

Public Health: Essential Services of the “Deep State” Are We All Socialists Now? Definitely Not Libertarians

by Nick Gier

I don't like having thousands of people around when you don't need them.

—Donald J. Trump on public health employees

It will soon be down to zero. . . it's under control. . . the flu kills more. . .

It's a national emergency. . . it's war! . . . back to work at Easter!

—Trump, Feb. 29 through March 23

There's no briefing that can prepare you for a worldwide pandemic.

—Former Trump Press Secretary Sean Spicer on Obama team warnings

Christian libertarian Dale Courtney published an article on Sweden in the Moscow paper (March 18) that is filled with errors. The most egregious one is his claim the “Nordics scrapped [their] welfare system decades ago.” The truth is that they still have the most comprehensive social and health services in the world, and they serve as safety nets for pandemics such as COVID-19.

Sweden: Generous Sick Leave and Unemployment Coverage

The Swedes have been hit hard by the coronavirus, but, in stark contrast to U.S. where only 12 states (all blue except one) have limited coverage, every Swedish worker has paid sick leave. It is incredibly generous: 80 percent of income for a year and then 75 percent up to 550 days.

Swedish unemployment insurance, vital for the COVID-19 crisis, is equally generous: \$962 for 52 weeks, and then \$842 for the next 12 weeks. In the U.S. the weekly payments range from \$823 for 30 weeks in the “People’s Republic of Massachusetts” (as some libertarians call it) to \$215 for 26 weeks in “Let Them Eat Cake” Kentucky. In response to the virus, the U.S. Senate bill will increase unemployment benefits to a maximum of \$600 per week for four months.

Denmark: Businesses Covered 90% for Two Months

In Denmark the Social Democratic government is also taking the virus very seriously. Except for health care, security, and grocery workers, all other citizens have been ordered to stay home. The government promises to pay the salaries of employees up to \$4,000 per month as long as they are kept on contract. Employers will also be excused from the first month’s sick leave they usually pay before the government coverage kicks in.

Denmark’s Employment Minister Peter Hummelgaard quipped: “You could say it puts the old Ronald Reagan quote on its head: We are the government, and we are here to help.” The government outlays could reach 13 percent of the nation’s gross national product, Hummelgaard says that it is worth it to save the Danish economy.

Every person in Europe (including refugees) also has health care coverage, just as those do, thanks to Republican Mitt Romney, in the socialist Bay State. The U.S. government will now pay for virus testing, but those without health insurance (\$46 million) will be left with any

hospital bills. Americans could also draw on their vacation leave, but the average is only 14 days as opposed to the 41 days that Swedes enjoy.

Hospital Beds: U.S. 32th out of 40 Nations

Also crucial for handling pandemics are available hospital beds. For the top four countries the number per 1,000 is as follows: Japan (13), South Korea (12), Germany (8), and Austria (7). The average for 25 European countries is 4.8, and even Greece (4.2), Portugal (3.4), Italy (3.2), and Spain (3) and have more than the U.S. (2.8). The U.S. ranks 32nd out of 40 nations.

In 2018, 59 percent American hospitals were for-profit private enterprises, which do not build for excess capacity, as opposed to the large number of the world's public hospitals, which are not driven by the profit motive and the short term, but for the long haul. America's private hospitals are one of the reasons why our health care costs are on average twice as much as the countries above.

Public Health Ranking: Idaho 40th out of 50 States

I could not find international ranking for public health, but my reading indicates that Singapore, Taiwan, and South Korea have responded effectively. A survey of the states revealed that California, New York, and New Jersey were ranked at the top with Utah the only red state in the top ten. Washington stands at 10th, but, sadly, Idaho was ranked 40th in this category.

CDC Botches Test Kits

Trump has called for major cuts in the Center for Disease Control (CDC), the National Institute for Health, and U.S. contributions to the World Health Organization (WHO). In 2010 the budget for the CDC was \$12.7 billion in current dollars, but it has now been reduced to \$8 billion.

By the end of February WHO had sent COVID-19 testing kits to 60 countries, but the new CDC director Robert Redfield, a controversial doctor associated with right-wing Christian views on AIDS and presumably not a friend of WHO, decided that the CDC would produce its own instead.

Instead of requesting all available private companies to compete, as South Korean health officials did, Redfield chose, against the urging of state and local officials, to test only one option. It failed the necessary tests, and this set back the release of viable kits for weeks.

Trump: Midwesterners Do Not Need Tests

Three weeks ago, Trump declared that "anybody that wants a test can get a test," but there is still a dire shortage of them. (Our testing rate is lower than Iran's.) Now that some tests are available, our infection rate has gone up 33 percent, the highest the world.

