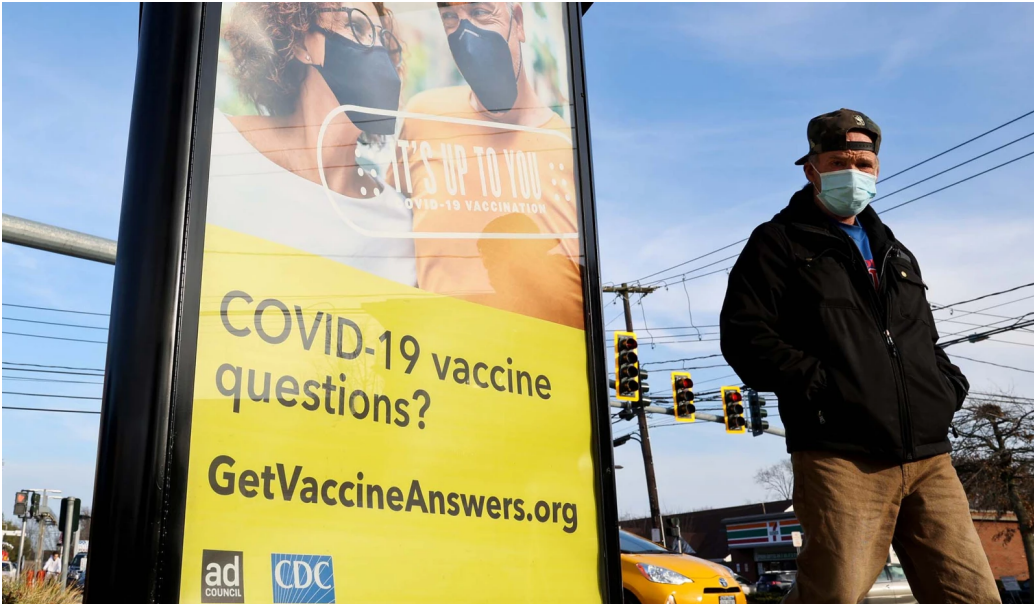


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NATIONAL REVIEW | NR PLUS | MAGAZINE | OCTOBER 3, 2022, ISSUE

The Dirty War over Covid



A man walks past a COVID-19 vaccine advertisement poster in East Islip, N.Y., December 10, 2021. (Steve Pfost/Newsday RM via Getty Images)

By **ARI SCHULMAN**
September 15, 2022 2:52 PM

A necessary backlash to the pandemic regime led its participants to dark places

C OVIDIANISM is dead. Americans have moved on from pandemic restrictions, Dr. Fauci is retiring, the CDC lies prostrate. The last pockets of masking-and-distancing fighters have been exiled to exotic reaches of blue jungles. And all around us we see wins for those who raged against the pandemic machine. Anger over school closures

It is no surprise, then, that Covid skeptics have spent this year crowing vindication. Alex Berenson, we hear, was right all along. So was the Great Barrington Declaration, the hotly debated alternative strategy based on protecting only the elderly and vulnerable. At *American Greatness*, Julie Kelly described the start of lockdown on its two-year anniversary as “the beginning of the largest crime against humanity since the last world war.” Helen Andrews praises those who “will forever enjoy the distinction of having seen through Covid hysteria at a time when everyone else was still cowed by it.”

From the beginning the Covid skeptics saw through it all. They warned us about security theater, a new biosecurity state, a reduction of human existence to bare life, a pretext by the ruling classes for social control. Have they now earned their victory lap?

If you have gained insight from conservative thought, you should have encountered the idea of the Technium, and learned to fear it. The Technium is what arises when we attempt to gain mastery over the unmasterable: the ordinary course of human affairs.

The roots of this problem are very old (see: Plato), but we often recognize it as a nasty overgrowth of the Enlightenment. The Technium is Darwin’s theories metastasizing into eugenics, enforced by jackbooted agents of the state. The Technium is Mark Zuckerberg, after his dorm-room project proved a disastrous experiment in global brainworming, unveiling the Metaverse. The Technium would have human begetting become a lab process, embryos become material for biomanufacturing, and opponents of all this cast out as anti-science troglodytes.

Accounts of this phenomenon are found in C. S. Lewis, Martin Heidegger, Karl Polanyi, Leon Kass, Alasdair MacIntyre, Isaiah Berlin, Friedrich Hayek, Wendell Berry, Joseph Weizenbaum, Giorgio Agamben, and many others. It goes by the names “technocracy,” “technopoly,” “technique,” “scientism,” “planning,” “conditioning,” “mastery and possession of nature,” the “Machine,” the “biosecurity state.” I call it the “Technium” here, borrowing from Kevin Kelly, to focus on two things.

First: Living under the Technium, who do we believe should solve social problems? Expert rulers. By science’s cosmic writ, they float above the democratic process. Ordinary people, provided for by the machine, are its cogs. And if they refuse, they must be excised so the system can keep humming.

And second: Living under the Technium, what do we come to believe counts as a problem in need of grand solution? Everything. The Technium is not just one wrong idea — that experts should rule, that science knows all, that technology is always good. It is an entire mode of relating to each other and our given world. It reorders us under its logic, making us subservient less to expert rulers than to the system, a totalizing pattern of seeing and acting and being.

