

Is the pandemic really over?

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Tuesday's State of the Union address by US President Joe Biden was a choreographed event intended to portray the COVID-19 pandemic as over. It marked the climax of a weeks-long effort of the entire political establishment and corporate media, spearheaded by the Democratic Party, to force the American population to "live with the virus" and accept a "new normal" of unending mass infection, debilitation and death.

The central focus of Biden's speech was the war in Ukraine, as he portrayed Russian President Vladimir Putin as the villain in a Manichean struggle of good versus evil. For the Biden administration and the Democratic Party, the war is seen as a means to "unify" the country and divert all attention away from the immense domestic crisis triggered by the pandemic.

Despite the fact that the COVID-19 death toll in the US is approaching 1 million and over 125,000 Americans have died since the start of the new year, the corporate media has stopped covering the pandemic and is almost exclusively engaged in war propaganda. A similar phenomenon has swept across Europe, whose capitalist governments are also implicated in ongoing mass infections and deaths from COVID-19.

But, despite the efforts of the political establishment and media to make the public believe that the pandemic is over, this is far from the case. On Tuesday, the day Biden spoke, BNO News reported that 1,763 people lost their lives to COVID-19. The following day, the death toll rose to 2,236.

Almost as many people are dying every day in the US as in the height of the surge caused by the Delta variant of COVID-19 in September. Vietnam, South Korea and other countries are recording record case rates as the BA2 variant surges around the world.

As part of the effort to normalize the pandemic, last Friday the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released new masking guidelines based on hospital capacity instead of COVID-19 infection rates. The guidelines have been widely denounced by scientists for turning masks into a personal preference rather than a necessary public health measure. On Wednesday, the CDC rescinded its contact tracing recommendations, another significant milestone in the scrapping of all COVID-19 mitigation measures in the US.

The coordinated announcement of the end of masking and contact tracing marks the final implementation of a policy dreamed of by the US political establishment since the start of the pandemic: to end all measures to interrupt the spread of the disease, even as thousands of people needlessly die every single day.

The CDC's masking guidelines were implemented at the State

of the Union, with almost every attendee maskless. Behind this veneer of normalcy, all those present had to have tested negative for COVID-19 that day, a luxury denied at nearly every school and workplace across the US.

The pandemic, which has profoundly affected every American for two years, was relegated to roughly seven minutes in the second half of Biden's hourlong speech. Not once did he say the words "Omicron," "Long COVID," "airborne" or "N95."

As with Biden's speech overall, his remarks on COVID-19 were a mass of contradictions, lies and a profound distortion of the present reality of the pandemic.

He began, "For more than two years, COVID has impacted every decision in our lives and the life of this nation. And I know you're tired, frustrated and exhausted. That doesn't even count the close to a million people who sit at a dining room table or a kitchen table and look at an empty chair because they lost somebody."

This oblique reference to the staggering US death toll, which will surpass 1 million later this month, was Biden's only acknowledgment of this immense tragedy. He omitted the fact that since he took office on January 20, 2021, over 535,000 Americans have died from COVID-19, more than the combined total number of US soldiers killed in World War I and World War II. Roughly 15,000 Americans have died each week for the past month, with no end in sight.

As a tried and true American pragmatist, Biden refused to dwell on the past and quickly moved on, stating, "Tonight I can say we're moving forward safely, back to [...] more normal routines." He later added, "COVID-19 no longer need control our lives."

He praised the CDC's new masking guidelines, saying, "most Americans in most of the country can now go mask free." Directly contradicting himself, he then stated, "Because this virus mutates and spreads, we have to stay on guard."

Biden presented a fairy tale description of the future of the pandemic, outlining "four commonsense steps as we move forward safely." The first step will be "vaccines and treatments."

Evidently having learned nothing from the unprecedented spread of the Omicron variant, Biden stated, "The vaccine can stop the spread of these diseases." In fact, for over one year it has been known that the vaccines do not fully protect against COVID-19 infection but rather primarily protect against hospitalization and death. The CDC has withheld critical data on breakthrough infections and deaths, but it is known that they are not uncommon and can lead to death or debilitating Long COVID.

