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afgazad@gmail.com

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BY DAVID ROSEN

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Covid-19: a Nation at War?



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On January 26, Pres. Joe Biden gave a White House [speech](#) directly linking dealing with Covid-19 pandemic as a war effort. “I’ve said before: This is a wartime effort.” He went on: When I say — when I say that, people ask, “Wartime?” I say, “Yeah, more than 400,000 Americans have already died.” I think it’s four hundred eleven or twelve [thousand] have died in one year of this pandemic — more than all the people who died in all of — Americans who died in World War Two. This is a wartime undertaking; it’s not hyperbole. He added: “And as such, I directed the team to be ready to exercise all the authorities I have under the Defense Production Act, and expedite these vaccines. And we’re using the Defense Production Act to launch a full-scale, wartime effort to address the supply shortages we inherited from the previous administration.”

Among Biden’s first [actions](#) was to “directed relevant agencies to exercise all appropriate authorities, including the DPA, to accelerate manufacturing, delivery, and administration to

meet shortfalls in these twelve categories of critical supplies, including taking action to increase the availability of supplies like N95 masks ...” and other products “to accelerate the manufacture, delivery, and administration of COVID-19 vaccine.”

In a follow-up action, on February 5, Biden ordered the deployment of 1,110 military troops to assist the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to establish 100 mass vaccination centers across the country within a month. There will be five teams, each with 222 personnel, including nurses, vaccinators and clinical staff.

The question that now haunts the new Biden administration is simple: Is this enough to end the Covid “war”?

On December 8, 1941, the day following Japan’s attack on Hawaii’s Pearl Harbor, Pres. Franklin D. Roosevelt declared war against the Empire of Japan. Three days later, on December 11, the U.S. Congress declared war against Germany. During World War II, U.S. military deaths totaled 416,800 – as of February 9, 2021, 462,000 Americans have died from Covid-19.

One estimate projects, that by June, a worst-case death rate will see about 700,000 Americans die from Covid. At that rate, the U.S. death rate will top the 618,222 men who died in the Civil War — 360,222 from the North and 258,000 from the South.

Donald Trump was no FDR. While occupying the White House as the ostensible president, Trump was not the leader of a nation confronting a horrendous war. In abdicating leadership, he actively contributed to not only the deaths and infections caused by the Covid pandemic but furthered the recession that grips the national economy.

FDR’s presidency was marked by two major crises. The first crisis was the Great Depression set-off as a result of the 1929 stock market crash. He took office in 1933 as the nation was in a depth of the crisis and initiated the New Deal, a series of programs, public work projects, financial reforms and regulations that were in effect from 1933 to ‘39. In 1941, FDR faced his second crisis, WW-II.

A week before the 2020 election, candidate Joe Biden spoke in Warm Springs, GA, FDR’s vacation retreat. Invoking the president’s spirit, he said: “We’ll act to pass my economic plan that will finally reward work, not wealth, in this country.” And added, “We’ll act to address systemic racism in our country, and we’ll act to give working people a fair shot again in this country.”

In the face of both crisis of his tenure, FDR implemented major economic programs. Confronting the Great Depression, the New Deal was anchored in the Reconstruction Finance Corp. (RFC), an agency that channeled private capital into public investments. Facing WW-II, in January 1942 he established the War Production Board (WPB) that lasted until the war’s end in 1945.

The WPB converted industries from peacetime work to war needs and allocated scarce materials, established priorities in the distribution of materials and services, and prohibited nonessential production. It rationed gasoline, heating oil, metals, rubber, paper and plastics. It supervised the production of \$183 billion worth of weapons and supplies, about 40 percent of the world output of munitions.

A handful of companies suggest how the war-time [conversion](#) played out:

- + The Lionel toy train company started producing items for warships, including compasses.
- + Ford Motor Company produced B-24 Liberator bombers.
- + Alcoa, the aluminum company, produced airplanes.
- + The Mattatuck Manufacturing Company, which had made upholstery nails, switched to making cartridge clips for Springfield rifles.

The national war effort lifted a large swath of the population into the middle class and, as one [study](#) claims, “narrowed the gap between the top and the bottom in terms of wealth inequality.” Between 1929 and 1950, the disposable income for all Americans rose by nearly 75 percent. In the three decades between the start of WW-I and the end of WW-II. The income difference between the top 5 percent and the bottom 95 percent shrunk from 30 percent to 19.5 percent. The wealth of the top of the 1 percent shrunk by nearly a half, from 13 percent to 7 percent.