“At the heart of this temptation,” writes Jeffrey Bilbro at *Front Porch Republic*, “is the promise that our frustrations and limitations and failures have solutions and all we need to do is acquire the right technique.” Put another way: “The dream that scientific progress could, in effect, solve the human condition has warped our aspirations, making perennial problems seem like novel catastrophes.” The latter is from the mission statement of *The New Atlantis*, a magazine devoted entirely to understanding this threat. (I am its editor.)

Covidtide seems to offer dramatic vindication of the Technium critique. Unconstitutional CDC power grabs, an unelected mid-level NIH bureaucrat enjoying the cultural power of a wartime president, a medical establishment telling us one day that science says kids can’t go to playgrounds and the next that science says we all must join in race riots, social control over our very right to move and breathe: All this would have seemed like fever-dream stuff in 2019, but it all just really happened.

The skeptics were right then to see many dangers that others ignored. And the effort to censor and delegitimize them backfired, bogging the pandemic regime down in a stupid, fruitless battle of wills. But we must nonetheless take a hard pass on joining their victory lap. In some ways warped even by reasonable fears of the Technium, in other ways subtly under the grip of the machine itself, the skeptical project was ultimately damaging for conservatives, for the country, for human life, and for those who gave themselves over to it fully.

In the classical vision of the Technium, a technologically ordered society accepts a grand bargain. Without entirely meaning to, we begin to lose our spontaneity, life’s rhythm and shape, the finitude of body and indefiniteness of spirit that make us human. That is bad. But we are also supposed to get some goodies in exchange: peace, predictability, health, long life, protection from the vicissitudes of Nature. Did we? Was that what the Covid Technium wanted?

Consider a case from last October, when, according to a *Vanity Fair* report by Katherine Eban, an expert group offered the Biden administration a plan to markedly expand rapid testing. The idea had been urged since the pandemic’s early days: If rapid testing were abundant, free, and regularly used, we might shift to a national strategy that targeted only people who were knowably infected. It would offer not a full end run around difficult choices, but a better set of trade-offs than a

Why? Experts with the administration's ear argued that more testing would reduce the incentive for vaccination. They were also part of a grand "pissing contest," "as the physicians worked to protect their turf running hospital-based tests." They believed that testing "should be used only by doctors as a diagnostic instrument, not by individuals as a public-health tool for influencing decisions." In other words, maintaining medical control mattered more than helping people, more than stopping the pandemic. And Biden agreed.

It was a Victorian schoolmaster's view — *How can you have any testing if you have not taken your vaccine?* — and you could see it everywhere in the Biden administration and the public-health establishment. Biden's campaign talk of competence seemed to bespeak Warp Speed-style initiatives' going from the exception to the norm — the federal apparatus finally mobilizing drugs, hospital capacity, coherent actionable guidance, clear data, higher-quality research, N95 rather than cloth masks — the resources the country needed to materially address the virus. Instead, we got even less of this approach under Biden than we did under Trump. Other than stimulus checks, trillion-dollar bills to fund who-still-knows-what, and the astonishing choice to permit race-based allocations of Covid vaccines and drugs, Biden's signature approach was more mandates and scolding. It was as if the federal apparatus had before it only two levers, labeled "print" and "enforce," and none labeled "build."

Or consider how lockdown logic evolved. At the beginning, the case was overwhelming: In a nation caught unprepared, something had to be done while other options were brought online. Restrictions on movement were a desperate, temporary, last-ditch Band-Aid. The problem was that this same logic still prevailed years into the pandemic, because leaders showed so little urgency in actually using the time purchased at such terrible cost to create other options (with notable exceptions such as Warp Speed). "We don't have a choice" held less and less water because it became clear that we were choosing not to have a choice.

My view of the Covid Technium, then, is not as clear-cut as the picture of a "biosecurity state." Yes, there were vaccine mandates and passports, masking theater, draconian testing and isolation regimes in university and bien-pensant corporate halls, the CDC eviction moratorium, and a daunting list of other abuses, with much worse yet on the wish lists of planners. But there was more that was *not* done that would have been better targeted at the immediate material problem.

The Covid Technium has been defined more by the lack than by the excess of technocratic planning. It sometimes anti-democratically seized power — and then often had little interest in using it in the ways most directly relevant to countering the virus. The high priests of the Covid Technium are by and large not the master planners C. S. Lewis warned of in *The Abolition of Man*. Rather they are the petty, turf-guarding bureaucrats in Katherine Eban's reporting; middling liberal-arts graduates working the Big Disinformation censorship mills; the swaths of the country that did not so much oppose ventilation, pharmaceutical expansion, and anything outside the frame of a grand historical morality play as they simply paid no attention to them.

The most outrageous instance was how remarkably long school closures continued. This too, a duration pushed for by teachers' unions alongside public-health leadership, was not really a symptom of technocratic planning. Beyond a reasonable period of wait-and-see caution, at which point it was plain that children and teens were at very low risk and the costs of closures were intolerable, there was little planning logic behind it at all. It resembled less a scientific bureaucrat overly enamored of his spreadsheets than a hostage situation.

