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Despite a disturbing spike in coronavirus cases in Texas and nationwide last month, tubers took to Texas's Comal River in New Braunfels on June 25. Officials are now blaming young people and their failure to socially distance this summer for the increases. Texas and other states have since begun to reverse or pause reopening. | AP

A likely culprit in Covid-19 surges: People hell-bent on ignoring social distancing orders

Turbulent reopenings and partisan mask wars have only highlighted the nation's preoccupation with personal liberty above all — even a deadly pandemic.

By Eleanor Cummins | Updated Jul 2, 2020, 2:00pm EDT

The
Highlight
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For months, it's been clear that the world has separated into two camps: the rule followers, observant of **social distancing** and hopeful of quashing the pandemic; and the risk takers, who have been storming the nation's beaches, bars, and burger joints in spite of the **coronavirus** — and public health efforts to curtail its spread.

Some states, such as New York, have contained new cases, but others, including Texas and Arizona, **brazenly reopened** even as cases continued to rise, unleashing a torrent of pent-up partiers. Now, even as an illusion of normalcy has slowly returned, rates of infection are reaching **new records**, with cases surging in **dozens of states**.

The US is “going in the wrong direction,” Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and frequent face of the Trump administration's virus response, warned **senators** recently.

In March, the new virus pushed dozens of countries **to implement strict isolation** methods to prevent a global health crisis. In China, coronavirus measures were hard to evade, as authorities **sealed apartment buildings** and **scanned millions** for rising body temperatures. But in the United States, these restrictions have been harder to devise and enforce, mostly because democratic norms and a strong sense of individual liberty prevail. So, instead, the crisis has exposed humanity's tendency to flout the rules.

Masks — although recommended by federal and world health officials as effective in slowing the virus's spread — have become a polarizing symbol of this dangerous phenomenon. In recent weeks, protesters have descended on **government buildings** and **private businesses** to decry face-covering requirements, calling them “**muzzles**” and “communist.” In **one viral video**, a maskless Florida man shoved a Walmart employee who tried to enforce the store's face-covering policy. In **another**, a woman at a California Trader Joe's screamed at employees and customers after others in the store criticized her for shopping without a mask. Some scofflaws have taken to **brandishing sham cards** from a phony “Freedom to Breathe Agency” that purportedly exempt them from mask-wearing.

Adding fuel to this fire, officials say, are the multitudes of young people determined to socialize. Some have tried to pin the problem on the Black Lives Matter protests that have continued for weeks, but **preliminary research** using geolocation data suggests these events had no impact on the virus's spread. Instead, public health experts are attributing the surge in new cases to the mask-free masses flocking to reopened restaurants and bars, pool parties and **lazy rivers**.

“They’re conducting themselves like it’s pre-Covid, and that’s not going to work anymore,” Bruce Dart, director of the Tulsa Health Department, **told the Washington Post**. Younger people, he said, are “not social distancing, not wearing masks or paying attention to hand-washing.” In one stunning case shortly after Memorial Day, a group of 16 friends all **tested positive** for the virus after visiting a newly reopened bar in Florida.

In the months since worldwide lockdowns were adopted, there’s been a recurring theme among coronavirus rebels: They do what they want. In the early weeks of the pandemic, people swarmed beaches around the world, from **Florida** to **Bondi Beach in Australia**. “If I get corona, I get corona,” one spring breaker **told Reuters**. “At the end of the day, I’m not gonna let it stop me from partying.” (He later **apologized**, calling his comment “insensitive.”)

Even after quarantines had been instituted, Washington, DC, Metro officials in March **had to practically beg** riders not to visit the city’s famous cherry blossoms, which they did anyway, **in droves**. Brits took to crowded pubs to **chant “f*** coronavirus!”** And one woman went viral when she **tweeted** about her defiant trip to a crowded Red Robin restaurant. “It was delicious,” she tweeted, “and I took my sweet time eating my meal. Because this is America. And I’ll do what I want.”

Even officials are taking smug positions on the public health warnings. “I don’t need his advice anymore,” Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick **said of Fauci** on Fox News in late June.



