

# *Covid-19: US unpreparedness is rooted in historic ideological tendencies*

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By Charles McKelvey

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As the United States has emerged as the epicenter of the global coronavirus crisis, it increasingly has demonstrated that it is unprepared to respond to the emergency. Its state of unpreparedness is rooted in two ideological factors; first, its concept of a limited state role, and secondly, its disregard for scientific knowledge.

The concept of a limited state role has been central to liberal democracies since their emergence in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. They conceived of democratic rights as individual liberties, and they did not conceive the state as a protector of human needs and collective well-being. The concept of the limited state was challenged by the Great Depression of the 1930s, which led to the emergence of social democracy, in which the state creates structures to facilitate the access of the people to a decent wage,

health, education, housing, and nutrition. When the capitalist world-economy entered a sustained structural crisis in the 1970s, corporate interests seized the opportunity to promote the idea that the culprit was state regulation of the economy, which hampered, they claimed, economic development. The prevailing political discourse turned to a reduction of the role of the state in the economy, including its tendency during the previous four decades to ensure the access of the people to health, education, and a decent standard of living.

Since its origins, the capitalist world-economy has been ambivalent about science. On the one hand, scientific knowledge is the foundation of technological developments that fuel economic development and expansion. But on the other hand, science sometimes discovers truths that contradict the legitimations of the powerful. In the United States, the ambivalence toward science led to a level of state support for scientific research in those fields of science that are tied technological and economic development, and minimal state support for those branches of knowledge that tended toward the discovery of inconvenient truths, combined with a cultural tendency to ignore their insights.

The consequences of these tendencies have become manifest as the nation has confronted the coronavirus emergence. Reflecting the minimalist approach of the last four decades with respect to the health needs of the people, in recent days doctors, nurses, and other health care providers of the United States have been saying that the nation lacks the of necessary equipment, including masks, ventilators, and testing kits, to respond to the Covid-19 emergency, as has been reported by The New York Times columnist David Leonhard. As the crisis unfolded, health care professionals have maintained that there is a huge gap between the need and the available supply.

The structures of liberal capitalism, even in its neoliberal free-market moment, have the possibility to respond to a medical emergency when suddenly caught unprepared. In the United States, the 1950 Defense Production Act, passed during the Korean War, gives the president the authority to order companies to produce necessary medical supplies and drugs. But sadly, the epidemic has broken out at a time when the government of the United States is in the hands of the most conservative ideological sectors, which, as Ronald Brownstein writes in *The Atlantic*, possess an ideological suspicion toward scientists and experts on particular subjects within the federal government. Conservatives feel that the experts pertain to an elite that looks down on the less-educated and less-fortunate; a self-serving elite whose version of the truth cannot be believed, in spite of their pretense to be defending the common good.

The conservative disdain for science is illustrated by the conservative claim that the coronavirus is no worse than the flu. In an article in *The New York Times*, Nicholas Kristof and Stuart A. Thompson maintain that Trump “and many other political conservatives suggest that we are responding to something like the flu with remedies that may be more devastating than the disease.” Seeking to discredit a false claim, Kristof and Thompson maintain that the coronavirus is different from the flu. First, persons sick with the flu infect on average 1.5 others, but persons sick with Covid-19 infect 2.5 other persons. Secondly, roughly one percent of persons with the flu must be hospitalized, but hospitalization ranges from 5% to 20% for Covid-19. Thirdly, approximately 0.1 of persons with the flu die, whereas the death rate for Covid-19 is at least ten times greater, ranging from roughly one percent to 4.5%. Although their remains much to be learned, because this coronavirus is new, scientific knowledge indicates that, even though Covid-19 has flu-like symptoms, it spreads much more rapidly than the flu and is much more deadly.

Reflecting the conservative ideological orientation toward the state, the economy, and science, the Trump administration delayed in taking the necessary steps to respond to the shortage in medical equipment, as Leonhard observes in *The New York Times*. Because of his limited-government ideology, he was reluctant to involve the state in resolving the problem, apparently hoping that the problem would work itself out through the action of state governments and the private sector. For two months, he played down the importance of the virus, and he did nothing to address the problem. And Trump was not alone in this. Brownstein writes that “conservative media figures . . . insisted for weeks that the media and Democrats

were exaggerating the danger as a means of weakening Trump.”

Once it became clear that the epidemic was spreading, Trump changed course, falsely claiming that he had responded aggressively from the beginning. He adopted a political maneuver of pretending to act in order to respond to the people’s desires, when in fact he continued to not use the power of the state to direct companies to produce medical equipment and supplies, not only because he continued to suspect that the problem was exaggerated by the specialists, and also because such state involvement in the economy violated the free-market ideology of the administration.

The delay in decisive state action has been costly. During the critical time when the nation was in a position to know that the coronavirus was coming and that the health delivery system was unprepared, Trump rejected proposals to use the 1950 Defense Production Act to order companies to produce needed supplies, which would have facilitated the production of ventilators and coronavirus tests, enabling the nation to be in a better position of responding to the tens of thousands of positive cases that it has today.

The federal government now responds with a bipartisan relief bill. It provides direct financial support for low- and middle-income families and for big and small companies. And it includes \$100 billion aid to hospitals and \$150 billion for state and local governments. But does it provide for sufficient support for local governments and the overstressed health care system? Is it too late and too little?

Trump now declares that the pandemic will soon be conquered and the economy will be up and running by Easter Sunday, only a few weeks away. But specialists say that an easing of social distancing restrictions emitted by some states would result in a renewed acceleration of transmissions of the coronavirus.

.Thus far, the outbreak is concentrated in large urban areas. We do not yet know if it will break out to rural areas and small towns. Given the lack of medical supplies, especially the testing kits that are central to containment, and the general organizational unpreparedness of the nation, it would not be surprising if the virus spreads. Brownstein observes that “if the outbreak becomes more widely dispersed over time, it may be tougher for . . . Trump to escape consequences for his initially dismissive response.”

Depending on how long the epidemic lasts and the extent of its damage to the health of the people and to the economy, and depending on how the crisis is interpreted by the opinion-makers of the nation, it could give rise to a return to social democracy, reversing the turn to the Right of 1980, just as the Great Depression provoked a turn to social democracy. And it could establish space for a socialist discourse that could reframe the public debate on the question of the role of the state in the economy, invoking the successful experiences of economic and social development in the socialist nations.

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