Rather, policing transgressions often seemed the chief focus of political and medical leaders. It was so consuming that their imaginations narrowed, locking in on the options that had emerged in the early weeks: distancing, shutdowns, masking, vaccines. They mostly ignored anything else — and in some cases actively impeded other options as contrary to the spirit of the regime, as the Biden administration did with rapid testing.

The planners were so preoccupied with moral and cognitive hygiene that they largely lost interest in planning. It was not a bargain with the devil, for there was no bargain. We hungered for the spiritual baggage of technocratic culture without even caring whether we got the material benefits.

So why no victory lap? Why not praise those who saw through Covid hysteria from the start? Because, well, sometimes a problem is really a problem. And if the unexpected deaths of 1 million Americans does not qualify, then what does?

Over these past 30-odd months, I have read more blistering critiques of the new biosecurity regime, Covidianism, the Covid meme, the lockdown laptop class, and the Machine than I can count. Often I have nodded along with them in gratified agreement. I have written plenty of them myself. And yet when I read these critiques, there has always loomed out of view a question that they did not seem to meaningfully answer: *Okay, yes — but what do you propose to do instead?*

I do not mean this question in the specific, about all the things we should *not* do — school closures, outdoor masking, failing to let natural immunity count the same as vaccination — questions on which skeptics often did have compelling



ordinary.” This answer was given voice in the “focused protection” strategy articulated most famously by the Great Barrington Declaration.

Authored by three medical experts from Harvard, Oxford, and Stanford, cosigned by dozens more, and eventually joined by nearly a million members of the public, the declaration, released in October 2020, was the most serious proposed alternative to broad restrictions and disruptions. “Adopting measures to protect the vulnerable should be the central aim of public health responses to COVID-19,” it argued, while “those who are not vulnerable should immediately be allowed to resume life as normal.” The declaration became a go-to when skeptics needed to show that there was an answer for what to do instead.

The core claim of focused protection was that Covid was not a broadly shared problem but rather a narrowly focused threat — mainly a risk to the old, the immunocompromised, and people with certain other medical preconditions. Consequently, we could focus protection measures just on the vulnerable segment of the population, thus ending broad, blanket restrictions.

There was something to this theory. In the early phase of the national lockdown, many of us — myself included — had a view of what was in store that owed something to histories of the Black Death and to Hollywood movies. We had reason to think this was in store because we could see it unfolding already in China, Iran, Italy, and then on our own shores, in New York.

But after this early phase, the reality was more complicated and seemed less dramatic. Covid never reached levels of mortality comparable to the Black Death’s (though even notoriously pessimistic predictions never said it would come close). The scenes that played out in New York City — streets filled with wailing ambulances, mobile-refrigeration trucks lined up to store the dead — never expanded to a national scale (though bodies continued to overflow funeral homes in many areas, with less public attention paid). The risk of death never had the full sense of randomness we associate with historical plagues. A large majority of the dead were indeed elderly, and the mortality rate among the young was hundreds to thousands of times lower — a fact that received soft acknowledgment in public messaging but even now stands as something of an impolite truth. And for the sizeable share of us who never lost a loved one or close acquaintance, the death toll can feel abstract.

The catastrophist view that dominated, then, had holes in it, doubts that rational people should have entertained, and that focused protection did.

BUT focused protection had many holes of its own — things left over, remainders that couldn’t fit into the theory and so were explained away or ignored.

Most importantly, Covid was a much greater hazard for working-age adults than the skeptical picture allowed. Yes, the old died in greater numbers. But that is already the case in ordinary times. According to CDC data, adults aged 85 and up who get Covid are 330 times more likely to die from it than adults under 30. But Social Security Administration data show that even before Covid, this older age group was already 150 times more likely to die in a given year than the younger group.

What does this mean? As skeptics were eager to remind us, a real crisis would mean people dying not only *with* the disease but *of* it — a multiplication of Death’s workaday harvest. And by these standards, Covid was much more egalitarian than skeptics admit. Various studies have shown that relative increases in mortality — the excess mortality rate — were roughly similar among adult age brackets, not wildly different. (Notably, the pandemic saw no excess mortality in children and teens.)

The skeptics were also right about a point that they did not realize actually worked *against* their picture of the pandemic: that while all lives matter equally, the unexpected death of a person in their 30s or 40s or 50s is a greater shared blow than the unexpected death of a person in their 70s or 80s or 90s, as those deaths rob decades more of life not only from their victims but from those who depend on them. Indeed, studies find that the greatest toll in *years of life* lost was not mostly among the elderly. One recent analysis found that Americans aged 85 and up who died of Covid lost 720,000 years of otherwise expected life — an awful figure, but far less than the staggering 1.9 million years lost among those who died aged 35–44. (The greatest loss was among the dead aged 65–74: 3.2 million years of life.)

As of this writing, the CDC shows that Covid claimed the lives of 69,606 Americans between 18 and 49 years old, and another 192,908 between 50 and 64 — altogether, a quarter of the million Covid dead. These are not only lives lost but lives lost at their peak: businesses that will fold or never start, wealth that will not be created, charitable donations that will not be made, junior colleagues who will not be trained, husbands and wives who will raise their children alone, children who will grow up without a parent. A pandemic that has been reasonably understood as a plague of the old may also, *just with a minority segment of its overall toll*, have created more American orphans than the Vietnam War.



