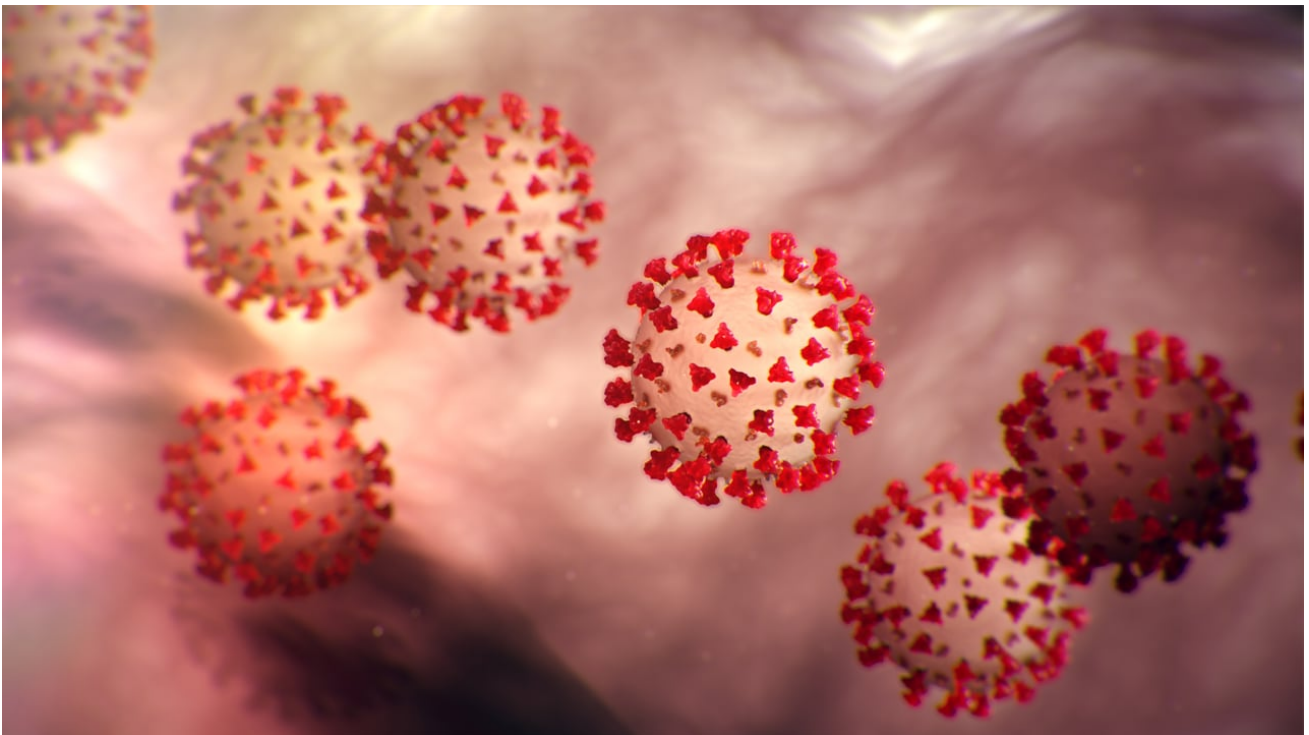


Overcoming the Multiple Coronavirus Contagions

There are delicate balances the administration will have to sort out, but the results of the national voluntary mobilization the administration has led are already emerging.

by Conrad Black



As the coronavirus crisis rapidly develops, the Trump Administration must cope with two paradoxical problems looming above the race to prepare the public health service and shield the population as much as can be done, before the full force of the pandemic arrives.

An imaginative campaign by the government of the Peoples' Republic of China to represent its response to the coronavirus as a triumph of Chinese efficiency predictably has won the hearts and minds of the credulous Western Left. In fact, it was a disaster of complete unpreparedness, insolent official refusal to pay the slightest attention to incoming facts, totalitarian dissembling and censorship, and the persecution

of those who gave unheeded warnings.

China now purports—with what must be acknowledged as majestic (though not simply admirable) aplomb—to be laying out a “silk road” of medical assistance to late-coming sufferer-nations. Of course, these nations are all victims of China’s official lies about the medical dangers it had inadvertently fostered and negligently transmitted. Having inflicted this pestilence on the world, China now claims to be the indispensable world leader in mastering the problem.

Of course, the Chinese must not be allowed to get away with this colossal rodomontade. The United States must take the lead in repatriating pharmaceutical production from China, demanding the World Health Organization cease to be a shill-and-whitewash operation for the Peoples’ Republic, and render a truthful and objective account of how this virus got started and how it got so completely out of control.

