

The Price of Technocracy

Michael Brendan Dougherty

For those watching the melodrama of Senate hearings these days, the big update is that [Dr. Anthony Fauci](#) is now playing the role of victim. And, in a way, I did (slightly) sympathize with him, but not because of anything Senator Rand Paul said or did.

At a Senate hearing on Tuesday, Fauci, the head of NIAID, accused Senator Paul of endangering his life. “You keep coming back to personal attacks on me that have absolutely no relevance to reality,” Fauci said. He charged Paul with “distorting everything about” him and noted, “I have threats upon my life, harassment of my family and my children with obscene phone calls because people are lying about me.”

Fauci also cited an incident on December 21 in which a man traveling with an AR-15 from Sacramento toward Washington, D.C., was arrested and said he had planned to kill Dr. Fauci, among others. Fauci had said that Paul’s attacks on him stirred up “crazies.”

As evidence for this very emotive charge, Fauci cited a banner on Rand Paul’s website that said “Fire Fauci” with an encouragement to donate to the senator. He charged Paul with using a “catastrophic epidemic” for “political gain.”

As a piece of evidence, this was rather lame. It is perfectly legitimate for senators or any citizen to call for the firing of an official in the executive branch. And it is legitimate to challenge such an official on grave matters.

Paul correctly parried this charge in later interviews, noting that he had been at the congressional baseball game at which a Bernie Sanders supporter opened semi-automatic fire and severely wounded Congressman Steve Scalise. Paul and other Republicans never blamed Sanders for inciting these attacks with his harsh criticism.

However, it is true that Senator Paul’s focus in these hearings has shifted toward potentially blaming Dr. Fauci himself for the pandemic, given that Fauci and Dr. Francis Collins at the National Institutes of Health had a documented interest in ending or evading a government ban on funding gain-of-function research, and gave grants to an outfit called EcoHealth Alliance whose president, Dr. Peter Daszak, had [once bragged about funding research into making coronaviruses more infectious in humans](#) with the Wuhan Institute of Virology. After the pandemic started, Daszak also organized a media campaign against the lab-leak hypothesis without disclosing [his flagrant conflict of interest](#) in doing so.

It is also somewhat rich for Fauci to accuse others of political gain in the pandemic. Fauci has become a household name, [sat for glamorous profiles](#), and participated in a hagiographic documentary about himself. And Paul is correct that Fauci has cast all criticism of his role in our national life in these unpleasant years as an attack on science itself. Fauci has repeatedly [said that attacks on him amount to little more than attacks on science, which he represents](#).

But I have the slightest twinge of sympathy for Fauci. His plaintive cry is, in my mind, scored with a microscopic violin: No matter what he did, no one deserves targeted harassment, or to be menaced by potentially deranged assassins. He, like CDC director Rochelle Walensky, and their peers in public health in America and in many other countries, has been cast in the wrong role.

The role of experts in a democratic republic like our own is to inform elected officials of the facts, so that these officials can make informed political judgment, balancing the knowledge from subject-matter experts with the facts and circumstances of the people themselves — their values, prejudices, habits, and way of life.

Covid-19 presented a crisis that politicians could not fully control or defeat, but for which they could be blamed. One method politicians have used to avoid taking responsibility for unpleasant decisions — or potentially difficult choices — has been to partly obscure their role in making them, by deferring to experts like Dr. Fauci or translating guidance from the CDC into regulation with no amendment. Fauci has played up his wisdom and his influence, politically knifed his enemies, and seems to genuinely enjoy his central role in recent events. Thus, if you were angry, your anger was directed at people who aren't elected, who may, like Dr. Fauci, have been appointed by a president whose term in office ended before your birth.

A people with a democratic spirit will, under the governance of technocrats, tend to respond in one of two ways, and both have been common in the pandemic. The first is cowlike obedience — hoping to escape the impositions on their life through fulsome but temporary cooperation. The other response is something more like regicidal rebellion — a false king has been raised up, and the small-d democratic heart thrills at the idea of tearing the pretender down from his throne.

We badly need to recover our sense of republican governance. That would mean recovering fully the knowledge that public-health measures in your state are the responsibility of governors and legislatures. It would also mean a diminishment of celebrity for figures such as Fauci himself. And it means restoring to the American people their dignity as self-governing citizens of a republic, not mere vectors of transmission to be managed by a man with a medical degree sitting in a TV studio.