

AGAINST MASKS

May 29, 2020

The great social argument of this instant is whether everyone should now, because of the Wuhan Plague, be required to wear face masks, and if so, under what circumstances. Today, therefore, I will offer a complete analysis of mask wearing, something I have seen nowhere else. True, I normally disdain writing about transitory matters, which this likely is, but the Plague and the varied reactions to it in the policy realm say much that reflects light onto broader and more permanent topics, and this is particularly true of masks, arguments about which condense matters of greater import.

There are rational reasons to wear masks, and there are rational reasons not to. My threshold point is that mask proponents, at this moment ascendant in the ruling class and in the media-visible populations of the country, rarely, if ever, discuss those reasons. In part, this is because they are not challenged. Among the chattering classes, left and right, mask opponents, or those suggesting a more nuanced approach than universal coerced mask wearing, are afraid to speak out because of the mob. For the most part, opponents are therefore not heard, simply seen, refusing to wear masks in locations where many other people are wearing them. When we do hear from opponents in the mass media, it is no accident, because this is the image our media wants to portray of mask opponents, that all of them, except the author of this article, are fat, unattractive people from America's heartland, who shriek incoherently about their freedom and rant at thin, handsome, well-spoken shop workers. There is almost never any actual discussion.

The purported goal of mask wearing is to maximize personal safety, in the form of good health, of society's members. As with nearly every policy connected to the Wuhan Plague, "arguments" by those demanding mass social action consist mainly of surfing waves of emotivism, fueled by the pleasant sensations of consuming and disseminating panic porn. Proponents of mask-wearing never offer any type of cost-benefit analysis. Instead, they offer unfocused yet fierce emotion of various types, usually buttressed with bromides such as "spread love, not germs" (a sign I saw today), claims such as "science shows," without any knowledge of or reference to actual science (that is, they offer a mystery cult version of

scientism), or self-focused non sequiturs such as “I want to be part of the solution.” Some, especially on the Right, say mask wearing “is for the common good,” which is merely a sophisticated-sounding way of begging the question. If pressed further, proponents usually clam up or become angry, but if not, they offer third-hand anecdotes, or phrases such as “it can’t hurt, and it might help.” They invariably completely ignore costs, and if cornered, explicitly deny there are any costs. Thus, whether by government functionaries or a grocery-store Karen, demand for universal mask wearing is not reasoned, but visceral.

My aim here is to impose rationality—delineate the costs and benefits of masks, and to examine the reasons that make mask wearing a good or bad idea. Of course, that mask proponents resolutely refuse to engage in such a rational discourse is not a promising sign. They can’t even get their story straight—to this very day, despite pressure, the World Health Organization (corrupt, but no more corrupt than the Centers for Disease Control, and less attuned to hurting Donald Trump at any cost) says only the sick, or healthy people tending to patients, should wear any type of mask. This conflict is not surprising, since as is often pointed out, there is still a great deal we don’t know about the Plague. Rather than this engendering modesty in those who demand mask wearing, they instead claim certainty at all times.

The divide over masks only partially maps onto left-right divisions. Yes, the Left at this moment universally favors mandatory mask wearing, but much of the Right does too, swept up in the herd mentality and, as always, unwilling to stand firm against Left demands. Who on the Right does not favor mask-wearing, and why, isn’t especially clear. Trump doesn’t, but he hasn’t offered a coherent reason for not doing so—either it’s a gut feeling or he thinks it reduces Presidential gravitas, I imagine. Some libertarians just object to any reduction in their freedom, a rational position, but not one that says much about masks specifically. Rusty Reno, the editor of the prominent magazine *First Things*, was viciously attacked by a mob of right-wing literati when he rejected mask wearing as cowardly, including by Rod Dreher, whom the Plague has revealed as an unstable and gullible hysteric, not the leader in the face of hardship many thought he was. Reno retreated, post-haste, presumably afraid he would lose his job. None of this is a coherent argument against wearing masks, however.

