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POLITICAL POLARIZATION AND THE DISSEMINATION OF
MISINFORMATION: THE UNITED STATES PANDEMIC RESPONSE AS A
CAUTIONARY TALE

by

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of the Requirements for a Dual-Degree with Honors
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ABSTRACT

This thesis discusses the failings of the United States response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and how it has been shaped by the nation's intense political polarization and the widespread dissemination of misinformation. In this thesis, I critically examine the government's initial response to the pandemic, including its lack of preparedness and the ineffectiveness of its eventual policies. I also attempt to explain the influence of political polarization on the states, resulting in congressional gridlock, as well as wildly varying policies regarding lockdowns and mask mandates. I connect the increasing prevalence of misinformation today to the historically recent rise of postmodernism, a philosophy and cultural mindset which declares that there is no such thing as objective fact, as well as to former President Trump and the questionable reliability of social media. Ultimately, I conclude that the United States pandemic response should stand as a cautionary tale to any developed nation looking to develop effective policy regarding international disease.

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INTRODUCTION

“When you want to know how things really work,
study them when they’re coming apart.”

— William Gibson, *Zero History*

With every new age comes at least one new pandemic. The Spanish flu was the prolific plague of the early twentieth century, infecting more than one third of the global population and killing anywhere between 20 and 50 million people, a higher casualty rate than the First World War.¹ Since there was no vaccine at the time, the American public took non-pharmaceutical precautionary measures, such as self-isolation, quarantine, use of disinfectants, limitations on public gatherings, and wearing masks.² Some complained that masks were uncomfortable or ineffective, and that mask mandates violated their fundamental freedoms.³ Nevertheless, compliance with anti-flu policies was high, since citizens ultimately understood that public safety necessitated some degree of personal sacrifice.

More than a century has passed since the Spanish flu shook the world, and we have faced a legion of new pathogens in that time. SARS, MERS, HIV/AIDS, H1N1,

¹ Dave Roos, “Why the Second Wave of the 1918 Flu Pandemic Was So Deadly,” History, A&E Television Networks LLC, December 22, 2020, <https://www.history.com/news/spanish-flu-second-wave-resurgence>.

² “1918 Pandemic,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/1918-pandemic-h1n1.html>.

³ Becky Little, “When Mask-Wearing Rules in the 1918 Pandemic Faced Resistance,” History, A&E Television Networks LLC, May 6, 2020, <https://www.history.com/news/1918-spanish-flu-mask-wearing-resistance>.

Zika, Ebola—When the novel coronavirus appeared in 2019 in Wuhan, China, it was nothing new in the context of recent world history, just another pathogen in a long list. And yet, many nations were caught off guard when it emerged, left completely undefended from this most recent biological threat. One such nation was the United States, supposedly one of the world’s powerhouses. Led by President Donald Trump, the United States suffered a long series of missteps that resulted in the rapid, unmitigated spread of COVID-19 across the country. More than 550,000 are dead as of this writing in April 2021, with thousands more infected, not to mention a dismal recovery rate and the irreversible bodily damage of many of those who survive. Clearly, the United States pandemic response has been generally unsuccessful.

Even the nation’s initial responses were futile. It began with the Trump administration, which failed to prepare in any shape or form when warned about the emergence of a new coronavirus in late 2019 and early 2020. Additionally, the administration dissolved a special pandemic unit under the National Security Council (NSC) established by former President Barack Obama, leaving the government without an office specifically delegated for exactly this sort of crisis. Another crucial aspect of any early pandemic response is the production and distribution of test kits, but when this finally happened in the United States, the vast majority of test kits were ineffective, producing inaccurate or inconclusive results and allowing the coronavirus to spread unchecked. The president’s pandemic task force was equally ineffective, with few scientists on the team and without any comprehensive plan to follow, a pathetic attempt at replacing the Obama NSC pandemic unit.

The detrimental effects of these early mistakes were compounded by the unique politicization of the novel coronavirus in the United States, a result of our nation's extreme political polarization, which has only grown more severe in recent years. Rather than relying on the expertise of medical professionals and uniting against an inexorable biological threat, the American public fragmented along party lines. Simply believing in the virus has become a political act; while Democrats recognize COVID-19 as a scientific issue, many Republicans treat it as an ideological affront. They view lockdowns and masks not as attempts to protect the public, but as symbols of governmental interference in personal freedom.

In addition to the politicization of the virus itself, the deep political divide in our nation has enabled a new type of misinformation: a complete distortion of reality, a grotesque evolution of postmodernism where American citizens no longer share the same baseline of facts, making it almost impossible to accurately inform the public, since some outright deny irrefutable truths. Reality is now more about subjective experience than objective observation. People emulate their party leaders, as they are wont to do, feeding into partisan narratives and ignoring the empirical facts of the pandemic. Postmodernism has mutated intellectual freedom into something unrecognizable, with Americans denying scientific fact in favor of fabricating their own sectarian realities about a deadly pathogen.

The increased dissemination of misinformation has only worsened this intellectual fragmentation. President Trump himself was a frequent opponent of truth throughout his time in office, making thousands of false or misleading claims,⁴ but most notably during

⁴ Glenn Kessler, Salvador Rizzo, and Meg Kelly, "Trump's False or Misleading Claims Total 30,573 Over 4 Years," *The Washington Post* (2021, January 24), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/24/trumps-false-or-misleading-claims-total-30573-over-four-years/>.

the pandemic response, when he refused to wear a mask and promoted untested pharmaceuticals as cures for COVID-19. Alongside the president's support of alternative facts, social media enabled the rapid-fire spread of unverifiable information about the coronavirus, including the refutation of scientifically proven precautionary measures, such as wearing masks and social distancing. In addition to the negative impacts of the president and social media on information surrounding the pandemic, the decades-long anti-vaccination movement and their misinformed foundations have resulted in high rates of hesitancy regarding COVID-19 vaccinations. Together, these factors led to the mass miseducation of the American public, reducing the large-scale effectiveness of these precautionary measures by encouraging noncompliance.

Every step of the way, the American pandemic response was mismanaged. The political division and federal incompetence that plague the United States created an environment inhospitable to reason and cooperation, resulting in a lethally inadequate governmental response. As made painfully clear by the toothless response to COVID-19, political polarization and the dissemination of misinformation are two formidable and prevalent threats to American democracy. Politicians are incapable of reaching across the aisle and working together to implement effective policy solutions. Citizens are incapable of agreeing on basic facts and uniting against a shared biological threat.

In this thesis, I will analyze the ineffective initial response of the United States government, caused by the overall failure to prepare for pandemic, the establishment of an underqualified task force, and the production of faulty test kits. Then I will dissect the unique politicization that coronavirus has seen in the United States, how it is a result of centuries of mounting political polarization, how it has resulted in congressional gridlock

that endangers the nation, and how it has resulted in lockdowns and mask mandates that differ wildly in severity from state to state. I will also address the increasing prevalence of disinformation and its complex relationships with postmodernism, President Trump, social media, and perceptions surrounding vaccinations.

It bears mentioning that the United States has dealt with the pandemic better than many other countries, such as Brazil, India, and Mexico, which have thousands of new cases every day and staggering mortality rates, or Hungary and Italy, which have some of the highest death rates per capita.⁵ Additionally, as a developed, wealthy nation, the United States was able to roll out test kits and vaccinations relatively quickly, although both test kits and vaccinations for COVID-19 experienced issues with effectiveness and availability. While there are aspects of the United States pandemic response that undeniably deserve praise, I choose to focus on the negatives here because, regardless of the minor successes throughout this crisis, there is ample room for improvement. We have the highest death toll in the world, an unfortunate and shocking development, considering our medical technology and sizable economy, which should have facilitated the procurement and distribution of equipment necessary for COVID-19.

Why did the United States government respond so slowly to the pandemic? Why was the response so ineffective overall? It is because this nation's political division and refusal to control misinformation crippled us during a crisis that demanded national unity. That is why it is essential that we analyze how the government failed to protect American citizens, so that we can learn from our mistakes and instead implement effective policies moving forward. We must mitigate the partisan tensions that plague both our leaders and

⁵ "Mortality Analyses," Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, John Hopkins University & Medicine, 2021, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/mortality>.

our citizens. We must slow the spread of misinformation and teach the public how to distinguish lies from truths on social media. We must craft appropriate legislation and be prepared for the arrival of the next inevitable storm if we want to prevent the deaths of more American citizens, if we want to help other nations through this ongoing crisis, and especially if we want to reinstate the United States as a global role model. While I cannot possibly hope to propose a panacean solution to the pandemic and its innumerable social and economic detriments, my mission here is to shed light on the systemic dysfunctionality of the United States pandemic response as a result of this nation's extreme political polarization and tolerance of misinformation in order to propose solutions for problems encountered during this crisis and make suggestions for more effective policies in the future.

CHAPTER I

INITIAL RESPONSE

Before analyzing the impacts of political polarization and the dissemination of misinformation, we must first understand how the early failings of the government handicapped the United States pandemic response from its very outset.