The curve of infections in U.S., Spain, and Italy is still rising, but South Korea and Germany, with quick action and intensive testing, has "flattened" it. The U.S. now has the highest number of cases—more than Italy or even China. Amazingly enough, a clueless Trump is saying that Midwesterners need not be tested!

Trump Transition Team Ignores Warnings

In early January 2017, Obama officials briefed the Trump transition team on the possibility of a novel virus spreading through Asia and then threatening the rest of the world. They warned that “this could be the worst influenza pandemic since 1918.” They apprized the team of the possibility that there would be severe shortage of hospital beds and essential medical equipment. The Obama officials later found their hand-outs in the trash.

John Bolton Closes Health Security Unit

In 2018 the Trump administration, on the advice of then National Security Director John Bolton, dissolved the Global Health Security and Biodefence unit, and its former senior director Beth Cameron declared that this left “the country less prepared for pandemics like COVID-19.” This office was housed within the National Security Agency, and it was set up by the Obama administration to deal with the Ebola, H1N1, and any future viruses.

Obama Acted Properly on Swine Flu

There is misinformation in the right-wing media about Obama’s response to the H1N1 virus, commonly known as the “swine flu.” Here is the Politifact correction on the matter: “The Obama administration declared H1N1 a public health emergency six weeks before (WHO) declared it a pandemic. No H1N1 deaths had yet been recorded in the United States. Six months after that initial declaration, when more than 1,000 deaths had occurred, Obama himself declared H1N1 a national emergency.” After two months, the number of coronavirus deaths are already over 1,300, so this will be far worse than H1N1.

Totally Inadequate Response to “Crimson Contagion”

From January to August of 2019 the Department of Health and Human Services ran simulations on the possibility of a deadly flu epidemic originating in Chicago. Within 47 days, the scenario, code-named “Crimson Contagion,” predicted 110 million infections and 586,000 deaths in the U.S. alone.

When asked about the draft report of the simulation, released on October 19, the White House, after explaining its totally inadequate response, also stated, falsely of course, that the simulation did not apply to COVID-19. In light of this report, Trump’s recent claim that “nobody knew there would be a pandemic of this proportion” is obviously a lie.

Coronavirus Much Worse than the Flu

Even though his own health officials have explained the differences to him, Trump still keeps implying that the seasonal flu is worse than COVID-19. Nicholas Kristoff has laid it out succinctly: “Covid-19 is at least 50 percent more infectious, requires hospitalization at least 5 times as often and results in death 10 times more often. A single person with the flu will lead to 386 people with the flu over two months, and a handful will require hospitalization. But a single person with Covid-19 will result in 99,000 Covid-19 infections in the same period, and up to 20,000 will require hospitalization.”

Political and Cultural Factors Worsen the Pandemic

Political and cultural factors have affected the way nations have responded to the coronavirus. Authoritarian regimes such as China can act quickly and enforced draconian measures, but they can also prohibit dissent and block transparency. In both the SAARs outbreak and this one, China blocked the release of vital information about the viruses.

The democratic nations of East Asia—Singapore, Taiwan, and South Korea—have had the greatest success against this virus. South Korea and the U.S. reported their first case on the same day, but South Koreans immediately instructed its medical labs to come up with test kits, and they were the first to conduct drive-up testing. Realizing that they already had “community spread,” they did not ban in-coming flights nor they did lock down their cities. New cases are declining dramatically and their mortality rate has been low.

In Europe and the U.S., however, authorities try in vain to enforce confinement orders. People throw “corona parties,” and crowd beaches in Australia, California, and Florida. Matteo Renzi, leader of Italy’s Democratic Party, recently hosted a big party and told his guests that “we not to need to change our habits.” Northern Italy has some of the best hospitals and medical staff in Europe, but even the best can be overwhelmed in such a health crisis.

Trump: Courting Disaster with “Back to Work”

Trump is just as irresponsible: he refuses to listen to his own health advisers and claims, as he always does on all issues, to know better than the experts. The following tweet shows how woefully ignorant he is about the basic rules for controlling pandemics and reasons for intensive testing: “we keep the high risk groups protected as necessary and the rest of us go back to work.”

Christian libertarians such as Dale Courtney use the words “public” and “government” as swear words, but private efforts and individual charity are obviously not enough. I’m sure that Courtney has championed Grover Norquist, who once wished that the federal government be so small that it could be “drowned in a bathtub.” I shudder to think where we would be today if libertarians had their way.

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