

COMMENTARY

THE BLAME GAME IN HIGH PLACES IS PUTTING INNOCENT PEOPLE AT RISK



BY PHILIP J CUNNINGHAM

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A stealthy, highly-contagious virus has caused a precipitous drop in the US stock market and sent shudders through a stalled economy. With factories and stores closing down, lights being dimmed from Broadway to Las Vegas and hospitals overwhelmed with critically ill patients, the American mood is confused, resentful and laced with fear. Lockdowns of hard-hit areas and shelter-in-place orders for major cities are essential to containing the outbreak but add to the growing psychological stress.

Sadly for the human record, scapegoating often arises in reaction to disaster. After the devastating Great Kanto earthquake of 1923, ethnic Korean residents of Tokyo were rumored to be a cause of trouble and were massacred in the thousands. The punishing economic conditions of Germany after World War I is frequently cited as a key factor leading to a rise in an anti-Semitism so toxic and pervasive it led to genocide.

There is hardly a nation left on earth that has not been hit with the novel coronavirus COVID-19 so international cooperation is essential. However, the tribal fears invoked in border barriers, lockdowns, shutdowns and quarantines have put the very project of globalization on the defensive. Thousands of jets have been idled, trains run empty, highways are free of cars while the world's great tourist sites are ghost towns.

Though there is a documented benefit to be found in social distancing and reduced flow of traffic, the erection of draconian border controls, travel shutdowns and the rise of physical barriers have been mirrored by barriers being thrown up in the minds and imaginations of worried people everywhere.

Only scientists can definitively answer questions about the origin of COVID-19, but the city of Wuhan is indelibly tied to public awareness of the disease because the first wave of the epidemic erupted there. Leaving aside the thorny question of where the microscopic coronavirus came from, except to note that most scientists consider it to have been a freaky but otherwise natural zoonotic transfer of virus from animal to man.

Wuhan was the first city to hit by the microscopic invader on a massive scale. With over 3000 dead and tens of thousands ill, and millions more confined to their rooms for the duration, the suffering and anguish has been palpable.

Yet the regrettable human tendency to discriminate quickly gelled and took root, and soon people around China became wary of compatriots from Wuhan. By the same weak leap of logic, when the disease spread from China to Thailand, Japan, South Korea and other neighboring countries, the world began to turn a jaundiced eye to China.

It's not fair, and scientists and medical doctors know that better than anyone else, but politicians have their agendas and popular prejudice cannot be waved away with a magic wand. That's why international organizations such as WHO called on experienced medical professionals to assign a name to the disease that did not reflect on race or location.

COVID-19 is not a catchy term, but it contains information about year of outbreak and category as a coronavirus.

By the time the official moniker was coined, the more general term "coronavirus" was in such widespread use that it has remained the default term for describing the novel coronavirus. Even if it lacks the precision of the official name, it is unobjectionable in social terms.

However, far from China's shores, other names were being concocted to describe the perilous pathogen, and terms like "Wuhan flu" and "Wuhan coronavirus" (which was used by the New York Times) began to be bandied about. US Senator Tom Cotton from Arkansas throughout the crisis has made statements designed to inflame and arouse anti-China sentiment by blaming China for the virus. Although Cotton's hatred for China pre-dates the outbreak and is rooted in a rigid anti-communist worldview, he has exploited the epidemic by conflating his political enemy with the hated virus.

Despite the incendiary rhetoric of a few hot heads, references to the virus designed to indict China as a co-conspirator faded in February, and the mainstream press, *New York Times* included, was careful to stick to the scientific term COVID-19 or the more general term, coronavirus.

But in early March a new wave of stigmatizing language entered the national dialogue by close associates of President Trump. Manipulative populism and playing to the hidden prejudice of a conservative political base came into play. It was no longer loud-mouth radio hosts

and red-neck politicians talking that way and as such is not easily dismissed.

America's top diplomat, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, started to use the terms "Wuhan virus" and "Chinese coronavirus" in official statements in the first week of March, giving political cover to closet racists anxious to pin blame on China.

President Donald Trump's two-month long pretense that the virus was nothing more than the common flu was finally shaken by an undeniable outbreak in the US. Unwilling to take blame, he found it useful to deflect criticism away from his own negligence by making witheringly use of the term "foreign virus." This incendiary term came short of tagging China directly, but by then the narrative of presumptive guilt had been well-established and his own supporters were bad-mouthing China with increasing frequency.

Trump's March 11, 2020 use of the term "foreign virus" was eagerly picked up by his political base, and social media use of the term "[surged into the tens of millions](#)" according to the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab.

Elsewhere, prejudice was becoming more overt. A White House aide joked about the China connection, telling CBS White House reporter Weijia Jiang that it was the "Kung Flu."

Around the same time, reports on social media and elsewhere describe an uptick in anti-Asian abuse and violence.

New Yorker writer Jiayang Fan reported in a [tweet](#) that she was accosted by a stranger using vile, racist language when she stepped out her front door to take out the garbage. It left her feeling afraid to even walk down the street to go shopping.

Dozens, if not hundreds of such reports are now circulating on social media. And it's only getting worse. Trump, for reasons best known to him, has been a credible defender of China on certain policy points and has generally resisted

the vocal deprecations used by intemperate political advisors such as Stephen Miller, Peter Navarro, and Steve Bannon.

But looking weary in the face of mounting criticism of his failure to lead a national response to the pandemic, Trump suddenly joined the chorus of China-blamers as seen in this March 18 tweet from his official account:

"I always treated the Chinese Virus very seriously, and have done a very good job from the beginning, including my very early decision to close the "borders" from China - against the wishes of almost all. Many lives were saved. The Fake News new narrative is disgraceful & false!"

When questioned about his injudicious use of "Chinese Virus" at a press conference later in the day, he [doubled down](#) in his use of the term. When Yamiche Alcindor of PBS asked him if

using the term "Chinese virus" puts Asian-Americans at risk he bristled.

"No. Not at all. I think they would probably agree with it 100%. It comes from China."

The die is now cast for racial tensions to follow. Reasonable people can disagree with Beijing and its policies. Not everyone has to like Chinese food or Chinese culture. But it is inexcusable to blame a disease that knows no boundaries and afflicts all humans regardless of race on an ethnic group or a faraway nation. This is intellectually dishonest and it is a cheap shot to deflect blame and arouse populist support.

It is racist, it is wrong and President Trump and his team owe us all an apology.

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