The novel coronavirus is scientifically known as severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), which can lead to the disease now known as COVID-19. It is highly transmittable, spreading easily from person to person through aerosols, like coughs and sneezes. It can also be spread through semen and feces, but transmission through intercourse appears to be extremely unlikely. Most people afflicted with COVID-19 present only mild symptoms, but the disease can result in severe illness, and even death, as evidenced by the mounting global death toll. Symptoms can be neurological, including loss of smell, inability to taste, and dizziness; respiratory, typically manifesting as a non-productive cough; as well as gastrointestinal, including loss of appetite, nausea, and diarrhea.⁶ Needless to say, COVID-19 is not a disease to be taken lightly.

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in the United States was a 35-year-old man who tested positive on January 20, 2020, in Seattle, Washington. He had returned to the United States on January 15 after traveling to visit family in Wuhan, China, where we

⁶ “COVID-19 Basics,” Harvard Health Publishing, Harvard Medical School, April 14, 2021, <https://www.health.harvard.edu/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-basics>.

now know the virus originated.⁷ He exhibited a cough, fever, nausea, and vomiting, and he eventually developed pneumonia in the hospital due to the weakened state of his immune system. He was not hospitalized until several days after his return to the United States, however, leaving ample time for him to come into contact with dozens of people before he was quarantined and diagnosed. The next COVID-19 case in Washington state was not reported until the end of February, but pandemic models indicate that thousands of cases existed and went undetected in Seattle, as well as in Chicago, San Francisco, New York, and other densely populated areas of the country.⁸

The government did not formally address the existence of the pandemic until several days after the diagnosis of “Patient Zero.” President Trump initially refused to acknowledge the disease’s severity. The pandemic continued to spread, but most Americans were blissfully unaware of its existence, or they grudgingly swallowed Trump’s reassurances and chose to live life normally. The novel coronavirus was an invisible, omnipresent threat, temporarily in the periphery for those not living in densely populated cities. By the time the government was willing to take the threat seriously—or, at least, attempt seriousness, forming an impotent pandemic task force and producing flawed test kits, as I will soon explain—it was too late, with thousands of American citizens sick and dying, and with unemployment rates at their highest since the economic devastation of the Great Depression.⁹

⁷ Michelle L. Holshue, MPH, et al., “First Case of 2019 Novel Coronavirus in the United States,” *The New England Journal of Medicine* 383, no. 10 (2020, March 5), <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMoa2001191>.

⁸ *Totally Under Control*, directed by Alex Gimbley (2020; New York, NY: NEON), Hulu.

⁹ Scott Horsley, “One For The History Books: 14.7% Unemployment, 20.5 Million Jobs Wiped Away,” NPR, May 8, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/05/08/852430930/one-for-the-history-books-14-7-unemployment-20-5-million-jobs-wiped-away>.

The nation's initial response was a catastrophe for several reasons, but here I focus on the three factors that I consider the most impactful. First, the Trump administration failed to prepare adequately for an impending pandemic, dissolving prudent safety nets put in place by the Obama administration. The United States is one of the most developed nations in the world; it is inarguable that we should have had some sort of pandemic precautions in place. Second, President Trump's task force was a continuation of this ineptitude, with few credible experts on the team, as well as frequent arguing among its members. As the pandemic took hold of the nation, we needed strong and competent leadership to guide us through this crisis, but Trump's lackey task force was just the opposite. And third, when the government eventually began producing test kits for COVID-19, almost all of them were ineffective, which allowed the coronavirus to continue spreading, untraced. Together, these early missteps culminated in an impotent initial response, which precipitated the ultimate failure of the United States government to curb the disease's spread.

Failure to Prepare

As a result of its encounters with H1N1, Zika, and Ebola over the course of just eight years, the Obama administration recognized the need for a strong and well-prepared governmental response to dangerous diseases. That is why President Obama formed a unit within the National Security Council (NSC), named the Global Health Security and Biodefense Unit, specifically dedicated to the development of a response in anticipation of the next pandemic. The administration also published a comprehensive guidebook in

2016, the Playbook for Early Response to High-Consequence Emerging Infectious Disease Threats and Biological Incidents, more commonly referred to as “the playbook,” with an outlined plan and a list of epidemiological experts to contact in case of an emergency.

However, when the White House changed hands in early 2017, the Trump administration dismissed the Obama playbook, and instead chose to create its own.¹⁰ Additionally, Obama’s NSC pandemic unit was dissolved by National Security Advisor John Bolton in 2018. “When President Trump took office in 2017, the White House’s National Security Council Directorate for Global Health Security and Biodefense survived the transition intact,” wrote Beth Cameron, former Senior Director for Global Health Security and Biodefense in the NSC. “Its mission was the same as when I was asked to lead the office, established after the Ebola epidemic of 2014: to do everything possible within the vast powers and resources of the U.S. government to prepare for the next disease outbreak and prevent it from becoming an epidemic or pandemic. One year later, I was mystified when the White House dissolved the office, leaving the country less prepared for pandemics like COVID-19.”¹¹ The Trump administration’s goal was to reduce the overall size of the NSC, which saw considerable expansion under President Obama, and streamline the agency’s work. The intentions behind this decision were good—to reduce federal redundancy, a major flaw of the American governmental system

¹⁰ Dan Diamond and Nahal Toosi, “Trump Team Failed to Follow NSC’s Pandemic Playbook,” Politico, Politico LLC, March 25, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/03/25/trump-coronavirus-national-security-council-149285>.

¹¹ Beth Cameron, “I Ran the White House Pandemic Office. Trump Closed It,” *The Washington Post* (2020, March 13), https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/nsc-pandemic-office-trump-closed/2020/03/13/a70de09c-6491-11ea-acc8-80c22bbee96f_story.html.

that I address later in this thesis—but with the onset of the pandemic, the lack of an adequate team to handle the medical crisis became painfully clear.

“It would be nice if the office was still there,” Dr. Anthony Fauci lamented to Congress in March of 2020 as the nation’s coronavirus rates were skyrocketing.¹² Numerous experts, including Cameron and Fauci, were baffled by the Trump administration’s decision to dissolve the Global Health Security and Biodefense Unit. President Obama had established the framework for an effective pandemic response, with an authoritative body to develop and execute policies, as well as a step-by-step list of priorities for the next administration to follow. President Trump chose to disregard all of the pandemic preparation that was completed before his ascension to power, most likely in an attempt to forge his own path and establish his own legacy as a national leader.

In addition to its dismissal of Obama-era pandemic preparation, the Trump administration ignored glaring warning signs that the United States was not at all prepared for the next epidemiological threat. In the fall of 2019, the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response (ASPR) ran an exercise called “Crimson Contagion,” which aimed to test the effectiveness of states’ responses to a pathogen from—prophetically enough—China. The results were not promising. Among the twelve states that participated in the simulation, every single one discovered insufficient funding, supply chain problems, confusion about interagency roles, and a lack of clear leadership. Rather than reacting accordingly to the negative feedback, ASPR cut funding for medical counter-measure programs and slowed the production of N95

¹² Deb Riechmann, “Trump Disbanded NSC Pandemic Unit That Experts Had Praised,” ABC News, ABC News Internet Ventures, March 14, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/wireStory/trump-disbanded-nsc-pandemic-unit-experts-praised-69594177>.

masks.¹³ The American government knew, well before the arrival of COVID-19, that our nation was unprepared for the next biological threat, and it did little to rectify this. We were doomed from the very start due to the American government's complete lack of foresight regarding global disease.

The United States even received advance notice about the emergence of COVID-19. An intelligence report by the Pentagon's National Center for Medical Intelligence (NCMI) in November 2019 warned of a contagion spreading through the Wuhan region of China. Through December, the NCMI continued to brief major American decision-makers, including members of the National Security Council and the Trump administration, on the potential dangers that an unknown disease would pose to national security.¹⁴ Obviously, the NCMI's warnings went unheeded.

Public health officials worldwide were shocked and appalled by the American government's slow response to the pandemic. According to the Obama administration's playbook, the government should have been leading the "coordination of workforce protection activities including... [personal protective equipment (PPE)] determination, procurement and deployment" by late January.¹⁵ But these developments did not occur until months later, and by then, it was too late.

¹³ *Totally Under Control*, directed by Alex Gimbley (2020; New York, NY: NEON), Hulu.

¹⁴ Josh Margolin and James Gordon Meek, "Intelligence Report Warned of Coronavirus Crisis as Early as November: Sources," ABC News, ABC News Internet Ventures, April 8, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/intelligence-report-warned-coronavirus-crisis-early-november-sources/story?id=70031273>.

¹⁵ Dan Diamond and Nahal Toosi, "Trump Team Failed to Follow NSC's Pandemic Playbook," Politico, Politico LLC, March 25, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/03/25/trump-coronavirus-national-security-council-149285>.

