

Thank Public-Private Partnerships for COVID Vaccines

by Nick Gier

In his column “Private Sector Saved Us while Government Bungled Covid Details” (*Spokesman*, March 7), conservative Marc Thiessen claims that the “medical miracle” of the COVID vaccines was the result of the “the innovative free enterprise system.”

\$14 Billion for Vaccine Research

It is unlikely that Johnson & Johnson would have gone forward without a government grant of \$456 million. U.S. taxpayers gave Moderna \$955 million for late-stage clinical testing. Pfizer refused to take government funds for the development of its vaccine, but Trump officials did guarantee \$1.95 billion for production and distribution.

Biochemist Katalin Kariko, originally from Hungary, and University of Pennsylvania immunologist Drew Weissman did the original research on the revolutionary mRNA vaccine, first licensed by Moderna. A husband-and-wife Turkish research team also joined Kariko and Weisman at BioNtech, Pfizer’s German partner.

BioNtech received \$455 million from the German government and it also received \$177 million in loans from the European Union Bank. So far Uncle Sam has distributed about \$14 billion to seven drug manufacturers for COVID vaccine development.

I am just as much a critic of China as the next person, but it must be pointed out that China released the SARS-CoV-2 genome, the virus that causes COVID-19, so that the rest of the world could start vaccine manufacture in earnest.

University Research Was Key

Drug companies will also have to concede that decades of research at the National Institutes of Health, the California Institute of Technology, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Dartmouth College, Scripps Research Institute, Universities of Pennsylvania, Cambridge, and Oxford have contributed to mRNA research.

Many other institutions—public and private with government funding—have also helped, including work done at the UI and WSU. Think of all the public high schools that started these talented people on their scientific careers.

Public-Private Cooperation Essential

Other COVID vaccines that will soon be available use older methods that were also largely funded by government agencies. There is a reason to place “public” first in the phrase “public-private partnerships,” because many of the achievements of the 20th Century (space, health, infrastructure) could not have been accomplished without government support.

There is this false assumption that if businesses are constrained, innovation will dry up, but innovation obviously comes from public employees as well. In many cases the science and government subsidies come first and then entrepreneurs do the production and marketing.

Furthermore, governments take risks, too, and Operation Warp Speed is a great example: betting on one or two of the seven companies to succeed.

Huge Profits to be Made

There is nothing miraculous about the drug companies' desires to make huge profits in a market of 7.9 billion people. These companies have largely stayed out of vaccine development primarily of the risk of low profits. This is most likely the reason why they have not produced better treatments for tuberculosis, whose primary victims are the world's poor.

The day that Pfizer announced its phenomenal trial results, CEO Albert Bourla sold 62 percent of his shares for \$5.6 million at \$10 more per share than today's \$34. This looks like insider trading, but, sadly, it is arguably legal.

Drug Monopolies Must be Dissolved

Outside Dhaka, Bangladesh's capital, there is a state-of-the art pharmaceutical factory whose managers want to produce COVID vaccines, but Pfizer and Moderna have refused to waive their intellectual property rights.

The U.S. government will soon hold a patent on Moderna's mRNA vaccine, but its contract came with the provision that the technology not be shared for world-wide production. The U.S. government is even prohibited from sending any surpluses overseas.

The Trump administration could have negotiated with the companies for "tech transfer," but it decided that would have taken up too much precious time. The European Union is way behind in vaccinations, primarily because it chose to negotiate on various provisions.

The World Health Organization is insisting that President Biden use his executive power to break this vaccine monopoly. (His administration has not budged.) Otherwise, hundreds of millions of lives will be held hostage by profit rather than pursuing the common good. The longer the developing world waits for vaccines, the greater the risk for mutant variants, which are a danger for rich countries as well as the poor.

Serum Institute: One Billion Vaccines

To our government's credit, we have contributed \$4 billion to Covax, a World Health Organization fund for COVID vaccines in poor countries. We are also joining with Japan and Australia to pledge over \$200 million to help India's Serum Institute, the world's largest vaccine producer, to manufacture the AstraZeneca vaccine. Bill and Melinda Gates contributed \$300 million.

The Serum Institute intends to produce 1.5 billion doses by the end of this year. These will be used in India and distributed to two dozen other countries at \$3-5 per dose. It also plans to produce COVID vaccines for Novavax and Codagenix, two American firms, and SpyBiotech, a British pharmaceutical company. Serum's goal is, eventually, to send the vaccines out at cost, because it makes a good profit on its many other products. This is a lesson for our own drug companies.

Trump: Bungler-in-Chief

After ignoring public funding for vaccine development, Marc Thiessen then criticizes government failures during the pandemic. He takes cheap shots at Anthony Fauci's alleged mistakes, but does not mention ex-President Trump's responsibility—the biggest “bungler,” to use Thiessen's word. Trump privately admitted to Bob Woodward that he knew that the virus was far more deadly than the flu, that it was air borne, and that children could die from it.

Warp Speed Success; Distribution Failure

In a previous column (*Lewiston Tribune*, Jan. 7) Thiessen candidly wrote about Trump's 10 worst mistakes, and one was that his “vaccine distribution has been an inexcusable disaster,” as it left “about 22 million Americans without any immunity during the deadliest period since the pandemic began.”

Operation Warp Speed's genius was betting on seven companies and having three (so far) to succeed, but it is a real shame that Trump officials dropped the ball on distribution. President Biden has picked up that ball and has run with it. He is now doubling his prediction of 200 million vaccines offered in his first 100 days. An underfunded state public health system has done wonders in protecting the American people from this horrible virus.

Will Republicans Block Herd Immunity?

Trump and his wife were inoculated in private, and, only when prompted on Fox News, did he say that people should get the vaccine. However, he immediately undercut his recommendation by saying that “we have our freedoms and we have to live by that, and I agree with that also.”

In a recent poll, 41 percent of Republicans (49 percent of men) said that they won't get the shot, while only 11 percent of Democrats did. It will be very difficult for us to reach herd immunity with so many foolish people opting out.

Why isn't some attorney willing to file a class action suit on the part of families who have lost love ones, citing Trump's willful and gross negligence?

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