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The Pacific Heart

Calling COVID-19 a “Chinese Virus” or “Kung Flu” Is Racist

President Trump doubles down on a racist term, endangering Asian Americans

Posted Mar 18, 2020



Source: Wikimedia commons

Update 3/24/20: [President Trump](#) marginally walked back his comments yesterday. However, this was not a full [apology](#) and recognition of the harm of racializing the virus. Asian Americans experiencing incidents of hate or [discrimination](#) can [report them on this website](#).

My gut sank when President Trump responded today to ABC correspondent Cecilia Vega’s pointed question about his calling [coronavirus](#) the “Chinese Virus.” (See transcripts and links to video below.) He doubled down on his use of the term, and did not substantively address the report that [his aide used the even more derogatory term “Kung Flu” with CBS correspondent Weijia Jang](#). He then reflexively went to his long-documented go-to aggressive and antagonistic nationalism by framing his words as counteracting a Chinese official’s Twitter claim that the virus was introduced to China by the American military. (To those who don't know, Zika is the name of a forest, and Ebola names a river. [The WHO advises against naming pathogens for geographic regions](#).)

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As I’ve noted before, when some individuals feel insecure and threatened, they can feel more powerful by blaming and victimizing others. This bluster is superficial and shallow, and does nothing to make us safe. In fact, the president’s racism is paired with his putting the country on “war footing.” This should ring alarm bells. Racist

sending messages to our better angels. I try to maintain [compassion for President Trump](#). He has a difficult job. But I wish he would show more compassion for the rest of us. By framing this issue as "us vs. them" (or "me vs. them") President Trump dangerously personalizes a global situation.

There are numerous and daily reports of Asian Americans, British Asians, and others being attacked physically and verbally as the coronavirus has spread in the Western world. (See references.) For the president to not take a clear line denouncing these racist and fear-based actions puts the entire Asian American community at risk. I'm quite sure it's possible to deal with the propaganda of Chinese officials while also safeguarding lives of Asian Americans and Asians around the world.

The problem is not just the term "Chinese Virus," but also the implicit linkage to a long history of anti-Asian rhetoric and violence. Chinese (and other immigrants) have been targeted as filthy vermin and rats, parasitic locusts, rapists, hopeless burdens, and so on. The outstanding [American Experience documentary "The Chinese Exclusion Act"](#) is now streaming online, and documents the virulent racism that Asian immigrants faced in this country. [Google "racist Chinese Exclusion Act cartoons"](#) if you don't believe me. The term "Chinese Virus" raises history's ghost, and it is clear that there are those who become possessed by the ghost. To be generous, their fear of the virus and infection triggers their survival brain, fight-or-flight responses, and then becomes displaced into fear and rage against Asian Americans more generally. To be less generous, underlying racist attitudes become exposed when they are given official sanction. During the crisis following Pearl Harbor, fears were displaced onto Japanese Americans, leading to their incarceration. Racism is not a minor matter in crisis. Racism worsens the crisis and leaves lasting damage to our nation.

Already, this has impacted people in my greater community. Some, like New Yorker writer Jiayang Fan, who have been verbally abused, strategize about staying safe in an atmosphere of racism that could easily turn physical. Another friend wrote "I'm so scared. I feel like we are one out of work Tesla employee away from the next Vincent Chin." [Vincent Chin was brutally murdered](#) in the Detroit area in 1982 by Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz, who blamed him for autoworker unemployment and the rise of the Japanese auto industry.