Trump's Task Force

The White House Coronavirus Task Force, also known as the President's Coronavirus Task Force, was a team assembled within the Department of State to address the growing concern of the pandemic, an ambitious attempt to replace the Global Health Security and Biodefense Unit created by President Obama. Task force members included Vice President Mike Pence, Global AIDS Coordinator Deborah Birx, Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar, CDC Director Dr. Robert Redfield, and Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) at the National Institutes of Health, who has become the face of the government's pandemic response, even now that Trump is no longer in power. In addition to these big-name members, there were several secretaries and advisors from various departments within the Trump administration.¹⁶

When President Trump assembled his pandemic task force on January 29, 2020, "experience was not nearly as important as loyalty."¹⁷ He appointed officials who were well known Trump loyalists, rather than creating a solid team of scientific experts who would rely on empiricism and rise above political division. For instance, the president included Matthew Pottinger, Rob Blair, Joseph Grogan, and Christopher Liddell, all of whom, amongst other responsibilities in the administration, served as Trump's personal assistants.¹⁸ Pottinger is a former journalist and officer in the Marine Corps; Blair is a

¹⁶ Stephanie Grisham, "Statement from the Press Secretary Regarding the President's Coronavirus Task Force," The White House, January 29, 2020. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/statement-press-secretary-regarding-presidents-coronavirus-task-force/>

¹⁷ *Totally Under Control*, directed by Alex Gimbley (2020; New York, NY: NEON), Hulu.

¹⁸ Stephanie Grisham, "Statement from the Press Secretary Regarding the President's Coronavirus Task Force," The White House, January 29, 2020. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/statement-press-secretary-regarding-presidents-coronavirus-task-force/>

long-time politician with expertise in diplomacy; and Liddell is a business magnate who has served as the Chief Financial Officer of Microsoft and the Vice Chairman of General Motors, along with several other ventures. None of them had any sort of scientific experience, let alone knowledge that might help in the development of a pandemic response. Dr. Fauci was one of just a few scientists on the team. Another was Dr. Redfield, a virologist who promoted abstinence as the solution to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and who has twice been investigated for scientific misconduct,¹⁹ further demonstrating Trump's prioritization of loyalty over credibility. It is disturbing to think that Dr. Fauci was the lone trustworthy expert in the field of epidemiology on Trump's White House Coronavirus Task Force.

Similar to Redfield in his questionable credibility, a minor but notable source of dissent on the coronavirus task force was Dr. Scott Atlas, a radiologist who was featured as a commentator on Fox News and caught the attention of President Trump. Atlas disagreed with expanding testing, he disputed the effectiveness of masks and social distancing, and he frequently argued with other doctors on the team, including Fauci, Redfield, and even Trump's coronavirus response coordinator, Deborah Birx, who was in charge of the entire operation.²⁰ He also believed that allowing the coronavirus to spread would eventually lead to global "herd immunity," a theory repeatedly debunked by health experts. "[Atlas] is an MRI guy... He has no expertise in any of this stuff," said Dr. Ashish Jha, who serves as dean of the Brown University School of Public Health. "He's

¹⁹ Alexandra Sifferlin, "Controversial HIV Researcher Robert Redfield Is CDC Director," *TIME* (2018, March 22), <https://time.com/5211143/robert-redfield-cdc-director/>.

²⁰ Yasmeen Abutaleb et al., "Trump's Den of Dissent: Inside the White House Task Force as Coronavirus Surges" *The Washington Post* (2020, October 19), https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trumps-den-of-dissent-inside-the-white-house-task-force-as-coronavirus-surges/2020/10/19/7ff8ee6a-0a6e-11eb-859b-f9c27abe638d_story.html.

been bringing out arguments that have been refuted week after week, month after month, since the beginning of this outbreak.”²¹ Not only did Atlas sow division within his own team, but he also helped to deepen preexisting divisions in the United States by supporting and disseminating inaccurate information about the pandemic.

The majority of the remaining members on the White House Coronavirus Task Force were other officials from within the administration, or simply lawyers or businessmen who had professional dealings with Trump prior to his election, during his heyday as a multimillionaire businessman. These members had no experience with science, let alone with developing policy germane to a deadly pandemic. In the midst of a scientific emergency that demanded the attention of medical experts, like credible virologists and epidemiologists, Trump preferred to appoint yes-men, discredited researchers, conservative news commentators, and fellow business tycoons.

In general, the White House Coronavirus Task Force under President Trump was more focused on reopening the country and maintaining economic stability than preventing the spread of COVID-19, a respectable but myopic goal. Economic experts predict that the pandemic could cost the United States economy as much as \$4.8 trillion in gross domestic product over the next two years,²² so it is completely understandable why Trump would make this a priority. But many have critiqued the administration’s decision to pass over the primary concern of public health in favor of finances. “Mike Pence and the task force have done a great job,” said Trump in May of 2020,

²¹ Vanessa Romo, “Dr. Scott Atlas, Special Coronavirus Adviser to Trump, Resigns,” NPR, November 30, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/11/30/940376041/dr-scott-atlas-special-coronavirus-adviser-to-trump-resigns>.

²² Emily Gersema, “Business Closures and Partial Reopenings Due to COVID-19 Could Cost the U.S. Trillions,” USC News, University of Southern California, November 30, 2020, <https://news.usc.edu/178979/business-closures-covid-19-pandemic-united-states-gdp-losses/>.

acknowledging the task force's initial attempts to control the pandemic. "But we're now looking at a little bit of a different form, and that form is safety and opening." Some critics have claimed that this was a calculated political move, since Trump was up for presidential reelection and knew that appealing to the economic priorities of his Republican base would ensure more votes.²³ No matter the motivations behind this refocusing, it was ultimately an unfortunate decision, since the task force was ill equipped to formulate a pandemic response in which the primary concern was health.

Ineffective Test Kits

The task force was not the only aspect of the United States pandemic response that showed a prioritization of economics over public health. Based on the poor performance of many states in the Crimson Contagion experiment, Dr. Rick Bright, Director of the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority (BARDA) from 2016 to 2020, urged the CDC to respond, positing that the United States would need approximately \$10 billion in funding for the next pandemic to manufacture test kits and, eventually, a vaccine. His prudent requests fell on deaf ears; then Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar was offended that Bright had asked for such a substantial sum and dismissed his concerns. As a result, our nation was left completely unprotected, despite a clear demonstration of myriad weaknesses in Crimson Contagion.

On February 4, 2020, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued the Emergency Use Authorization (EUA) so that the CDC could begin producing and

²³ Anthony Zurcher, "Coronavirus: Trump Says Virus Task Force to Focus on Reopening Economy," BBC, May 6, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52563577>.

distributing COVID-19 test kits without having to trudge through the traditional red tape. Test kits were available the next day, with each kit capable of testing 800 patients within 4-5 hours. At first, it seemed like a miracle; tests would be accessible to the American public within a matter of weeks. But by February 9, it was clear that something was wrong. The CDC test kits used three assays: N1 and N2, which looked for the COVID-19 strain specifically, and N3, which looked for any type of coronavirus. Due to a problem with the N3 assay, public health labs were receiving inconclusive results from 90 percent of the test kits.²⁴ Recently it was revealed that the CDC knew about the faulty nature of these test kits; the final quality control assessment showed that they could fail at least 33 percent of the time.²⁵ And yet, the agency pushed for production and distribution, setting public health labs up for failure. The CDC eventually ordered labs to disregard the N3 assay and move forward with the tests' previously unusable results anyway.

In addition to being ineffective, the initial test kits were exceedingly difficult to procure. Even before the arrival of COVID-19, American public health labs were egregiously underfunded and underprepared. Data from the American Society for Microbiology and the Association of Supply Chain Management show that 35% of labs have a shortage of test kits for sexually transmitted infections (STIs); 47.5% of labs have a shortage of test kits for common bacteria, like pneumonia, bronchitis, and urinary tract infections (UTIs); 29% of labs have a shortage of microbacterial tests, like those used to identify tuberculosis (TB); and 19.4% of labs have a shortage of tests for common fungi,

²⁴ *Totally Under Control*, directed by Alex Gimbley (2020; New York, NY: NEON), Hulu.

²⁵ Dina Temple-Raston, "CDC Report: Officials Knew Coronavirus Test Was Flawed But Released It Anyway," NPR, November 6, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/11/06/929078678/cdc-report-officials-knew-coronavirus-test-was-flawed-but-released-it-anyway>.

like skin and lung infections.²⁶ It is no wonder then that the United States was woefully unprepared to create and distribute test kits when an entirely new, unknown pathogen emerged, considering the fact that we have a severe lack of test kits for diseases that are already well known. Because COVID-19 test kits were in such short supply during the beginning of the pandemic, testing was restricted to those who were dangerously close to respiratory failure, leaving essential workers without PPE at risk.

Coronavirus tests are now readily available across the country, and there are even several different types of test kits. But the government's failure to increase pandemic funding and manufacture functional test kits during the early stages of the pandemic led to the invisible, unmeasured spread of the disease, which has resulted in the infections of millions and the deaths of hundreds of thousands.

²⁶ "Supply Shortages Impacting COVID-19 and Non-COVID Testing," American Association for Microbiology, January 19, 2021. <https://asm.org/Articles/2020/September/Clinical-Microbiology-Supply-Shortage-Collecti-1>.