Twith patients, infections coming in waves that disrupted workplaces and supply chains, and on and on. I have said nothing yet either about skeptics' fundamentally wrong estimates of how many lives the pandemic would claim.

For many of these remainders there is some halfway-plausible explanation. There is indeed an ongoing debate among demographers about how to explain the minority of excess deaths during the pandemic that were not recorded as Covid deaths, indeed especially among younger people. Surely those younger people who died of Covid were obese or immunocompromised or had some other risk factor? Mustn't anyone who died have been vulnerable, abnormal by definition? And the rest must have been the consequence of the lockdowns themselves? And so on.

But the remainders pile up too quickly to be borne. When focused protection was taken up *as a corrective to the lockdown regime*, these remainders needed not come too far into view. This critique especially helped to draw early attention to the wildly excessive costs and near-pointlessness of restrictions on children and teens. It was an important focal point for thinking through the alternatives, one that was obvious enough that if the Great Barrington Declaration had not offered it, someone would have had to.

Yet at least in the pre-vaccine phase of the pandemic, it was always going to be an uphill battle for this to become more than just a critique, to actually win out and become the governing strategy. For all the problems of the doomist view that dominated, it was easier to view the pandemic as a broad, multifaceted, shared problem than as a narrow, individualized, targeted one, because by and large that is what Covid was. We all had a stake in it, we were all threatened by it in myriad even if not entirely equivalent ways, and we all needed a coherent, shared answer to it.

LIKE environmentalists warning about the end of the world, to borrow a line from Ted Nordhaus, focused protection was not quite wrong, only too early. At some point the public would lose its will even as viral death continued, and focused protection would seem vindicated. Does that mean it was right all along? What would it have meant to really enact the strategy early in the pandemic?

Cast your mind back. It is March 11, 2020. We have just spent ten weeks watching a catastrophe unlike any in living memory unfold in Wuhan, then in Iran, then in Bergamo, all the while assuring ourselves that it won't happen here, that the types of people who worry about pandemics are MAGA xenophobes. And now exactly what we told ourselves would not happen is happening in New York City, just like a bad disaster movie, and we have barely any idea what might be coming next. Our vaunted viral-surveillance system has failed, our CDC has squandered our chance at getting testing online quickly, our media have spent two months turning the virus into a political-coding exercise, the travel ban bought us a little time but we didn't use it, and we are caught completely defenseless as the tidal wave of death crashes on our shores. Is there really an alternative world where the United States does not adopt broad shutdowns?

I am not asking here what we *should* have done, whether we actually made the right choice (though I believe we did). I am asking what we *could* have done within the constraints of the reality of that moment — whether there was a world where the country largely kept about its business as the skeptics howling “hysteria” from Day One said we must.

Let us imagine this alternative timeline. Let us be conservative and say that focused protection prevails not immediately but by the early fall of 2020 — after the Great Barrington Declaration, released on October 4, offers the most concerted public airing of the idea, after the country has had months to experience the brutal toll of both the virus and the lockdowns.

One problem with this strategy is that similar kinds of grueling, contentious isolation measures are still required for Americans who fall in the “vulnerable” category and this category is so broad — retirement-age, immunocompromised, obese, one of any number of complicating preconditions — as to still encompass a vast swath of the country anyway. Yes, three-quarters of America's Covid dead were age 65 or older. But one in six Americans are in this age range. More than one in three Americans are obese.

Another problem is that the rates of death, hospitalization, and severe illness among the “non-vulnerable” group are almost surely higher in the world where most adults return to normal behavior before there is widespread immunity (as there is now). Recall that, in our own version of events, the period just after the release of the Great Barrington Declaration wound up as the deadliest phase of the pandemic, a six-month wave that at its peak saw more than 20,000 Americans die of the virus every week.

But remember: While this seems bad to us, in the alternative timeline all of this (and probably worse) is understood and tolerated as the cost of ending broad shutdowns, because this is also a world where focused protection has won broad public buy-in. Again, the question I wish to raise here is not whether we *should* have opted for this world, but whether we *could* have.

No, it was not possible. Focused protection was a viable alternative to broad social disruptions *only if most people could be*

things looked good in the summer of 2021 despite being told not to, then doing so again this year — has by and large organically tracked the conditions of the pandemic itself.

The same has mostly been true even in the skeptics' darling Sweden, famed for avoiding many of the official restrictions imposed in other countries. Though Sweden's approach deserves hefty praise — especially for largely avoiding school closures — the Swedes did not simply go about their business as normal, but in fact had roughly similar broad disruptions in public behavior. Mobility data from Apple show that in Miami, Fla., public-transit use fell to 38 percent of normal levels in March 2020. In Stockholm, it fell similarly, to 48 percent of normal. There were also vast disruptions to business. Sweden is hardly a bastion of rational individualism, but rather has a population that is so trusting of government authority that the country's pandemic strategy leaned on voluntarism more than coercion.

Americans, for their part, never had the appetite for the zero-Covid approach of New Zealand or China. But neither was there a world where we could have simply kept about our business and tolerated mass death in that desperate first year. This is fantasy thinking.

