

# Covid-19 and Trump: Dangerous times in the USA

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**This has been a rather impressive week even for Donald Trump. Whenever you think that he has reached the nadir of his Presidency, he always manages to continue the downward trend; it is like a sink-hole that appears in the middle of an area that simply sucks everything in its path downwards.**

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The freezing of [funding](#) to the World Health Organization in the middle of a pandemic was jaw dropping; Richard Horton the Editor in Chief of *The Lancet*, Britain's premier medical journal, [rightly called](#) his behaviour "a crime against humanity." Thinking that this may be useful in case Trump actually wins the next election (if nothing else if charges were brought against him that may keep him trapped in the US fearing arrest) this in and of itself clearly is insufficient to stop the extremely dangerous actions of this President.

## Trump's Response to the Pandemic

Trump has absolutely and consistently refused to take any responsibility for the death and destruction wreaked by the spread of Covid-19 across US society, aided by the appalling incompetence of his government. He started by down-playing the virus and its potential for contagion - arguing that it was similar to seasonal flu. When that became unsustainable, he blamed the Chinese - as [Chomsky](#) argues playing on century's old anti-Chinese racism. He also blamed the Europeans and latterly the World Health Organization (WHO). In doing so he has undermined the international fight against the virus and its effects by prioritising the short term needs of the American state over international cooperation.

Rather than work across borders to address a global pandemic, Trump has gone out of his way to undermine an international response; the defunding of WHO just being the latest example. He prevented N95 masks (the ones that protect the wearer rather than those around them) produced by US company 3M being sold overseas, tried to corner the market on a potential vaccine produced in Germany, literally [stole](#) PPE and ventilators from other countries whether by outbidding them or diverting delivery. This has all done little to ensure international goodwill or cooperation.

He banned Chinese tourists coming to the US; hoping that would show he was taking the virus

seriously while using racism as a tactic again but of course did not stop Europeans coming and did nothing to prevent the spread of the virus through community transmission.

In a problem that is peculiar to the US due to the number of politicised religious believers, religious services among some sects have continued despite the pandemic. The “Freedom of Religion” so important to Americans has led to the defiance of lock-down orders in many states. Refusing to stop religious services due to the pandemic (or to even hold them on line like Catholics, Anglicans in Britain, and most Muslims and Jewish sects), right-wing Christian fundamentalist religious leaders (this seems to be a problem with other fundamentalist religious leaders across religions) insisted on holding open services in the middle of the pandemic which has also led to the spread of the virus. Moreover, several Pastors and Reverends have died from the virus following these public services. Essentially, we are waiting for the impact on their parishioners of their religious leader’s fears of the “evils of science.”

The US was particularly vulnerable to a pandemic due to the insufficient level of public healthcare. Moreover, the [elimination](#) of the Directorate for Global Health and Security and Bio-Defense as part of the National Security Council (NSC) in 2018 under John Bolton certainly did not help with pandemic preparedness. The existence of public healthcare in most advanced capitalist countries allowed European countries to at least mobilise their healthcare systems even if too late to prevent large numbers of deaths.

China gave western countries time to prepare for the virus and yet this was squandered by many of their governments; the purchase or production of did not happen, healthcare systems were not put on pandemic alert, this led to a delayed response with catastrophic consequences which we are now witnessing. Trump’s insistence that the Chinese are lying about the extent of the deaths from the virus irrespective of the fact that clearly once again America is #1 is simply bizarre; is this a competition?

Without a doubt, once deaths at home and in care centres around the world are counted, we will see a far higher death toll from the virus; but this fact does not alter the reality that the Trump Administration (and for that matter Republican Governors, Legislators at both state and federal levels) have grotesquely failed to prepare and fight the virus. Rather than introduce a lock-down earlier, they allowed beaches to remain open during Spring Break (e.g., Florida), allowed Mardi Gras celebrations to continue (Louisiana), and some are still opposing lock-down measures that are needed to contain the virus. Even more so, Trump actually played desperate state governors against each other, telling them that they were responsible for obtaining PPE and ventilators and then sabotaging their attempts to get this essential equipment by buying it out from under them; there are [reports](#) that Trump has erected a blockade preventing hospitals and states from getting PPE ... the fear of his using his powers to withhold distribution of desperately needed PPE to states where governors support him are increasing.