The Chinese role must be exposed in effectively assuring the exportation of the coronavirus to the whole world, including through the large concentrations of Chinese workers building the self-important “Belt and Road” with which the Middle Kingdom will assert itself across the Eurasian land-mass, and through its failure to give advisory warnings to international travelers. China deliberately ignored the universally recognized responsibilities of all countries to report outbreaks of communicable diseases promptly and accurately.

A Sharp Rejoinder

The world must understand that the Hong Kong protesters and the huge numbers of persecuted Uyghurs in their concentration camps (which China denies) are not freakish aberrations from some almost uniform munificence of the Peoples’ Republic. They are the successors to other completely inoffensive groups who have been trampled underfoot, oppressed and traduced by the Beijing regime, from the long Civil War (1920s-1949) through

the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962), the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the occupation of Tibet and persecution of practitioners of all the world's religions, especially Christianity, but also authentic Chinese religions.

There are limits to what the world can reasonably aspire to do in jurisdictions that are not our own and boil down ultimately to Chinese internal affairs. But this attempt of the Chinese government, as it blames the United States for this debacle and threatens to be sluggish about the transmission to the United States of medical supplies produced in China by American companies it had induced to invest there, requires a sharp rejoinder.

Where this creates a conundrum for the United States is that although all Chinese comments on the coronavirus have to be somewhat, or even substantially, discounted, China's partially plausible claim that it has turned the corner and that the virus is now in retreat, is extremely useful in combating the profound panic which is sweeping the United States and the entire Western world. In democratic countries, the media are free to hype any version of events, no matter how terrifying, and the temptation to do so in the United States is aggravated by the possibility presented to the anti-Trump media to hammer the president for incompetence and deception in an election year, and destroy the benefits of his skillful management of the economy.

This is going to require the administration to execute the sophisticated maneuver of exposing China's duplicity and negligence, while citing the fact that even despite the Beijing regime's blunders and disinformation, the incidence and impact of the coronavirus are clearly now declining in China.

Highlight China's Callousness and Deceit

Proper emphasis on this point will close the door that has

been hurled open to unlimited panic. It has been impossible to steady the country's nerves, and especially the shaky-legged, sweaty-palmed managers of the nation's and people's money, who flee like asphyxiated cockroaches whenever any threat appears that can't be measured precisely. The prudent course is to assume the worst and plan and act for it. But when the worst is indiscernible, the usual response is for the great money-managers to drink the Kool-Aid of outright panic, and flee to the front of the unsettled masses and lead them over the cliff.

This can be combated in only two ways: a plan of believable action based on the assurance that the country possesses the ability to deal with the problem—FDR's genius exhortation that "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself, nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance." As he said at his first inauguration on March 4, 1933, our "difficulties, thank God, concern only material things." That is not the case here, and no one knows exactly where this might end since it is distinguishable from previous pandemics. Where the danger could be infinite, the Roosevelt response is not a complete solution.

This is why, as China's official misconduct, ineptitude, callousness, and deceit must be highlighted, the demonstrably finite character of the coronavirus threat must also be emphasized. As a completely legitimate reference point to cure panic and focus on "flattening the curve," as the scientists say, we are doing what China did not do: take every appropriate action to minimize the human damage and shorten the life of the crisis.

Delicate Balances

And this is where the second paradox arises: the commendable scientists, who are senior in managing the official American response, seek the most radical measures to prevent the spread

of the coronavirus. This is natural. But the possibility of a shut-down on almost the entire population, which is already in effect in Italy, France, and Spain, and is creeping upward in the United States also, reduces the likelihood of severe attacks of an influenza that is often much nastier than any flu but is not life-threatening to more than a tiny fraction of healthy people beneath the age of 70.

This will shorten the duration of the medical crisis. But we saw in China that it also strangles the economy, which collapsed for at least two months—there were almost no sales and little production of durable goods in China during that time.

The remit of the scientists is to end the medical crisis, but the administration has the challenge of imposing total risk-avoidance measures on the susceptible elements of the population (the infirm and elderly), and urging those with minimal chance of serious, much less, mortal illness, to pursue their occupations as best they can on as risk-free a basis as they can.

These are delicate balances the administration will have to sort out. The results of the national voluntary mobilization the administration has led are already emerging. A preliminary vaccine was tested on Monday in Seattle, and the ability to test Americans—which had a very wobbly beginning, aggravated by Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar's promise of four million tests last week, the almost complete failure to occur he blamed, a bit unconvincingly, on a "less seamless" passage from production to application—seems to be coming in a week late.

Tests are not cures. They're only useful for quarantining, and a person who is virus-free today may be infected tomorrow. But the psychological impact of the testing failure and the reflection on the administration's credibility and competence were significant, but not irreversible.

I predict that the administration will thread this needle and that the coronavirus crisis will be seen to be receding before the end of May.

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