CHAPTER II

POLITICIZATION OF THE VIRUS

Perhaps the strangest development amidst the American pandemic response is the politicization of the virus. Rather than presenting a rational, unified front against the novel coronavirus, the United States “descended into division and chaos” when the disease breached its borders,²⁷ fracturing along party lines, demonstrating the increasing severity of our political polarization. Congressional gridlock, which has always been a reality of the American two-party system, prevented the passing of crucial legislation that would support American businesses and prevent economic collapse. Another unfortunate result of polarization in Congress was the lack of uniformity in precautionary measures. These varied wildly from state to state, with many conservative states prematurely lifting lockdowns and mask mandates, or refusing to implement them entirely. The creation of a vaccination for the virus also truded up preexisting tensions, based less on partisan disparity and more on debunked myths about vaccinations in general. As a result of the extreme political polarization and medical misinformation present in the United States long before COVID-19, partisan pride became far more important than science during the pandemic response. From the start, the pandemic was not only a biological enemy, but also an ideological one.

²⁷ *Totally Under Control*, directed by Alex Gimbley (2020; New York, NY: NEON), Hulu.

Political Polarization

Before delving into the content of this section, it is necessary to define a few keywords. In general, the concept of *polarization* refers to the division between two contrasting groups or belief systems. As James E. Campbell puts it, polarization is “the condition of substantial and intense conflict over political perspectives arrayed along a single dimension—generally along ideological lines.”²⁸ *Political polarization* refers specifically to this divisive phenomenon’s occurrence in the political sphere, resulting in two competing ideologies that have become more and more extreme over time. In the United States, political polarization most often occurs between Democrats and Republicans. *Partisanship* is loyalty to a particular faction or cause. In this context, partisanship refers to the tendency of American citizens to ally themselves with a certain political party. Political polarization and partisanship are two distinct but closely related terms that are crucial to understanding the current state of American politics.

Partisanship has plagued the United States since its very beginning. There have been several variations of the two-party system over the course of our nation’s history—first the Federalists and Anti-Federalists, then the Whigs and the Democrats, the Republicans and the new Democrats, and so on for the rest of our country’s foreseeable existence—always positioning political groups so that they are diametrically opposed, almost incapable of compromise. This is why, in his 1796 Farewell Address, President

²⁸ James E. Campbell, *Polarized: Making Sense of a Divided America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 16.

George Washington so prudently cautioned all Americans about “the continual mischiefs of the spirit of party,” which destroys national unity in favor of ideological faction.²⁹

Some degree of polarization is an inevitable reality of politics. But the political polarization particular to the United States has worsened in recent decades. Beginning in the 1960s, the Republican Party grew increasingly white, Christian, and wealthy, while the Democratic Party grew more diverse and increasingly represented the working class. As a result of these demographic developments, by the 1970s and 1980s, centrism was becoming a thing of the past; most of the American electorate was already polarized, with nearly 60 percent of Americans identifying strongly as either Democrat or Republican.³⁰ Since then, the United States has only continued to fracture along partisan lines, and divisions have actually grown deeper, with the right becoming more conservative and the left becoming more liberal. In fact, in a study of American values, Pew Research Center reported that “values and basic beliefs are more polarized along partisan lines than at any point in the past 25 years.”³¹ As the parties move farther apart socially and ideologically, it becomes more difficult to reach a political consensus across partisan lines. The mood has shifted—Politics is not about representing the people and implementing policy in their interests. Rather, it is about victory, about defeating the other party and establishing partisan dominance in the government.³² As a result of this competitive, acrimonious atmosphere, now more than ever, members of both parties negatively stereotype members

²⁹ “Washington’s Farewell Address,” United States Senate, 2021, https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/minute/Washingtons_Farewell_Address.htm.

³⁰ James E. Campbell, *Polarized: Making Sense of a Divided America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 65.

³¹ Campbell, 29.

³² Lilliana Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 11.

of the opposing party,³³ which significantly reduces the likelihood of bipartisan cooperation and causes legislative activity to stagnate due to gridlock. This is an unfortunate yet expected evolution in the two-party system, one that Washington warned us about more than two centuries ago, but we refused to listen.

Well before the global pandemic, former Secretary of Defense James Mattis warned that attacks across the aisle are “fueled by emotion and a mutual disdain that jeopardizes our future, instead of rediscovering our common ground and finding solutions.”³⁴ His prophecy was fulfilled with the arrival of the novel coronavirus, which crept through the cracks caused by partisan fragmentation. This deep national division has been detrimental to our pandemic response. “There’s red states and blue states that are almost hostile to each other in some respects because of political differences... I think that’s the worst possible ingredient to be able to address an outbreak of an infection that even under the best of circumstances would be a formidable challenge,” Dr. Fauci said in February of this year.³⁵ He is absolutely right—Developing an adequate pandemic response would have been nearly impossible even with the stability of national unity and bipartisan cooperation. With the added stressor of political polarization, the chance of success from the United States pandemic response was lowered significantly, and it was already abysmal to begin with.

³³ Lilliana Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 3.

³⁴ James Mattis and Bing West, *Call Sign Chaos: Learning to Lead* (New York, NY: Random House, 2019), 248.

³⁵ Mayank Aggarwal, “Fauci Says Trump Failures and Political Divide Over Masks Led to 500,000 Covid Deaths Milestone,” *The Independent* (2021, February 23), <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-fauci-covid-deaths-masks-b1805931.html>.

American democracy has devolved into “a grossly dysfunctional political system that runs on partisan warfare.”³⁶ The legislature is nothing but a warzone where decades of attrition is the primary method of attack. The ineffectual pandemic response is the perfect example of how political polarization is a considerable threat to the functioning of the United States government and to democracy itself. During a time where cooperation was essential in the development of a timely response, where bipartisanship could have prevented the deaths of thousands, political sectarianism stood firmly in the way. “If we don’t intervene as a nation, as citizens, to begin to correct this identity-based polarization, then the erosion of democratic norms will go even further. And that’s the threat of potential social unrest,” said Tim Phillips, head of Beyond Conflict, a nonprofit in Boston that tracks political polarization.³⁷ There is far more at stake here than ideology; polarization threatens public health, political stability, and national security, especially in the context of the pandemic.

Congressional Gridlock

The perpetual gridlock we see in Congress is the perfect example of the dire threat that polarization poses to the functioning of American democracy. In the current age of extreme political polarization, our two-party system makes it nearly impossible to reach an ideological consensus, let alone to execute a prompt legislative response. As discussed

³⁶ Michiko Kakutani, *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump* (New York, NY: Tim Duggan Books, 2018), 151.

³⁷ Hannah Allam, “‘Us Vs. Them’ In A Pandemic: Researchers Warn Divisions Could Get Dangerous,” NPR, May 15, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/05/15/857165715/us-vs-them-in-a-pandemic-researchers-warn-divisions-could-get-dangerous>.

previously, Democrats and Republicans in Congress are more interested in vying for political dominance than crafting effective legislation.

With this needlessly competitive attitude amongst congressmen, “Victory, then, becomes more important than policy outcomes.”³⁸ Rather than putting aside partisan differences for the sake of our shared nation, pointless bickering among congressmen delayed crucial economic relief plans. The Senate only approved such a plan, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, which established the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), on March 27, more than two months after the onset of the pandemic. And this program was hardly effective; the PPP, worth \$349 billion, ran out of funding in just a few weeks.³⁹ As a result, nearly 50 million Americans had applied for unemployment benefits by July,⁴⁰ and by October, more than 97,000 businesses had permanently closed.⁴¹ The nation desperately needed governmental support, needed Congress to act swiftly and decisively, but partisan politics undermined the efficacy of our legislature, to the detriment of millions of American livelihoods.

Lockdowns and Mask Mandates

Another way in which the political polarization in Congress affected the United States pandemic response was through the extreme variation in precautionary measures

³⁸ Lilliana Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 23.

³⁹ Darla Mercado, CFP, “The Paycheck Protection Program Has Run Out of Money – Meet the Entrepreneurs Left in the Cold,” CNBC News, CNBC LLC, April 17, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/04/17/this-government-loan-program-has-run-dry-these-people-lost-out.html>.

⁴⁰ Jack Kelly, “Nearly 50 Million Americans Have Filed For Unemployment — Here’s What’s Really Happening,” *Forbes* (2020, July 9), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackkelly/2020/07/09/nearly-50-million-americans-have-filed-for-unemployment-heres-whats-really-happening/?sh=748a281127d3>.

⁴¹ Anne Sraders and Lance Lambert, “Nearly 100,000 Establishments That Temporarily Shut Down Due to the Pandemic Are Now Out of Business,” *Fortune* (2020, September 28), <https://fortune.com/2020/09/28/covid-buisnesses-shut-down-closed/>.

from state to state. The implementation and severity of lockdowns and mask mandates depended on the region, with some states enforcing full lockdowns and restricting all travel, while others required brief periods of self-quarantine, or had no requirements at all. This high variability undermined any possibility of a cohesive national response.