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Jiayang Fan @JiayangFan · 15h

Went to take out trash. Was talking on phone in Chinese. Man walked by on sidewalk & in interest of social distancing, I said, "sorry, go ahead." "FUCKING CHINESE," he yelled loud enough I could hear him over aide's voice on phone. I turned to look at him to make sure I heard right

4.9K

10.6K

47.9K



Source: Jiayang Fan's public Tweet, March 17, 2020

must go 2 bank to get \$ for Moms health aide whose fam needs paycheck. Im ashamed to fear speaking Chinese in public bc it feels like defeat but rite now,it also feels like minimization of risk...&survival

 99

 48

 643



Source: Jiayang Fan's public Tweet, March 18, 2020

Our survival will not be enhanced by racism or denial of racism. On an individual level, our immune systems are enhanced by compassion and community, and damaged by contempt. Our immune systems also include the systems of care that surround us, from the president to the grocery store clerk and the people working hard to keep our supply chains and health care system functioning.

The president's contemptuous, racist words pose a physical threat to Asian Americans. They also expose and amplify a weakness of our communal immune system. We are all part of the body of America and the world, and we all play a role in keeping each other well and safe. We cannot afford to turn on one another, in any way.

We may be sheltering-in-place, but we must make ourselves shelters as well, by cultivating compassion and connection. This virus is teaching us that our fates are deeply intertwined.

[Exchange between Cecilia Vega and President Trump, 3/18/20:](#)

Cecilia Vega: “Why do you keep calling this the ‘Chinese virus’? There are reports of dozens of incidents of bias against Chinese Americans in our own country. Your own aide, Secretary Azar, says he does not use this term, he says ‘ethnicity does not cause the virus’ – why do you keep using this? A lot of people are saying it’s racist.”

President Trump: “Because it comes from China. It’s not racist at all, no. It comes from – China. That’s why. It comes from China. I want to be accurate.

Vega: “Are the aides behind you comfortable with this term?”

President Trump: “I have great love for all of the people from our country. But as you know, China tried to say – at one point, maybe they stopped now – that it was caused by American soldiers. That can’t happen. That’s not going to happen. Not as long as I’m president. It comes from China.”

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Later, [PBS NewsHour correspondent Yamiche Alcindor dug in again:](#)

... puts Asian Americans at risk?

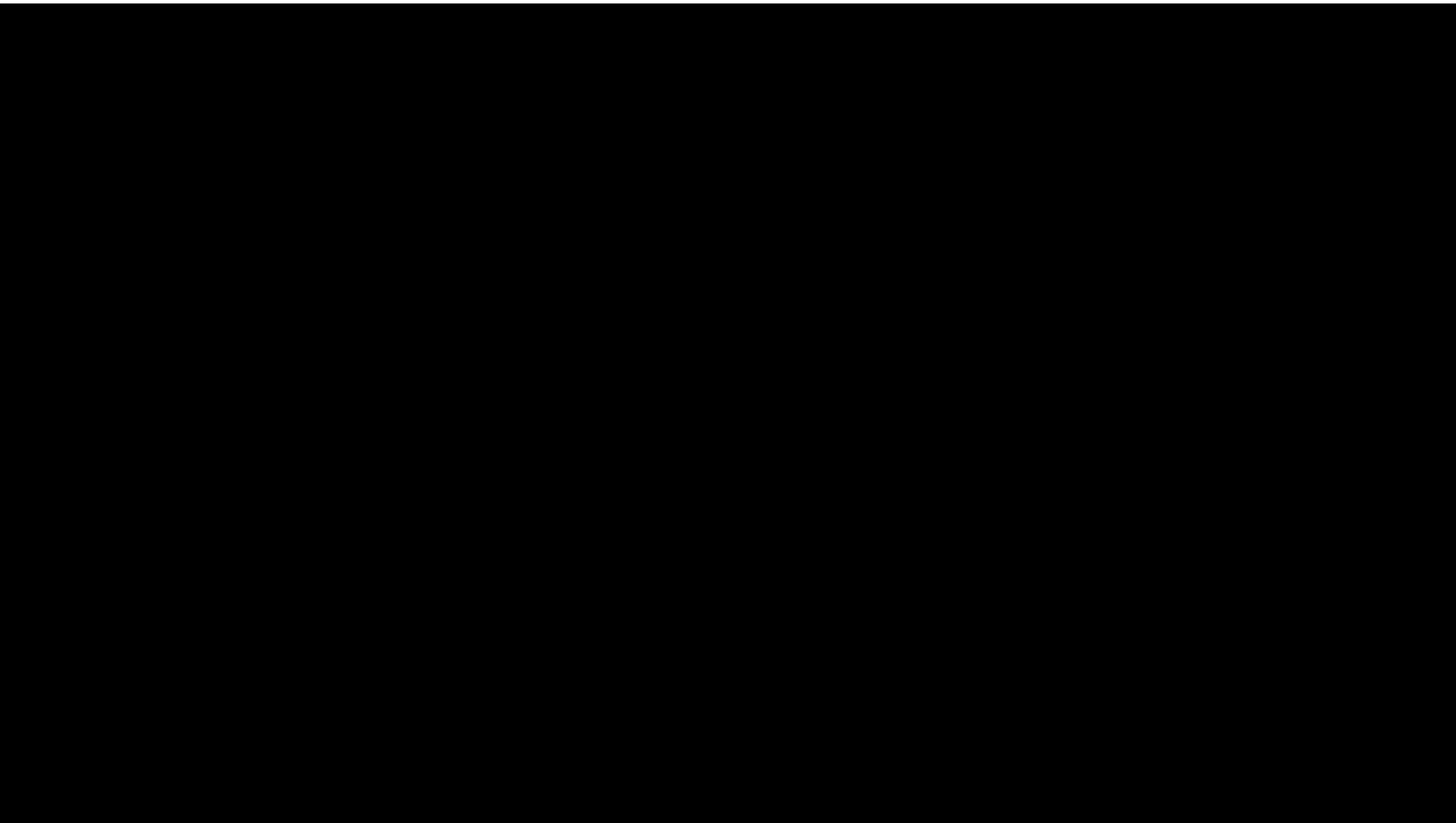
President Trump: “No, not at all. I think they probably would agree with it a hundred percent. It comes from China.