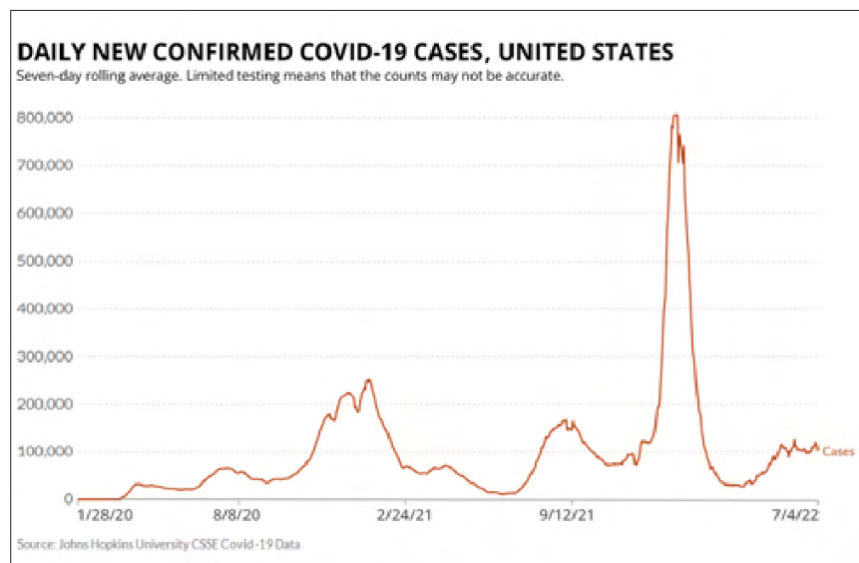
We don't have to argue hypothetically: The arguments that we should do exactly that — that shutdowns were a hysterical overreaction, that Covid was not a shared threat but a risk only to a vulnerable few — were a constant presence throughout the pandemic, not starting with Great Barrington but from the moment the first wave hit. And while these ideas significantly moved the needle of public opinion, especially in red states, they were not anywhere near enough to talk a supermajority of Americans out of distancing and shutdowns as core elements of the pandemic strategy.

That is not because ordinary Americans were in love with lockdowns, but because most people responded to the virus as a genuine shared threat. And focused protection did not answer this good sense; it asked us not to believe it.

ONE way, then, to describe the problem with the skeptical project is to say that it had weight as a corrective, but not as a positive alternative program for governance. But another way is to ask whether, as skeptics deployed it, they really meant it to.

Covidtide has offered us absurdities in bounties; each of us will carry forever our own precious ones. One of mine is Biden's rejection of the mass-rapid-testing plan. Another is a tweet in January from Representative Jim Banks (R., Ind.), a steadfast opponent of pandemic restrictions. Along with a news article headlined "Indiana life insurance CEO says deaths are up 40% among people ages 18–64," Banks commented, "This is a catastrophe and we need to figure out why it's happening."

Whatever could the answer be? Banks suggested "Fentanyl, suicide, homicides." But it is obvious that the novel coronavirus had caused enough death in working-age adults to account for a great deal, quite possibly most, of this surge. To get a basic intuitive sense of this, you can observe for yourself how closely synchronized the cresting waves of excess mortality were to the cresting waves of Covid cases.



(Our World in Data)

EXCESS MORTALITY: U.S. DEATHS FROM ALL CAUSES COMPARED WITH PROJECTION BASED ON PREVIOUS YEARS

The percentage difference between the reported number of weekly or monthly deaths in 2020–22 and the projected number of deaths for the same period based on previous years. The reported number might not count all deaths, owing to incomplete coverage and delays in reporting.



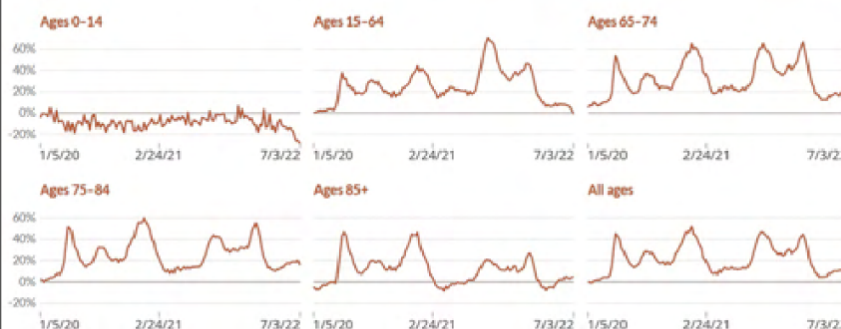
Source: Human Mortality Database (2022), World Mortality Dataset (2022)

(Our World in Data)

The timing of these two sets of waves is too close for the excess deaths to be mostly explicable by lost access to routine medical care and other effects of the pandemic response itself. And this pattern held across age groups (again, except for children and teens).

EXCESS MORTALITY: U.S. DEATHS FROM ALL CAUSES COMPARED WITH AVERAGE OVER PREVIOUS YEARS, BY AGE

The percentage difference between the reported number of weekly or monthly deaths in 2020–22—broken down by age group—and the average number of deaths in the same period over the years 2015–19. The reported number might not count all deaths, owing to incomplete coverage and delays in reporting.