Furthermore, only 65 percent of Americans have received two doses of vaccine. Less than 29 percent have been boosted, with

vaccination rates stalled at only 350,000 per day. Antivirals, while promising, are in highly limited supply. Relying on vaccines and treatments alone sets the stage for further mass infections and deaths whenever the next variant inevitably evolves.

Facing enormous backlash for the CDC's new masking recommendations, which place over 9 million immunocompromised Americans in peril, Biden stated, "If you're immunocompromised or have some other vulnerability, we have treatments and free high-quality masks. We're leaving no one behind or ignoring anyone's needs as we move forward." However, he failed to reconcile this with the fact that every indoor public space will now be hazardous for millions of at-risk people.

The second step of the Biden administration's plan is to "prepare for new variants."

Biden promised, "If necessary, we'll be able to deploy new vaccines within 100 days instead of maybe months or years," adding, "I can't promise a new variant won't come, but I can promise you we'll do everything within our power to be ready if it does."

He neglected to mention that attempts to produce an Omicron-specific vaccine proved unsuccessful, as well as the fact that the BA.2 Omicron subvariant is rising exponentially in the US while shattering records for infections, hospitalizations and deaths in Hong Kong, South Korea, Denmark and Iceland, all of which have higher vaccination rates than the US.

The conception that each time a new variant arises, the correct response is to restart the entire process of vaccinating the world's population, is absurd. Given the laws of viral evolution, this Sisyphean struggle would continue for years, as billions more are needlessly infected and millions die while new vaccines are slowly distributed worldwide.

The third and most critical element of Biden's pandemic future is to "end the shutdown of schools and businesses." This is the essence of the "new normal," which prioritizes the interests of the corporations and financial elite.

Biden stated, "It's time for America to get back to work and fill our great downtowns again with people. People working from home can feel safe and begin to return to their offices." He added, "Our schools are open. Let's keep it that way. Our kids need to be in school." This drew a bipartisan standing ovation.

Biden claimed, "[M]ost Americans can remove their masks and stay in the classroom and move forward safely."

This is a lie of monumental proportions. The vast majority of children remain unvaccinated, and recent studies indicate that the pediatric vaccine is less effective. During the ongoing Omicron surge, children have been infected, hospitalized and killed at record rates, with the CDC recording 212 child deaths from COVID-19 in February and 84 in the last week alone.

Concluding his four-point plan, Biden said, "We'll continue vaccinating the world. We've sent 475 million vaccine doses to 112 countries—more than any nation on Earth." He elided the fact that the US has refused to relinquish intellectual property rights for the Moderna vaccine, which was developed in collaboration with the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

Biden's remarks summarized the content of a new "National COVID-19 Preparedness Plan" released Wednesday. As with

Biden's first "Preparedness Plan" issued the day after his inauguration, this plan is nothing but hot air. Nearly every aspect of the plan hinges on securing funding from Congress in a weeks- or months-long, drawn out process that may never come to fruition.

While paying lip service to the need to support Long COVID patients and improve air filtration systems in schools and public spaces, the central aim of the plan is to ensure that schools and workplaces stay open during future surges of new variants. It states, "Our path forward relies on giving schools and businesses the tools they need to prevent economic and educational shutdowns, so our students can stay in school, our workers can be safe at work and our economy can continue to grow."

Everything pertaining to indoor ventilation amounts to "recommendations," "guidance," a "checklist" and "technical resources." Nowhere is there any mention of a legal requirement or funding specifically for this most essential issue.

The "new normal" demanded by Biden and the Democrats, following in the footsteps of the "herd immunity" policies of Trump, will only deepen the social crimes committed over the past two years. In demanding that the population accept mass death from a preventable disease, the American ruling class is conditioning society for even more unspeakable crimes and mass casualties in a war with Russia.

The objective reality facing hundreds of millions of workers across the US and billions worldwide belies the propaganda that the pandemic is over. The chief task facing the international working class is to build a mass movement fighting to stop both the pandemic and the escalating drive to world war.



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