



Project Syndicate: Coronavirus Policy Stasis

J. Bradford DeLong
Department of Economics & Blum Center for Developing Economies at
U.C. Berkeley, & WCEG

<http://bradford-delong.com> :: brad.delong@gmail.com :: @delong

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HASNEXTSTEPS:

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I. Where We Are

A. The United States

As of the evening of April 23, 2020, the United States crossed 50,000 confirmed coronavirus deaths <<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>>. It is now the worst-hit region of the world: with half of continental Europe's population, it now has 3/4 as many daily deaths <<https://www.ft.com/coronavirus-latest>>.

My guess—which is worth very little, as this is far outside my wheelhouse—is that because of undercounting the true number of deaths that would not have happened so far but for coronavirus is half again as many: 75000. If you are also willing to guess that one percent of those whom the virus brushes past close enough that they develop at least temporary resistance to it, that means that two and a bit more weeks ago—as of April 7, say—7,500,000 Americans may have been acquiring at least a temporary immunity. That means that each day two and a bit more weeks ago about

3,600 additional Americans were acquiring the disease that will kill them, and that 360,000 new people were in the process of their immune systems' becoming aware of the virus and making antibodies in response.

B. Other Countries

Other countries have managed to achieve enough social distancing to put the number of virus cases on a downward trajectory, and have promise of in a month or two or three getting to a state where they can keep the virus rare via test-and-trace-and-isolate and wait for the one year, two years, three years, or more before humanity's virologists work miracles and develop a vaccine.

Italy and Spain are down from 700 confirmed deaths a day to 500. Germany, Canada, and Turkey appear to be turning the corner at between 100 and 300. Ireland looks unlikely to get above 50. Australia is at 1. Austria is at 12. Denmark is at 10. Greece is at 4. Hong Kong is at 0. Japan is at 30. New Zealand is at 2. Norway is at 7. South Korea is at 2.

C. U.S. Failure

The United States as a whole has not. New confirmed cases each day have been about the same at roughly 30,000 for three weeks now. Testing for coronavirus per day has been about the same at roughly 150,000 for three weeks now. The share of those tested for whom the test comes back positive for the presence of coronavirus has been the same at about 20% as well.

The United States thus appears to have flattened the epidemic: the current $R[t]$, the average number of new cases to which someone infected spreads the virus, is no longer much greater than one—the epidemic is not growing. But by the same token $R[t]$ is not less than one: the epidemic is not dying away, even slowly, but continues to burble along.

I. On Our Current Track...

A. Unable to Plan for the Next Stage

Ultimately—if humanity’s virologists fail to work miracles and invent an effective vaccine—this virus will have an attack rate, I am told, that is perhaps likely to be 70% of the U.S population: 265 million people. If it were to have a 1% mortality rate, that would not be the perhaps 75000 deaths we have suffered so far, but 2.65 million. And that is if the health-care system does not collapse under the strain of a wave of cases and the death rate rise from 1% to 3%, which would be not 2.65 but 8 million dead.

If the epidemic were on the decline, we could begin to plan for what the next stage should be: test as many people as possible for virus and antibodies as often as possible; hand out green armbands to people with antibodies who are presumably resistant; have them do the human-contact jobs; keep people who do not have green armbands masked and more than six feet from one another; wipe down hard surfaces where the virus might lurk, and then wipe them down again. Then employment and the economy could recover and the cases could be kept down, so that the virus is a tragedy to the few who die and their relatives and friends and an annoyance to other Americans, while we wait for the miracles in the forms of effective antiviral treatments and a vaccine.

But the epidemic in the U.S. is not on the decline.

B. Broken System, So Unlikely to Make Progress

Perhaps the U.S. will make a renewed effort to increase social distancing, and get the epidemic on the decline. But that does not seem the way to bet right now. President Trump’s confidant and chief mouthpiece, former New

York mayor Rudy Giuliani, goes on TV to sneer at the idea of test-and-trace as a goal <<https://www.thewrap.com/giuliani-calls-covid-19-contact-tracing-ridiculous-we-should-trace-everybody-for-cancer-video/>> and to demand that the FDA fast-track approval for clinical trials of biotech company Celularity’s stem-cell therapies. All Stat News reporter Adam Feuerstein will say about this is that there are “critics” and “fears of political meddling” <<https://www.statnews.com/2020/03/31/rudy-giuliani-wants-fda-to-fast-track-a-stem-cell-therapy-for-covid-19-critics-see-political-meddling/>>.

President Trump and Vice President Pence both egged on Georgia Governor Kemp to relax Georgia’s social distancing measures <<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/trump-approved-georgia-gov-kemp-s-plan-reopen-early-president-n1191621>>, and Kemp today, April 24, reopened businesses like bowling alleys, gymnasiums, and tattoo parlors <<https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/24/us/georgia-coronavirus-reopening-businesses-friday/index.html>>. Trump then denounced Kemp for “opening too soon”.

Trump also called for experimentation on how to fight coronavirus by injecting people with Lysol and Clorox <<https://www.thedailybeast.com/trump-slammed-for-touting-sunlight-uv-light-bleach-as-possible-covid-19-treatments-during-briefing>> and using strong ultraviolet light—the last of these being how the behavior-altering parasites were killed in the 1967 Star Trek Episode “Operation—Annihilate!” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_-_Annihilate!>. All that New York Times reporters Dan Levin and William Broad could bring themselves to say was that Trump was theorizing “dangerously, in the view of some experts” <<https://twitter.com/AdamSerwer/status/1253637064396070912>>—thus implying strongly that there were other experts who were open-minded and agnostic.

Republican Governor Kristi Noem of South Dakota, now thirteenth and rising among the fifty U.S. states in coronavirus cases per million, claims that social distancing does not work because in South Dakota's hotspots "99% of infections" are happening not in workplaces but in people's homes among people "liv[ing] in the same community... same buildings... same apartments". A spokesperson for Smithfield Foods backed her up with respect to Smithfield's employees: "Living circumstances in certain cultures are different than they are with your traditional American family". Noem denounced people in other states "giv[ing] up their liberties for just a little bit of security" while stating that she "believe[s] in our freedoms and liberties." <<https://www.foxnews.com/media/gov-kristi-noem-vows-to-keep-south-dakota-open-becomes-public-enemy-no-1-for-the-left-amid-covid-19-crisis>>.

She also, with the approval of President Trump and Vice President Pence, launched a statewide clinical trial of hydroxychloroquine as a coronavirus treatment <<https://www.foxnews.com/politics/south-dakota-implements-statewide-hydroxychloroquine-clinical-trial-for-coronavirus-treatment>>.

The American public sphere is broken. And so is the American political and governance system.

With the calculated political decision last January of the Republican U.S. Senate caucus that they should pretend that President Trump was not guilty of high crimes and misdemeanors warranting his removal from office, the U.S. lost its final chance to have a rational policy response to the coronavirus epidemic.

C. Despair

We will not just burble along with things as they are—something will change, for good or, more likely, for ill. But as long as we continue to burble along, the country will continue to suffer about 4000 true

coronavirus deaths each day and about 20% unemployment as, each day, 400,000 new people begin developing at least temporary immunity to the virus, and we thus each day come 0.2% closer to achieving nationwide herd immunity.

Notes, etc.

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