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FEATURED

Anti-China rhetoric fails to stop American COVID-19 deaths

By Lois Gilbert

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President Donald J. Trump visits China in 2017. (Wikimedia Commons)

Accused of stabbing an Asian family, including a 2-year-old, a 6-year-old, and their father, a 19-year-old Texan said he thought they were Chinese and spreading Corona virus disease. The victims survived because a store employee, Zack Owen, disarmed the knife-wielder with

his bare hands, receiving a stab wound on his leg and a cut on his hand, while an off-duty border patrol agent, Bernie Ramirez, held the man until police arrived.

In Anchorage last Saturday, Ted Stevens International Airport was closed and incoming traffic diverted to Fairbanks due to the threat of a bomb on a China Air cargo flight. On its way from Seattle to Taipei, the flight was diverted to Anchorage for a search; no bomb was found.

It's no secret why there's been a surge in anti-Asian hate crimes. Trump, attempting to pin the blame for American deaths on China, has been calling Covid 19 the "Chinese virus."

Let's be really clear about who's to blame for American covid 19 deaths: it's Trump. Intelligence sources warned him in November that the virus could become a pandemic. He kept saying it would disappear, despite receiving over a dozen January and February Presidential Daily Briefings warning about the virus. (PDBs are prepared before dawn each day to warn the president of the most significant world developments and security threats. Government officials say Trump routinely skips reading them, according to The Washington Post. National Security Council officials writing memos included Trump's name in as many paragraphs as they could "because he keeps reading if he's mentioned.")

On February 26, Trump claimed the number of corona virus cases "within a couple of days is going to be down to close to zero." The next day he said "it's like a miracle, it will disappear." While other countries attacked the virus with tests, isolating those who were positive and tracking their contacts, Trump ignored the warnings. According to the New York Times, senior Trump officials are pressuring our spy agencies for evidence that the virus originated in a Chinese government lab rather than in the Wuhan live animal market. According to scientists who've studied the genetics, it's far more likely it jumped from an animal host to humans outside a lab. If Covid had come from American bats, we would bristle at anyone calling it the "American virus."

The Chinese government at first lied about the virus and silenced the doctor who warned about the threat and later died of Covid. But that wasn't the fault of the Chinese people, who were angry the doctor was silenced and, not living in a democracy, don't control their government. It certainly isn't the fault of Asian Americans, Chinese or otherwise. Trump knows exactly what he's doing in calling Covid the "Chinese virus;" he's being divisive and instigating hate. Trump repeatedly attacks people racially or sexually to deflect

from his own inadequacies and behavior. When he came down the stairs to an audience he paid, announcing his presidential candidacy, Trump attacked immigrants from Mexico as rapists and criminals. He's the one with at least two rape accusations, one by his wife Ivana, who later recanted, one by a writer. At least 23 women have accused of Trump of various degrees of sexual assault, groping, and sexual harassment. He's on audiotape bragging that he could grab women by the genitals because he was famous, and that he could get away with walking into dressing rooms because he owned the pageant.

In my commentary "Guns, Germs and Steel - updated," I cited Jared Diamond's explanation of how viruses mutate from animals living in groups to versions that can infection people. Since there are always hosts in the flock or herd, the virus is never extinguished. Historically recent viruses that made the jump to humans include AIDS, Ebola and SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, another type of coronavirus). None of those viruses was named after a particular country. Early in history, the virus causing smallpox made the jump from cattle. British doctor Edward Jenner noticed cowpox seemed to make milkmaids immune to smallpox, and developed a vaccination (from vacca, the Latin word for cow).

George Washington, himself a victim of smallpox, which killed roughly 30% of those infected, had the Continental army inoculated with an earlier smallpox preventative, using dead pustules. He improved sanitation among his troops, and sent almost a thousand soldiers to help Boston prevent the spread of smallpox. That was leadership.

