

Mississippi governor offers religious pipedreams for COVID-19

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During a Republican Party fundraiser held August 26 in Memphis, Tennessee, Governor Tate Reeves of Mississippi addressing a group standing shoulder to shoulder, said, “I’m often asked by some of my friends on the other side of the aisle regarding COVID ... and why does it seem like both in Mississippi and maybe in the mid-South people are a little less scared, shall we say?”

This provocative question could have been answered with the frank admission that politicians like himself, who promote anti-scientific quackery, belittle vaccination and public health measures and appeal to ignorance and religious bigotry, are largely responsible.

Instead, he attributed the seeming lack of concern over coronavirus to the religious belief in the afterlife: “When you believe in eternal life, when you believe that living on this earth is but a blip on the screen, then you don’t have to be scared of things.”

Then, apparently realizing he was saying something so offensive it might backfire on him politically, he quickly added, “Now, God also tells us to take necessary precautions. And we all have opportunities and abilities to do that, and we should all do that. I encourage everyone to do so.”

He proceeded to affirm optimistically that case rates and hospitalizations in his state were finally holding steady and fully vindicated his persistent opposition to imposing the most meager measure to contain the pandemic, including mask or vaccine mandates.

Actually, Governor Reeves is presently presiding over a state that last week not only registered the highest rate of new cases of COVID-19 per capita in the country, it was also the pandemic hotspot of the world. If Mississippi were a separate country, it would lead every other nation on this planet in new infections per capita.

As the graph below, obtained from the Mississippi public health website demonstrates, the numbers of new cases and patients in ICUs and on ventilators are the highest in the pandemic. The state also has the lowest vaccination rate, with 37.7 percent of the population fully vaccinated. Notably—and this is directly connected—the median household income in the state is also the lowest in the country, highlighting the tremendous poverty that plagues the population.

The upward acceleration in new COVID-19 cases across Mississippi commenced with the start of the school year in the latter half of July. In the first week of August, just two weeks into the school year, 69 outbreaks were reported across some districts, affecting at least 1,000 students and over 300 teachers and staff who tested positive for COVID-19. Yet the Delta variant was given free rein despite alarms raised by public health officials.

In the week of August 16-20, there were 386 COVID-19 outbreaks out of 835 schools reporting across 75 of 82 counties. In total, the Department of Health tallied 704 coronavirus outbreaks since the start of the school year.

Close to 12,000 students have tested positive for COVID-19, and over 30,000 staff, teachers, and students have been quarantined. Against the governor’s wishes, the Mississippi State Board of Education, in the face of an out-of-control pandemic, provided school districts options for a combination of in-person and virtual instructions until October 31. They also remarked that when they meet again in October, they could extend the date.

Last Wednesday, a sixth student died from COVID-19 complications. As the *Mississippi Free Press* noted, “As many Mississippi children have died of COVID-19 over the past month as died during the

first 16 months of the pandemic combined.” The latest victim was under five years old. What consoling words would Governor Reeves offer these grieving parents?

The current massive surge of infections has also taken an immense toll on the health care sector and not just in Mississippi but across the entire South, where the impact has been felt most heavily of any region in the United States. Many health care professionals are quitting due to the persistent post-traumatic stress they have faced in seeing countless deaths.

Nicole Atherton, a Mississippi ICU nurse, recently resigned due to the stress caused by the overwhelming number of young people who have inundated hospitals only to die after their bitter struggle. She told CNN, “It looks heroic, but that’s not what it is. It’s sweaty and hard and chaotic and bloody. And it’s hard to live in this every day and then go home and live a normal life.”

Other nurses have told the media that the most challenging part has been seeing patients in the prime of their lives quickly cut down, leaving behind their bewildered children asking where “mommy or daddy is?” Lacy Lancaster, a registered nurse at Ocean Springs Hospital near Biloxi, who works in the ICU, explained that many colleagues are crying and putting themselves down. They are angry and, at the same time, terribly saddened.

According to the state’s hospital association, 2,000 nurses have quit since the beginning of the year, leading to a massive staff shortage that adds to the health sector’s strain. There are approximately 875 staffed ICU beds across the state. According to the US Department of Health and Human Services, almost all are used, and more than 63 percent are occupied with COVID-19 patients.

Staff vacancies also mean underutilization of available resources. Even if a hospital had available beds and equipment, a lack of trained personnel to care for patients effectively reduces capacity. For instance, nearly 30 percent of the 500 beds at Singing River hospital are empty because there are 169 unfilled nursing positions. Those nurses on the job are overworked and exhausted, meaning that the potential for errors is compounded, leading to unintended injuries and deaths.

Given these figures, Governor Reeves’s claim of case rates and hospitalizations having reached stability

needs context. As one physician had observed, stability may mean saturation. Dead people, too, are stable.

If state numbers are stable, it may be due to the recent halting of in-person classes and placing people under quarantine, which can mitigate the community spread and has little to do with a religious conviction that God has miraculously intervened.

Perhaps Reeves, in the style of a preacher shrieking about hellfire and damnation, should have cited the Afghanistan disaster, mass evictions, and hurricanes striking New Orleans, along with COVID-19, as the arrival of the proverbial four horsemen of the Apocalypse, and urged his flock to rely on God and not the government to keep them safe.

While wrapping himself in the cloak of religion, however, the governor is serving very earthly social interests. It is the capitalist class, not any heavenly deity, that is demanding that schools and businesses stay open so they can continue to amass profits and increase their wealth. It is the capitalist class that has systematically run down the social infrastructure of Mississippi to the point that neither the health system nor the schools can meet the needs of the population.



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