The first state to close its borders was California on March 15, nearly two months after the pandemic began,⁴² demonstrating the incredibly slow response of both state and national governments. Wisconsin initially ordered its citizens to stay at home, but the state's Supreme Court declared this mandate unconstitutional within just a few weeks.⁴³ Arkansas, Iowa, Nebraska, and North Dakota never issued any sort of order to stay home. Numerous states and outlying American territories, including California, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, Louisiana, Oregon, Washington, West Virginia, Michigan, Indiana, Colorado, Minnesota, North Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee, Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, Iowa, South Dakota, and Utah, as well as Guam and the Virgin Islands, did not impose any restrictions on incoming travelers, as opposed to other states that required at least two weeks of self-quarantine. This wide variety of state lockdowns and travel restrictions—or lack thereof, in some instances—made a uniform national response impossible, which significantly reduced the overall effectiveness of these precautionary tactics. Data from Columbia University show that more than 54,000 deaths,

⁴² Dakin Andone, Christina Maxouris, Steve Almasy, and Jen Christensen, “The Number of US Coronavirus Cases Has Topped 13,000 As Testing Becomes More Available,” CNN, Cable News Network, March 20, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/19/health/us-coronavirus-case-updates-thursday/index.html>.

⁴³ Shaquille Brewster and Dareh Gregorian, “Wisconsin Supreme Court Strikes Down State’s Stay-at-Home Order,” NBC News, NBC Universal, May 13, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/wisconsin-supreme-court-strikes-down-state-s-stay-home-order-n1206586>.

nearly one tenth of the current death toll, could have been avoided if only state lockdowns had been implemented a few weeks earlier, in the beginning of March.⁴⁴

Masking was the second prong of the government’s attempted precautionary measures, but as was the case with state lockdowns, its implementation was met with mixed reactions. President Trump himself refused to don a mask when the CDC first recommended it to the public, a tacit declaration of antiestablishment sentiment. After that, the mask became a partisan symbol. Supporters of Trump refused to wear masks as a matter of principle, arguing that it restricted individual liberty, citing the president as inspiration. Ignoring expert advice became an act of patriotism under the Trump administration. “The mask seems to represent which side of the political aisle that you’re on,” said Dr. Taison Bell, director of the University of Virginia’s COVID-19 ICU. “And somehow, showing up without a mask on in close proximity with others says that I support the president. That is dangerous. People have died because of the misinformation.”⁴⁵

On March 2, 2021, in an act that fits with the larger Republican trend of flouting pandemic recommendations, Governors Greg Abbott of Texas and Tate Reeves of Mississippi announced that they would be lifting their states’ mask mandates, despite their stagnant COVID-19 rates. Health professionals from each state strongly cautioned against this. “I think the governor’s decision was premature,” said Dr. James McDeavitt of the Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. “If the goal is to reach herd immunity, we

⁴⁴ Isabel Togoh, “At Least 54,000 U.S. Deaths Could Have Been Avoided If Lockdown Had Come Two Weeks Earlier,” *Forbes* (2020, May 21), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/isabeltogoh/2020/05/21/at-least-54000-us-deaths-could-have-been-avoided-if-lockdown-came-two-weeks-earlier/?sh=41d14bdd42f1>.

⁴⁵ *Totally Under Control*, directed by Alex Gimbley (2020; New York, NY: NEON), Hulu.

are not there yet. Masking and distancing are an important bridge to herd immunity. We're still seeing 1,000 new cases per day in Houston. We're getting some 200 new COVID-19 patients per day in the hospitals. Yes, the numbers are down considerably, but that's still pretty high."⁴⁶ Including Texas and Mississippi, 14 states now have no mask restrictions at all.⁴⁷ Some of these states have fared better than others, despite their lack of masking requirements, but if nothing else, this indicates just how disjointed the national pandemic response was and how its effectiveness was highly regional.

The same day that Texas and Mississippi declared their intentions to abandon mask mandates, President Biden announced that the United States would have enough COVID-19 vaccines for every adult by the end of May. But this does not mean we should abandon prudent precautionary measures. "This fight is far from over," President Biden said. "Though we celebrate the news... I urge all Americans, please keep washing your hands, stay socially distanced, *wear masks*."⁴⁸

With more and more Americans getting vaccinated against COVID-19, masking is decreasing in importance. The CDC recently loosened its guidelines: those who are fully vaccinated no longer need to wear masks outdoors while exercising alone.⁴⁹ But masks are still required in crowded areas, even for vaccinated individuals, since it is very

⁴⁶ Corky Siemaszko, "Texas doctors say Gov. Greg Abbott's decision to scrap mask mandate could result in another Covid-19 surge," NBC News, NBC Universal, March 3, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/texas-doctors-say-gov-greg-abbott-s-decision-scrap-mask-n1259513>.

⁴⁷ "See Coronavirus Restrictions and Mask Mandates for All 50 States," *The New York Times* (2021, March 12), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/states-reopen-map-coronavirus.html>.

⁴⁸ Tim Fitzsimons, "Texas and Mississippi to lift mask mandates and roll back Covid restrictions," NBC News, NBC Universal, March 2, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/gov-greg-abbott-lift-texas-mask-mandate-open-state-100-n1259329>.

⁴⁹ Sharon LaFraniere, "Vaccinated 12- to 15-Year-Olds at U.S. Camps Will Be Able to Remove Masks Outdoors, the C.D.C. Director Says," *The New York Times* (2021, May 5), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/05/us/politics/cdc-vaccine-mask-outdoor-camp.html>.

likely that a proportion of Americans will remain unvaccinated and susceptible to the virus, a phenomenon largely rooted in misinformation, which I discuss more below. Unless every single citizen gets vaccinated—and even then, inoculation is not a guaranteed defense, since new strains of COVID-19 are appearing every day—there will always be the potential for transmission, and masking will always be a prudent precautionary measure in theory. But just as we accept the everyday risk of contracting the common cold or the flu, masking will inevitably fade away in practice as more people are vaccinated, as the coronavirus is normalized as a threat, and as the United States moves past the initial trauma of the pandemic.

CHAPTER III

DISSEMINATION OF MISINFORMATION

Freedom of speech, also referred to as freedom of expression, is a sacred right in the United States. A cornerstone of the First Amendment to the Constitution, it is arguably the most important fundamental right in our nation's history. In order for a democracy to function, citizens must be able to express their opinions freely, without fear of retaliation from the government. However, in the context of the modern United States and an unprecedented technological age, freedom of expression has transformed into something beyond a constitutional right, a mutated form of postmodernism. Now more than ever, freedom of expression is used to publish blatantly false information for public consumption, resulting in a disconnect among citizens about what exactly "the truth" is. The frequent dissemination of misinformation is a direct result of the American obsession with intellectual freedom. Even when the opinion being expressed is objectively incorrect, American citizens are more concerned with their right to free expression than with the facts.

One particularly strange aspect of the United States pandemic response was the major role that President Trump played in the miseducation of the public. Normally, one would expect a national leader to unify and educate their people during a time of crisis. But instead, the dissemination of misinformation was facilitated by Trump's duplicity throughout his four-year tenure, and his willful neglect of the truth proved fatal with the arrival of COVID-19. The technological innovations of social media further enabled the

rapid spread of false information, as well. The president and the unverifiable nature of social media content created the perfect storm of erroneous information about COVID-19, miseducating the American public about a critical issue.

American Postmodernism

The United States has always valued individualism and freedom of expression above all else, so that any citizen could contribute to the development of democracy in their own unique way (at least, in theory, though we know from centuries of discriminatory practices that this is not true). This nation was founded on the Enlightenment ideals of intellectualism, rationalism, and individual liberty, in order to create a society whose members were educated, independent thinkers. But these fundamentals of democracy are disappearing; individualism has mutated into extreme relativism, and it seems as though rationalism has been abandoned altogether. Americans “are losing a sense of shared reality and the ability to communicate across social and sectarian lines.”⁵⁰ We no longer have a common baseline of truth, a common understanding of how the world really works, as evidenced by innumerable accusations of “fake news” and “alternative facts” over the last several years.

Reliance upon fact has been replaced by postmodernism, which denies the existence of any reality independent from human bias.⁵¹ Just as an individual’s perspective is affected by their race, class, gender, and other identities, so is their

⁵⁰ Michiko Kakutani, *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump* (New York, NY: Tim Duggan Books, 2018), 12.

⁵¹ Kakutani, 47.

understanding of fact. In other words, there is no such thing as an objective, universal truth. The world is ultimately unknowable. Postmodernist philosophy emerged in mid-twentieth century and was solidified in Thomas Kuhn's 1962 book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* as an anti-authoritarian response to long-held American beliefs, during a time where the world felt increasingly absurd and difficult to understand, in the wake of such crises as the Great Depression and both World Wars.⁵² (Kuhn is also the coiner of the phrase "paradigm shift," indicating a fundamental change in one's beliefs and assumptions.)⁵³ The original motivation behind postmodernism was to encourage unconventional thinking and to break away from the status quo.

It is no surprise, then, that this mindset became more and more common in the United States in the twenty-first century, with such earth-shattering events as the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the second Iraq War, and the Great Recession. In particular, this cynical and hyper-relativistic worldview made it extremely difficult to educate the American public about COVID-19, both in the beginning of the pandemic and throughout. Rather than taking scientific fact at face value, many citizens refuse to believe the opinion of medical experts and instead choose to listen to the anti-science polemics of their political idols, feeding into the postmodernist belief that empiricism is a farce and cannot be trusted, even in the midst of a deadly pandemic.

