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Dr. Anthony Fauci was correct — more importantly, he was humble

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In certain political circles, it has apparently become important to knock Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

One prominent article at RealClear Politics argues that Fauci in January was telling the American public not to worry about the novel coronavirus, and “the administration’s initial reassurances were largely aligned with the assessments of the medical community,” specifically Fauci.

This is not true, and the contention rests on misrepresenting Fauci’s comments.

“On Jan. 21,” writes Kalev Leetaru, Fauci “emphasized that it was unclear whether the virus could spread from person to person.” This is the opposite of what Fauci said, according to the article linked. “While it’s clear this new virus can be spread from person to person,” the piece paraphrases Fauci, “it’s unclear how easily that spread can happen.”

Walter Olson on Twitter flagged this blatant, 180-degree misrepresentation of Fauci’s remarks:

Quoting that CNN piece: “He [Fauci] also said while it’s clear this new virus can be spread from person to person, it’s unclear how easily that spread can happen.” /5

So what happened is that Fauci himself said “it’s clear” the virus can spread from person to person and Leetaru at @RealClearNews relays that to readers as “It’s unclear.” /6

The podcast was riffing of a journal article in which Fauci had written “Human-to-human transmission of 2019-nCoV occurs, as evidenced by the infection of 15 health care practitioners in a Wuhan hospital.”

The RCP article also picked on comments Fauci made in a podcast, where Leetaru claims “Dr. Fauci repeatedly downplayed the virus’ potential impact on the U.S.”

Here’s the meatiest accusation against Fauci: “Asked whether the U.S. might contemplate city-wide shutdowns like those China was enacting at the time, Fauci replied, ‘There’s no chance in the world that we could do that to Chicago or to New York or to San Francisco, but they’re doing it. So, let’s see what happens.’”

Fauci was correct about this. He was saying that there’s no way U.S. cities would do the same thing Chinese cities were doing. Specifically, Fauci cited the total inter-city travel bans China had implemented. ““They have not only shut out the traffic out of Wuhan—planes, trucks, ferries, rail—but they’ve done it to a number of the surrounding cities....”

There's no way we would lock everyone in New York City. It's not "downplaying" the seriousness of the virus to state that the U.S. will not stop all planes, trucks, ferries, and trains from running into or out of major cities. It's commenting on the supremacy of civil liberties and freedom of movement in the U.S. as compared to China.

When asked on that podcast to make a prediction as if he "had a crystal ball" Fauci gave the following noncommittal answer: "I think things are going to get worse before they get better. And whether this turns into a global pandemic (before it is something that becomes entrenched and we can't do anything about it) [depends on] if the Chinese can put their arms around—as it were—the outbreak in China, and [whether] the countries that have travel-related countries, handle it well enough so that it doesn't evolve into a sustained outbreak in their country. I think there's a possibility that it could be turned around the way SARS was turned around. But it's gonna be a real tightrope walk."

"There's a possibility it could be turned around" means, *we might be able to prevent a pandemic.*

Compare Fauci's warnings and his uncertainty to what the administration was saying. Asked on CNBC on January 22, "Are there worries about a pandemic at this point?", President Trump responded, "No. Not at all. And we have it totally under control. It's one person coming in from China, and we have it under control. It's going to be just fine."

Four days later, after his prudent (but clearly insufficient) China travel ban, Trump went on TV with Sean Hannity. Hannity asked Trump about coronavirus, "How concerned are you?"

Trump's answer: "Well, we pretty much shut it down coming in from China." This was false.

Throughout February, Trump would state confidently that things were getting better. "We're going down, not up. We're going very substantially down, not up."

Or: "Looks like by April, you know, in theory, when it gets a little warmer, it miraculously goes away."

Fauci consistently had a very different tone. "The ultimate scope and effect of this outbreak is unclear at present as the situation is rapidly evolving," he wrote in that late-January journal article.

Common throughout Fauci's piece were sentences like this: "The extent, if any, to which such transmission might lead to a sustained epidemic remains an open and critical question. So far, it appears that the fatality rate of 2019-nCoV is lower than that of SARS-CoV and MERS-CoV; however, the ultimate scope and effects of the outbreak remain to be seen.... The trajectory of this outbreak is impossible to predict...."

So, no, Fauci wasn't *predicting* a pandemic. But he also wasn't saying there would be no pandemic. He was expressing *uncertainty* about a new and mysterious disease, and warning that it could become really bad.

Everybody is wrong sometimes. The key is that when we speak about the future, especially, we should acknowledge the possibility we may be wrong.

The statements that have looked the worst—Trump early on, Huffington Post writer Nick Robins-Early, that bad Vox tweet, and many others like Trish Regan's — all conveyed a

misplaced certainty about what was going to happen. They spoke from ignorance with confidence, when they should have spoken, like Fauci, with humility.