While the full impact of Covid-19 is far from clear, arguments that the virus is milder or equivalent to seasonal flu appear to be overly optimistic. Nonetheless, we cannot simply freeze human activity in place indefinitely; and attempting to do so will exact greater human consequences than a pandemic virus. Thankfully containment of Covid-19 is possible without either shutting down the economy or blithely conducting business as usual.

Is Covid-19 a deadly pandemic or equivalent to seasonal flu?

It is neither outlandishly unscientific nor irresponsible to pose this question. As the first accounts began to emerge of a novel upper respiratory illness crippling Wuhan province, China, information was sporadic and inconsistent. The World Health Organization (WHO) [tweeted](#) in January that “Chinese authorities have found no clear evidence of human transmission,” a claim which disintegrated under nominal scrutiny. (WHO data has been so unreliable that on March 24th, researchers at Oxford University [publicly announced](#) they would stop using it.) As information leaked out—despite the Chinese government’s [considerable efforts to suppress it](#)—that a novel human coronavirus was infecting hundreds or thousands of Chinese patients, a reputable bioweapons expert [posited](#) that the virus might be a lab-engineered byproduct of a bioweapons program. The proximity of the epicenter of the outbreak to the Wuhan Institute of Virology, China’s only pathogen-4 level facility, naturally invited speculation. Scientists have since concurred that the subsequently-released full genome sequence of the SARS-Cov 2 virus [disproves that theoryscale up capacity](#) of ICU beds with respirators and contain the spread of the virus among latent carriers are warranted.

Did the U.S. Respond Appropriately? Is Mass Quarantine Necessary?

Unquestionably, the slow and incompetent CDC response led by career bureaucrats hobbled national containment efforts during the most critically important early weeks of the outbreak. Ironically, the decision which earned President Trump the most criticism and perhaps saved the most lives was [closing the border to China](#) in January. Since that time, leaders around the world have struggled to keep up with current information

and make decisions which protect the economy from the catastrophic effects of either freefall from instability, or collapse under burgeoning and fragile healthcare systems treating a sick population. Architects of the widely promoted Imperial College epidemiological model have had to [walk back](#) their most dire predictions which informed policies implemented throughout Europe and the U.S. While it made sense to try and freeze contagion in place once the potential scope of the pandemic came into view, it's equally rational to plan a cessation of mass quarantine once protective social distancing measures are implemented. After 14 days, those infected today will have shown symptoms and will be able to self-quarantine.

Suggestions to [wait out](#) the pandemic under quarantine until a vaccine can be developed are unrealistic and dangerous, both biologically and economically. The Federal Reserve [estimated](#), before the emergence of Covid-19, that 38% of American families have less than \$400 in reserve for unexpected emergencies. Unemployment claims have skyrocketed in recent weeks, with a record [3.3 million people filing claims](#) during the week of March 21st. Furthermore, experts including NIAID Director Dr. Anthony Fauci have [warned](#) that rolling out an inadequately tested and experimental vaccine could be ineffective and dangerous. An experimental coronavirus vaccine was fast-tracked to approval for human trials this year [without animal testing](#), despite [ominous outcomes](#) in animal trials of a previous coronavirus vaccine which was tested in mice. The results indicated that recipients could become more susceptible to [pulmonary damage](#) and [pneumonia](#) upon exposure to multiple strains of coronavirus. Study authors urged caution in developing coronavirus vaccines.

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Luckily, waiting for a vaccine may not be necessary. On Sunday, President Trump [announced](#) an extension of social distancing guidelines until April 30th. This policy, in combination with proven effective treatments such as prophylactic and [therapeutic Vitamin C](#), [hydroxychloroquine](#) particularly in [combination](#) with Zinc and azithromycin, should provide the foundation under which state and federal lockdowns can be safely eased in compliance with measures to “[flatten the curve](#).” Perhaps the most damaging [misinformation](#) propagated by public health officials and the press has been the idea that masks provide inadequate protection against infection. While it's true that medical-grade masks in particular should be distributed to healthcare providers first, trying to dissuade hoarding with false information was poor strategy which must be reversed once production and distribution is ramped up. Face masks, when worn by everyone, are a safe and effective way to prevent transmission of virus among infected people who don't yet have symptoms, and prevent people from touching their mucous membranes while out and about. If everyone wears masks while interacting with the public and practices rigorous social distancing, transmission could be [curbed exponentially](#). There's no question that the Covid-19 pandemic presents a real and unprecedented challenge to the world's population, and that an unprecedented response to contain the virus is necessary. With use of masks, [social distancing](#), and [proper handwashing](#), Americans can be back to work and out and about, engaging in meaningful activity and adjusting to the new Covid-19 era normal.

As we emerge from lockdown into the new Covid-19 normal,

there's opportunity to look to the silver linings amid our challenges. We've had a glimpse over the past weeks of what an even greater catastrophe might look like, and so we have a tremendous opportunity to prepare and adjust accordingly. The vast majority of us, if we are infected with Covid-19, will recover from the virus especially with access to proper therapeutics, including OTC prophylactic Vitamin C. Economic recovery may be [within reach](#). And we've had the chance under quarantine to rediscover what's real and important: biological reality has [made a comeback](#). Social justice mobs have given way to [quarantine memes](#). And a citizenry which was divided in a remarkably divisive political climate just a few weeks ago is [pulling together](#) to endure this crisis and dig our way out of it, together.

«[Previous Article](#) [Table of Contents](#) [Next Article](#)»

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