

The Fall of Saint Anthony Fauci

[Michael Brendan Dougherty](#) May 27, 2021 11:04 AM



(Roman Genn)

On the unforced errors of America's most political doctor

In mid March of 2020, most Americans, including those in the White House, were still trying to understand the COVID-19 crisis unfolding around them. In a span of 24 hours, the NBA came to a sudden halt when players tested positive for the virus; seemingly minutes later, the American actor Tom Hanks announced from Australia that he and his wife, Rita Wilson, had this mysterious new illness; stock markets crashed around the world; President Donald Trump declared a pause on travel from Europe; and the World Health Organization, belatedly, labeled the spread of the coronavirus a pandemic. On March 16, the Trump White House called for 15 days to slow the spread of the virus — a lockdown.

The White House coronavirus task force was meeting regularly and issuing daily briefings at that time. In the Situation Room, economic advisers began presenting their models and predictions for the economic effects of lockdown to the task force, including its leader, Vice President Mike Pence, and the president. What the advisers reported was shocking. Just four weeks of lockdown would lead to millions of Americans unemployed, extreme burdens on the public purse, and the greatest one-month contraction of the American economy since the Great Depression. A health adviser present said that, as the lights came up following the presentation, the faces of most of the advisers in the room were ashen. The gravity of what had just been said — all of which shortly came to pass — seemed to have stunned everyone into silence.

Except one man. Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease (NIAID), immediately turned to Vice President Pence and asked a question that appeared to dismiss not only the imminent miseries of lockdown but the relevance of the entire subject from the proceedings: "I'm still in charge, right?"

More or less, yes, Fauci was still in charge. And he still is. Though he had spent the weeks before that day giving interviews in which he told Americans to be more concerned about the seasonal flu than the coronavirus, and that the wearing of masks by the public would be useless at protecting them from it, Fauci was cast as the face of America's best pandemic response, the one figure who took it seriously. Fauci was the anti-Trump, possessed of a "quaint fondness for facts and evidence-based science," according to the *New York Times*. Trump's biggest supporters, sensing that Fauci was delighting in this role and despairing as they were of lockdowns, turned on the doctor, demanding he be fired. The White House began treating the administration's most prominent medical expert as a threat, circulating anti-Fauci talking points. Which made progressives

embrace him all the more. On social media your liberal friends call their COVID-19 vaccine shots their “Fauci ouchies.” Fauci became the latest warrior-saint of “the Resistance,” holding aloft the banner of science and reason.

Fauci joined the National Institutes of Health soon after graduating from medical school. He was a pioneering researcher on infectious diseases such as lymphomatoid granulomatosis and polyarteritis nodosa. He then moved into studying AIDS. He became the director of NIAID in 1984 and has held that position ever since.

Fauci first achieved something like a public profile during the AIDS crisis, becoming a hated figure among progressive gay activists who viewed him as an antagonist for his slowness and unwillingness to approve therapeutic drugs. Later, though, after Fauci relented, the playwright and activist Larry Kramer, of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), held him up as a hero and friend. Fauci’s effort to win over activists has been described as a charm offensive that included wine-soaked dinners. The *Washington Post* said that it was during this phase of his career that Fauci learned his strategy of doing prolonged media blitzes. With Fauci playing a congenial doctor on television and framing all political issues as mere matters of science, politicians could, according to the *Post*, “launder credibility through him, all the while holding at a distance the more radioactive elements of any crisis.” The doctor said that he learned not to be political. “It’s when you get into the politics that you get in trouble,” Fauci said to the reporter Molly Roberts last year. She summed up his achievement as having “brokered a generational peace between” science and partisan politics.

But there was a price to be paid. In his AIDS memoir, *Body Counts*, Sean Strub points out that Fauci used his insistence on bulletproof studies to justify his mulish slowness in response to the AIDS crisis, including his

fateful hesitancy to authorize therapeutic treatments for the diseases that were killing those who suffered from AIDS. Gay men turned to “buyers’ clubs” to get the drugs that their own desperate research indicated they needed. As Strub notes, by 1989, when the government approved a prophylaxis for pneumocystis carinii pneumonia (PCP), which affects people with weakened immune systems such as those with HIV, 30,534 people in the United States had died from a preventable disease over the previous decade. Michael Callen, an AIDS activist who eventually died of the disease, “estimated 16,929 of them had died between the time he went to plead for Fauci’s support and more than two years later, when the guidelines were finally issued,” Strub writes. Some of the themes Strub delineates in Fauci’s conduct during the AIDS crisis seem to have been repeated in COVID: the prioritization of a vaccine over therapeutic treatments, a refusal to take bold action in the face of a crisis, and a bureaucrat’s comfort with a slow process of updating guidance, even as people languish or die. The saving difference is that this time the vaccines came through remarkably quickly.

