Death Came for the Dakotas

In terms of the coronavirus, they're a theater of American disgrace.

By Frank Bruni
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Under normal circumstances, I would have flown to one or both of the Dakotas to write this column, but the whole point is that these aren't normal circumstances. And I don't have a death wish.

Too much? Probably. But how else to convey the proper timbre of outrage, the right pitch of grief, over what happened there? Deep into the coronavirus pandemic, when there was no doubt about the damage that Covid-19 could do, the Dakotas scaled their morbid heights, propelled by denial and defiance. They surged to the top of national rankings of state residents per capita who were hospitalized with Covid-related symptoms or whose recent deaths were linked to it.

As of Friday afternoon, South Dakota led the country in the average daily number of recent Covid-associated deaths per capita, with three for every 100,000 people, according to a New York Times database. North Dakota was second, with 1.5.

More than 40 percent of South Dakota's 1,033 Covid-related deaths to that point occurred in November, according to statistics from the Covid Tracking Project, and the same was true of North Dakota's 983 deaths.

The Dakotas are a horror story that didn't have to be, a theater of American disgrace. Want to understand the tendencies — pathologies might be the better word — that made America's dance with the coronavirus so deadly? Visit the Dakotas.

Intellectually, I mean.

"It's mind-boggling," Jamie Smith, the leader of the Democratic minority in South Dakota's House of Representatives, told me. He was referring primarily to how politicized such basic safety measures as social distancing and masks became, but also to many South Dakotans' distrust of science and unshakable belief that the virus wouldn't come for them.

"We're dug in," he said when we spoke recently. Of the 10 counties in America with the most Covid-related deaths per capita, three are in South Dakota.

Lawrence Klemin, a Republican legislator in North Dakota who just finished his two-year term as the speaker of its House of Representatives, told me that people in his state "are pretty much independent-minded about how they conduct their affairs."

"I don't know if maybe some people are stubborn," he added, but the deep sigh in his voice said that he knows full well that many people are. And the most stubborn, he said, have been the loudest. Throughout the pandemic, he said, he was deluged with communications from constituents adamantly opposed to any mask-wearing requirement, which North Dakota didn't even have. He heard almost nothing from the other side.

But after Gov. Doug Burgum, a Republican, used an executive order on Nov. 13 to institute precisely such a mandate, a poll showed that a significant majority of North Dakotans favored it. Maybe they'd just

seen too much dying by then. Or maybe, Klemin conceded, they'd been a silent majority for a while and political leaders underestimated their fellow citizens.

Regardless, he said, the state definitely should have taken that step last spring or summer — before the number of coronavirus cases skyrocketed, before hospitals were so overrun that sick North Dakotans had to be sent to neighboring states and before his own mother tested positive and died in early October.

Until recently, Governor Burgum was loath to exert much pressure on North Dakotans and steered clear of the social-distancing orders put in place by so many other states. But he did invest heavily in testing and never merrily shrugged off the threat of the coronavirus the way his Republican counterpart in South Dakota, Gov. Kristi Noem, did.

Deaths and hospitalizations have dropped significantly in North Dakota over the past two weeks. On Friday evening, it ranked just ninth among states for the percentage of its residents hospitalized with Covid-19.

South Dakota, in contrast, was No. 1. Still no mask mandate there, and no leadership at all from Noem, who didn't just welcome but beckoned President Trump to Mount Rushmore for that enormous Independence Day rally, the one at which his perpetually maskless entourage clustered near a similarly maskless crowd. Kimberly Guilfoyle, Donald Trump Jr.'s romantic partner, tested positive then, compelling the two of them to go into isolation. Sadly, they didn't remain there.

One month later, Noem played cheerleader for a 10-day motorcycle rally in Sturgis, S.D., that attracted some 460,000 people. In an article in The Times, my colleagues Mark Walker and Jack Healy described it as "a Woodstock of unmasked, uninhibited coronavirus defiance."

