

# Why Is the U.S. So Exceptionally Vulnerable to Covid-19?

By [Nicolas J. S. Davies](#)

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[Science and Medicine](#)

*The United States has become the [new center](#) of the global coronavirus pandemic, with over 86,000 cases, more than China or Italy. More than a thousand Americans have already died, but this is surely only the very beginning of this deadly collision between the U.S.'s uniquely inadequate [public healthcare](#) system and a real pandemic.*

On the other hand, China and South Korea, which both have universal public health systems that cover the bulk of their people's healthcare needs, have already turned the tide on Covid-19 through targeted quarantines, mobilization of public healthcare resources and testing programs that quickly and efficiently test everyone who may have come into contact with the virus. China sent [40,000](#) doctors and medical staff, including 10,000 respiratory specialists, into Hubei province in the first month or two of the epidemic. It has now gone up to 3 days in a row with no new cases and is starting to lift social restrictions. South Korea quickly tested over [300,000 people](#), and only 131 of its people have died.

The WHO's Bruce Aylward visited China at the end of February, and [reported](#),

"I think the key learning from China is speed... The faster you can find the cases, isolate the cases, and track their close contacts, the more successful you're going to be... In China, they have set up a giant network of fever hospitals. In some areas, a team can go to you and swab you and have an answer for you in four to seven hours. But you've got to be set up — speed is everything."

Researchers in Italy have experimentally confirmed that up to [3 out of 4](#) Covid-19 cases are asymptomatic and therefore undetectable by testing only people with symptoms. After a series of deadly missteps, the U.S., which had its [first case](#) on January 20th, the same day as South Korea, has over two months later only just begun widespread testing, when we already have the most cases and the 6th highest death toll in the world. Even now, the U.S. is mainly limiting testing to people with symptoms, not doing the targeted testing of new case contacts that was so effective in China. This ensures that otherwise healthy, asymptomatic carriers will unknowingly spread the virus and keep fueling its exponential growth.

So why is the United States so uniquely incapable of confronting this pandemic as efficiently or effectively as China, South Korea, Germany or other countries? The lack of a national, publicly-funded universal health system is a critical deficiency. But our persistent inability to set one up is itself the result of other dysfunctional aspects of American society, including the corruption of our political system by powerful commercial and class interests and the

American “exceptionalism” that blinds us to what we can learn from other countries.

Also, the military occupation of the American mind has brainwashed Americans with strictly military concepts of “defense” and “security,” perverting federal spending priorities in the interest of war and militarism at the expense of all our country’s other vital needs, including the health of Americans.

Why can’t we just bomb the virus?

Of course this question is ridiculous. But this is how U.S. leaders respond to every danger we face, with massive diversions of our national resources to the military-industrial complex (MIC) that leave this otherwise wealthy country starved of resources to tackle problems our leaders can’t pretend to solve with weapons and war. Depending what is counted as “defense” spending, it accounts for [up to two-thirds](#) of federal discretionary spending. Even now, a bailout for Boeing, the [2nd largest](#) U.S. weapons maker, is more important to Mr. Trump and many in Congress than helping American families get through this crisis.

At the end of the Cold War in 1989, senior officials told the Senate Budget Committee that the U.S. military budget could safely be [cut by 50%](#) over the next ten years. Committee chairman Jim Sasser hailed the moment as “the dawn of the primacy of domestic economics.” But by 2000, the influence of the military-industrial complex had shrunk the “peace dividend” to only a [22% reduction](#) in military spending from 1990 (after adjusting for inflation).

Then, in 2001, the military-industrial complex seized on the crime of the new century by 19 mainly Saudi young men armed only with box-cutters to launch new wars and the [most expensive](#) U.S. military build-up since World War Two. As former Nuremberg war crimes prosecutor Benjamin Ferencz [said at the time](#), this was not a legitimate response to the crimes of September 11th. “It is never a legitimate response to punish people who are not responsible for the wrong done,” Ferencz told NPR. “If you simply retaliate en masse by bombing Afghanistan, let us say, or the Taliban, you will kill many people who don’t approve of what has happened.”

Despite the abject, bloody failure of the so-called “Global War on Terror,” the opportunistic military-build-up it served to justify still wins every budget battle in Washington. After adjusting for inflation, the [2020 U.S. military budget](#) is 59% higher than in 2000, and 23% higher than it was in 1990.

Over the past 20 years (in 2020 dollars), the U.S. has allocated [\\$4.7 trillion](#) more to the Pentagon than if it had just maintained its budget at the same level since 2000. Even between 1998 and 2010, as Carl Conetta documented in [his paper](#), An Undisciplined Defense: Understanding the \$2 Trillion Surge in US Defense Spending, actual war spending was matched dollar for dollar by unrelated additional military spending, mostly increased procurement spending to develop and buy very [expensive new warships](#) for the Navy, budget-busting warplanes like the [F-35 fighter](#) for the Air Force, and a wish-list of new weapons and equipment for every branch of the military.

Since 2010, this unprecedented diversion of our national resources to the military-industrial complex has outstripped actual war spending even further. Obama spent [more on the military](#) than Bush, and now Trump is spending even more. In addition to \$4.7 trillion in extra Pentagon spending, U.S. wars and militarism have cost [\\$1.3 trillion more](#) for Veterans

Affairs since 2000 (also adjusted for inflation), as Americans predictably come home from America's wars needing levels of medical care that the U.S. does not otherwise provide to its people.