The declared aim of mask wearing is to reduce the chances of transmission of the Wuhan Plague. On this basis, three general scenarios exist in which one might wear a mask. We can call these High, Medium, and Low, tied to the general likelihood of disease transmission. The High scenario is where one knows himself a carrier of the disease, or cannot avoid repeated close physical contact with those who have it, or is in ongoing close physical contact with those at high risk of death if they contract the disease. Examples include families with someone sick at home, hospitals that are actually treating virus patients in the part of the hospital they are treating patients, and nursing homes. Medium is where nobody is in close physical contact or is known to carry the disease, and interaction is transitory. Examples include stores such as Costco and restaurants, as they are currently set up. Low is where nobody is in any other than indirect, transitory contact with other people. Examples include outdoor exercise—walking, biking, and so forth.

Underlying this framework is that we have learned much about the disease over the past five months, and perhaps the key fact relevant here is that only two groups of people in the general population have any material risk of death from the Plague. (True, the disease is supposedly sometimes very unpleasant in any sufferer, but usually not, and often completely asymptomatic. And death is the focus here.) The first is people over seventy; the median age at death in developed countries for all deaths is around eighty. The second (significantly overlapping the first) is people with certain health debilities, mostly respiratory and cardiovascular, but including obesity. This last is the most important for policy reasons, since so many Americans are obese. But in America, obesity is ignored by politicians and the press, both deathly afraid of conveying stigma, which might constitute the dread sin of “fat shaming.” Nonetheless, the stark truth is impossible to deny at this point: anyone not in these categories, that is, anyone healthy (or unhealthy but without these specific health problems), is at low risk of hospitalization and very low risk of death.

Exactly how low the risk is for healthy people is hard to tell at this point, both because much is still being learned and because the figures are distorted for, and used for, political purposes. It approaches zero, however. Do yourself a favor. Find a news article about a survivor (or, if you can find it, a fatality) that is about a person under fifty claimed

to be otherwise “healthy.” In the vast majority of cases you will find one of three things. First, the person was unhealthy, and that is admitted in the body of the article, but downplayed. Second, the person was obese, but it is never explicitly mentioned, and usually can only be seen from pictures. Third, the person was a male homosexual, and whether he was immune compromised is never asked or answered. There are exceptions, just as there are with any respiratory illness, all of which can and do kill completely healthy but unlucky people. (The Spanish Flu infamously did exactly that.) But for the Plague, they must be very rare, because any that could be definitively shown would be widely covered by all mainstream news outlets, and go viral on social media.

If you tell these facts to vociferous mask proponents, they will almost always simply deny them. This is of course the classic reaction of those in the grips of an ideology, or of a cult—facts that contradict their beliefs are either ignored or twisted to reinforce their beliefs. Instead, they will emote, and then personalize, saying that either they, or people they love, are at risk, so therefore we must act as if everyone is at risk. Again, not a promising sign for the possibilities of rational discussion.

It is not just individuals who emote in this fashion, though. A few days ago the *New York Times* had as its entire front page a long list of names of some of the dead, with only a headline, that these deaths were an “incalculable loss.” Using the front page in this fashion had never been done before, not even for 9/11, and the reason it was done now is clear—to signal that the opinion-setters of the country demand that we bathe in the emotion of fear, and not dare to inquire into the facts. Certainly, the *Times*’s readers are already covering, so there is no change there—but now all the media in the country who take their marching orders from the *Times* will parrot the same line for the foreseeable future, including the overtly false statement that the loss is “incalculable.” It is true that the emotional cost may be high for the families of the dead, if they had family, or family that remembered their existence. But the societal cost is objectively very low. The vast majority of the people listed were already close to the natural end of their lives, and would not have contributed anything notable to society had they lived longer—especially since nearly three-quarters of them had been warehoused, out of sight and out of mind, in nursing homes by their

now-bereaved relatives, or by the state. The truth may be unpleasant, but it's still the truth.