Visitors walk around the Washington, DC's Tidal Basin on March 21 to see the cherry blossoms, despite social distance warnings and city efforts to dissuade visitors. | Eric Baradat/AFP/Getty Images

The poor reaction of a growing number of people to social distancing and mask policies — even as the virus resurges — comes as no surprise to psychologists, sociologists, and public health experts. No one alive today has experience with a pandemic of this severity, catching even the most experienced researchers off-guard, not to mention the average person sorting through their Facebook feed. Conflicting government messaging and reopenings of restaurants, bars, hair salons, and gyms in many states have only exacerbated the wildly divergent individual responses, and reliance on personal responsibility in public health matters.

It's created fertile ground for the public to practice the long-held wisdom that we must "carry on" in a crisis: For at least a century, citizens have believed that in the midst of a disaster, their job is to go on with their daily lives as best they can — as if it were a safeguard against an unseen enemy.

"We feel like we have to do something," said **Robert Wuthnow**, a sociologist at Princeton University and author of *Be Very Afraid: The Cultural Response to Terror, Pandemics, Environmental Devastation, Nuclear Annihilation, and Other Threats*. But without a good frame of reference for the present crisis, we've looked to lessons

learned from past calamities, including natural disasters, terrorism, war, and economic collapse, to guide us. “We’re a little bit like generals fighting the last war,” he said.

But the old rules no longer apply. The pandemic is unprecedented, said **Amy Fairchild**, a public health ethicist and the dean of Ohio State University’s College of Public Health. “In this moment in time, ‘carry on’ could be a formula for disaster.”

When the coronavirus first arrived in the United States, people cast about for comparisons. “So last year 37,000 Americans died from the common Flu,” President Trump **tweeted on March 9**. “It averages between 27,000 and 70,000 per year. Nothing is shut down, life & the economy go on. At this moment there are 546 confirmed cases of CoronaVirus, with 22 deaths. Think about that!”

Experts including Fauci debunked the comparison. “The flu has a mortality of 0.1%,” **he told Congress on March 11**. “This has a mortality rate of 10 times that.” But **the analogy** — intended to make an extraordinary threat look like ordinary — persists.

In reality, the coronavirus has no clear analogue. “The normal mechanisms we’re using to predict things don’t work,” said **Tali Sharot**, a professor of cognitive neuroscience at the University College London who studies human motivation. “Actually, nothing else that has happened before in our lifetimes is relevant or helpful here.”

Many contemporary disaster mantras emerged in past wars, and they often contained a kernel of a consumerist message. At the outset of World War I, British politicians such as Winston Churchill encouraged “**business as usual**,” suggesting that both companies and citizens should continue to behave just as they did in peacetime. But the status quo eventually gave way to a coordinated defense effort when the state realized it would need to control manufacturing, trade, and commerce to win the war.

Twenty years later, in World War II, the British government **coined “Keep Calm and Carry On”** to boost morale in anticipation of a Nazi invasion. But it quickly pulped the test posters; other campaigns about courage in a crisis provoked public outcry as many people found the messages tone-deaf. After **half a century**, however, the phrase was exhumed — in part as a message to those weathering the Great Recession.



The Princess of Wales Theater in Toronto bears the famous British wartime poster reading “Keep Calm and Carry On” on March 17. | Steve Russell/Toronto Star via Getty Images



An electronic ad from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in a Washington, DC, subway station on March 14. The “Keep Calm” message, discarded during WWII, became newly popular in the Great Recession. | Bill Clark/CQ-Roll Call via Getty Images

In times of crisis, Americans have borrowed English idioms, and coined a few of their own homespun mottos for personal and economic perseverance. During the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt made an enemy of an emotion, telling the public, “We have nothing to fear but fear itself.”

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, President Bush gave this famed aphorism a **consumerist spin** when he **told airline employees**, “When [the terrorists] struck, they wanted to create an atmosphere of fear. And one of the great goals of this nation’s war is to restore public confidence in the airline industry. It’s to tell the traveling public: Get on board. Do your business around the country. Fly and enjoy America’s great destination spots. Get down to Disney World in Florida.”

“Get down to Disney World” was probably never meant to apply to the people who actually **traveled to the Magic Kingdom** in March amid public health warnings to avoid crowds. (Disney eventually closed its theme parks to visitors, though some reopenings are **imminent**.) But that didn’t stop some politicians from applying this logic to the coronavirus. In a White House press briefing, **President Trump said**, “America will again and be soon open for business,” and later suggested **relaxing guidelines by Easter**. That jingoistic outlook quickly dissipated as the virus seemed to metastasize, killing more than **120,000 Americans** and requiring social distancing to continue for months.

