

CNN's pandemic “postmortem”: The anatomy of a “social murder”

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On Sunday night, CNN aired a two-hour special on the COVID-19 pandemic featuring interviews with the public health experts who nominally led the country's response to the disease under the Trump administration.

The interviews are a devastating indictment of a government and political establishment that deliberately allowed hundreds of thousands of people to die in order to protect the interests of the financial oligarchy.

According to the two leading figures interviewed in the program—White House Coronavirus Response Coordinator Deborah Birx and National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci—almost the entire US public health response to the pandemic took place in defiance of science and the advice of public health experts.

In the defining moments of the pandemic, according to the officials' own admissions, the Trump administration was either actively engaging in a massive cover-up or pursuing a deliberate policy of allowing the pandemic to spread unchecked throughout the population.

If, in the words of CNN host Dr. Sanjay Gupta, the program is a “postmortem” on the pandemic, the cause of death must be deemed, in the words of the BMJ medical journal, “social murder.”

The US government's response to the pandemic was a disaster from the start, beginning with what Gupta called the “original sin” of failing to carry out any meaningful testing for the first two months of the pandemic.

The decision not to test the population throughout all of January and February has never been convincingly explained. The World Health Organization (WHO) formally alerted the world to the outbreak of what would later be called COVID-19 on January 1, 2020. But for the next two months, the United States would carry out no testing for the disease, even though a test from the WHO became available in early January.

In their interviews, the health officials faulted each

other for failing to use the widely available WHO test, passing the blame like a hot potato until FDA Commissioner Steven Hahn finally claimed the WHO was itself responsible because it did not force the United States to use its tests.

This account is absurd. A far more believable explanation is offered by Birx: “People really believed in the White House, that testing was driving cases, rather than testing is a way for us to stop cases.”

In other words, since the White House claimed testing was the cause of cases, it discouraged testing. Conveniently, the fact that there was no testing meant that everyone, including Fauci and Birx themselves, could justify claiming that the danger was low, while discouraging the public from taking vital social distancing measures that could have halted the spread of the pandemic.

By mid-March, with the pandemic totally overwhelming Italy and rapidly spreading in New York, it became impossible to keep up this charade. Once the US finally began testing people who showed symptoms of COVID-19, it became undeniable that there was widespread community transmission all over the country.

Workers began walking off of shop floors, and the markets went into freefall. The US government responded by passing the CARES Act, a massive, multi-trillion-dollar bailout to major corporations, accompanied by trillions more in cash from the Federal Reserve. Sensing the need to buy time, the Trump White House temporarily encouraged remote work and the closure of schools.

Birx and Fauci claim the Trump administration seriously listened to their advice on only two occasions: when it initiated the development of vaccines in January and when it advised the public to “work or engage in schooling from home whenever possible” for 45 days beginning in March.

Within a matter of days, however, Trump began to

advocate for the abandonment of these basic measures under the slogan, coined by the *New York Times*' Thomas Friedman, that "the cure can't be worse than the disease." This campaign led the White House to release a set of guidelines entitled "Opening Up America Again."

While these guidelines nominally set out a set of criteria for states to reopen non-essential businesses, they in fact sent a political signal that all measures to contain the disease were to be abandoned. Governors in every state proceeded to reopen in violation of the Trump administrations' own guidelines, including states with both Democratic and Republican governors where cases continued to surge.

The states, Birx said, went on to "completely ignore the opening criteria." She added, "I didn't see coming that no one would follow really the gating criteria... so when Memorial Day came, it was—it was shocking."

But the states' actions did not come as a surprise to the *World Socialist Web Site*. Just days after the release of the guidelines, the WSWS wrote:

The Trump administration's cynical announcement of a set of fraudulent "guidelines" that will serve to legitimize a rapid reopening of businesses and a forced return to work, in unsafe conditions, brings to an end any public pretense of a systematic and coordinated effort within the United States to prioritize health and to protect human life in combating the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

One year later, not a word of this analysis needs to be changed. With the announcement of the reopening criteria, Birx and Fauci were largely sidelined, going weeks without speaking to Trump, replaced with the right-wing ideologue and herd immunity proponent Scott Atlas.

As "testing tsar" Brett P. Giroir, who was also interviewed, put it, "Dr. Atlas's position is that we should just sort of let it go in the healthy population to create herd immunity." Atlas and his co-thinkers believed that any measures to contain the disease were "compromising the American economy, the American lifestyle. In their mind, all of those things outweighed the fatalities."

The most highly cited passage from the CNN program came with the admission by Birx that nearly half a million deaths in the United States were preventable. As Birx put it, "The first time, we have an excuse, there were about

100,000 deaths that came from that original search, all of the rest of them, in my mind, could have been mitigated or decreased substantially."

In other words, by closing non-essential businesses and schools, the spread of the disease could have been contained enough so as to be dramatically reduced through testing, quarantine, and contact tracing. But these measures conflicted with the social interests of America's financial oligarchy. They were not carried out, leading to the deaths of hundreds of thousands.

While CNN calls its program a "postmortem," the crime is still ongoing. Even as Fauci and Birx condemn the Trump administration's premature reopening of schools and businesses, the Biden administration is carrying out the same policies, with the same results.

On Monday, just one day after Birx made clear that most of the deaths in the United States were preventable, CDC Director Rochelle Walensky warned of "impending doom" if the United States does not change its course. Yet, only two weeks earlier, the CDC, bowing to the pressure of the Biden administration, modified its guidelines on social distancing to facilitate the reopening of schools.

One year after the events depicted in the CNN program, one thousand people are dying daily in the United States. And with deadly new variants of the disease emerging around the globe, COVID-19 is more dangerous than ever.

The catastrophic consequences of the pandemic are the product of the fact that the response of governments, led by the United States but repeated throughout the world, were dictated not by social need and public health, but by private profit. A solution to the pandemic, therefore, was and remains not primarily a medical issue. It is a matter of social and political struggle, waged by the international working class, against the capitalist system.



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