Trump, who repeatedly and wrongly claims he can do whatever he wants as president, bullies instead of leading. He's failed at his job of protecting Americans. We can contrast his behavior with that of Germany's leader, Angela Merkel, herself a scientist. She told the Germans the truth: that the virus was dangerous and they needed to isolate themselves. Germans were tested whether or not they showed symptoms, because the virus can be in the body for a week before causing symptoms, and can also be spread by carriers who never get sick. Germans who tested positive were isolated and their contacts traced so the contacts could be isolated before infecting anyone. The government sent medical personnel to people's homes to treat those who were ill. Due to the testing and contract tracing, Germany has opened up, having conquered the virus. Trump also had the example of South Korea's successful fight against the virus.

The United States has the highest rate of Covid 19 exposure in the world and it's far too soon to open up. The federal government should have had tests and contact tracing ready when the virus hit. And, of course, Trump shouldn't have cut the Center for Disease Control budget and closed the office tasked with stopping the spread of pandemics when he first took office. When Trump claimed anyone who wanted a test could get one, he lied. Shutting down America reduced covid's spread, but without testing and contact tracing we were basically kept on hold.

Desperate to activate the tanking economy, Trump pressured governors to open prematurely, tweeting "Liberate Virginia, and save your great 2nd Amendment. It is under siege!" He also urged the "Liberation" of Michigan and Minnesota. Trump supporters, most of them without masks and in close contact, some carrying semiautomatic rifles, Confederate flags, nooses, and white nationalist symbols, flooded into the Michigan capitol building. When you bring a rifle to a legislature, that's not protesting, it's an attempt at intimidation.

Trump sent the Navy Blue Angels and Air Force Thunderbirds in flyovers as a purported show of solidarity with health care workers. I'm sure our health care workers would prefer the personal protective equipment that could save their lives. While Trump repeatedly proclaims himself to have unchecked power, and wrongly claimed he rather than the governors could open the states, he didn't do what he actually has the power to do: order American industry to manufacture the desperately needed personal protective equipment so nurses and other medical staff stop dying from treating covid patients. He had that power back in November when he was first told the virus could be a pandemic. He's used the Defense Production Act to force medical suppliers in Texas and Colorado to sell to the U.S. government ahead of American states or hospitals. Trump told Fox News that Democratic governors would have to "treat us well" and not be critical in order to get supplies their states need to fight Covid 19.

Various states, including Massachusetts and a Kentucky hospital head charged the Federal Emergency Management Agency with scooping up personal protective equipment and medical gear. According to ABC News, Maryland's Republican Governor Larry Hogan, with the help of his South Korean wife, got tests from South Korea, had them flown to Maryland, and has them in a nondisclosed location guarded by the National Guard to prevent Trump from getting them. He cited his concern after the federal government's confiscation of N95 masks Massachusetts ordered.

When the Center for Disease Control advised that the public wear non-medical masks [to save medical masks for medical workers] Trump said it was voluntary and that he didn't think he'd be doing it. I think wearing a face mask as I greet presidents, prime ministers, dictators, kings, queens, I dunno, somehow I don't see it for myself, I just, I just, maybe I'll change my mind. Apparently in deference to Trump, Vice President Mike Pence, head of the Corona Virus Task Force, was the only person not wearing a mask at Mayo Clinic, despite being informed that their policy was for all visitors to wear masks (to protect their patients).

Trump approvingly noted that bleach worked against the virus on surfaces. He said, I see the disinfectant, it knocks it out in one minute, and is there a way we can do something like that by injection, inside or almost a cleaning, because you see it gets in the lungs . . . A reporter asked him the question: "Maryland and other states" Governor Larry Hogan specifically said they've seen a spike in people using disinfectant after your comments last week. I know you said they were sarcastic--Trump interrupted to say I can't imagine why I can't imagine why yeah. The reporter continued "Do you take any responsibility" Trump immediately said, "No, no I don't" "I can't imagine--I can't imagine that."

On March 27 Trump posted on Twitter to urge Ford and General Motors to start making ventilators now, according to Buzz Feed News. Thousands of tweets replied, including an electrical engineer in Silicon Valley named Yaren Oren-Pines, a specialist in mobile phone technology. He has no apparent experience in government contracting or medical devices. New York paid Oren-Pines \$69.1 million for 1450 ventilators, at least triple the standard price of high-end models. No ventilators arrived. A state official said New York entered into the contract at the direct recommendation of the White House coronavirus task force.

