

## **My Turn: U.S. COVID failure has deep roots**

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To an epidemiologist, COVID 19 and the various means of mitigating the spread of the infection relates to a fairly concrete focus of study. Scientific examination of disease and its containment considers the way that droplets are dispersed allowing viruses to migrate from one host to the next. However, COVID has become — particularly in the U.S. — an infection that thrives on symbolism and the gyrations of mass culture.

The gnarly problem of this pandemic involves an array of issues more familiar to linguists, political scientists, psychologists and cultural anthropologists. Medical problems, so COVID has shown us, intersect with all of the vicissitudes of human culture. At some point, COVID in America evolved into the most lethal hybrid — the mutant offspring of free market, ideological metaphor and a fatal virus.

Consider a recent piece by Pulitzer Prize-winning, one-time leftist journalist and new darling of FOX News — Glenn Greenwald — in which the writer notes that a Democratic fundraising event featured maskless Democratic elites, like AOC [U.S. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez], in proximity with masked waitresses and catering staff.

Masks have long been an iconic symbol evoking ire for Trump and his acolytes. Greenwald simply took the worn out Republican metaphor and created a spinoff “variant” — masks oppress the working class. In Greenwald’s effort to repurpose Republican tropes for left wing consumption, masks become the means by which workers are made into “faceless robots.”

It hardly matters that this is gibberish that panders mostly to Greenwald’s new far right fans, or that the failure of corporate bosses to provide masks for employees led to spikes in cases and deaths among slaughterhouse workers at the outset of the pandemic. What is critical is the ease with which COVID becomes cloaked in symbolism, and how eagerly opportunistic pundits shape the manner in which the disease takes on peripheral meaning.

In right wing discourse, the system of metaphor originated in an overarching tale about the evils of government (a refrain, for example, of Ayn Rand, Milton Friedman, Herbert Hoover and Ronald Reagan). But free market rhetoric on internet steroids promotes the concept of the “deep

state,” or, for media junkies craving the more bizarre realms of libertarian fantasy — the intergalactic, reptilian illuminati.

Thus, vaccines (in the strange system of right wing metaphor) are understood to be the means by which nefarious forces gain access to the internal mechanisms of private souls. Masks and social distancing requirements are, by the same token, the application of Marxist regimentation upon the innocent populace. All of the rather mundane means by which a rational nation mobilizes protective public health resources have been marinated in the memes and cliches of collective paranoia.

When Glenn Greenwald paints a picture of an unmasked AOC beside a masked server, he is mining the mythology of Ayn Rand whose world pitted the sinister intrusion of government against the pristine aspirations of the individual. Free market metaphor may gird the system that is destroying the planet, but these tropes, applied to public health, are merely murderous. .

Perhaps, the solution lies in an honest reckoning with the problems inherent in American myth. A system of right wing think tanks such as The Federalist Society, The Cato Institute, The Hoover Institute, and countless others, endowed with unimaginable wealth, pump out an enormous stream of propaganda promoting free market rhetoric, but also extend the notion of laissez faire into the arenas of climate change and public health.

For example, a right wing think tank in Great Barrington, Massachusetts — The American Institute for Economic Research — funded the debunked “Great Barrington Declaration,” that notoriously argued for healthy people to employ no protective measures against COVID, with the goal of infecting as many people as possible in order to achieve “herd immunity.”

It is long overdue for critics to stop blaming Republican resistance to COVID mitigation on the “stupidity” and “insanity” of the Trump base. Public health policy in the U.S. is confronted by a powerful anti- government narrative that is nothing less than the foundation of American political ideology. The task may be overwhelming, but it begins by acknowledging as much.

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