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The US Response to COVID-19 and Climate Change Endangers the Country and the World

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Climate change and pandemics require cooperative, integrated responses that in turn require planning, co-ordination, and the mobilization of expertise. US failures in these domains have compromised the world's ability to cope with both problems. At a minimum, the US needs to re-engage with the Paris Agreement and support the World Health Organization.

For those who have spent decades sounding the alarm on climate change, the underlying failures that US responses to coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and climate change share are all too familiar. Both climate change and pandemics require cooperative, integrated responses that in turn require long-term planning, coordination, and the mobilization of expertise. These resources have been in decline since the late 1960s, when the Nixon administration initially attempted deregulation and vilified experts. Although the US is not alone in its failures, it is worth focusing on the US, a country in which experts have known about climate change for more than half a century[1] and about COVID-19 for months before the first publicized death on its soil—yet in both cases failed to respond adequately. These failures by the US have seriously compromised the ability of the global community to cope with these problems of common concern.

Competition and Private-Sector Solutionism

The US was once a country of great cooperative achievements, for example, during World War II when a large, active government harnessed the resources of a nation to help achieve victory in a two-front war. Seventy-five years later, the publicly led, cooperative problem-solving approach that made such achievements possible has largely been replaced by private, competitive approaches. A landmark in this transition was President Reagan's declaration in his first inaugural address that "government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem." Increasingly, US political elites have re-jected the role of the federal government as a provider of services and overseer of the private sector. Core functions of government, such as incarcerating convicted criminals and even the provision of some military services, have been privatized.

When not denying, downplaying, or dissembling about the seriousness of COVID-19, the Trump administration has pursued a competitive, private-sector approach by pitting the federal government, states, and other actors against each other (including even different agencies within the federal government). This has led to increases in the cost of medical supplies as states engage in bidding wars against each other, as well as spectacles such as Elon Musk's offering ventilators to hospitals on social media. In some cases, the price of personal protective equipment has soared by almost 1,000%.[2]

Beginning with the negotiation of the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), US climate policy has similarly suffered from competition among governmental officials and agencies and a private-sector orientation. In 1989, George H.W. Bush pledged to "counter the greenhouse effect with the White House effect," but this soon fell victim to competition between rivals in the executive branch. The Clinton administration adopted an ineffective voluntary program after failing to enact an energy tax. The George W. Bush administration wobbled between voluntary approaches and outright denial. With the return of the Democrats in 2009, the US House of Representatives passed a market-oriented bill that would have put a price on carbon, but the Democratic-controlled Senate never took it up. The jury-rigged system of executive orders and regulations put in place by the Obama administration has proven vulnerable to court challenges and a change of administration.

The challenge that the US faces is not so much one of policymaking or instrument design but rather one of temperament and political confidence. Fragmentation is extreme on both climate change[3] and COVID-19, and prevailing norms fail to effectively promote individual sacrifice in the service of collective action or even meaningful compromise. A recent survey suggests that only 55% of Americans say they will get vaccinated "if and when a coronavirus vaccine becomes available."[4]

The problems extend beyond oft-cited concerns about "trust in government" to the very foundations of legitimacy. Governments gain legitimacy by demonstrating their competence or by involving their citizens in democratic participation.[5] Disrespect for the competence of the US government began as a political ideology—increasingly made visible in protests against public health measures and climate-change policies—and has become rooted in reality as agencies have been defunded or reorganized out of existence, key appointments have been made on the basis of political loyalty rather than competence or qualification, and misinformation has been spread from the highest levels. Nor is there much sense of democratic ownership in a system in which two of the last three presidents assumed office by having lost the popular vote. The Global Democracy Project now categorizes the US as a

"flawed democracy" (alongside Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina).[6]

Failure of Global Engagement

In 1992, the US signed and ratified the UNFCCC, but when President Clinton signed the 1998 Kyoto Protocol, he did not submit it to the Senate for ratification because of overwhelming political opposition. President Obama re-engaged the US in the global effort to address climate change, but in 2017 the Trump administration announced plans to withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement.[7] The Trump administration first froze contributions to the World Health Organization (WHO) and then announced the US withdrawal. It has also refused to participate in the global initiative on developing, producing, and distributing COVID-19 drugs and vaccines. Now that there are over six million COVID-19 cases globally and the Earth's mean surface temperature is 0.5°C higher than when the UNFCCC was ratified—and both are continuing to rise—it is clear that the competitive approach has failed the US and the world. On both issues, the US needs to acknowledge its failure, accept the seriousness of the challenges, and adopt integrated, cooperative responses.

