

IDEAS

The 'Chinese Virus' Is a Test. Don't Fail It.

You should be more offended by Trump's incompetence than by his attempt to racialize the pandemic.

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LEAH MILLS / REUTERS

Tests for COVID-19 are not yet widely available in this country, but a test for gullibility is now available on Twitter in the form of Donald Trump's feed. This morning, he referred to COVID-19 as "the Chinese virus." In doing so, he was retreating, like a child to his blanket, to the kind of degenerate culture-war squabble in which he feels most secure and his supporters most aggrieved. Here's the gullibility test: When you read "the Chinese virus," are you most offended by Trump's insistence on racializing the pandemic, or by the administration's cowardice and incompetence, which may kill hundreds of thousands of Americans and have already decimated the economy several times over?

[*Franklin Foer: A frontline physician speaks out on the coronavirus*]

Before you answer, remember one more thing about the gullibility test: *Its results can be read only by someone else.* It is a truism in the world of sleight of hand that anyone who claims that she wasn't fooled by a trick—but says so after the illusion is long finished—not only was fooled by it but is a perfect mark for the next effect. (Watch that same person during the trick, and you'll see how she is utterly taken in.) The same is true of the gullibility test. You need the emotional equivalent of instant replay to see how the furnaces of your rage may have burned at the sight of that phrase, and how your reaction recalibrated only after you realized you were being tested.

The “Spanish flu” was so named even though the first outbreaks probably happened in Haskell County, Kansas. The virus likely traveled to Europe with American soldiers deployed in the First World War. It eventually killed 50 million people and spread all over Europe, but because Spain was neutral and its press relatively free, the reports of mass death started there, and the name stuck. Perhaps it was not coincidental that the swarthiest of European nations got its name appended to the worst modern plague—but then again, syphilis was “the French disease” to English speakers, “the Italian disease” to the French, and “the Christian disease” to Arabs. There is nothing new or particularly interesting about the urge to name a disease as if it were a visitor from a foreign land.

Still less novel is the use of such nomenclature to manipulate a political culture, both of the left and of the right, that is as defenseless against distraction as a baby presented with a jangling keychain. I can hear the keys jangling, and the coos of curiosity, every time I log on. You know where they come from: on the left, from people aghast that Trump would insist on a name that would needlessly stigmatize people who come from a certain place, or who look a certain way; on the right, from people who hear “the Chinese virus” and think, *The virus came from Wuhan, dagnabbit. He's right to call it by its name!* Neither side is entirely wrong: “Chinese virus” does needlessly (and harmfully) stigmatize people, and the virus did start in Wuhan. But these reactions are for suckers. Controversies like these are a perfect example of what Steve Bannon, Trump's former campaign manager, called “flooding the zone with shit”—distracting us from what matters with copious flushes of what doesn't. And raw sewage is this president's natural habitat, the

medium in which he fights most effectively. His opponents are willingly lured into the sewers.

One difference this time is the particular racial minority Trump has chosen to target. Anti-Asian racism, like all racism, is a phenomenon increasingly owned by the elderly and the cretinous. Thirty years ago it was possible to absorb anti-Asian sentiment ambiently—thinking of Asians as intrinsically foreign was an attitude you could just stumble into—but today you'd have to work a bit to fail to notice that Chinese, Japanese, and Taiwanese Americans are firmly established in the United States and, insofar as they are a political bloc, consider their success the best form of revenge. Good luck pitying them. As the writer Wesley Yang once reflected when the underdog Democratic candidate Andrew Yang confronted stereotypes about Asian prowess at mathematics: “Why should I be on the defensive about this?”

[*Read: The other problematic outbreak*]

One of the upshots of the history of Asian Americans, differentiating them from other minorities, is that it is easier for them to ask this question. And it is easier, for the same reason, to avoid the elementary trap of getting bogged down in the septic slop of Trump's latest tweet. Try to recover quickly and focus on what matters: The government of the United States has had months to prepare for a disaster that will, unmanaged, kill millions of people; instead, it frittered away its head start and doomed us to panic and desperation. Its failure to equip us with tests, ventilators, and protective equipment will kill our parents and grandparents in large numbers. Our heroic doctors and nurses will be fighting unarmored against the virus, and America's society and economy will halt until the battle is over. All of this was, once we saw that the virus escaped containment in January, preordained—a mathematical certainty, if you will. And it didn't take an Andrew Yang to see that.

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