### **The Production vs Protection Problem**

Trump has always trumpeted the state of the US economy as the primary accomplishment of his Presidency. Addressing a dangerous pandemic has required many countries to be put in lockdown and that means that their economies are also in lockdown except for key sectors needed to provide healthcare, guarantee food on shelves (food production and distribution), and to provide for basic necessities. The pandemic has resulted in a massive slowdown of the world economy and the probability that an economic depression will occur.

Trump’s fantasy that he can single-handedly save the US economy would be humorous if it was not

so completely confused. The collapse of the world capitalist economy into a depression is something that honestly is beyond Trump's personal ability to avoid; addressing and mitigating this depression will require a world-wide capitalist response to revive production, trade and consumption. This the US cannot do on its own; moreover, Trump is a rentier and speculator and just does not understand how the capitalist economic system works and that capitalist production requires more than his say-so to restart. In many senses, any government serving the interests of capital can actually provide both a source of autonomous demand (guaranteed purchase of goods and services) and ensuring that income for working class is available for them to purchase goods and services. The need for demand to drive production and for that matter international trade (remember that many necessities are not produced domestically in the advanced capitalist world) means that government can play an important role in trying to mitigate the economic crisis that is coming but due to globalisation, these economies are far more interdependent and as such a global response will be required.

Trump's desperation to restart the US economy to ensure that he has something to campaign on has led to his latest ploy of trying to reopen the economy in the middle of a pandemic. His insistence that he can actually do so has once again run smack into reality: while he can close the economy, he cannot open it; that is under control of State Governors. While there are certainly some state Governors that are willing to do so because they are also in denial about the dangers of this virus (for some reason they seem to think that because NY and NJ are flattening the curve, that holds for the whole country) and politically they support Trump and are quite willing to risk the continued spread of the coronavirus and deaths of their citizens if it keeps Trump in office. The [reopening of beaches in Florida](#) (irrespective of its overall state death toll hitting 726 people yesterday) yet again was shocking in its denial and stupidity. Florida's population has a high number of elderly people who are extremely vulnerable to developing fatal cases of the virus; perhaps the Governor thinks that because they are Democratic voters means that it will not hurt his chances of re-election? I cannot think of any other reason for this incredibly stupid and dangerous decision.

## **The Anti-Lockdown Protests**

Getting state governors to reopen their economies in a pandemic is viewed by Trump as crucial to his re-election. The protests that have been organised this week (and which are continuing) throughout the weekend are part of that strategy. If it were only that which was happening we could laughingly talk about winners of the Darwin prize this year (there are a multitude of candidates for this honour). However, the use of right-wing extremists (and they are not Conservatives in any manner irrespective of what they insist) to undermine the lock-down is by no means humorous as there is far more going on than is apparent.

These protests that have been organised by the far-right in the US have several purposes and only superficially are attempts to pressure governors to open their states. On the one hand, we can snicker at people who want to be exploited by their bosses and talk about natural selection at work. On the other hand, the real situation contains far greater dangers.

What is the purpose of these right-wing protests against the lockdown?

It is not only economic interests that are relevant; there is a strong political impetus at work. These are protests organised and [funded](#) by the leaders of the far-right like Charles Koch and organised by the Proud Boys and survivalist and white-supremacist armed militias holding Nazi and Trump flags on the streets.

I would argue that their goals are currently three-fold:

- Organise and coordinate the far-right to develop a [larger political movement](#);

- Prepare these groups to be used against opposition to Trump and the left;
- Use these groups to threaten both the legal arms of the state and political opponents; this is right out of the historical fascist handbook where roving groups of fascists were used against both the left and other opponents as threats to force their demands and to obtain control over the country.

To illustrate the danger we are in, let's put this disastrous situation in the world context of the revival of fascism and extremist right-wing nationalism in the world and let's discuss the dangers of their coordinating together which is what we have been seeing for years. So currently, governments are run by extreme right-wing nationalists (e.g., the US, Russia, Brazil, Hungary, India, Poland and Israel) and/or these hard-right political organisations have seats in legislators around the world, (see most of Europe like Germany, Italy, France, Spain, the Netherlands, etc). But it does not stop there as there are far-right political organisations that are organising on the mass level in many countries and coordination between them exists. We are in an extremely dangerous situation. The hard and extreme right is gaining supporters and the left is far weaker than the last time fascism reared its head. The question arises what will the centrist and liberals do if this struggle intensified? Anyone that is under any illusions that they will stand with anti-fascists may probably live to regret that.