All that money is gone now, just as surely as if it had been heaped up somewhere in Afghanistan and incinerated by a few of the [80,000 bombs](#) the U.S. has dropped on that poor country since 2001. So we do not have it to spend on public hospitals, ventilators, medical training, Covid-19 tests or any of the things we so desperately need in this distinctly non-military crisis.

Our \$6 trillion have been utterly wasted – or worse. The U.S. war on terror did not defeat or end terrorism. It only fueled an endless spiral of violence and chaos across the world. The U.S. war machine has destroyed country after country: Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Libya, Syria, Yemen – but it has never rebuilt or brought peace to any of them. Meanwhile, Russia and China have built effective 21st century defenses against America's [obsolete war machine](#) at a small fraction of its cost.

As countries around the world face the common danger of Covid-19, perhaps the most cynical response of all has been the U.S. government's decision to impose even [more brutal sanctions](#) on Iran, one of the worst-hit countries, already deprived of life-saving medicines and other resources by existing U.S. sanctions.

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has called for an [immediate ceasefire](#) in every war during this crisis, and for the U.S. to lift its [deadly sanctions](#) on all our neighbors around the world. That should include Iran; North Korea; Sudan; Syria; Venezuela; Zimbabwe; and not least Cuba, which is playing a courageous and active role in fighting the pandemic, [rescuing the passengers](#) of an infected British cruise ship that was refused entry by the U.S. and other countries, and [sending medical teams](#) to Italy and other infected countries around the world.

### The 21st Century Command Economy

The “command economy” was a derisive term used to criticize the centrally planned economies of Eastern Europe during the Cold War. But economist Eric Schutz used the 21st Century Command Economy as a subtitle for his 2001 book [Markets and Power](#), in which he analyzed the effects of the dominant market power of monopolistic multinational corporations on the U.S. economy.

As Schutz explained, neoliberal (or neoclassical) economic theory ignores a critical factor in the “free” markets a generation of Americans have been taught to revere. This ignored factor is power. As more and more aspects of American life are entrusted to the mythical “invisible hand” of the market, the most powerful players in every market are free to use their market power to concentrate wealth and even greater market power in their own (not so invisible) hands, driving smaller competitors out of business and exploiting other stakeholders: customers; employees; suppliers; governments; and local communities.

Since 1980, every sector of the U.S. economy has been gradually taken over by fewer and fewer larger and larger corporations, with a predictably debilitating effect on American life: fewer opportunities for small business; diminishing investment in public infrastructure and services; shrinking or stagnant wages; rising rents; privatization of education and healthcare; the destruction of local communities; and the systematic corruption of politics.

Critical decisions that affect all our lives are now made primarily at the bidding and in the interests of big banks, big pharma, big tech, big ag, big developers, the military-industrial complex and the wealthiest 1% of Americans.

The infamous revolving door through which senior officials move between the military, lobbying firms, corporate boards, Congress and the executive branch is duplicated in every sector of the economy. [Liz Fowler](#), who wrote the “Affordable Care Act” as a Senate and White House staffer, was a senior executive at Wellpoint Health (now Anthem), the parent company of Blue Cross-Blue Shield, which now rakes in billions in federal subsidies under the law she wrote. She then returned to the “industry” as an executive at Johnson & Johnson – just as James “Mad Dog” Mattis returned to his [seat on the board](#) at General Dynamics to reap the rewards of his “public service” as Secretary of Defense.

Whatever mix of capitalism and socialism each American may favor as a model for the U.S. economy, very few Americans would pick this corrupt 21st century command economy as the system they would choose to live under. How many American politicians would win election if they honestly told voters that this is the system they believe in and plan to promote?

We are living in a society in which everybody knows the deal is rotten, as the Leonard Cohen [song goes](#), and yet we remain lost in a hall of mirrors, victims of a “divide and rule” strategy by which the wealthy and powerful control politics and the media along with every other sector of this 21st century command economy. Trump, Biden and Congressional leaders are just their latest figureheads, demonizing and arguing with each other as they and their paymasters laugh all the way to the bank.

There is a savage irony in the way the Democratic Party closed ranks around Biden just as Covid-19 appeared on the scene. A month ago, it seemed that 2020 might be the year Americans would finally blow away the well-funded smoke and mirrors of the for-profit U.S. health insurance industry and achieve universal publicly-funded healthcare. Instead, Democratic leaders appear to be settling for the lesser evil of another humiliating defeat and four more years of Trump over (to their minds) the greater danger of a Sanders presidency and universal healthcare.

But now this exceptionally dysfunctional society has run smack-bang into a real force of nature, a tiny virus that can kill millions of people. Other countries are rising to this exacting test of their healthcare and social systems more successfully than we are. So will we finally wake up from our American dream, open our eyes and start learning from our neighbors in other countries, including ones that have different political, economic and healthcare systems than ours? Our lives may depend on it.

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*Featured image: President Trump visited the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) on March 6, 2020. From*

*the left: Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar, CDC director Robert R. Redfield, and CDC associate director Stephan Monroe. Credit: White House photo by Shealah Craighead*

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