Source: Human Mortality Database (2022)

(Our World in Data)

Only so much weight can be hung on one tweet, and so I will have to leave it to readers to evaluate from their own experience whether this was a crazy aberration of Covid skepticism or the norm. But I will assert from my own experience that it was the norm. Not only is it not plausible that most of the country could have been persuaded to watch death happening at such scales and simply accept it, but many of the skeptics themselves did not honestly accept it.

What is notable is not just Banks's error but his capacity for shocked outrage at this news. *Something is spiking death rates among working-age adults? What could it be? Who has been hiding this from us?* Nor was there much response from his fellow travelers along the lines of: *Alas, yes; but remember, this is a tolerable cost of getting back to normal.*

This is called cognitive dissonance. We saw it in the millions of Americans who were unembarrassed by their outrage at Florida beachgoers and earnestly believed that a Copernican-scale revolution of masking science happened over two weeks in 2020. But in a great many of those who proudly recognized that this was nuts, we saw the same thing.

WE saw this most of all when it came to the Big Kahuna, the question of whether Covid was really a catastrophe or not, by way of the argument about what the final death toll would be. In the early weeks of the pandemic, a chorus of skeptical voices assured us that everyone had lost their minds because the death

of 500, later corrected to 5,000, a figure he said remained “both far lower, and I believe far more accurate, than the common claim that there could be a million dead in the U.S. from well over 150 million coronavirus cases.” As of this writing, there are a million dead in the U.S. from well over 150 million coronavirus cases.

These low counter-projections were foundational to the skeptical project. Even in the summer of 2020, highly respected scientists such as Stanford’s John Ioannidis were still arguing that conventional wisdom was dramatically overestimating the infection-fatality rate. Skeptics were increasingly cagey about offering specific numerical predictions at this stage, but what they said implied a final death toll in the five figures or at worst the low six. Ioannidis specifically argued that the final toll of the pandemic would not, as early alarmists had warned, come close to being comparable to that of the Spanish flu.

Today the U.S. death toll stands far above the 675,000 estimated for the 1918–20 flu. As a share of the population, it is still half as large as that of the flu, making Covid the second-deadliest pandemic in U.S. history, a once-in-a-century disaster after all. So Covid skepticism failed because, for all the useful things it got right, on the most essential question of the pandemic it was proved terribly wrong. But the deeper question here is whether the skeptical project — which has so stridently decried the death of candor and accountability and truth — finds anything meaningful in its errors. Consider the evolution over time of the *way* that the “It’s all hysteria” argument was prosecuted:

“Why are you freaking out? It’s not bad now” was the opening bid in March.

“Why are you freaking out? It’s not going to get *unusually* bad” was the next argument, offered over the following months by those who said Covid would wind up only in the range of recent flu seasons.

“Why are you freaking out? Death is just a part of life” came alongside these, debuting as soon as the first wave of mass death was crashing over New York City.

“Why are you freaking out? Doctors are just counting every death as a Covid death, it’s a scam” was the final stand.

What matters is not just that these arguments were wrong and contradictory but that they were fundamentally instrumental, there to be picked up, used, and discarded as needed, like so much raw material. And this wasn’t just the pattern of marginal online posters. Look no further than the founding text of the skeptical project, the series of blog posts and articles penned in the first few months by Italian political theorist Giorgio Agamben. He shuffles between these arguments from post to post, even paragraph to paragraph, as suits the present need and without notice or embarrassment. It was a series of endlessly shifting goalposts put down by those intoxicated with unmasking the goalpost-shifters, sophistry from those who decried the loss of reason, denialism from the self-proclaimed defenders of truth.

It is one of the peculiarities of the pandemic moment that this critique will inevitably be read as a defense of the lockdown strategy. This is right in only a very limited sense: Yes, broad social disruptions were inevitable in the early going, for a few weeks at least and probably many months. But lockdowns were simply not a strategy at all; they were the absence of a strategy. “Two weeks to slow the spread” was a last-ditch measure to buy time to create better options, a real plan. But then it just *became* the plan.

The question is not whether the skeptics were right that this was going to happen; they were. It is whether their own project was effective at keeping this from happening, or whether that was even its driving motive. The essential choice that the Covid debate offered to the public was roughly “Do nothing, except for a few of us” or “Do everything, forever.” My claim is not that one side of this was right but that the choice was perverse, and that the most committed actors in this debate entrenched this perversity, caught up in a vicious cycle of mutual reinforcement.

In much the way the Covidian regime rationalized itself as “just following the science,” the basis of the anti-Covidian project was a phony conceit of powerlessness. This is why the demand that the skeptics hold themselves to the same standards they trumpet will be seen as a form of victim-blaming. What belongs to those whose necks are under jackboots is not to soul-search; it is to fight.

But Covid skeptics were not powerless. For the first twelve months of the pandemic, their champion was in the White House, and they held his ear. And they lost that power in part because of their refusal to use it well. Opponents of the Machine had countless opportunities to offer leadership alternatives that lessened the cruel trade-off between lockdowns or letting it rip. They almost always refused them. Even what they did get right, with a small number of exceptions, was usually about what measures were not necessary rather than what would positively help.