What about non-death long-term consequences of the Plague? We are now regularly treated to breathless media attention to one or another debilitating "syndrome" supposedly linked to survivors. Last month it was lung scarring; a few weeks later it was strokes. Both those are largely forgotten, and today it is a variation on Kawasaki disease, a systemic inflammation, supposedly appearing in children. It is quite plain that all of these are simply the usual occasional knock-on effects of sickness, especially respiratory illness, on the unlucky or already unhealthy, exaggerated and highlighted to give political cover to those who want the Wuhan Plague to be seen as more dangerous to the healthy than it really is. These syndromes are as real as Morgellons disease—that is, they're not real, merely a delusion (in this case, unlike Morgellons, manufactured by those with propaganda aims to delude others).

A mother who knows that literally zero children in America without some major existing health problem have died from the Plague (in fact, it appears children die from the regular flu at a higher rate than from the Plague) will press for school re-opening much more than a mother who has read that her child may suffer a debilitating follow-on illness as a result of the Plague. She will ignore, out of caution, that this latest claim follows the same pattern as other scare articles now forgotten. I will bet you money that in two months we will hear nothing at all about this supposed inflammatory syndrome, it having become clear it was nothing at all, but we will have heard of more than one other such syndrome not heard of now. But coordinated news stories, designed to psychologically manipulate the populace, will have accomplished their political purpose of running cover for those who benefit by exaggerating the impact of the Plague.

Before we get into reasons for and against masks, it is also important to acknowledge that the legal and social requirements with respect to masks have changed dramatically over the past two months. Such whipsawing is usually a strong sign of something lacking an underlying rational basis. Ten weeks ago anybody who showed up in public with a commercial mask was shamed for wearing it. We were lectured that such masks were to be reserved for so-called frontline workers only, who desperately needed them, while they offered no benefit to the average

person outside of a hospital environment, who showed his evil selfishness by wearing one, because he was a “hoarder,” denying “heroes” a fighting chance to live. To further discourage mask wearing, we were hectorred over and over that wearing of most commercial masks was a complicated task only for experts; anyone else was doomed to fail, and be worse off than before. If it was clearly a homemade mask, the wearer might escape opprobrium, but was regarded as silly, since everybody knew that cloth masks offered no benefit to anyone in Medium and Low situations, as our media and government instructed us (and as the WHO still does). Wearing a cloth mask was thus something done by those who ignored expert advice, but was socially tolerated as an understandable quirk.

Today, though, we are told Oceania has always been at war with Eastasia. In the current iteration of social stigma that now requires masks in some areas of the country, any mask is acceptable, even a sloppily-fitting cloth mask. Most people now realize that the virus is far too small to be stopped by any mask, high-filtration or not. Instead, to the extent they pause to focus on details while demanding everyone wear masks, they claim that masks stop virus-carrying droplets from entering the air, or perhaps they stop those droplets from being breathed in. That’s not really true, because any but a close-fitting mask doesn’t really contain sneezes and coughs any better than coughing or sneezing into one’s elbow. In fact, sneezing in a loose-fitting cloth mask creates Venturi-effect jets out of either side of the mask, hurling droplets far farther than they would go otherwise. If everyone always wore commercial N95 masks when out, it would change the calculus a little, maybe. But they don’t, and they won’t, because such masks are uncomfortable (and cause new health problems when worn for a long time). Cloth masks are all that will be worn by most people for more than a few minutes, so that is what we are talking about when we talk about masks.

What is more, as with the so-called six-foot rule of “social distancing,” there is little or no scientific evidence that masks, tight or loose, reduce transmission of the Plague, with the sole exception of commercial masks combined with other protective equipment (such as gowns, gloves and face shields) in High scenarios. Air-carried droplets in casual contact are likely not a relevant vector of the disease’s transmission,

just as asymptomatic transmission appears rare at this point. Most, or even almost all, transmission appears to occur in High scenarios. But I am not primarily interested in parsing scientific evidence, which is frequently updated, and will continue to be for a long time. Nor am I going to conduct an analysis of all policy questions related to the Plague, such as contact tracing, or testing, or ponder at length why, to what end, permanent mass social control is the goal of those pushing lockdowns. I am interested in reasoning about masks, so I am going to list reasons in support and in opposition, and analyze the substance and weight of each.

