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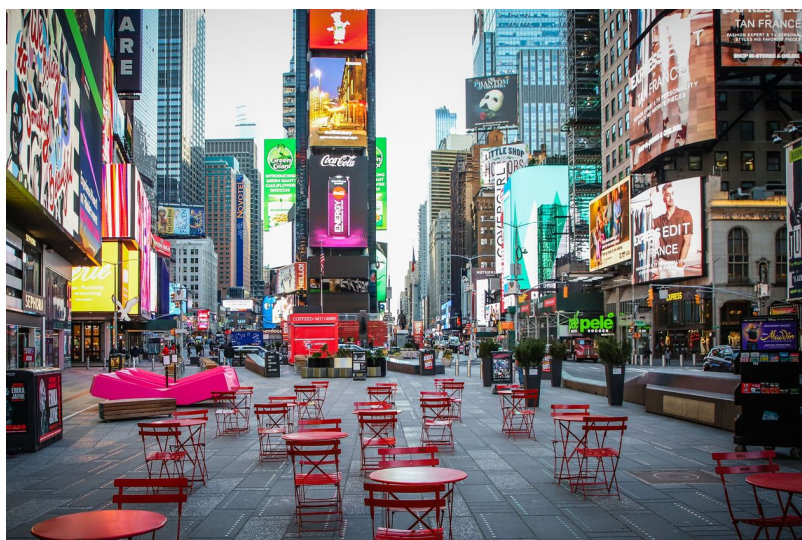
OPINION | REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Lessons of the Long Covid Year

Lockdowns made the pandemic suffering far worse than necessary.


By [The Editorial Board](#)

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Tables and chairs sit empty at a cafe in Times Square following the announcement of COVID-19 lockdown in New York, March 16, 2020.

PHOTO: VANESSA CARVALHO/ZUMA PRESS

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When a SARS-like virus was reported spreading in Wuhan in late 2019, most Americans never imagined their own government would soon close schools, churches and businesses, order people to stay home, and spend more than \$5 trillion to offset the damage. Yet a year later, here we are.

The anniversary is a moment to consider what the pandemic has wrought and how well the U.S. has responded. Healthcare workers have been courageous, drug companies ingenious, and average Americans resilient. The political class and health experts? Not so much.

Start with China and the World Health Organization, which is supposed to patrol for global health threats. China lied and the WHO played along. After censoring doctors, Beijing denied there was evidence of human-to-human transmission until shortly before it locked down Hubei province with 60 million people. Many Chinese had already left the country for Lunar New Year.

 OPINION: POTOMAC WATCH



Passing Covid-19 To Find Out What's In It



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The delay cost the world vital weeks in preparing for the virus, yet the WHO praised China for its transparency. We now know the virus by late January was spreading undetected in the U.S. and Europe. China's ability to manipulate the WHO shows how the free world has put too much faith in multilateral institutions with authoritarian governments as members.

President Biden and Democrats blame Donald Trump for 530,000 American deaths, though any Administration would have been tested. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention botched development of a Covid test, and the Food and Drug Administration was slow to authorize private alternatives. The U.S. was caught with a shortage of protective equipment and ventilators, though it mobilized fast on both.

U.S. deaths adjusted for population are comparable to Western Europe's. Asian countries also experienced surges, though fewer deaths because of healthier populations. Island nations Australia and New Zealand closed their borders. Mr. Trump too often downplayed the virus, and his compulsion to make himself the center of the Covid story is a major reason he lost the Presidency. But most politicians and public-health officials also minimized the virus early on because they didn't want to cause panic.

Mr. Trump's biggest mistake was putting too much faith in health experts and their lockdown models. As hospitals in northern Italy burst with patients, epidemiologists predicted U.S. hospitals would soon be overwhelmed. On March 16, Mr. Trump ordered a 15-day national lockdown to "slow the spread," which he later extended through April.

Lockdowns were understandable a year ago in the Northeast given how little was known about Covid. But as we warned at the time ("Rethinking the Virus Shutdown," March 20), "no society can safeguard public health for long at the cost of its overall economic health." As state shutdowns continued, they compounded the virus damage.

The tragedy is how poorly we've adapted as we've learned more about the risks. Studies from Europe showed nearly half of deaths were occurring in nursing homes, and children rarely transmitted the illness or became severely ill. Treatments improved as doctors learned more, but government prescriptions didn't change. As Philippe Lemoine argues nearby, the accumulating evidence is that lockdowns don't reduce the virus spread in the long run.

Lockdowns nonetheless became an ideological battle. The media became lockdown cheerleaders as they sought to take down Mr. Trump, with tragic results for lost businesses, lost livelihoods and health damage in late diagnoses, untreated conditions and mental illness that will compound for years.

Children have lost a year of learning, which many will never make up. The lockdown recession hurt low-income workers the most, while affluent Americans could work from home. While it's impossible to quantify the social harm, last summer's riots and the deepening political discord didn't happen in a vacuum.

There was an alternative. Tens of thousands of doctors signed the Great Barrington Declaration, which recommended that government minimize deaths and economic harm by protecting the vulnerable while letting most Americans return to normal life. Individuals and businesses could adjust to the virus and socially distance as they saw fit. The media and progressive elites dismissed these voices and refused to drop their lockdown dogmatism.

The Covid pandemic has seen the greatest loss of American liberty outside wartime. Politicians closed houses of worship without regard for the First Amendment. They ordered arbitrary shutdowns that favored some businesses but punished others. Politicians and governments have used the pandemic to justify an enormous expansion of

state power. Government had to act in March to avoid economic catastrophe from the lockdowns it ordered. But the politicians keep amassing power even as vaccines are rolling out.

Government spending and deficits have reached heights unseen since World War II as a share of the economy, and taxes are likely to follow. The Federal Reserve has become a de facto arm of the Treasury to finance deficits, with unknown future consequences.

The pandemic is now easing thanks largely to the ingenuity of American drug and biotech companies. The Trump Administration's Operation Warp Speed made the inspired decision last year to invest \$20 billion developing six vaccine candidates. This is the best decision government made. Vaccines typically take a decade to develop, but years of private investment and innovation have paid off in advanced technologies that have cut the time to a year.

The pandemic has been a testament to American grit and resilience—but an undeserved windfall for government. We will be paying for the lockdown excesses for generations.

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