Fauci is an unusually hardy and long-lived survivor in Washington. But the people who look up to him as merely “America’s doctor” or a mere public-health adviser may not quite understand the power wielded by the National Institutes of Health and his agency within it. NIH dispenses up to \$32 billion a year for biological and medical research, much of the funding in the form of long-term grants that are not just necessary for worthwhile scientific research but desperately needed for researchers’ academic job security. In the United States, biologists and other medical researchers whose grant proposals are approved are usually expected by their universities to cover their own costs, including salary for research teams. The NIH — its decisions about who gets funding and for what — is why, say, worm researchers end up studying worm aging rather than worm evolution.





Dr. Anthony Fauci

Dr. Anthony Fauci wears a lab equipment-themed mask at a COVID-19 response event with President Joe Biden at the White House, January 21, 2021.

Jonathan Ernst/Reuters

Now, Anthony Fauci is highly unlikely to be directly involved in most NIH grants. But long and various chains of professional interest will come together under a cloud that rains down \$32 billion a year. And this cloud may help us to understand strange fact patterns. Here's one fact: After Trump promoted the idea, Fauci repeatedly rubbished the use of the common, cheap-to-produce drug hydroxychloroquine as a therapeutic or prophylactic for COVID-19. A second fact: Studies conducted in North America of hydroxychloroquine's effectiveness in treating COVID are 3.4

times more likely to report negative results than studies of the same conducted anywhere else in the world. There is no obvious causal connection. But would you want your lab's name in the hot glaring sun embarrassing America's doctor? Or would you want it under that fat federal cloud that rains buckets of money on you and your peers?

Here's another odd fact pattern. The public-health consensus around COVID-19 and the proper or necessary interventions to take against it shifts all the time. This consensus shapes public policy and leaks out into respectable mainstream news outlets; most insidiously, it becomes encoded as a quasi-official public line that every individual on social media is obliged to repeat and share or else be subject to demonetization, warnings, censorship, and accusations of spreading disinformation. The polarization of our politics and of public-health elites has left us with two categories of thought on COVID: the Science, and dangerous (sometimes racist) conspiracy theories. Half the time, the conspiracy theories *become* the Science. Belief in the efficacy of masks or in the lab-leak theory made these transitions. But these shifts don't happen upon the publication of credible new scientific studies. There is almost no public jousting and argument among scientists and researchers. There is just a sliding from one position to another when it becomes safe. Long after these shifts take place, CDC guidance often comes to incorporate them.

Credible scientific evidence that outdoor transmission of the coronavirus was negligible was available late in the spring of 2020, even as newspapers were still shaming people about being on beaches and a solo paddleboarder was arrested in California. But CDC guidance on outdoor activities and outdoor mask-wearing didn't change for a year. We've long had evidence that children under twelve are far less likely to get seriously ill or die from COVID than they are from the flu. The *scientific evidence* is all there in the open that children are basically *safe to gather together*, but the

mysterious scientific consensus hasn't developed to the point of making it *safe to say this* in public. It's as if doctors are afraid that pointing this out will make them vulnerable to accusations that they are providing aid and comfort to COVID-skeptical parents. But Dr. Fauci does understand the science. And so he could barely suppress his laughter when asked to explain on television why the CDC insists on young children wearing masks outdoors at summer camps this year — children who will be sleeping in the same indoor spaces with each other. Fauci has been the face of this shape-shifting consensus, even at its most ridiculous.

And at its most dishonest.

In February 2020, Fauci dismissed the value of masks: "If you look at the masks that you buy in a drug store, the leakage around that doesn't really do much to protect you." He would later incorrectly claim that he had never earlier dismissed the medical value of masks, just advised against buying them, and only because of a shortage among medical and other frontline workers. But he did cite scientific reasons that the public wouldn't benefit from crummy masks — and subsequent studies have shown exactly that. Later, Fauci would explain the real value of masks: "I want to make it be a symbol for people to see that that's the kind of thing you should be doing," he said. The value was not medical but symbolic; masks were a reminder to be conscientious and afraid.

Last April, Fauci denounced theories that the novel coronavirus might have escaped from the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV), saying that the science showed the virus was "totally consistent with a jump of a species from an animal to a human." Most science journalists followed him. A former *Times* science reporter said that the lab-leak theory belonged in the same realm of nutty conspiracy theories as Pizzagate. Well, of course it did, when mentioning it in public was considered disinformation. While many new

papers have been published on the origins of the virus, very little evidence has changed since last spring. But only in May of this year was Fauci willing to say that he's not entirely convinced it developed naturally.

When confronted by hostile questions about his changing statements, Fauci says — like any good scientist — that he is just responding to new data as they come in. "I haven't been wrong, period," he has insisted. But when talking to friendly media, he admits he tries to manipulate the public with lies rather than level with them. In April 2021, he told the *New York Times*, "When polls said only about half of all Americans would take a vaccine, I was saying herd immunity would take 70 to 75 percent. Then, when newer surveys said 60 percent or more would take it, I thought, 'I can nudge this up a bit,' so I went to 80, 85." Manipulation and deceit like this are impossible to square with America's ethic of self-governance.