Note that, to the extent “authorities” and “experts” tell us to wear masks, they are entitled to no deference whatsoever. The same “authorities” have been wrong on every important aspect of the Plague, from it not being a problem at all; to hospitals being overrun (we were assured they would be nationwide, even with the lockdowns); to the infection fatality rate (currently estimated by the CDC at 0.3%, and heading lower, while we were assured it was as high as five percent); wrong about the deaths that would occur when the state of Georgia reopened; wrong that China was lying about the number of deaths; wrong that a massive wave of death would hit Sweden, which did not lockdown at all. When those pushing precautions have proven themselves repeatedly wrong, always to the side of gross exaggeration, as a result imposing massive costs on society through their errors, it is only rational to discount, or better, ignore, their latest demand for us to take action at no cost to them, until conclusive proof is first offered, which it never is.

Let’s start with possible reasons mask wearing should be mandated. I note there are a few narrow situations where nearly everyone would agree it is appropriate to wear a mask. All High scenarios (except perhaps uncomplicated elder care) are of this type; the discussion here therefore relates to Medium and Low scenarios—in other words, to any situation of normal social contact. Moreover, even in a Medium or Low situation, if you know your cousin, thirty years old and completely healthy, is an extreme hypochondriac, and he is present, it is perhaps a nice gesture to wear a mask, although one should not reflexively cater to mental illness, so some thought is still required. Beyond these, though, what possible reasons are there everyone should be required to wear a mask outside the home?

First, we cannot rule out that masks will reduce transmission to some degree. What that reduction might be is unclear; some argue qualitatively that countries where mask wearing is common, such as South Korea, have experienced less-severe outbreaks, although many other variables are also in play, and I am not aware of any analysis that shows mask wearing reduces transmission in Medium and Low scenarios. There is no evidence that those with the disease, but asymptomatic, reduce transmission by wearing masks, or are even significant sources of disease spread, even though that possibility has a certain surface logical appeal. Still, this is a rational, but weak due to lack of evidence, reason to advocate universal mask wearing.

Second, universal mask wearing may lead to lockdowns in those states where they are still active being ended sooner, because such demonstrated social compliance with government commands is something authorities can indicate as a reason to end a lockdown they already want to end, but need a scientific-sounding reason. That this is a sad commentary on our society is irrelevant; it's a possible benefit of everyone wearing masks. Again, it's a weak reason.

Third, if everyone has to wear masks, then a sick person doesn't feel like he's identifying himself as sick by wearing one, and is more likely to do so, entirely eliminating the most likely (if still unlikely) vector of transmission in Medium or Low scenarios. Logically, this is true, and a fairly strong reason, but the number of people who know themselves to be sick who are choosing to leave their homes is probably very small, so this is again a small benefit.

Fourth, one can rationally argue that the precautionary principle suggests everyone should wear masks. In essence, as applied here (a bit outside of its usual usage), this is the idea that when costs are unknown but may be enormous, it is wise to avoid any chance of those costs. However, the costs of the Wuhan Plague are not unknown; there is still much we do not know, but we do know precisely who is at risk, and what the maximum theoretical death toll is, and it is lower than previous pandemics that passed largely unremarked, such as the 1968 Hong Kong Flu (during which Woodstock was held) or the 1957 Asian Flu (sense a pattern in disease origin?) To be sure, ten weeks ago, when we could not quantify the costs, wearing a commercial mask was probably a sensible precaution—right at the time we were told it was socially unacceptable

to wear any but crude masks. But we now know more, so we are not dealing with the possibility, say, that the Plague may kill twenty percent of the population, or ten percent of children, or pregnant women, all of which would be costs vastly greater than the costs we are actually experiencing. That mask proponents resolutely refuse to make such distinctions undercut their demands. Thus, what this claim has devolved to is merely a claim we should ignore cost-benefit analysis, by assigning an essentially infinite, and unquestionable, value to vague benefits. It is a way to seem rational while never departing from the warm comfort of the swamp of irrationality, and is no reason to wear masks.