And Americans haven’t been the best socially distant citizens: Memorial Day weekend festivities served as a new catalyst for the spread of the virus, and many officials are desperate to **reinstate or expand** social distancing policies before the Fourth of July. At the Lake of the Ozarks, for example, a raucous pool party was later **linked** to multiple coronavirus infections. Alabama students **reportedly threw parties** attended by infected students that one local lawmaker has alleged were “**Covid parties,**” aimed at intentionally getting others sick.

“It’s almost like we don’t want the virus to win, so we’re going to go out drinking, go to parties, go out to the beach,” Wuthnow said. But these are risky responses when the enemy is not a person or a bad year for the stock market, but a virus — one that can be **transmitted asymptotically**.

“IT’S ALMOST LIKE WE DON’T WANT THE VIRUS TO WIN, SO WE’RE GOING TO GO OUT DRINKING, GO TO PARTIES, GO OUT TO THE BEACH”

Humans are generally terrible at assessing risk. But it's proven especially true in the case of the coronavirus. "It's about our risk to others, and that might make it a little more difficult to understand," said **Cynthia Rohrbeck**, an associate professor in clinical and community psychology at George Washington University. People are used to talking with their doctors about their personal health, but taking responsibility for the health of others comes up only infrequently, often in public discourse around smoking, drinking and driving, and getting vaccinated.

Our judgment could be clouded by optimism bias, the tendency to believe you are less likely than others to experience something negative. In late February, researchers polled 4,348 people in France, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland and found **half of them** believed they were less likely to get the coronavirus than others, sans real evidence. Another poll, conducted in mid-March on more than 800 people from the US, the United Kingdom, and Germany, **suggested** this optimism was bolstered by people's belief that they had fewer human interactions than their peers, making their risk of contracting the virus inherently lower.

When countries finally began to roll out isolation measures, they encountered additional obstacles. "One of the most important things for people is to have a sense that they are in control of their own life, that they have agency," Sharot said. In a **paper** in *The Lancet*, researchers reviewed 24 past publications on the psychological effects of quarantine and found it can cause post-traumatic stress symptoms, confusion, and anger.

But the desire for agency can have an ideological component, too. In China, the authoritarian government has wide latitude to control the behavior of its citizens. But in the United States, few Americans have experienced government-imposed restrictions on when they can go out and whom they can see.

Many politicians criticized the rules as an infringement on people's freedom, not to mention a disaster for the economy. In March, Arizona state **Rep. Anthony Kern** (R) and Oklahoma **Gov. Kevin Stitt** (R) both tweeted (and deleted) defiant photos from crowded restaurants. "We can't all just shut ourselves and stay home," Sen. Ron Johnson (R-WI) **told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel**. "The economy has to move forward." And even the president has refused to be photographed wearing a mask, underscoring the way protective face coverings have become a **partisan lightning rod**. Now, as **states** are seeing terrifying spikes in their coronavirus cases, some are **reinstating the social distancing strategies** they just rolled back.

"Me, personally, I just refuse to live my life in fear," Katie Williams, the 30-year-old Las Vegas resident who went viral for her Red Robin tweet, told Vox in March. "As



Frolicking crowds at Australia's Bondi Beach on March 20 amid coronavirus concerns garnered international news coverage, and led the government to close it and similar beaches. | Jenny Evans/Getty Images

People may bristle at being told what to do — especially when American coronavirus quarantine strategies look superficially similar to those used by authoritarian nations such as China or Singapore. But **Susan Michie**, a health psychologist and the director of the Center for Behavior Change at the University College London, saw it another way: “We elect people to [make] decisions at a national level to look after ourselves. That’s not authoritarianism; that’s democracy.”

And officials are largely dependent on the public’s compliance in a crisis. “This is not something we are doing because we are the fun police,” an Australian official **said in a press conference** as he implored people to stay home in March. “This is about saving lives.” To convince people to cooperate, Michie said, politicians need to continue to communicate a clear sense of urgency, while **providing support** for everyone who is forced indoors. “We’re interconnected,” she said, and the coronavirus proves it.

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Americans, we typically do what we want. It's kind of that attitude we've always had," she added. "I think if we're going to start pressuring people that they have to stay home, or publicly shaming them like pariahs, I think we're just starting to lose a little bit of our sense of country and our sense of rights."



Fairchild, the public health ethicist, said she understands these concerns. But there are other rights to consider. "As an individual, I have a right not to be infected by somebody who is not paying attention," she said.