

Opinion

Post-election, the truth must now be told about masks, COVID-19

By **DENNIS GRUBAUGH**

Maybe, just maybe, now that we have this border wall of an election out of the way, someone will begin speaking truth about COVID-19, masking up and taking precautions to keep the disease from spreading.



Grubaugh

That is, someone besides the omnipresent Dr. Anthony Fauci, a man much ridiculed, often threatened, and still widely regarded as the pre-eminent mind of his time when it comes to discussing epidemics.

Surely, we've learned our lesson. With 230,000-plus people dead and approaching 9 million (that we know of) infected in the United States, there was no excuse not to listen to science this past year. But our president's insistence on not looking weak in the face of a pandemic was in fact his greatest weakness in 2020. In the end he, too, fell victim, as did many of those surrounding him. Now that campaigning is over, it's time for some responsibility.

During the next two months, Mr. Trump can do much to reverse the course he followed leading up to Election Day. The flu season that comes with winter may be bleaker if he does not. He now has no reason to cater only to his most ardent supporters and no reason to play down this crisis. He has every reason to speak to all Americans in honest, blunt, heartfelt ways.

The economy is no longer an excuse because the longer the virus goes on, the worse the economy will become. We have all known that from the beginning. Stopping the virus is Job 1. Short of a vaccine, masks and social distancing are the means.

Joe Biden practiced what was being preached about masks during the campaign and in so doing inspired many Americans not only to support him but to follow his example. He may have looked a little nerdy with a mask, but then, so has everyone else.

I don't intend to debate the facts. Masks have been shown to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, but the election campaign, time and again, proved a major stumbling block for what should have been a clear health-care message. The debate over masks is a worldwide one, but in America, a democracy, it poses a unique situation because of the way it pulls us apart, even as it should draw us together.

Illinois is a prime example. The governor implemented restrictions to force businesses and the public into keeping the positivity rate down, with mixed results. Left to their own devices, many places simply preferred to ignore the advice about masks, which made the rift even worse.

The proof in the positivity of masks can be seen in those who were stricken after not wearing one, the doubters who scoffed about being asked to sacrifice their liberties. Former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, a Republican and a close ally of the president, was one, and he had one of the most telling reactions, after being hospitalized in intensive care for a week. He said:

"I was wrong to not wear a mask at the Amy Coney Barrett announcement and I was wrong not to wear a mask at my multiple debate prep sessions with the President and the rest of the team. I hope that my experience shows my fellow citizens that you should follow CDC guidelines in public no matter where you are and wear a mask to protect yourself and others."

Good for you, Mr. Christie. Lessons learned need to be passed along, even when they fly in the face of many of your colleagues. That's leadership.

Not to pick on Republicans, but two prominent local figures made headlines

and had plenty to say after the fact. Rodney Davis, the congressman from Taylorville, tested positive in August and was back on the road weeks later, after a period of quarantine.

"All of us must do our part," Davis said of mask wearing. "That's what it will take to get through this pandemic."

On Oct. 6, Davis was guest speaker at an outdoor event at SIUE, along with Congressman Mike Bost of Murphysboro. Two days later, Bost, too, was diagnosed with the illness, which also affected his wife and daughter.

Neither man knows how he contracted the coronavirus, and both have worn masks off and on during the past few months, judging from photos shot at various locations. Each man wore a mask during the Oct. 6 event at SIUE, but then that's only part of the equation. Every day we are seeing thousands of people infected – exclusively through exposure to others. And too often one side or the other, or both, are not wearing masks.

After months of being fed misinformation, the American people now deserve the unmasked truth.

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It may be another 100 years before we get affordable health care

By **ALAN J. ORTBALS**

The Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) was front and center during the hearings to consider Judge Amy Coney Barrett's nomination to the U.S. Supreme Court. That's because a challenge to the law enacted in 2010 will be heard by the court on Nov. 10, just a week after Election Day.



Ortbals

The Democrats, who beat the drum loudly during the hearings, fear that the rush to approve Barrett by the Republican-controlled Senate was, in part, so she can join the conservative majority and strike down Obamacare once and for all. I think they're right. I also think that when it goes, we won't see anything close to universal health care in this country during my lifetime. It's just been too hard to do.

The struggle to bring about universal health care in America goes all the way back to Teddy Roosevelt who first proposed it during his 1912 presidential campaign. He lost and his proposal lost with him.

The idea was revived as part of the New Deal in the 1930s. Universal health care was originally included in the Social Security Act of 1935. The proposal was essentially a single-payer plan with the government paying individuals' medical expenses from taxes collected for the purpose. But Franklin Roosevelt was concerned that it might bog down the bill and decided to move forward with Social Security and leave health care to another day. It took 10 years for that other day to come.

Shortly after taking office, Harry Truman made a push for universal health care. Employer-provided health insurance had emerged during WWII as a way to compete for scarce labor with salary caps in place. Truman's plan would have been optional. If you liked the insurance you already had, you could keep it. The government would provide a program for those who didn't have it. The AMA ferociously attacked it and coined the term, "socialized medicine" to play on the powerful anti-communist feelings of the time. Again, the idea failed.

Richard Nixon included a call for universal health care in his 1974 State of the Union address. His plan was to provide a form of Medicaid to people who did not receive health insurance from their employers. This time, unions killed the bill, thinking that, with Watergate sinking

the Nixon administration, they could do better under a Democratic administration that was sure to win in 1976. Little did they realize that the subject would be dead for almost 20 years.

And, in 1993, Bill Clinton turned over the creation of a universal health-care program to his wife, Hillary. The plan was drafted behind closed doors and presented to Congress as a finished product. "Hillarycare" was dead on arrival. Interestingly, in response to Hillarycare, the Republicans proposed a plan very similar to what eventually became the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act.

With the Republicans doing everything they could to block passage of the ACA, the Democrats needed every vote of their caucus to override the filibuster and get it to Obama's desk. Almost immediately, Republicans began to attack it and block its full implementation.

Fourteen states refused to expand Medicaid as called for in the ACA and a dozen states filed suit claiming the law was unconstitutional. After retaking the House in the 2010 elections, Congressional Republicans moved immediately to repeal the health-care law. "Repeal and Replace" became the mantra of the Republican party and the GOP-controlled House took dozens of votes to repeal the law over a three-year period.

Apparently, what the Republicans were going to replace it with was The American Health Care Act of 2017. That bill would have eliminated both individual and business mandates (a prerequisite for insurance companies to cover pre-existing conditions), kicked 23 million people off of insurance, reduced subsidies to help people pay premiums, made it harder to qualify for Medicaid and drastically reduced its funding, allowed insurance companies to charge older people up to five times as much as younger folks, removed the cap the ACA had placed on insurance company overhead and profit, and allowed insurers to sell low-cost "junk policies." Not exactly universal health care. Luckily for all concerned, it didn't pass.

The United States is the only country in the developed world that does not have a universal health-care system. Obamacare wasn't universal, but it took us nearly a hundred years to even come that close. It appears that it will take just 10 years to destroy it. Because it has been such a herculean lift, it may be the 22nd century before America joins the rest of the developed world in making affordable health care available to all its citizens.

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Illinois Business Journal
We Mean Business. Illinois Business.

The *Illinois Business Journal* is owned and operated by Better Newspapers Inc.
P.O. Box C
Mascoutah, IL 62258

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Periodical mailing permit 332440

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