### **Can Trump win the election?**

Some people are concerned that Trump might cancel the Presidential elections; which he cannot do legally. Even the introduction of [martial law](#) would not allow him to cancel or delay them. It would substitute military for police control and suspend [Habeas Corpus](#); leading to a real suspension of democratic rights and the arrest and detention of opponents. So, he could formally declare martial law and the [John Warner National Defense Authorization Act \(2007\)](#) passed under George W Bush means that he could take control over national guards of each state without their governors' permission if an insurrection or rebellion occur and order cannot otherwise be maintained.

This is a serious danger and it may become extremely relevant if the armed protests continue and seriously escalate; it is certain that Democratic State Governors are very aware of this possibility and will be very reluctant to set this process in motion.

An additional worse case possible scenario (hopefully remote as there is not sufficient support for this in the US) is the use of these groups to allow the declaration of martial law with the excuse it would be used against them, but instead using it against their opponents. But whether the far-right are deluded enough to try and force this step at this point and hope to succeed is another issue altogether.

The possibility of a *coup d'état* appears remote. That requires more than a few right-wing militias and Trump has actually infuriated the military leadership several times; so it is doubtful whether he can actually pull that off. This does not mean that the situation is not extremely dangerous.

However, Trump cannot prevent the election on his own or delay it. On a legal (Constitutional) level, he is constrained despite all his fantasies. Any delay to the election requires [Congressional support](#); getting this past Nancy Pelosi and the Democratic leadership in the House of Representatives is not likely. If there is no election, Trump is out of office in January 2021 which would put Pelosi in the driver's seat and he certainly doesn't want that. This does not mean that the situation is not extremely dangerous.

## Fascist goals

In essence, this is a political issue and it goes well beyond keeping him in office. While certainly some of the participants are simply Trump supporters, the real danger are the fascist and white supremacists groups looking to expand their movement. The normalisation of fascism, its ideas and groups is a major part of their agenda.

Uniting the far-right and creating a serious fascist movement is the goal; so while Donald Trump is certainly trying to benefit from the actions of these groups, their agenda is far greater than him. Trump is useful to them; his use of divide and rule in the forms of spreading racism, misogyny, homophobia and transphobia and undermining the creation of solidarity between people is useful for these fascists and the normalisation of their politics.

The use of the “don’t tread on me” flag ([aka the Gadsden Flag](#)) resonates with the right-wing understanding of American history — this is irrespective of the fact the flag itself initially did not have those connotations — it is a flag from the American Revolutionary War. The [appropriation](#) of this flag by the hard-right nicely coincides with the idea that the lockdown is a threat to American democracy as it is a threat to American individualism and of course the capitalist basis of the US which appears (and underlies) this demand (think of Milton Friedman and Friedrich Von Hayek’s Capitalism, freedom and democracy ideological nonsense for the economic justification of this argument).

Trump benefits from these far-right protestors and they are useful to him as they are serving his current agenda. He doesn’t however control them. If the situation were not dangerous enough, this increases the danger for American citizens. This is because the far right’s true goal goes way beyond Donald Trump. It is far more dangerous than anything he can produce. We need to be aware of their real agenda and be prepared in case this spreads beyond a few right-wing arseholes and leads to a consolidation of a fascist movement.

## Some final thoughts

There have been counter-protests against these right-wing protests in NY. It is understandable that people do not want to allow the far-right control over the streets, the question whether this is the best use of the left in this moment arises. Do we let the right-wingers risk their lives on their own or will we allow them to put our lives in danger? Is this the way to fight against them at this time or can we do organise in other ways against them?

Grass-roots organising and preparation are essential in fighting back and countering their messages. At the moment, this is a small group of fascists on the streets; this may stay as astro-turfing on the part of the American hard right. However, allowing them to endanger us and potentially extending the spread of the virus (as they are doing through these protests) must be opposed. We need to find new ways to do this in the current context of the pandemic as well as discussing across the left as a whole what are the ways forward in isolating the far right. This pandemic will not last forever and we need to discuss how and on what basis we can coordinate to develop a left-wing response.

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**P.S.**

- Daily Kos: Anti-Capitalist Meet Up. 19 April 2020:

<https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2020/4/19/1938654/-Anti-Capitalist-Meetup-Dangerous-Times>