

COVID's covert impact will alter the face of politics

[Henry Ergas](#) 12:00AM March 20, 2020

On March 24, 1976, as the US prepared to celebrate its bicentenary, president Gerald Ford faced a decision which could only damage his chances of winning the election that was to be held that November.

The underrated leader of an underrated administration, Ford had become the 38th president by accident. Appointed vice-president by Richard Nixon when Spiro Agnew resigned in October 1973, he acceded to the Oval Office on Nixon's own resignation in November 1974.

Ford's legitimacy, which was already diminished by being the only person to become president without having faced a national election, had been further eroded by the controversial decision to pardon Nixon. And his standing was tarnished by the bumbling image that had led Lyndon Baines Johnson to famously say (in the press's sanitised version of LBJ's far coarser remark) that "Gerald Ford is so dumb that he can't walk and chew gum at the same time".

But the highly classified memo Ford had received from his national security adviser was no laughing matter.

Summarising urgent briefings from the administration's science advisers, the memo reported that, unless immediate action was taken, "one million" Americans would die in the coming months, as the nation was swept by a "particularly virulent strain of influenza virus which, if contracted, is likely to result in a fatality".

Terrifying as it was, the memo did not overstate the anxiety gripping the organisations responsible for controlling the spread of contagious

diseases.

For some time, the US's most eminent virologists had detected a pattern of genetic instability in the prevailing strains of influenza, which typically presaged the emergence of an especially dangerous mutation.

By 1975, the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases could flatly state that "every 10 to 12 years a major modification takes place (in the influenza virus), rendering whole populations susceptible to the new strain" and that "the next such pandemic (was) predicted for the late 1970s".

To make things worse, many experts believed that the next strain would be antigenically very similar to the Spanish flu virus, which had caused a devastating global pandemic at the end of World War I.

Those fears reached fever pitch in early February, when a previously unknown virus struck the army training camp at Fort Dix, New Jersey, killing an extremely healthy young recruit. Rapidly analysed, the virus proved to be a swine influenza which was indeed antigenically close to Spanish flu and which, like it, seemed highly contagious.

With the only good news being that the new technology of recombination had made it possible to design a vaccine, the director of the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, David Sencer, promptly wrote to the then secretary of health, FD Mathews, recommending that — for the first time in the nation's history — preparations be made to vaccinate every American against a virus, despite the immense difficulties that would involve.

Mathews didn't hesitate, saying that, given "the possibility of another 1918", the administration could not in good conscience "face the electorate later, if it eventuates, and say well, the probability was so low we decided not to try".

And after meeting on March 24 with leading US virologists — who unanimously backed Sencer's recommendation — Ford didn't hesitate either. Flanked by polio heroes Albert Sabin and Jonas Salk, the president addressed the nation. He told Americans that a "dangerous" new virus, "very similar to one that caused a very deadly flu epidemic late in the First World War", had appeared, creating "a very real possibility that unless we take effective counter actions, there could be an epidemic next fall and winter here in the United States".

Ford therefore launched the National Influenza Immunisation Program, with congress authorising the program within weeks.

More than four decades later, the program's performance remains mired in controversy. What seems certain is that it neither failed as miserably as its critics claim, nor succeeded as greatly as its supporters contend.

But it is equally certain that it suffered from myriad delays and that, once it became clear the pandemic was not under way, public support shrivelled and, amid swirling recriminations, collapsed.

The political fallout from that collapse reached far beyond the program itself. As the election approached, Ford's position was fraught, with an economy trapped in "stagflation" compounding his electoral woes.

The first incumbent Republican president to face a contested renomination, he had to contend with Ronald Reagan — whose claim that Ford, as well as being soft on foreign policy, had done too little to dismantle the "big-spending" programs of LBJ's "Great Society", seemed confirmed by the NIIP.

And almost exactly the same accusation was being hurled at Ford by Jimmy Carter, who, appealing to the swelling evangelical electorate, had managed to seize the Democratic nomination from a crowded field of left-leaning liberals, in part by presenting himself as a staunch fiscal

conservative.

It would be foolish to suggest that the immunisation program caused Ford's narrow loss to Carter. There is, however, no doubt that it helped seal the fate of the Great Society, with The New York Times lambasting the program as a "costly fiasco" that highlighted the limits of massive interventions.

As Americans lost what little faith they had left in government, the early termination of the NIIP in December 1976 both symbolised and inaugurated an era of retreat from the post-war liberal consensus. Now, as this year's election approaches, the US is grappling with a real pandemic, but without any of the far-reaching preparations the Ford administration had deployed.

Going by recent reports, the immediate consequences could be devastating; and even if they are not, the panic COVID-19 has unleashed could cement the Democrats' tilt back to a much greater role for government — a tilt evident in Joe Biden's move to the left on almost every issue.

Once again, a virus could turn the winds of politics.

Nor would that turn be limited to the US alone. Almost everywhere, the pandemic has — often for good reason — led to measures whose scale, reach and intrusiveness are unprecedented in peacetime. At the same time, even within the EU, each country has focused entirely on safeguarding its own interests, eschewing international obligations.

And with economists expecting a severe global recession, all fiscal constraint has vanished, even in countries where debt levels are already unsustainable, while what remained of international economic co-operation has vanished.

The politics that emerges from the rubble of the pandemic may bear little resemblance to the high-minded technocratic optimism whose dying embers illuminated the immunisation program. The word "virus" originates in the Latin word for poison. Once this one has permeated the body politic, it could prove every bit as hard to eradicate as the disease itself.