Fifth, it appears that a high percentage of the population is in favor of requiring masks. This is meaningless and not a rational reason to support masks. That public policy should be decided by direct sampling of the opinions of the ignorant and manipulated public is dumb.

That's it. Five reasons can be found to wear masks in Medium or Low scenarios, some weak, some not reasons at all. OK, let's look at the other side of the coin, possible reasons why we should refuse to mandate the wearing of masks in Medium and Low scenarios.

First, anyone clear-eyed recognizes that mask requirements are not something arising organically among concerned citizens examining the facts. Rather, they are yet another abrupt ruling class dictate, from the people who for decades now have force fed us a multitude of destructive poisons, from neoliberal globalism to Drag Queen Story Hour. All of those dictates have been justified only by the benefits they have brought to the ruling class, either in lining their pockets or imposing their vision of a new society on the rest of us. Without the strictest proof, why should we believe coerced mask wearing to be any different, or justified in any way?

The same people who now present Greta Thunberg as an expert on the Wuhan Plague are those leading the charge to require masks, which reinforces the visceral recoiling from their commands. Even in healthcare, the ruling class has lied to us for decades, from their initial reactions to the Plague (such as accusing Trump of racism for wanting to limit travel from China in January) to their decades-long pretense that AIDS is a risk for heterosexuals. The reason for these lies is that for the ruling class, health care is wholly subordinated to their political agenda. Only one example is needed to prove this here—in April, at the

height of the Plague in New York, Dr. Anthony Fauci, while demanding total national lockdowns, was asked whether people should still use sex-hookup apps like Tinder and Grindr. His immediate and reflexive response was not “The government should mandate those apps be made inactive during the Plague,” which would have been coherent with his other demands. Rather, it was “If you want to go a bit more intimate, then that’s your choice regarding a risk.” In other words, ensuring that no harm came to the leftist dream of total sexual emancipation without consequences was more important to the man in charge than the supposed national crisis. What was instinctively crucial to him was preserving the Left social vision, not saving lives. This clown is the man who now tells us we must wear masks, though presumably not when cavorting with tonight’s third Grindr hookup.

Second, wearing a mask contributes to unseemly national hysteria, that is evidenced most notably by the total failure of our rulers and the chattering classes, and much of the rest of America, to engage in any rational discussion. It also contributes to hysteria’s close relation, the safetyism that has emasculated more than a generation of Americans, who as a result didn’t notice, or refused to notice, when “flattening the curve” was baldly changed into a totally different, and likely impossible, but safety-oriented, goal, “defeating the virus.” Refusing to wear a mask is refusing to participate in and contribute to, instead pushing back against, this hysteria and safetyism that has been so destructive of American virtue and ability to achieve. The very fact someone declines to wear a mask, especially in a place like Costco where walking through the parking lot is a far higher risk than contracting the Plague, is a rebuke to the hysterics and a blow for rationality and courage. It’s not quite Rosa Parks—but it’s not that far off, either.

Third, wearing a mask dehumanizes each of us in our social interactions, further destroying the already tissue-thin American social fabric. This crucial point was made recently by the Shenandoah Valley organic farmer Joel Salatin, speaking on Joe Rogan’s podcast. As a society, we need and crave social closeness, in the normal course and even more under the pressure of threats like the Plague. Masks destroy social closeness, further eroding already nearly disappeared social trust and social capital. We already see plans to make small children wear masks in school, an unfathomably corrosive idea for the same reason.

Refusing to wear a mask is refusing to help pound yet another nail into the American coffin.

