

White House lifts ban on international travel amid rising global COVID-19 cases

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Earlier this month, the White House announced that the COVID-19 restrictions placed into effect in March 2020 that effectively barred international travel to the United States would be lifted on November 8, 2021, to all fully vaccinated foreign visitors.

White House spokesman Kevin Munoz confirmed the lifting of the ban on Twitter after the pronouncement, writing on October 15 that “the US’ new travel policy that requires vaccination for foreign travelers to the United States will begin on November 8. This announcement and date apply to both international air travel and land travel.”

For all practical purposes, the announcement ushers in a complete end to any mitigation attempts to check the spread of the virus and inaugurates the concept of allowing the virus to become endemic like the influenza virus.

The call for the shift in policy was undoubtedly coordinated to coincide with the decline in recent cases and hospitalizations, which garnered national attention. Last month more than 1,700 people were dying each day. The healthcare systems from the South through the mid-West into the mountain regions were inundated with patients. Some states were enacting crisis standards of care that limited emergency healthcare measures to those deemed to have best chance of surviving.

More than 11 million people were infected in the last wave. More than 120,000 died. Still, daily new cases remain above 60,000 per day, and more than 1,200 people are dying each day from COVID. Presently, more than 46 million have reportedly been infected, and more than three-quarter million have perished.

Yet, the lobbying groups representing airlines have been clamoring incessantly for months for lifting these bans.

Not surprisingly, with the declaration to lift the travel restrictions, the stock prices for all the major airlines took off. In an email statement, Jonathan Root, senior vice president at Moody’s Investors Services, wrote, “Leisure bookings for the holidays from inbound tourist visits and non-US citizens visiting friends and relatives will accelerate in upcoming weeks. We also now expect a stronger increase in business travel by the first quarter of 2022 than would have occurred if the borders remained closed.”

Nicholas Calio, president of Airlines for America, the lobbying group for the major US carriers, cheered Biden’s decision, adding “The full reopening of international travel is also critical to reviving economies around the globe,”

In an attempt to cover for the deranged policy that will further the global transmission of the coronavirus, the Biden administration is promising that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) will require airlines to collect and pass on information on passengers to aid contact tracing.

White House Coronavirus Response Coordinator Jeff Zients said at a press conference, “In the coming weeks, CDC will be issuing a contact tracing order requiring airlines to collect current information for each US-bound traveler, including their phone number and email address.”

Contact tracing infrastructure in the United States is largely non-existent. Rather than bolstering the efforts of public health departments across the country to assist them during the pandemic, the federal and state governments have all been gutted through years of attrition. There have been widespread defections by public health officials due to aggressions and threats made against them by right-wing organizations. Having served years in their capacity, many of these same

officials report being entirely spent and severely depressed. Funding has been vastly eroded—their authority to impose health orders removed—these hollow public health institutions stand in name only.

Adrian Casalotti, chief of public and government affairs for the National Association of County and City Health Officials, an organization representing the nearly 3,000 local health departments across the nation, told the *New York Times*, “We have learned all the wrong lessons from the pandemic. We are attacking and removing authority from the people who are trying to protect us.”

By contrast, while the public health infrastructure was caving in, the airline industry was being buoyed by federal aid to the tune of over \$74 billion in government relief.

The rule in effect means that on November 8, any adult eligible to receive the vaccine must have been fully inoculated with a vaccine that has received emergency use listing by the World Health Organization and proof of this vaccination before entering the US. Children under 18, however, will be exempt from these requirements, which poses a significant public health risk.

The United States will also be opening air travel to individuals from the so-called Schengen countries, European countries that have officially abolished controls between their mutual borders. These include Germany, Italy, Spain, France, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Poland, etc.

Last week Europe had 1.67 million new cases of COVID-19, a weekly increase of 251,000 or a 17.7 percent increase from the previous week. Cases have been climbing for four straight weeks even though many of these countries have surpassed the US in the number of fully vaccinated individuals. These developments have significant implications for a virus that has kept pace with the rising tides of infection and vaccinations. As it stands, the globe is beginning the sixth wave of the pandemic.

The case of the UK is worth reviewing. With 68 percent of its population fully vaccinated and one-sixth previously infected, the country is reporting more than 46,000 daily cases of COVID-19, highlighting the difficulty of ever achieving herd immunity. They are also facing the rise in a new lineage of the Delta variant called AY.4. It is beginning to displace Delta,

accounting for 62.4 percent of sequenced COVID-19 cases in the last 28 days.

At present, there are 75 AY lineages, each with specific mutations that have been identified, and their numbers continue to increase. AY.4.2, a sub-lineage of AY.4, was first discovered in June but came to researchers’ attention in September. In four weeks, it rose to account for ten percent of all UK cases. Two additional mutations involving its spike protein may have made it slightly more transmissible than Delta. Researchers, however, suspect that one of these mutations gives it even more ability to escape immunity by making its spike region less recognizable by antibodies.

They admit it remains too early to say if it will become a dominant strain of the coronavirus. But in the context of a complete resumption of global air travel with a billion or two more people traveling to every region of the globe in 2022, it seems every advantage is being forwarded to the virus.



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