Some philosophers, including Friedrich Nietzsche, believe that postmodernism is the inevitable outcome of political liberalism, the prevailing philosophy of the United States, and that postmodernism will eventually lead to nihilism, in which the citizenry has

⁵² Michiko Kakutani, *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump* (New York, NY: Tim Duggan Books, 2018), 161.

⁵³ David Kaiser, "In Retrospect: The Structure of Scientific Revolutions," *Nature*, Springer Nature Ltd., April 11, 2012, <https://www.nature.com/articles/484164a>.

lost all trust in the government and its ostensible truths.⁵⁴ That is exactly why postmodernism is so dangerous when too loosely applied. It can be used to justify the spread of malicious misinformation, and to deny incontrovertible truths about how the world works. This makes agreement and cooperation almost impossible.

The threat that postmodernism poses to the functioning of American democracy has never been more relevant than now, given this nation's current circumstances, when misinformation about the coronavirus pandemic, published in the name of intellectual freedom, can result in widespread illness and even death. Since American citizens no longer share a common baseline of facts, we no longer share a common baseline of science, and so it is exceedingly difficult to educate people on scientific issues like the pandemic. In a poll conducted by NPR, 4 out of 5 respondents said that they are concerned about misinformation related to COVID-19,⁵⁵ which demonstrates that the American people are aware of their own miseducation. Their concerns are valid; as the World Health Organization (WHO) so ominously puts it, "Acting on the wrong information can kill."⁵⁶ This is why postmodernism is detrimental to public safety during the pandemic—because when people do not have the facts, they cannot make well informed decisions.

Interestingly enough, conservatives traditionally opposed postmodernism because it challenged long-held American values, but now they are endorsing it wholeheartedly.

⁵⁴ Gerald M. Mara and Suzanne L. Dovi, "Mill, Nietzsche, and the Identity of Postmodern Liberalism," *The Journal of Politics* 57, no. 1 (1995, February), <https://doi.org/10.2307/2960268>.

⁵⁵ Joel Rose, "Even If It's 'Bonkers,' Poll Finds Many Believe QAnon And Other Conspiracy Theories," NPR, December 30, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/12/30/951095644/even-if-its-bonkers-poll-finds-many-believe-qanon-and-other-conspiracy-theories>.

⁵⁶ "Fighting Misinformation in the Time of COVID-19, One Click at a Time," World Health Organization, April 27, 2021, <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/fighting-misinformation-in-the-time-of-covid-19-one-click-at-a-time>.

They recognized that postmodernism could help fight back against the liberals' monopolization of science as a rhetorical weapon. According to philosopher Lee McIntyre, "Even if right-wing politicians and other science deniers were not reading Derrida and Foucault, the germ of the idea made its way to them: science does not have a monopoly on the truth. It is therefore not unreasonable to think that right-wingers are using some of the same arguments and techniques of postmodernism to attack the truth of other scientific claims that clash with their conservative ideology."⁵⁷

Although he has never explicitly mentioned or advocated the philosophy, one prominent Republican postmodernist was center stage during the United States pandemic response: President Donald Trump.

The President

Throughout his presidency, Donald Trump was infamous for his penchant for twisting the truth, a true representative of the postmodernist sentiment that pervades the United States today. *The Washington Post*, which tracked his fibbing habit for five years, from the beginning of his campaign through the end of his presidency, estimated that Trump made more than 30,000 false or misleading claims during his time in office.⁵⁸ His goal was not to inform the American public, but to enhance his own reputation and form his own reality. He wanted to mislead, not lead. According to Michiko Kakutani in her

⁵⁷ Jan Krasni, "How to Hijack a Discourse? Reflections on the Concepts of Post-Truth and Fake News," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 7, no. 32 (2020, July 14), <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-020-0527-z>.

⁵⁸ Glenn Kessler, Salvador Rizzo, and Meg Kelly, "Trump's False or Misleading Claims Total 30,573 Over 4 Years," *The Washington Post* (2021, January 24), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/24/trumps-false-or-misleading-claims-total-30573-over-four-years/>.

book, *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump*, Trump “expect[ed] members of Congress and the judiciary to applaud his policies and wishes, regardless of what they think best serves the interests of the American people.”⁵⁹

In addition to his duplicity, Trump frequently and publicly flouted the recommendations of medical experts throughout the pandemic. In an interview with *Reuters*, Dr. Fauci complained about “mixed signals from the White House” regarding the virus. “You can’t deny that where you have the medical people saying, ‘please adhere to these guidelines,’ and then you have the president saying, ‘liberate Virginia, liberate Michigan.’ That’s not helpful.”⁶⁰ The president’s capriciousness led to the confusion and miseducation of many American citizens, encouraging them to resist reasonable governmental measures meant to curb the virus’s spread.⁶¹

Even when he himself was diagnosed with COVID-19, Trump denied its severity. The administration went out of its way to obscure details about the president’s medical condition and make it seem as though he was barely affected by the disease. In a thinly veiled publicity stunt, the White House released photos of him ostensibly working while hospitalized, a Machiavellian attempt to maintain his reputation among conservatives as a juggernaut of law and order, even when incapacitated. When he was discharged from the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center after just 72 hours, the administration tried to downplay the gravity of such a diagnosis, praising the president’s tenacity. But in

⁵⁹ Michiko Kakutani, *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump* (New York, NY: Tim Duggan Books, 2018), 94.

⁶⁰ Julie Steenhuisen, “Fauci Says U.S. Political Divisions Contributed to 500,000 Dead From COVID-19,” *Reuters*, *Reuters*, February 22, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-fauci/fauci-says-u-s-political-divisions-contributed-to-500000-dead-from-covid-19-idUSKBN2AM2O9>.

⁶¹ Rick Noack, “Trump’s Resistance to Face Masks, Even While He is Infected With Coronavirus, Sets Him Apart From Other World Leaders,” *The Washington Post* (2020, October 7), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/10/07/trump-coronavirus-face-masks-world-leaders/>.

reality, Trump was incredibly ill when he was hospitalized with coronavirus in October. His blood oxygen levels plummeted, and his doctors worried that he might have to be placed on a ventilator.⁶² However, when asked point-blank about the president's condition, Dr. Sean Conley, his physician, spoke vaguely and evasively, refusing to definitively disclose Trump's status. And when his chief of staff, Mark Meadows, expressed concern about the president's condition to reporters, the president ordered aides to provide a more positive version of events.⁶³ "It would have been much better if Dr. Conley and the White House had just been transparent and open with the American people as opposed to the stuff that we heard from them," said Dr. Ashish Jha, dean of the Brown University School of Public Health. "So that of course was very disappointing."⁶⁴ The administration and its affiliates intentionally withheld information about President Trump's medical condition to maintain his façade of unbreakable American stoicism, skewing public perception about the severity of the disease.

Another example of Trump enabling the spread of misinformation is his endorsement of hydroxychloroquine. Hydroxychloroquine is an oral pharmaceutical taken to prevent or treat malaria caused by mosquito bites. It can also be used to treat certain auto-immune diseases, like lupus and rheumatoid arthritis.⁶⁵ But when asked about the possibility of hydroxychloroquine as a cure for COVID-19 at a task force

⁶² Noah Weiland et al., "Trump Was Sicker Than Acknowledged With Covid-19," *The New York Times* (2021, February 11, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/11/us/politics/trump-coronavirus.html>.

⁶³ Tom Porter, "The White House Released Photos of Trump Working in Hospital That Critics Say Appears to Be A Publicity Stunt," *Business Insider*, Insider Inc., October 4, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-hospital-working-pictures-are-pr-stunt-say-critics-2020-10>.

⁶⁴ Kaitlan Collins and Jim Acosta, "Trump's Covid-19 Condition Was So Concerning That Doctors Considered Putting Him on A Ventilator, Source Confirms," *CNN*, Cable News Network, February 11, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/11/politics/donald-trump-covid-19-ventilator/index.html>.

⁶⁵ "Hydroxychloroquine Sulfate," *WebMD*, WebMD LLC, 2021, <https://www.webmd.com/drugs/2/drug-5482/hydroxychloroquine-oral/details>.

briefing, Dr. Fauci answered succinctly and directly, “The answer is no.” Always the devil’s advocate when it comes to scientific fact, Trump immediately stepped forward and added, “But I’m a big fan, and we’ll see what happens. I feel good about it.”

Hydroxychloroquine has since been connected with fatal heart problems, and the FDA strongly recommends against its use outside of hospitals.⁶⁶ Health experts are certain that hydroxychloroquine is neither effective nor safe as a treatment for COVID-19. But with his repeated and vocal endorsement of hydroxychloroquine, President Trump showed that he cares not for scientific fact, promoting his panacean pharmaceutical and flouting medical recommendations, leading to the further miseducation and subsequent endangerment of the American public.

Trump’s tendency to lie or, at the very least, to obscure the truth, was devastating for the United States pandemic response. As former Vice President Al Gore prudently noted in his book, *The Assault on Reason*, America suffers from “the persistent and sustained reliance on falsehoods as the basis of policy, even in the face of massive and well-understood evidence to the contrary.”⁶⁷ From refusing to wear a mask to promoting the untested hydroxychloroquine, Trump repeatedly questioned and undermined the reliability of science, confusing the American public and leading many to believe that empirical data about the novel coronavirus was manufactured.

