



COLUMNIST

Biden's Welcome Call to Shared Responsibility

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While president-elect Joe Biden's recent suggestion that all Americans wear face masks for the first 100 days of his presidency was as much public relations as policy, it was a refreshing change in the messaging of the last eight months for an anxious nation grappling with an unprecedented public health crisis destined to become worse.

His recommendation drew on "the first 100 days" mantra promoted by the political/media axis as a measure of whether a new Administration will succeed or fail. It is in truth a patently absurd notion that has its origin in President Franklin Roosevelt's first term in 1932 and has over the years worked its way into the nation's political lore, repeated and worshipped in the media as some sort of magic talisman to accurately predict what the ensuing 1,361 days of a four-year term will deliver.

Biden's "mask up, people" suggestion was a lighthearted attempt to draw a sharp distinction and highlight his differences with the Trump Administration over the approach to the COVID-19 pandemic which has infected 14.7 million Americans and killed nearly 283,000.

"Throw off your masks; you have nothing to lose but your health" has been the president's call to the American people as he routinely and crudely attacked his own Administration's public health experts, dismissing convincing evidence that personal protections – masks, social distancing and avoiding public gatherings – are effective in

halting the spread of a pathogen for which there is no cure.

To drive his point, Trump refused to wear a mask and defiantly whipped up crowds of tens of thousands of supporters at campaign rallies while ridiculing Biden as a weakling who always appeared wearing a mask at his small and infrequent campaign appearances.

Even upon his release from the hospital where he was treated after contracting the virus, Trump returned to the White House and made a public spectacle of ripping off his mask and exhorting people to not fear the virus or allow it to dominate their lives.

Recognizing that it is beyond his authority to require mask wearing, Biden framed his suggestion as a request that the American people join hands with him and his incoming Administration in the struggle to halt and ultimately defeat the pandemic.

It is a public relations gesture, to be sure, but it cost him nothing politically. There was no risk for him to throw the weight of the Oval Office behind the mask-wearing idea while the upside — displaying an understanding of the seriousness of the outbreak and the toll it's taken rather than dismissing it — is considerable.

Those who've consistently refused to wear masks as an intrusion on their personal liberty obviously won't be swayed by Biden's suggestion but they are outnumbered by the majority of Americans to whom a face covering while outside the home is an exceedingly small inconvenience to help protect themselves and their families from a devastating illness.

The anti-mask crowd has justified its position as a constitutional right and, to an extent, they are correct. They also have a constitutional right to leap off the Ben Franklin Bridge, but they have no right to grab my arm and carry me over the rail with them.

Biden's suggestion is a call to shared responsibility, a trait the American people have consistently shown it possesses in abundance. They are motivated by respect and concern for others along with a generosity of spirit rather than selfishness.

And it was to that population that Biden's mask wearing appeal was directed, confident that it would resonate particularly in light of the out of control surge of the virus since September.

This past weekend, for instance, nationally 228,000 new cases were reported — the highest single day total since the pandemic began — and 102,000 people were hospitalized.

Nor has New Jersey been spared the second wave onslaught with nearly 15,000 new infections reported over the three day weekend.

After easing somewhat during the summer months, the re-emergence of the virus has forced some states to re-impose lockdowns, close schools and restrict business activities.

Even with the approval of a vaccine and its deployment imminent, providing immunity to a majority of the population will consume the better part of 2021, pushing a return to normal and robust economic recovery to 2022.

In the meantime, the need for masks will remain. Various studies have, for instance, predicted that upwards of 150,000 lives could be saved over the coming months if mask wearing approached universal.

Biden owes his election victory in considerable measure to the Trump Administration's chaotic and ineffective response to the pandemic. The American people gave Biden their trust and confidence that he would see it as an existential threat to the country and bring the expertise and resources of government to bear on it.

His recent announcement that he intended to retain Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases since 1984, is a step in that direction.

In his role as an advisor to the Trump White House, Fauci's experience must have been like the guy who went to a meeting of the Flat Earth Society and he was the only person in the room who knows its round.

Thanks to Biden, he'll have an opportunity to prove it to everyone else much to the benefit of the American people.

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