Operation Warp Speed, for example, could have become a darling rather than a bastard son of the Trumpian response. There were glimmers of a posture shift in the Trumpian willingness to embrace pharmaceuticals, which much of the establishment sneered at as a threat to the distancing–masking–vaccine trifecta. But the horses the skeptics bet on (ivermectin and hydroxychloroquine) came un-lame, and they mostly yawned at the winners (Paxlovid). Delivering free



Just as President Biden later would do, President Trump was presented with a national rapid-testing plan and rejected it. And this was at a far more crucial moment, within days of the national lockdown — as reported by Katherine Eban in *Vanity Fair*. This was a pivot point, when the national-greatness, anti-China Trumpian response that might have been gave way instead to the own-the-libs response. Trump turned the plan down precisely because of the influence of skeptical thought, reasoning it would bump case numbers and so bolster Fauci.

Imagine instead a President Trump who turned the country's manufacturing might to producing rapid tests, pharmaceuticals, and N95 masks, to expanding hospital capacity to handle surges. Imagine a Trump who pushed the GOP to take bold ownership of the vaccine triumph. Imagine him encouraging patriotic voluntarism among his base instead of fueling a zero-sum conflict between coercion and resistance. Imagine him trumpeting all these resources as means for the country to build its way out of the problem, reducing the burdens on individuals and the motives for mandates and restrictions.

With more and better tools at our disposal, likely more lives could have been saved. Moreover, the push against restrictions can be entertained *as part of an alternative way of dealing with the problem*, rather than as a rationale for *not* dealing with it. The skeptical project can grant a broader hearing because skeptics can be seen as trying to govern the whole of the pandemic trade-offs more sanely. And at some point, their core argument — that any remaining drive for restrictions is just a fruitless bid for a medical forever war — starts to feel right to a broad public, as it does now.

A collective “We can’t do this anymore” is where we are at present. In this it is easy to see vindication for the skeptics. But it is also where we were always bound to end up; there was no clean victory to be had. And there is good reason to think that Covid skeptics, even while believing they were pushing for this outcome, also played into the dynamic that made it so very long in arriving. It is possible we could have gotten here sooner, and with a lower toll in lives and liberty and psyches.

DESPITE all this, it is hard not to join the skeptical impulse. The Covid regime was rife with absurdities and cruelties. Deep in the depths of lockdown and isolation, the sense that there was no endgame, and little interest from our leadership in really finding one, was sound. Even a great many of those who anticipated the enormity of the death and illness, I believe, reached a point where we simply could not do it anymore, where the logic of it seemed not so much false as scrawled on tissue paper wafting in the wind. I did.

The insult on top of the injury of lockdown life was the social penalty for airing any of this, for allowing ourselves, even as we kept up this sacrifice, to acknowledge it *as a sacrifice*. This pain was not permitted the same public space as the pain of the virus. To even say plainly that we cried out to be with others, to know again spontaneity and joy, to hold the hands of loved ones on their deathbeds, was to be labeled, as Bethany Mandel was, a “Grandma-killer.” For wanting what the human heart still beating must want, we were shamed. Of course giving the middle finger to all this would come to seem to so many an act of just resistance to a world gone mad.

The spirit moves not just to *stay alive* but to *live*. We find stories of restrictions in accounts of the Spanish flu, diphtheria, and smallpox, when many of the measures enforced by state governments were much more aggressive than those for Covid — quarantine notices pasted on house doors, city-mandated vaccinations. “Patsy and I were fixin’ to go to the show and Aunt Vivian called a lady to get her little girls to go with us,” my grandmother Virginia, then 15 years old, wrote to her sister in 1937. “But the lady said she couldn’t think of letting them because there are twenty-five cases of infantile paralysis [polio] in Dallas and they had been staying strictly at home for a solid month. So, of course, Aunt Vivian didn’t let us go either and we are not going to go to a single place where there are crowds.” So too do we find accounts of rebellion against pandemic regimes. Some historians theorize that the 1518 dancing mania in Strasbourg, when townspeople took by the hundreds to the streets, was a stress-induced response to syphilis and smallpox outbreaks then roiling the city. Historians record girls in 17th-century Florence who were caught dancing in defiance of a truly draconian lockdown regime imposed by authorities during the Black Death.

Anyone who in the past three years was not even tempted to say *To hell with it all* and just for a while dance in the streets, who was not in some way driven crazy, must be nuts. We would have done better all along to confront this than to pretend it wasn’t so. Not only was resistance a real moral need, it was probably a historical inevitability.

YET it is mainly in this light — our yearning not only for truth but for hope — that the skeptical project seems to me a failure.

There are two enduring images in my mind of the anti-Covidian project. One that occurred early on — as I read reams of skeptical debunkings, dug through spreadsheet after spreadsheet of self-styled “data guys” confidently unmasking Fauci’s lies, read a million possible deaths explained away — was of Herman Kahn, the Cold War policy wonk who coined the term “megadeath.” It meant a million deaths, a unit useful for planning for nuclear war. Kahn’s idea was that we needed to take the emotion out of our thinking and begin to look rationally at what might constitute acceptable losses in such a conflict. His conceit was that he had actually found a more serious way to confront the threat than those bent into



suffered the maladies of mind and spirit that we usually associate, if not with technocracy, then at least with rationalism. Vaccines, masks, distancing, border closures, travel restrictions, lockdowns, quarantine: The measures of core fixation of the Covidian response were mostly not products of advanced technological and scientific thinking, but were many centuries or millennia old. And “Follow the science” logic, yes, had a scientific veneer, but it was wafer-thin; beneath it lay something less rationalistic than authoritarian.

