

Column: Unmasked



A member of the U.S. House of Representatives recently declared that the House rule that members must wear masks while in the House chamber was equivalent to the Nazi demand that Jews wear gold stars on their clothing to facilitate their being identified, packed on to cattle cars, and shipped to the *Vernichtungslagen*, the extermination camps.

As a physician, I have a high tolerance for stupidity, but this claim struck me as exceeding the acceptable limits of stupidity, even for a member of Congress. I have heard members of Congress demand the right to carry loaded firearms into the House and Senate chambers, despite there being armed guards already assigned to these facilities.

I have heard “distinguished” legislators brag about their efforts to deny Constitutionally guaranteed rights to specific ethnic or racial groups, but these obscene statements pale in the face of a doubly unspeakable slur. This Congresswoman managed to demonize the Speaker of the House who sought to limit the spread of Covid-19 in the Congressional workplace, while simultaneously trivializing the most unspeakable crime against humanity committed during the last century. And many of her colleagues and constituents applauded.

I expected to hear a chorus of condemnation and sanctions but no such recommendations were heard from her Congressional colleagues. Instead, I saw a group of parents outside a grammar school demanding that their children not wear masks and carrying signs that said, "Masks are slavery." Really? Are they suggesting that putting a mask on their precious offspring is equivalent to the sale, rape, torture, brutalization, and inhumanity visited upon millions of people in our country over the course of more than two centuries? Do they need a crash course in American history? Are they intentionally trivializing one of the most despicable aspects of American history, the enslavement of black people?

Everywhere I turn, I hear the refusal to wear a mask shouted out proudly, as if embracing ignorance is a virtue. Since January 2021, flights originating in the United States have reported more than 1,900 incidents of "unruly passengers" who got into yelling matches with or physical assaults on flight crews who tried to enforce the mandate that passengers wear masks while on the airplane. You do realize that while on that airplane you are inhaling what your fellow passenger just exhaled?

You do not mean to suggest that the more than 500,000 dead and several million permanently disabled by Covid-19 were fake? Let me assure you, as a physician working in the first epicenter of the pandemic, people actually died. They were not pretending. The stench from the overflowing refrigerator trucks that were needed to hold the bodies of the dead permeated the city. Hospitals were filled with pandemic victims, and doctors and nurses and orderlies and transporters working in the hospitals died. It really happened, and in many places, it is still happening.

More than a century ago, physicians and nurses with a good command of the obvious noticed that diseases spread by people who coughed spread less easily if the affected individuals and their caretakers wore masks. Hospitals were established solely to house people with tuberculosis and other lung diseases so that they would not spread their infections to other patients. Fresh air, limited contact with other people, and masks were all the medical community had to offer until the mid-20th century when antibiotics were

developed. This is not ancient history. Many people still alive today remember the toll exacted by tuberculosis and other bacterial lung diseases. Even I had an uncle who died from tuberculosis.

The legacy of the bad old days when communicable diseases drastically reduced life expectancies still affects modern medical practice. To maintain privileges at hospitals where I worked, I had to get a skin test for tuberculosis every two years. Privileges are what you need to have to treat people in hospitals. I had to be tested for HIV, syphilis, and a host of other communicable diseases. Some of the hospitals I worked at demanded that I get flu shots every year.

If I could not prove I had been immunized against or suffered from a variety of childhood diseases and had antibodies to those diseases, I needed to get vaccinations before I would be allowed to treat patients. One hospital insisted that I get hepatitis B vaccinations three times because my antibodies kept failing to demonstrate immunity. They even demanded that I wear a mask during the flu season, years before Covid-19 struck.

Does this strike you as an infringement on my rights as an American? Would you mind if I treated you or your children or your parents while infected with syphilis or tuberculosis or HIV or Covid-19? Do you believe these hospitals and the Board of Health overstepped their authority and frivolously ignored my "God-given right" to risk my life at work and at home? Would you deny the maskless child sitting next to yours at school the right to cough on his or her teacher or on your child? Would you deny the maskless person sleeping next to you on the airplane the right to disperse Covid-19 when he sneezes? Give it some thought.

As a footnote, I must confess my own stupidity. While working on the pulmonary (lung) service at the Boston City Hospital, I never wore a mask. I examined several people with highly contagious lung diseases, including tuberculosis, and it never occurred to me that I might get these diseases. I spent years drawing blood, and never wore gloves while

performing the procedure. I often had blood spilled on me, but it never occurred to me that I might get HIV, hepatitis, syphilis or other blood borne infections.

I examined a man with leprosy using my bare hands, but in my defense, I did not know the diagnosis until after a nerve biopsy came back. I did mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. The man died, but I never found out what killed him. Obviously, whatever it was did not kill me. To what do I attribute my survival? Dumb luck. So, my fellow American, do you feel lucky? Even if you do feel lucky, hedge your bets. Wear a mask. Stop the stupid.

Dr. Lechtenberg is an Easton resident who graduated from Tufts University and Tufts Medical School in Massachusetts and subsequently trained at The Mount Sinai Hospital and Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center in Manhattan. He worked as a neurologist at several New York Hospitals, including Kings County and The Long Island College Hospital, while maintaining a private practice, teaching at SUNY Downstate Medical School, and publishing 15 books on a variety of medical topics. He worked in drug development in the USA, as well as in England, Germany, and France.