Just before Thanksgiving, Noem announced the passing of her 98-year-old grandmother, one of 13 residents of a South Dakota nursing home who died in a two-week period. The home's administrator told The Daily Beast that the other 12 residents, along with many of the nursing home's workers, had tested positive for the coronavirus, but not Noem's grandmother. (Hmmm …) While Noem publicly mourned her lost family member, she drew no particular attention to Covid-19's rampage among her grandmother's companions.

I get the sense that Noem has presidential aspirations (though she has denied that). If she ever presses the accelerator on those, please remember this savage season, and please remember her damning indifference to it.

When I said "horror story," I was cribbing. That was a description used in a series of mid-November tweets from a South Dakota emergency room nurse, Jodi Doering, that went viral. Doering was reeling from tending to dying Covid-19 patients who continued to insist that the coronavirus was some kind of hoax.

They "scream at you for a magic medicine" and warn that Joe Biden will ruin America even as they're "gasping for breath," she wrote. She added: "They call you names and ask why you have to wear all that 'stuff' because they don't have Covid because it's not real."

"They stop yelling at you when they get intubated," she wrote. "It's like a horror movie that never ends." I altered that last sentence. Doering put a curse word before "horror," and who can blame her?

The Dakotas are hardly alone in dealing with an onslaught of coronavirus cases, hospitalizations and deaths over the past month, a grim one for most of America. Neighboring Minnesota, a much less politically conservative state, has lately rivaled South Dakota for new cases per day per capita. Iowa,

which abuts southeastern South Dakota, is also in terrible shape, as Elaine Godfrey wrote in The Atlantic on Thursday.

"To visit Iowa right now is to travel back in time to the early days of the coronavirus pandemic in places such as New York City and Lombardy and Seattle, when the horror was fresh and the sirens never stopped," Godfrey wrote. "The virus has been raging for eight months in this country; Iowa just hasn't been acting like it."

Then again, has California? It got educated early, but if the lessons had taken as well as they should have, its governor, Gavin Newsom, might not have had to announce the stringent new lockdown measures that he did on Thursday as the state's intensive care units were stretched almost to the limit. In New York City, meanwhile, the daily rate of positive coronavirus tests exceeded 5 percent for the first time since May, according to city figures.

The truth is that the Dakotas are as emblematic as they are exceptional, the American story — or at least a strain of it — in miniature. In resisting the lockdowns, slowdowns and sacrifices that many other states committed to, they indulged and encouraged a selective (and often warped) reading of scientific evidence, a rebellion against experts and a twisted concept of individual liberty that was obvious all over the country and contributed mightily to our suffering.

"North Dakotans will come to each other's aids in a heartbeat, but when asked to give up personal freedom for an amorphous common good — that's difficult," Paul Carson, an infectious-diseases doctor and a professor of public health at North Dakota State University, told me. Just recently, Carson said, a lawmaker from the western half of the state — whose denizens regard its eastern half, where Carson lives, as elitist and too liberal — wrote to him to share a famous quotation from Benjamin Franklin: "Those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety."

For too long, staying safe from the coronavirus was indeed an amorphous mission to many North and South Dakotans, and their false sense of security was surely intensified by what they heard from President Trump, who spoke of disease-ridden blue states versus freedom-loving red ones and kept promising that this would all blow over. "We maybe believed that our rural nature sheltered us from what cities like yours were experiencing," Carson said. "Then we found out, very brutally, that was wrong."

Klemin, the North Dakota legislator, said that his mother, Carol Roaldson, was 99 when she died but had always thrilled to the idea of reaching 100 and was in excellent health before the coronavirus swept in. Her nursing home had to establish a segregated unit for the many residents who were infected in September, he said. He couldn't visit his mother after she was moved there.

But when she sank into what were clearly her last days, he was allowed by her beside — in a face mask and shield. "I watched her die," he told me. "That was a very sad day."