

No, Joe Biden, the Pandemic Is Not Over

The president's words were irresponsible and flat-out wrong, but they accurately reflect his administration's long-standing attitude toward the pandemic.

By Gregg Gonsalves for The Nation

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President Biden removes his mask in the Rose Garden. (Anna Moneymaker / Getty)

On CBS's *60 Minutes* in late September, President Biden announced: "The pandemic is over." With more than 400 deaths each day all summer, Covid is still among the leading

causes of death in America. The United States still leads the G7 industrialized nations in per capita Covid mortality and excess deaths, and with life expectancy in the US declining due to the disease, these basic health metrics do not support the president's contention. Things may not be as bad as they were in 2020 or in the darkest days of the Omicron surge, but the current status quo bakes a staggering amount of death and suffering into a surrender to the virus.

Let's be clear: President Biden capitulated to the pandemic long ago. The high-water mark of his tenure was the passage of the American Rescue Plan in March 2021, an important achievement for which he rightly should be praised. But after that, there was just a slow withdrawal of effort, a shameful retreat from the comprehensive strategy against the virus that the president outlined shortly after his inauguration. By the end of 2021, Biden had embraced a vaccination-only strategy to try to fend off SARS-CoV-2—but couldn't even manage to get Americans vaccinated and boosted at rates comparable to other nations around the world. More people have now died under President Biden's watch than under President Trump's—a 9/11's worth of American deaths every week for the past several months. Not to mention the millions of Americans suffering from the lingering effects of long Covid. Yes, Congress failed to act, but with an administration trumpeting that we were all vaxxed-and-relaxed, any sense of urgency on the pandemic melted away months ago.



The Biden Stop on Lula's World Tour

The president has said Americans are tired of the pandemic. Yes, we are tired, frustrated, angry, depressed in the midst of what is a singular American tragedy: No mass death event—no war or pandemic or catastrophe—has killed so many of us so quickly since the Civil War. But it's political expediency, rather than fatigue, that motivates the administration to put the pandemic firmly into the past, with pollsters from Impact Research telling the president in a February 2022 memo to take the win and “declare the crisis phase of Covid over.” The midterms are coming up, but this short-term thinking will only make the pandemic worse—as many seek to dismantle programs associated with the current federally declared public health emergency—and could discourage individuals from protecting themselves.

This isn't just about President Biden. It takes a village to make a mess like this. We can start with pundits like David Leonhardt at *The New York Times* and Leana Wen at *The Washington Post*, who have egged on the White House for over a year. Even in the middle of mounting deaths last winter, Leonhardt called Omicron “mild,” making wild claims

about pandemic mitigation efforts causing everything from suicides to car crashes. He wrapped much of this opinion in cherry-picked data, maintaining it was only the very liberal who still worried about SARS-CoV-2. This was catnip to the aspirational middle-of-the-roaders in D.C. Meanwhile, at the *Post*, Wen was using her trust-me-I'm-a-doctor shtick to persuade readers, like Elsa in *Frozen*, to “let it go, let it go”—stop worrying and learn to live with the virus. Her pitch was that thanks to vaccines and treatments, Covid infection was now no big deal and the downsides of continuing mitigation were far more terrible than SARS-CoV-2 could ever be. Wen clearly views the pandemic as a you-do-you affair, a question of personal risk assessment and personal choice, making public health into a private matter.

These are the kinds of voices that the White House fed on for months. Eager to go along to get along, some people in public health and medicine have also downplayed the pandemic, because no one wants to be on the losing team. Ashish Jha, the dean of the Brown School of Public Health, was plucked to be the administration's spokesman on Covid largely because his refrain of “we have the tools” was seen as a neat way of telegraphing to Americans that your life is in your own hands now—so don't look to those of us in Washington for any more help.

America's “best and brightest” have led us astray once again. It's up to ordinary Americans to resist this stumbling into catastrophe, to refuse to accept nearly 3,000 deaths a week as “Mission Accomplished” or a job well done.

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