Other reporters shouted these questions to Vice President Pence, White House coronavirus task force member Dr. Deborah Birx, and others. Thanks to all of them for keeping this issue in our awareness.

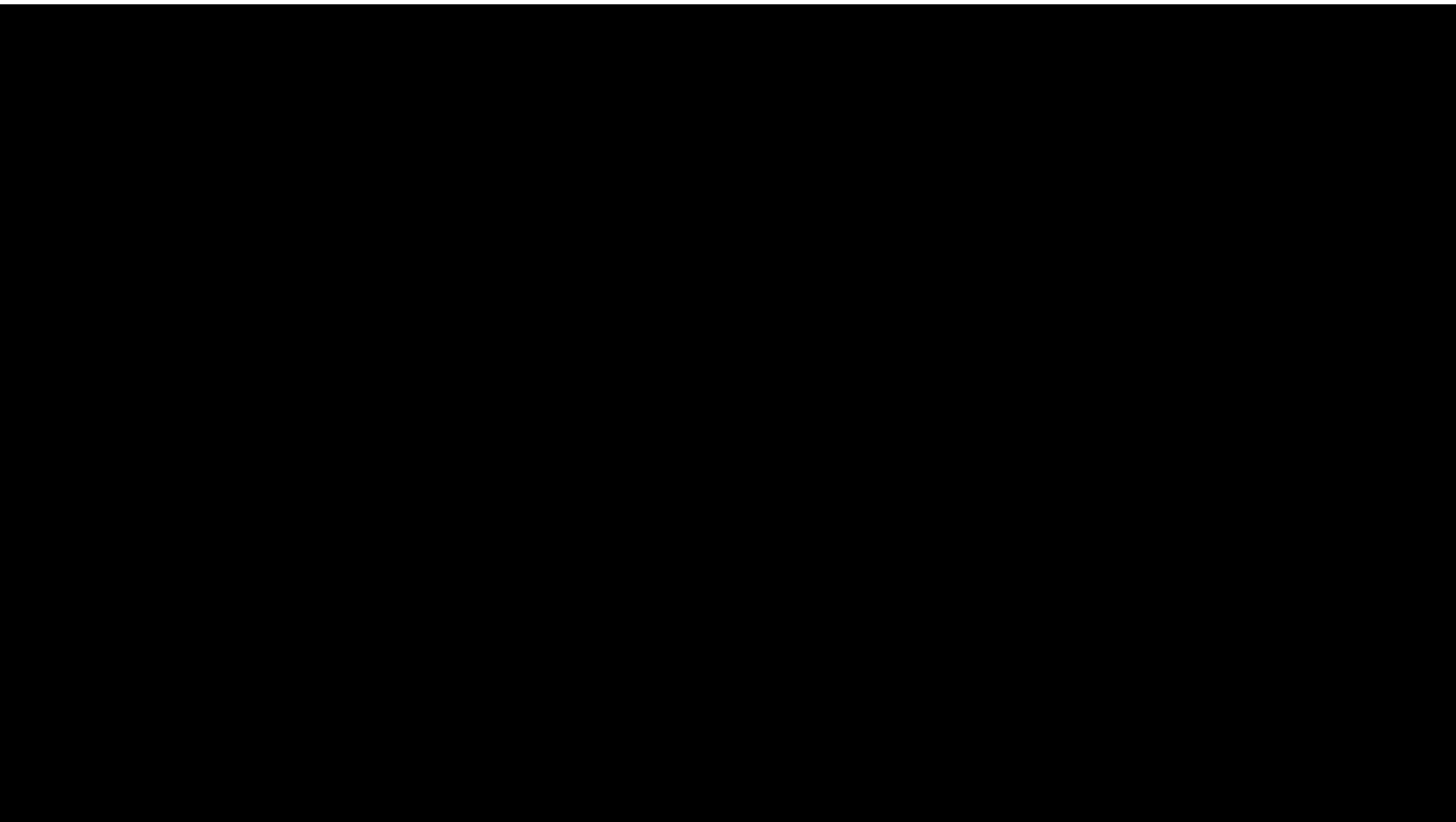
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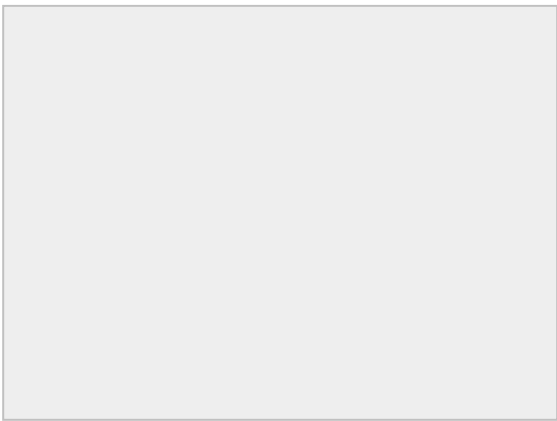
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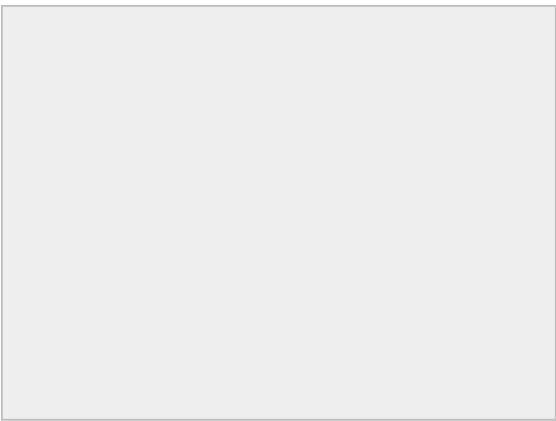
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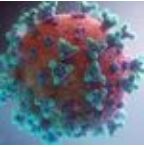
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