Integration, Cooperation, and the Importance of Expertise

An integrated response is not the same as an "all of the above" strategy, which opportunistically deploys whatever options are available regardless of their consistency or coherence. At best, "all of the above" leads to fragmented and ill-coordinated reactions and, at worst, mobilizes failed, damaging, or improbable responses, such as approving drugs and therapies that have not been properly vetted or are demonstrably harmful. An integrated response involves mutually reinforcing policies: for example, using revenues captured from a price on carbon for adaptation and to rectify environmental injustices in the case of climate change and using mass testing to inform strategies regarding who should be distanced from whom in the case of COVID-19. The current piecemeal system of various stay-at-home and physical-distancing rules is the result of ignorance about who has been exposed to the virus and who is exposing others, and the rush to "reopen" the American economy is

largely moving independently of "testing, tracing, and isolating" public health measures. Similarly, US climate policy—now largely being made by firms, municipalities, and states—is a crazy quilt pattern ranging from New York's commitment to 100% carbon-free electrical generation by 2040 to the US government's giving $649 billion in subsidies to the fossil fuel industry.[8]

Despite the president's declaration that "nobody could have predicted something like this," many people actually predicted "something like this." The history and risk of pandemics are part of the core curriculum of public health.[9] In both public health and climate change, the US research community remains strong, but there are weaknesses, especially in those areas in which science bumps up against policy. In the last 2 years, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has had three directors, and its grant program for state and local public health emergency preparedness declined by 31%.[10] The administration's fiscal year 2021 budget, submitted 11 days after the WHO declared the coronavirus outbreak a "public health emergency of international concern," called for a 16% reduction in CDC funding from 2020 spending levels.[11] Although it is difficult to calculate the US government's spending on climate-change research,[12] it is clear that US climate science has never been stronger, yet its influence on federal policy has never been weaker. In late 2018, Trump revived the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology, which had been dormant for almost 2 years, by appointing 7 of 16 members, six of whom are from industry and two of whom do not hold doctorates. His science advisor, a meteorologist, was not sworn in until early 2019 and has had little influence on climate policy. Meanwhile, science marches on. A recent paper demonstrates that simulations run a half-century ago on climate models showed "no statistically significant difference between their output and historic observations,"[13] yet the dissembling, denial, and feeble policy responses continue.

With both COVID-19 and climate change, we need leadership that embraces expert knowledge and accepts responsibility for its decisions. Beyond this, many of the policymakers' usual tools—including various pre-commitment strate-

gies, mandates, and nudges—work for both problems. For example, the federal government could require states and private actors to meet various standards (e.g., with respect to COVID-19 testing or renewable energy) on the pain of financial penalties while providing funding and technical support in meeting these challenges. Similarly, governments could require citizens to vaccinate or retreat from vulnerable coastal areas. Identifying effective, efficient, and equitable policies is relatively easy; enacting them is difficult.

Conclusion

There will be more disease outbreaks.[14] The human transformation of the planet is putting us in contact with a range of organisms whose biological interests are served by infection of the world's most populous and mobile mammals: humans. There will be more climate-related extreme events as sea levels rise, temperatures become more extreme, and hurricane intensity increases. The really perfect storm will be an intersection of these global crises: a devastating hurricane striking a city desperately coping with an epidemic or a drought of biblical proportions in a region suffering from a pandemic-driven economic collapse.

As the epidemiologist Larry Brilliant has said, "Outbreaks are inevitable, but pandemics are optional." The same can be said of extreme climatic events and disasters.[15] Although powerful countries can ensure that we remain stuck in a fossil fuel economy, no country acting alone can ensure a transition to renewables. Aided and abetted by the US, the retreat to nationalism is on view around the world, and the worst might be yet to come. There will be a vaccine for COVID-19, but there will be no vaccine for climate change. The US does not need to lead the world, but it does need to act as a good citizen. This requires at a minimum re-engaging with the Paris Agreement and supporting the WHO. Whereas there are 300 million Americans and 7 billion potential victims of a global pandemic and climate change, there is only one earth that we all must share.

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