Fourth, enforced mask wearing is very obviously, for many pushing them, from the government to the local Karens, merely a manifestation of the pernicious human impulses to have power over and control others and to feel superior to others. Last week Andrew Cuomo, the governor of New York, shrieked on Twitter, "I'll keep saying it for as long as it's necessary to say it: Wearing a mask is about RESPECT." This gives the game away; he means not actual respect, which is earned, but cowering at his power and his dictates, combined with giving into the social pressure he whips up and encourages. Refusing to wear a mask is refusing to participate in and contribute to the social control that blue state rulers love so very, very much.

Mask wearing in America has an analogue in the United Kingdom, where (following WHO guidelines) the government does not suggest universal mask wearing and there is little social pressure to wear masks. Instead, another instrument of social control is used. For the past three months, in England everyone in the country is forced by social pressure to leave his house every Thursday evening at 6 p.m. to clap and cheer wildly for the abysmal National Health Service, worshipping its workers, for no reason that is given or apparent, as national saviors. It is all very much like North Korea or East Germany, without (so far) those refusing to comply with the latest dictates being taken out and shot. That the instrument of social control is a different one in other countries undercuts any possible arguments in favor of universal mask wearing, while at the same time revealing, yet again, the goal underneath requiring the actions.

Fifth, Americans used to value their liberty. True, this was always an ordered liberty, until modern times, and an excessive focus on liberty, based on Enlightenment errors, was probably the original snake in the American garden. And libertarians who claim a free-floating liberty to never take any action that they do not feel like taking, which today for some is refusing to wear masks, do not have a sound argument. Absolute liberty in health matters has never existed in America, and although it is true that the idea that the police power includes the power to unconstitutionally prevent the movement of the healthy is a radically novel idea, mask wearing in the abstract is not a significant

constraint on the individual's liberty, and not a powerful argument against wearing masks.

Nonetheless, refusing to knuckle under to demands to wear a mask is a condensed symbol of resistance to Leviathan, that today crushes all Americans not part of the ruling class, and such signaling rejection of coercion is both understandable and a virtue, and a good reason to refuse to wear a mask in Low and Medium scenarios. Enforced mask wearing, like extended lockdowns, is also a front in the ongoing war between the invisible classes and the professional-managerial elite, where the latter relaxes and benefits at the expense of the former, in this case ordering food from Grubhub instead of having to go to McDonald's. Wearing a mask is surrendering to the elite, and a defeat in that war, which will further encourage their bad behavior.

Fifth, enforced mask wearing is pseudoscientific, with little or no evidence it actually achieves the supposed goal of health. I discussed this above, when discussing possible reasons to wear masks, so no need to repeat myself.

And there you go, five very strong reasons to refuse to wear masks. I think it quite clear that the balance of reasons for and reasons against universal mask wearing in Medium and Low scenarios suggests mask wearing should not only not be required, but be strongly discouraged in those scenarios. Basic hygiene and not licking doorknobs, or embracing strangers, should be encouraged instead. And if as a society we decide to worry about the Wuhan Plague more than previous pandemics, and insist on spending massive resources to combat it, actions should be targeted. Most of all, people at high risk should stay home, to the extent, and only to the extent, they value reducing their risk of sickness or death more than they value being able to go out and live their lives. (Or, for those who are more comfortable with government orders, old people should be barred from leaving their homes, and everyone else should do as they please.) Sick people, old or young, should stay home, not put on masks and then go out, and we should spend the necessary money to ensure they are adequately supplied, not print trillions to placate those made unemployed by hysteria.

No doubt, in this digital age where the cycle of public policy has sped up to a blinding pace, mask wearing will soon disappear as a matter of consequence, superseded by other arguments tied to the Plague, or

to other events entirely. Maybe those events will be the disappearance of the Plague, as Farr's Law (though not really a law, any more than Moore's Law) would suggest. Maybe they will be new disasters, murder hornets or the like. Maybe it will be whether schoolchildren, at zero risk from death, should wear face shields and not come near to others, come August, on penalty of the schools not re-opening. Maybe the riots will begin and the cities will burn. The Plague has exposed our lack of social resilience, but that doesn't mean we need to deliberately kneecap it by mandating universal wearing of masks.