



Pandemics vs. Personal Liberty

Jeffrey A. Singer

Public health policy should not be exempt from the “non-aggression principle.” Force must be prohibited from interpersonal relationships, except when used in self-defense or retaliation.

In the case of a highly contagious lethal disease, I believe that screening potential carriers, and containing them via quarantine, represents an act of self-defense.

One of the few legitimate functions of the government is to protect people from physical assault. The transmission of a disease with significant lethal potential fits that description.

Therefore, it is appropriate to screen people reasonably considered potential carriers. It is completely proper to confine people found to be a threat to the lives of others until that threat no longer exists.

That’s the easy part. The hard part is the science. Who poses a threat and who does not? How long should the quarantine last?

Here, panic and emotion must not cloud rational evaluation of scientific data. It would be a tragedy to curtail liberty through quarantine without a sound, evidence-based rationale. But it is also important to remember that all knowledge is contextual. We know what we know based upon the available evidence. We must be willing to revise our conclusions as more is learned. We must rapidly adjust the criteria for quarantine as new knowledge dictates.

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