

Mandating Vaccination?

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As Americans go back to work after the pandemic, a new issue has created controversy. Some businesses and city governments are mandating vaccinations as a condition of work, medical exemptions excepted. The anti-vax conspiracists have weighed in, complaining that nobody has the right to mandate medical intrusion into their bodies.

Missing in this battle is an understanding of public health, the idea that some things are not just personal choice. Despite headlines appearing that the only new Covid hospitalizations and deaths are among those unvaccinated, the anti-vax people just don't understand this.

People are not free to reject government intervention in providing clean water, sewer systems, unpolluted air, safe food and drugs, and children vaccinated before permitted into public school. As a condition of employment, workers should be vaccinated to protect themselves and other workers and customers. That is what public health is for.

San Francisco has mandated vaccination of all city workers (with the usual exceptions), but of course there is instant pushback. The city workers' unions have weighed in, claiming that this mandate is directed at Black workers who have the lowest vaccination rates nationwide. Their reasons are: suspicion of government, distrusting the medical profession that in the past exploited black patients, and belief in the anti-vax conspiracy theories that these vaccinations are harmful."

Other complaints are that the vaccines are "too new" and not yet absolutely declared safe by the authorities. This flies in the face of the millions of us who have been vaccinated with no ill effects, and with complete protection against this very nasty virus.

One Hispanic lady was interviewed about her fear of the vaccine. "Do you really believe that if you are vaccinated, you will turn into a Zombie?" asked the reporter. "Yes," she said. "It was on the Internet." How does one respond to that?

Public Health is just that: practices and policies that protect the majority of inhabitants from harm. George Washington, when he was our first general during the Revolutionary War, mandated smallpox vaccinations of all his soldiers. There were no arguments about this. Smallpox vaccinations were a new medical discovery in France, not yet widely accepted. His mandate not only protected his own troops from this deadly killer and disfiguring disease, but disadvantaged the invading British troops who were not so protected.

The concept of public health goes back as far as the Romans, who brought clean water and waste sanitation systems to all their cities. When governmental collapse followed Rome's fall and Europe lived through the dark ages, public health steeply declined. For centuries, plagues swept through much of the world, and by the 19th century, many of these plagues were water-borne.

Europe changed with the advent of the scientific revolution, which began in the 18th century, when experimentation and critical thinking replaced superstition and ignorance. Religion, unfortunately, proved itself not effective when offering only faith and resignation instead of science and technology.

There has always been pushback to new scientific ideas. In the 19th century, medical doctors rejected the idea that hand washing before handling patients could save lives. Many unfortunate women in childbirth succumbed from childbed fevers because of this. We learned the hard way.

The campaign of disinformation about modern health practices is very cynical. In the least educated parts of the world, the villages in Pakistan and in parts of Africa, Muslim clerics frighten women about the dangers of polio vaccination offered by UN health workers. They tell the women that it is a western campaign to make their children sterile. Of course, the results of this are more maimed beggars, crippled when they need not have been.

I don't expect much from ignorant people. However, it is shocking to see the success of the anti-vax movement among educated citizens of democracies. Despite debunking conspiracy theories by medical authorities, the lies persist.

One beneficiary of this campaign against public health is Vladimir Putin, who is financing a campaign to show that the United States, a democracy, is incapable governing. Other beneficiaries are politicians sowing ignorance, fear, and distrust of truth to get reelected.

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Threats to Democracy
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Historians of democracy are becoming alarmed at the possibility of the United States, the oldest continuous participatory government in the world, may be on the verge of losing this system.

We have had close calls in the past. The Civil War threatened to cut this nation in two, but the election of Abraham Lincoln saved us. Even during that dreadful conflict, we held an election in the Union north and Lincoln was reelected to his second term.

The slave owning Southern states were less devoted to democracy. They did not want participatory government if that meant that their Black population could vote. Their lesser educated White population was deluded into thinking that they mattered because they were not Black. In reality, they did not matter at all, but were controlled by propaganda that the system gave them status.

The South lost the war, but revived the propaganda campaign and worked to once more deprive the emancipated Blacks from voting and serving in government. Reconstruction was aborted when Lincoln was assassinated and was replaced by Andrew Johnson, a man in every historian's list of our country's worst presidents.

The next danger to democracy was during the great depression of the 1930s. Many people were discouraged that their elected government (the 1920s Republicans) were incapable of saving the country from the Depression. Their political philosophy was to do nothing, hoping the economy would heal itself.

Propaganda campaigns flourished. Communists, winners of the Russian Revolution, set out to win followers globally. They claimed to be a just system that was classless, ruled by "the people." Their philosophy went worldwide with simmering rebellions everywhere. China was ripe for their campaign, and communist agents burrowed into many troubled countries.

Another new political system, Fascism, appealed to those looking for a "great leader" who would get things done. Their models were Mussolini and Hitler, and in Japan, Tojo. Fascism won many followers, particularly those who believed conspiracy theories and identified "enemies" to hate. Cults of cruelty have an appeal of their own to certain resentful populations.

Once more, the United States lucked out, electing a president who set about making beneficial changes, solving problems, and trying programs that benefitted those unemployed, hungry, poor and elderly. Our democracy survived.

Today, we have a problem of polarization not seen since the Civil War. The problem focuses on the recent presidential election, with a clear loser (Trump) refusing to concede, using a loud propaganda campaign based on the lie that the election was fraudulent. His ridiculous complaints would have no traction without the unexpected support of the Republican Party, which is indulging it.

Herein is the danger to democracy. This country depends upon a two-party system, centrist liberal and centrist conservative, both of whom trust elections and share a set of values and truths. They must agree on behavior, the behavior of honorable men

and women who treat each other like competitors, not enemies.

The once respectable Republican Party has now become the Trump Cult party. Congressional and Senate Republicans are so afraid of the ignorant Trump "base" that they support the big lie that Trump really won the election except for election fraud. They know better, as we can see from their earlier taped acknowledgments that the election was fair and that Joe Biden is our president.

The Republican party is in meltdown. The Democrats and Independents outnumber them two to one, therefore Republicans only hope of surviving is to suppress majority votes. By Gerrymandering state voting districts and passing vote suppressing regulations, they hope to maintain their power. To make absolutely sure, they expect judges they elected to override election results they don't like.

Fascism always begins with the election of a demagogue, a propaganda campaign of hatred and bigotry, and a population of disinterested and non-voters. We might survive this if the Republican Party melts down and is replaced by a new party devoted to the rules of democracy.

My hope lies with the former Republicans who speak the truth, unite to form the basis of a new party (the Lincoln Project), and an alert public that cares to protect our fragile democracy.

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