In 1950, Congress adopted the Defense Production Act (DPA) in response to the Korean War. It confers upon the president a broad set of authorities to influence domestic industry in the interest of national defense. Gradually, Congress has expanded the term “national defense” – as the [Congressional](#) Research Service finds – “to enhance and support domestic preparedness, response, and recovery from natural hazards, terrorist attacks, and other national emergencies.”

So now, 70-odd years after the adoption of the DPA, both Trump and Biden have invoked the Act to deal with Covid-19. Trump implemented it – as the Department of [Health and Human](#) Services – in August 2020 “to apply priority rated orders for contracts” with two private companies so as to “fulfill a large-volume purchase of diagnostic systems and assays for COVID-19 testing ...”

Sadly, the Covid-19 war is taking its toll with the death rate very much resembling the U.S. social landscape. As of January 27, 2020, deaths due to Covid by [race](#) were as follows: White = 60.7%; Hispanic = 18%; Black = 15.6%; Asian = 3.6%; Native American = 1.1%; Other = 0.7%; and Hawaiian = 0.2%.

The full impact the Covid pandemic is further revealed in a recent [AMA](#) study that notes “in counties where the population was substantially non-white with a median income defined as \$60,240, the COVID-19 death rate was more than nine times higher when compared to counties that are substantially white with the same median income.” It adds, “the COVID-19 infection and death rates were nearly three times higher in substantially non-white counties

with higher median incomes when compared to substantially white, higher income counties”

The “ground troops“ of the current U.S. war against Covid-19 are those euphemistically called “essential workers.” The [Centers for Disease](#) Control and Prevention (CDC) identifies them “as those who conduct a range of operations and services in industries that are essential to ensure the continuity of critical functions in the United States.” They include paid and unpaid persons serving in healthcare settings – and non-healthcare workers — who have direct or indirect exposure to patients or infectious materials.

[JAMA](#) reported that there are 157.3 million workers in the U.S., of which nearly three-fourths (112.4 million or 71.5%) are essential workers; of these, only 31.2 million could WAH (Work at Home). Among all adults, 49.7% (123.2 million of 248 million) were at increased risk of severe Covid using the main CDC guidelines; 61.0 percent using the broader CDC guidelines. Although workers were at lower risk than nonworkers, 41% (46.1 million) and 54.4% (61.1 million) of the 112.4 million essential workers met the main and broader CDC increased-risk guidelines, respectively.

As Covid - 19 death rates continue to rise, existing structural inequalities continue to shape racial disparities in the pandemic. The [National Center](#) for Biotechnology Information (NCBI) argues: “the disproportionate health effects of the COVID - 19 pandemic are consistent with the unequal presentation of chronic medical conditions among communities of color that result from a historical legacy of structural inequities.” Going further, it declares: “Our central hypothesis was that COVID - 19 mortality was higher among NH Blacks compared with NH Whites because NH Blacks hold more essential - worker positions.”

Amidst the Covid pandemic, the [Dept. of Labor](#) reported that as of the week ending January 16th, the total number of unemployed Americans claiming unemployment insurance was 17,835,525. And this total doesn’t not include the millions of working people who are unemployed but cannot claim federal unemployment insurance.

In the U.S., the Covid-19 “war” might be better understood as an opportunity for the top 1 percent to further consolidate its power in the class war, thus maximizing inequality. As [Bloomberg](#) reported, “With income inequality already near the highest in at least half a century, the country’s response to the financial devastation wrought by the coronavirus raises questions about who emergency measures were designed to help, and who was left behind”

Peter Atwater, of William & Mary, put the situation most graphically: “There has probably not been a better time to be wealthy in America than today.” He added, “so much of what policy makers did was to enable those that were wealthiest to rebound fastest from the pandemic.”

In the months between March and December 2020, one estimate finds that the wealth of billionaires increased by an average of 57 percent. “Interestingly, that’s about 10 percentage points higher than the overall growth of the S&P 500 index during the same time period.” Among the top dozen billionaires analyzed, it notes, “Elon Musk saw the highest increase during this period, with a \$129 billion boost in net worth — that’s a whopping 523% in gains.”

The super-rich take to heart former Congressman Rahm Emanuel now infamous statement: “You never want a serious crisis to go to waste. And what I mean by that is an opportunity to do things that you think you could not do before.”

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David Rosen is the author of Sex, Sin & Subversion: The Transformation of 1950s New York’s Forbidden into America’s New Normal (Skyhorse, 2015). He can be reached at drosennyc@verizon.net; check out www.DavidRosenWrites.com.