

The Politics of Panic are Far Deadlier Than the Coronavirus

US president Donald Trump “Has a Problem as the Coronavirus Threatens the US,” assert the authors of a *New York Times* analysis: “His Credibility.”

In the tagline and elsewhere in the article, the authors imply that the spread of COVID-19, aka “the coronavirus,” constitutes a “public health crisis” and a “national emergency” which Trump’s “history of issuing false claims” handicaps him in selling plans to address.

If they’re right about Trump’s credibility, they’re pointing to a feature, not a bug. The last thing we need is an impetuous political response to COVID-19.

The coronavirus is neither a national emergency nor a public health crisis in the US. Absent heavy-handed government involvement it’s unlikely to become either.

What is COVID-19?

It’s a regional epidemic in China, with a fairly low — and continuously falling as more and more asymptomatic cases are discovered — mortality rate even there.

It’s likely to be far less deadly in the US, which has better air quality than, and about 1/5th the percentage of smokers as, China. Like other “common cold” type viruses, it’s more likely to kill those with compromised lungs and/or immune systems.

Yes, COVID-19 is coming to America. In fact, it’s already here, and it’s going to spread.

It will spread whether Trump appoints vice-president Mike Pence to stop it or not.

It will spread whether federal government and state governments impose draconian but ineffectual measures like travel restrictions and large-scale quarantines or not.

Political grandstanding over the coronavirus and “emergency measures” versus the coronavirus will almost certainly kill more people — in the US and abroad — than the coronavirus itself.

Every “emergency measure” imposes costs in the form of drag on economic activity.

We’ve already seen what happens to the stock market when business gets nervous about the Chinese nodes in its supply chains.

Travel and trade restrictions mean higher prices and lost jobs, both of which discourage Americans from seeing doctors when they get sick.

Treating COVID-19 as a genuine American public health emergency instead of as an understandable but unjustified panic means medical resources get mal-invested in fighting COVID-19 instead of the other real, existing health problems they're needed to fight.

Higher prices, lost jobs, and medical mal-investment are a recipe for dead Americans.

You probably won't get the coronavirus. If you do get it, it probably won't kill you. But politicians and bureaucrats trafficking in panic just might succeed where it fails.