A reporter said "If an American president loses more Americans in the course of six weeks than died in the entirety of the Vietnam War, does he deserve to be re-elected?" Trump made some cursory comments about even one American was too much to lose, then I think we've made a lot of really good decisions. Really? What good decisions were those?

Even a broken clock is right twice a day. Trump keeps doing the wrong thing. We know where the hot spots are for covid 19: nursing homes, assisted living homes, and veterans homes, due to the age of the residents living in close quarters. Also due to the close quarters, prisons

and slaughterhouses. Covid 19 goes through these facilities like wildfire, and from there spreads into the general population.

So what did Trump do? He finally invoked the Defense Production Act, to prevent state and local governments from closing down slaughterhouses. So, with workers continuing to work in close quarters, shoulder to shoulder, the virus will keep spreading, and from them to the communities in which they live. At one meatpacking plant 890 workers were positive for covid 19.

MSNBC's Rachel Maddow in her Friday May 1 program showed how JB foods shut down their slaughterhouses, had them disinfected, then had workers spaced farther apart and wearing personal protective equipment. It means meat would cost more, but it would keep the virus from spreading to more workers and their families and communities. Yet Trump prioritized meat over human lives. Sure, it's politically embarrassing when chickens are euthanized and more and more cattle are crowding into stockyards as more and more people line up at food banks. But, spreading the virus further is hardly the answer. Prisons that have been able to test have found as much as 30 times as much covid as they expected. Covid-infected prisoners spread it to staff, who spread it to the community.

Maddow also showed the change in Center for Disease Control reports between April 20 and April 22. The CDC team that inspected the JBS plant in Greeley, Colorado report gave clear-cut directives. The Sioux Falls Smithfield report two days later told the plant to "consider" implementing protocols, and said recommendations were discretionary, not mandatory.

Colorado: "Emphasize that face coverings must cover the nose and mouth at all times and should remain in place until taken off safely." Also, "Provide all entrants (e.g. workers, contractors, regulatory staff, and visitors) to the plant with a face covering and show them how it needs to be worn."

Sioux Falls: "Face coverings are generally recommended . . . and if feasible, all employees should wear the face covering."

Two neuroscientists from Michigan State University wrote a Wall Street Journal op-ed offering hope on testing. Their team in one week developed a PCR test using Food and Drug Administration guidelines and a scientific report from Wuhan, China. (Polymerase chain reaction tests rapidly make millions of copies of a specific DNA sample, allowing scientists to

use a very small sample and increase it to an amount sufficiently large to study in detail). Their test doesn't use the scarce re-agents required by other tests and can identify the virus at levels too low for other tests to pick up. Their lab sits idle because it lacks Clinical Laboratory Improvement Amendment Certification; they've applied for FDA approval so the test can be made widely available.

A May 4 Washington Post article cited a draft government report projecting that U.S. covid 19 deaths will rise to 3000 a day by June 1, with new confirmed cases rising to almost 200,000 daily. So why are we opening up when other nations have kept their economies closed until covid cases decreased? Trump keeps floundering, concentrating on getting elected, while repeatedly going against medical recommendations.

Covid isn't to be taken lightly. It's killed children and young adults as well as the elderly. In severe cases it can affect the heart, kidneys and brain, and it's caused strokes. Yet Americans, including many Alaskans, are going out in public without masks and without keeping social distance. This is going to show up in emergency rooms jammed with Covid patients. We don't have a covid cure; we merely have things that show promise. We're a long way from a vaccination, if we can get a vaccination that works. Our governor is allowing businesses such as massage and hair cutting to open because he doesn't want to pay unemployment. It's impossible to give a massage or cut someone's hair using social distancing.

Please, stay home. If you can't stay home, wear a mask and keep social distance; droplets from a cough can travel over nine feet. When you get back home, please call or email your governor, congressional representative, senators, and the White House to see why the government keeps tanking our economy and letting Americans die without doing what the successful countries have done: test, isolate those who are positive for covid 19, track and test their contacts and isolate those who are positive for covid 19, until the virus is eradicated. And ask why tax money is going to large businesses instead of the small businesses that drive our economy and to unemployed individuals.

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