Social media, Trump’s favorite means of communicating with the American public, also played a devastating role in miseducating the citizenry about COVID-19.

⁶⁶ Libby Cathey, “Timeline: Tracking Trump alongside scientific developments on hydroxychloroquine,” ABC News, ABC News Internet Ventures, August 8, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/timeline-tracking-trump-alongside-scientific-developments-hydroxychloroquine/story?id=72170553>.

⁶⁷ Michiko Kakutani, *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump* (New York, NY: Tim Duggan Books, 2018), 31.

Social Media

Although they are revolutionary innovations that facilitate communication and the spread of information, the Internet and its many social media platforms provide equal opportunity for the spread of misinformation. For instance, before and after the 2016 presidential election, the Russian government used platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to disseminate misinformation in order to deepen preexisting political divisions, an aggressive political tactic that is only possible because of the technological advancements of social media. There is also an unfortunate phenomenon whereby misinformation is easier to spread than the truth on social media; in fact, falsehoods are a whopping 70 percent more likely to be retweeted and spread on Twitter.⁶⁸ Clearly, social media are strongly correlated with misinformation.

The detriments of social media became more apparent than ever upon the onset of the pandemic, when the nearly instantaneous spread of questionable information led to the miseducation of millions of online users. A recent study found that people who frequently use social media are more likely to believe falsehoods about COVID-19.⁶⁹ And in 2017, two thirds of Americans said that they receive at least some news from

⁶⁸ Sara Brown, "MIT Sloan Research About Social Media, Misinformation, and Elections," MIT Sloan School of Management, October 5, 2020, <https://mitsloan.mit.edu/ideas-made-to-matter/mit-sloan-research-about-social-media-misinformation-and-elections>.

⁶⁹ Aengus Bridgman et al., "The Causes and Consequences of COVID-19 Misperceptions: Understanding the Role of News and Social Media," *Misinformation Review*, Harvard Kennedy School's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy, June 18, 2020, <https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/the-causes-and-consequences-of-covid-19-misperceptions-understanding-the-role-of-news-and-social-media/>.

social media.⁷⁰ Since so many people rely on social media for information, and since social media users are highly susceptible to misinformation, the majority of American citizens are likely to be miseducated about the pandemic.

In addition to the recent increase in misinformation, people's social media feeds are catered to their specific viewing history, meaning they only receive information that aligns with their own interests and opinions. This causes an informational vacuum of sorts, termed confirmation bias, where an individual only receives information that reaffirms their preconceived beliefs, even if those beliefs are objectively incorrect. And unfortunately, presenting an individual with accurate information is unlikely to change their mind, since they are so accustomed to their own personal cocoon of confirmation bias. And since different citizens view individually tailored streams of information, they develop wildly varying perceptions of the same reality. Facts are no longer immutable and inarguable; they are interpretable, changing depending on an individual's perspective. This is very much enabled by the postmodernist attitude of today's America—Since everyone experiences reality differently, every citizen's personal view of reality is equally valid and plausible. Trump supporters in particular use “social media as a backbone to transmit a hyper-partisan perspective to the world.”⁷¹

The famous author David Foster Wallace was right when he said that “the truth” is wholly a matter of perspective and agenda. An individual is exposed to only a small selection of information—all of which is totally unverifiable—in their personalized social media, which inevitably shapes their understanding of the world. And since each

⁷⁰ Michiko Kakutani, *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump* (New York, NY: Tim Duggan Books, 2018), 123.

⁷¹ Michiko Kakutani, *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump* (New York, NY: Tim Duggan Books, 2018), 112.

individual receives a different selection of information, everyone has a different understanding of reality, an undeniable manifestation of postmodernism and quintessential example of the danger posed by misinformation during the pandemic.

Vaccinations

Media figures play a major role in the perpetuation of misinformation, using their influence to change public perceptions. One such example of this is the anti-vaccination movement. Famous anti-vaxxers include Jenny McCarthy, Jim Carrey, Jessica Biel, Rob Schneider, Bill Maher, Robert DeNiro, and many others.⁷² Most recently, Tucker Carlson, an infamous personality on Fox News, has come under fire, even from his own colleagues, for making false statements about the COVID-19 vaccine. “Between late December of 2020 and last month, a total of 3,362 people apparently died after getting the covid vaccine in the United States—3,362,” he said during his show on May 5, 2021. “That’s an average of roughly 30 people every day. It’s clear that what is happening now, for whatever reason, is not even close to normal. It is not even close to what we see in previous years with previous vaccines.”⁷³ This is simply not true. Carlson was citing data from the Vaccine Adverse Reporting System (VAERS), which consists entirely of self-reported and unverified information. As of yet, there is no clear correlation between the COVID-19 vaccine and death. But millions of people watch Carlson’s show, and so

⁷² E. J. Dickson, “A Guide to 17 Anti-Vaccination Celebrities,” *Rolling Stone* (2019, June 14), <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/celebrities-anti-vaxxers-jessica-biel-847779/>.

⁷³ Aaron Blake, “Tucker Carlson’s Worst Vaccine Segment Yet,” *The Washington Post* (2021, May 6), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/05/06/tucker-carlsons-worst-vaccine-segment-yet/>.

millions of people received this misinformation, and with preexisting fears about vaccination, they were eager to believe it.

“Please ignore anyone who tries to make you question the safety of getting vaccinated,” wrote Mo Elleithee, another Fox contributor and former Democratic National Committee (DNC) communications director, in a Tweet responding to Carlson’s claims. “Trust the science that has proven that getting vaccinated is the best way to make us all safe.”⁷⁴ Tucker Carlson is just one recent example of how the anti-vaccination movement is has impacted the United States pandemic response, spreading misinformation and hysteria about COVID-19 and discouraging people from receiving a potentially life-saving medical treatment.

Even before the arrival of COVID-19, vaccination was a contentious debate topic among Americans. Many people believe that vaccinations are connected to autism, an unscientific belief based on a fabricated medical study by British physician Andrew Wakefield in 1998 that has been thoroughly disproven (which, in 2010, resulted in the revocation of his medical license). Others question the safety or effectiveness of vaccinations, especially when given to children. There are fringe theories claiming that the whooping cough vaccine causes neurological disorders, and that the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccines cause ulcerative colitis, in addition to autism,⁷⁵ although all of these have been debunked by medical experts.

⁷⁴ Brian Stelter, “Tucker Carlson’s Fox News Colleagues Call Out His Anti-Vaccination Rhetoric,” CNN, Cable News Network, May 6, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/05/06/media/tucker-carlson-anti-vaccination-monologue/index.html>.

⁷⁵ Vincent Iannelli, MD, “An Overview of the Vaccine Debate,” Very Well Health, Dotdash, February 2, 2021, <https://www.verywellhealth.com/the-vaccine-debate-2633685>.

Despite opinions to the contrary, the effectiveness of vaccinations has been proven time and time again, evidenced in recent history by the widespread disappearance of several dangerous diseases, including smallpox, polio, and measles. Some of these diseases have made a comeback in the western hemisphere, however, due to widespread American resistance to vaccinations. For example, the CDC declared that measles had been entirely eliminated from the United States in 2000.⁷⁶ But in 2015, an unvaccinated eleven-year-old was hospitalized with measles after visiting Disneyland in Anaheim, California. And just a few weeks later, there were more than 120 cases of measles across eight states, Canada, and Mexico, all connected to this single unvaccinated child.⁷⁷ This is an unfortunate but clear example of how vaccinations are necessary for the eradication and continued suppression of infectious diseases.

So far, millions of Americans have received COVID-19 vaccinations, and according to the CDC, “these vaccines have undergone the most intensive safety monitoring in U.S. history,” including “both established and new safety monitoring systems” for an incredibly thorough vetting process that ensures no bodily harm will come to the recipient,⁷⁸ although it is far too soon to tell if any long-term side effects may emerge. With that said, it is understandable that some Americans have reservations about the COVID-19 vaccine. According to one study, more than 14 percent of people are hesitant about getting vaccinated, which translates to more than 40 million American

⁷⁶ “History of Measles,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, November 5, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/measles/about/history.html>.

⁷⁷ Tony Hicks, “How the Debate Over Child Vaccinations is Dividing Parents,” Healthline, Healthline Media, August 21, 2019, <https://www.healthline.com/health-news/how-parents-feel-about-their-anti-vaccination-neighbors#Concerned-parents>.

⁷⁸ “Key Things to Know About COVID-19 Vaccines,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, March 13, 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/keythingstoknow.html>.

citizens.⁷⁹ And in a poll conducted by *The New York Times*, more than 20 percent of respondents said they would outright refuse the COVID-19 vaccine, or only get it if required by their workplace or school,⁸⁰ demonstrating that a considerable number of Americans do not trust the science behind the vaccine.