Rationalism offers the promise of a grand solution that does an end run around the ordinary frustrations that define the human experience. Often this solution exists so far within the realm of the hypothetical that it forever escapes the test of reality. Thus, without risk, those who reject it can be cast as anti-rational. The allure of ivermectin, hydroxychloroquine, letting it rip till we reached herd immunity, focused protection — all had wisdom in some part, but in full they bore an uncanny resemblance to a certain type of fantasy, the dream of one weird technical fix to lop all the heads off a vast beast of a problem. It was a fantasy fix not only for the material problem but for the political one too.

It was thus that the skeptical articulation of our lockdown miseries grew into the sin of relishing the despair it identified. Where it could have counseled realistic prudence about how high we should set our expectations of technical control over a natural disaster, it put all its bets on a plan with no hope of implementation, granting itself permission to shrug and smirk at mass death. Where it had means, motive, and opportunity to offer a politically viable alternative that did not take two-plus years to win by attrition, it struck a pose of powerlessness. Where it could have offered a real vision of hope, it negated and owned.

The project failed in a way characteristic of those who become obsessed by sweeping theoretical critiques, but also characteristic of the Technium itself: by making problems that are in essence forever with us seem like a unique historical rupture. “Never before, not even under Fascism and during the two world wars, has the limitation of freedom been taken to such extremes,” Giorgio Agamben wrote in April 2020, from a country where cities during plague outbreaks of the 16th century had closed their borders and forced residents to isolate at home.

That the dream of solving the human condition can make perennial problems seem like novel catastrophes obviously works as a critique of Covidian excess. But it works too as a critique of where anti-Covidianism wound up — the conceit that the conflict between life and liberty in a public-health emergency, and the grave errors and injustices and absurdities that easily follow from it, were all cooked up by Anthony Fauci three years ago.

It is not only the soul’s yearning for joy that we find in those historical narratives of past plagues. It is also the give-and-take between that yearning and a society’s desire to limit mass death. This challenge, and the agonies that come along with it, are as old as government, as old as plague. A technologically advanced society is uniquely poised to reduce the trade-offs, perhaps quite a bit more than we did during Covid. It is also uniquely vulnerable to solutions that become tyrannical, as they did in China and Australia and New Zealand. But to see the very presence of this conflict as merely the product of corrupt modern technocrats was to break with history in its own perilous way.

C OVIDIANISM is dead, and we have killed it. Related to the Technium is another very old problem of Western thought: the trouble of separating rational skepticism as deployed in pursuit of Truth and rational skepticism as deployed in pursuit of, well, something else.

The skeptical type I have targeted here is not the one who believes merely that prolonged school closures were a travesty (which is true), that natural immunity should have counted as equivalent to vaccination (true), that an egalitarian view of the virus meant that too little was done to protect people in nursing homes (true), that with different choices, restrictions could have ended far sooner than they did (true again).

No, he was the one who gave himself over wholly to Unmasking the Machine. Starting from entirely reasonable frustrations, the skeptical project took its followers to dark places. The unmasker insisted a million of his countrymen would not die and then when they did felt no reckoning. He at one moment cast himself as Churchill waiting to lead us out of our cowering fear of the Blitz (*Death is a part of life*) and in the next said that actually the Luftwaffe is a hoax (*Those death certificates are fake anyway*). He feels no reckoning because he has been taken in by a force as totalizing as the Technium’s; he is so given over to it that he too no longer accepts his own agency.

This skeptic is no aberration. An entire intellectual ecosystem is fueled by his takes. He owns, if not the whole movement of the Right, then certainly its vanguard.

Yet still, still one can hear the reply: *Corrupt powers lied and demanded ritual pieties and put their boot on our necks and tore the country apart, and you want a reckoning from us?*

The other image that has been in my head, alongside Herman Kahn, comes from Flannery O’Connor’s story “Good Country People.” Its protagonist is Hulga, a 30-something loner crippled by physical and moral debility who is condemned to live



But when the story comes to me today it is with an unnerving sense that an ironic switch has taken place. The anti-Covidian account has much truth in it, after all. So let us follow it to its conclusion. Who today are the right-thinking, gullible followers of a stifling national folk religion? And who have set for themselves the grand project of unmasking this religion as no more than a slave morality? Perhaps we can find comfort in arguing that today's unmaskers have better reasons on their side than Hulga did. I do not: Hulga, after all, is hardly wrong in her diagnosis of her mother's faith.

I will not spoil the story for those who haven't read it, other than to say that for Hulga, an awakening ruder than any she can dish out is about to come due. The sophisticated unmasker can become enslaved even more deeply than the simpleton member of the flock. In believing her power grants her exemption, she makes herself a ready mark for a different, more ancient force that moves of its own will through this world, one that needs no arguments to see through it all, that has been believing in nothing ever since it was born.

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New York City Mask Mandate

A shopper wears a face mask as he enters a store in New York City, December 13, 2021.

Mike Segar/Reuters

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