Because of the strangely quiet and slippery consensus among scientists, Fauci's public critics have tended to come from other fields. During the Trump years, they came from the economics side. Peter Navarro, the Harvard-trained economist and China hawk who served as an economic- and trade-policy adviser to Trump, wrote an op-ed in *USA Today* pointing out many of the times that Fauci had been wrong during the pandemic. *USA Today* eventually published a groveling note apologizing to readers for publishing something critical of Dr. Fauci but at the same time tried not to refute Navarro's claims, saying they were "misleading or lacked context."

That Fauci knows how to work the press is something that comes up many times when one speaks to people from Trump's COVID task force. "I sent out a memo to the task force in February of 2020," Navarro explained in an interview with National Review, "saying we could have a vaccine as early as November in mass production up to 150 million doses. Fauci challenged me, and went out on TV. And said it could be well over a year or more. Next

thing I knew, I was getting attacked on CNN for what I was saying. They were actively taking Fauci's point of view." Others involved in the task force remarked on Fauci's ability to outleak the leakiest White House in living memory. Those who disagreed with Fauci even in private would find themselves the subject of unflattering coverage almost immediately in the *Washington Post*.

Navarro was correct. Fauci did go on television to say it would take 18 months to develop a vaccine. But the vaccines were developed and went into mass production by the end of 2020. Navarro is just one example of many whose views during the COVID crisis that year were dismissed as "disinformation" across the media at every single turn and who then watched as much of what they said either came true or was quietly rechristened as the new accepted view.

Whatever Fauci's prior career achievements, he has shown in the COVID-19 pandemic that he is not the disinterested expert he claims to be. He survives in Washington not just because he launders politics through science and has an affable demeanor but because he's also a cutthroat in the media game. Even when his critics are right, they get cashiered, and Fauci wins more public accolades. After Biden won the election, Fauci went on a kind of post-Trump media tour, broadcasting his relief and detailing his problems with Trump. He broke his rule about not getting into politics and sticking to the science, leaving no doubt that he embraced his role in the Resistance.

But the other shoe is yet to drop. Former *New York Times* science writer Nicholas Wade, who did as much as anyone to mainstream the lab-leak theory of COVID, went on to point out another thing that only "Pizzagaters" were saying 15 months ago: Dr. Anthony Fauci had been personally involved in lobbying to exempt gain-of-function research into coronaviruses at the

Wuhan Institute of Virology from funding restrictions. Gain-of-function research takes viruses from animals in the wild to see which of them can be made more infective in humans in the lab; the theory is that by seeing which viruses can make the jump to humans, biologists can get ahead of natural viral evolution and produce treatments faster. Dr. Shi Zhengli, the virologist at the WIV who is known as China's "Batwoman" and who said she wondered upon hearing of the outbreak whether the virus had escaped from her lab, has thanked Fauci in her papers before. Wade's reporting showed that the laws governing the flow of NIH money meant that "either the director of the NIAID, Dr. Anthony Fauci, or the director of the NIH, Dr. Francis Collins, or maybe both, would have invoked the exemption in order to keep the money flowing to Dr. Shi's gain-of-function research."

At a May Senate hearing, Senator Rand Paul broke the seal on questioning Fauci about his personal involvement in what would be the worst man-made disaster in history: a controversial lab-research project, which many biologists had warned against, resulting in a virus escaping the lab and killing 3.5 million people while shutting down the world economy for a year. Fauci's denials turned on legalistic deflections. NIH hadn't directly funded the Wuhan lab, he said. True, the agency had funded a research group that subcontracted to the Wuhan lab. Similar contortions were made to redefine gain-of-function research.

If this is the last "conspiracy theory" and disinformation campaign to become transformed into the accepted wisdom — which may shortly occur — then Fauci will have to explain why it was that he accepted the role of Pandemic Hero in the first place. Or why he joined a phony and flimsy consensus that the virus had emerged in nature. Or why he so consistently downplayed the risks early on, given what he must have known or suspected the minute reports emerged of a coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan. Given that he's already told us he lies because the public isn't ready for the

truth, how likely are his denials to be believed?

“My theory is that Anthony Fauci is a sociopath,” says Navarro. “He knew full well that virus came from the lab. He knew full well that he was the one who reauthorized gain-of-function. And day after day, for nine months leading up to the election, he did not level with the American people.”

Is Navarro angry over how Fauci was lauded? You bet. It wouldn't be the first time that an outlandish and demonized theory about COVID-19 turned out to be the likeliest story. But in any event, America no longer needs a saint of the Science. The Resistance turned on and discarded every previous hero, whether it was Michael Cohen, Michael Avenatti, or even Robert Mueller. Dr. Fauci broke his own rule. He got political, and now he's about to get into trouble.

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