Medical experts are confident about the vaccinations' effectiveness and safety, however, citing cutting-edge mRNA technology. Rather than injecting the recipient with a weakened or inactivated version of the disease, messenger RNA (mRNA) vaccines trigger the recipient's cells to produce a certain protein, which then causes the immune system to produce antibodies. In layman's terms, the COVID-19 vaccine is even safer than routine vaccinations, like those for the common flu, because it does not involve the injection of germs.

Regardless of scientific fact, skepticism about vaccines lingers. And as is the case with any disease and its corresponding vaccine, this skepticism has and will continue to result in the loss of human lives. The anti-vaccination movement is rooted in the decades-long campaign of misinformation surrounding vaccination. It is established on outright falsehoods and debunked medical theories, and its influence on vaccination rates for COVID-19 in the United States has been detrimental, with vast swaths of the American public distrusting science and rejecting a potentially lifesaving treatment.

⁷⁹ CUNY Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy, "Coronavirus Vaccines Stir Doubts Among Many People Worldwide, New Study Shows: *Nature Medicine* Publishes Findings of a 13,400-Person Survey in 19 Countries Hit Hard by COVID-19," ScienceDaily, October 20, 2020, www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2020/10/201020131340.htm.

⁸⁰ Jan Hoffman, "Confidence in Covid-19 Vaccination Keeps Rising Significantly in the U.S., But Pockets of Resistance Remain, A Survey Shows," *The New York Times* (2021, March 30), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/30/health/covid-vaccine-confidence.html>.

CONCLUSION

The United States pandemic response has been a humiliating and absolutely devastating blunder. As I write this, there are at least 28 million reported cases, with more than half a million people dead.⁸¹ These incredibly disappointing rates are only possible because of the government's extreme ineptitude in the midst of this pandemic.

The Trump administration failed to take any effective preparatory measures when the Crimson Contagion simulation made it abundantly clear that the United States was not ready for the next high-consequence pathogen. As Dan Diamond, a political reporter for *The Washington Post*, wrote, "The Trump administration failed to react quickly to the coronavirus pandemic in spring 2020 despite urgent warnings, failed to implement a national strategy to alleviate critical supply shortages that were putting American lives at risk, and pursued a haphazard and ineffective approach to procurement."⁸²

The majority of the first American test kits provided inaccurate results. Aside from Dr. Fauci and the controversial Dr. Redfield, the president's task force consisted of attorneys and business tycoons, total strangers to science.

The coronavirus was turned into a political issue that divided the nation. Instead of unifying and addressing the threat, we devolved into partisan debate, using postmodernist relativism to excuse ignorance. Even masks, which have been

⁸¹ "Coronavirus in the U.S.: Latest Map and Case Count," *The New York Times* (2021, February 24), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/coronavirus-us-cases.html>.

⁸² Dan Diamond, "Top Trump Adviser Warned Then-President on Virus Supply Shortage, Then Pursued Controversial Deals," *The Washington Post* (2021, March 31), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2021/03/31/navarro-pandemic-supply-contracts-trump/>.

scientifically proven to help mitigate the spread of airborne disease, became political symbols.

The well of information available to the American public was poisoned. In addition to the incalculable amount of misleading content on the Internet, the president himself frequently made false claims and promoted lies about COVID-19, refusing to wear a mask and endorsing an untested, potentially dangerous pharmaceutical.

The hopeless disarray of the United States government also played a part in our disastrous pandemic response. Agencies in charge of public health, like the FDA and the CDC, failed to communicate about the production of test kits, allowing the virus to spread untraced. Congress continued its sectarian arguing, slowing the approval of vital economic relief packages for both businesses and American citizens. And the high turnover of the Trump administration certainly did not help this governmental mayhem.

We cannot yet let our guard down, even with the good news of declining infection rates. “I think it’s really critical for us to ramp up vaccinations as much as we can, and in the meantime, do our best to continue with masking, physical distancing—these other measures that we know to be really important in controlling the spread of infection,” said Dr. Leana Wen, a medical analyst for CNN.⁸³

When the international community realized the full severity of COVID-19, all eyes turned to the United States as a historically dependable political power, but we failed miserably. Our nation has lost its credibility as a world leader as a result of its bungled pandemic response. To regain any sort of respect as a global power, as well as

⁸³ Christina Maxouris and Dakon Andone, “COVID-19 Cases Have Declined Sharply. Experts Say These Factors Will Determine How the Pandemic Unfolds,” CNN, Cable News Network, February 14, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/14/health/us-coronavirus-sunday/index.html>.

the ability to help other nations through this crisis, the United States must get its act together. If we want to do better when the next pandemic ravages the world, then we must learn from our mistakes this time around.

Going Forward

I am no expert at formulating federal policy, but there are clear lessons to be learned from the egregious mishandling of the United States pandemic response.

First and foremost, the United States government needs to reestablish some sort of equivalent to President Obama’s Global Health Security and Biodefense Unit under the NSC. Many of our nation’s leaders agree—Congressional representatives Gerald Connolly and Steve Chabot of Virginia and Ohio, respectively, introduced a bill in 2020 that would require future administrations to have pandemic experts on permanent retainer in order to prepare for new pandemics and address them when they arise. “The [Trump] administration dismantled the apparatus that had been put in place five years before in the face of the Ebola crisis. I think, in retrospect, that was an unwise move. This bill would restore that and institutionalize it,” Congressman Connolly said. “We can’t go from pandemic to pandemic.”

“The Global Health Security Act ensures that the U.S. government, and the world, are ready for new diseases like the coronavirus, before they become pandemics,” Congressman Chabot said.⁸⁴ The act was passed by the House of Representatives in

⁸⁴ Deb Riechmann, “Trump Disbanded NSC Pandemic Unit That Experts Had Praised,” ABC News, ABC News Internet Ventures, March 14, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/wireStory/trump-disbanded-nsc-pandemic-unit-experts-praised-69594177>.

September 2020, and by the House Foreign Affairs Committee on March 25, 2021,⁸⁵ so hopefully there will be new developments in the near future. President Trump’s White House Coronavirus Task Force under the Department of State was poorly staffed and ill equipped to handle the COVID-19 pandemic, but there must be some sort of established team to respond to such crises.

Additionally, now that the government has established more connections and allocated more resources to deal with biological crises, we have the knowledge to formulate a pandemic playbook more comprehensive than that of any previous administration. We need to have manufacturers in place, be they domestic or international, who are equipped to produce testing kits, as well as personal protective equipment, upon the arrival of a new infectious disease.

The solutions for the political polarization that grips this country are far less obvious. Political fragmentation has existed since the very beginning of the United States, suggesting that it is an irresolvable problem. But never before has it been so bitter and so inhibitive of democratic functionality. If any lesson can be gleaned from the intersection of political division and the pandemic, it is that we must do all we can to mitigate the effects of irrational partisanship on scientifically sound legislation. Lockdowns, mask mandates, and vaccinations are not ideological affronts, but precautionary measures put in place for the safety of American citizens. Perhaps health education is the way to initiate this shift in perspective, although educational success is never guaranteed when confronting believers of misinformation with scientific fact. At the end of the day, we cannot possibly eradicate political division because freedoms of speech and expression—

⁸⁵ “Chabot, Connolly Global Health Security Act Passes Committee,” Congressman Steve Chabot, March 26, 2021. <https://chabot.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=401099>

and the subsequent freedom to disagree—are sacred fundamentals of American democracy. But, at the very least, we can do our best to mitigate their inhibition of bipartisan cooperation.

Controlling the dissemination of misinformation is an equally redoubtable task, given the infinite dark corners of the Internet. The current postmodernist atmosphere makes it all too easy to become disillusioned with the real world, to seek competing truths because objectivity is supposedly a farce. This skepticism only worsened with Donald Trump's rise to power and his endorsement of alternative facts. The final nail in the misinformative coffin is the influence of social media, which allow anyone to publish anything as if it were irrefutable truth.

Although I am advocating the creation of a new unit for pandemic management, there are numerous other departments, agencies, and offices within the federal government that are exceedingly redundant, an arrangement which significantly increases the likelihood of interagency miscommunication. In order to facilitate coordination within the government and enable a prompt response to burgeoning crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, we must streamline the organization of the federal government and eliminate unnecessary departments. Another contributing factor to the slow pace of the government is partisan gridlock in Congress, a frustrating exemplification of the political polarization that infects so many other aspects of American life. We must do something to mitigate partisan gridlock in Congress, because the people need an active government, not to see their leaders squabble over petty ideological differences. The unprecedented turnover rate of the Trump administration is no longer an issue that needs to be

addressed, but it is certainly a testament to the importance of stable governance during times of national crisis.

The coronavirus pandemic is undoubtedly the most pressing international security threat of our time. The world has “become increasingly aware of health issues as security risks,”⁸⁶ and we need to reflect this awareness through strong leadership and policies.

“Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different,” wrote political activist and author Arundhati Roy in *The Financial Times*. “It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.”⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Paul D. Williams and Matt McDonald, *Security Studies: An Introduction*, “Chapter 36: Health” by Colin McInnes, London and New York: Routledge (2018), 553.

⁸⁷ Arundhati Roy, “The Pandemic is a Portal,” *The Financial Times* (2020, April 3), <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>.

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