

Bill Kaplan: COVID-19 apocalypse is here

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“The pandemic has worsened across the country over the last two months, but perhaps nowhere as precipitously as in Wisconsin. Testing centers are overwhelmed, raising the risk of further spread as people who might otherwise learn they are infected delay isolating themselves” (NYT). Hospitals are near capacity, our medical heroes are at a breaking point and PPE is running out. The COVID-19 apocalypse is here.

There are 300,000+ cases, with 2,600+ deaths in Wisconsin. And, many of the sick will suffer lasting “damage (to) the lungs, heart and brain” (NYT). There have been 11 million cases and 250,000 dead nationally. Moreover, there is a leadership vacuum in Washington, despite the mounting horror.

“It seems clear Trump has checked out It’s pretty clear he feels wounded. Under those circumstances, the idea he’s going to pay more attention to the details of governance is ridiculous” (Norman Ornstein, conservative scholar). Wisconsin cannot wait for president-elect Joe Biden to take office.

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Last week, a downcast, exhausted Governor Tony Evers delivered a statewide plea: “Wisconsin, this is serious. This crisis is urgent.” He implored Wisconsinites to take precautions – wear a mask, avoid crowds and limit social gatherings. Evers also relitigated the past, pointing out how GOP legislative leaders have repeatedly sued to have COVID-19 safety rules overturned. GOP Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, reacting to Evers, said it might be time to “hit the reset button”. However, he then

listed all his grievances to the press, calling Evers a “dictator” for imposing a mask mandate. Enough!

Personal responsibility hasn’t worked. “An evaluation of state policies showed greater declines in daily COVID-19 cases after issuing mask mandates compared with states that did not have mandates” (JAMA). 34 states have mask mandates. Many GOP governors get it. Ohio GOP Governor Mike DeWine said: “Wear a mask, so that your friends, neighbors and family might live.” And, Utah GOP Governor Gary Herbert declared a mask mandate last week: “Under this requirement, all Utahns must wear masks in public ... (and) in business settings We cannot afford to debate this issue.” Does Vos think those mask mandate conservatives are “dictators”?

Time for a reset. Governor Evers would be wise to ask a prominent Republican to serve in his administration to show goodwill and reinforce that safety rules are nonpartisan. GOP legislative leaders need to meet Evers at least halfway. The “Stop the COVID Spread” coalition (health care and business groups) could be helpful in that, and more.

For example, make the case that wearing a mask is not optional. Point out how Republicans across the nation support a mask mandate. Second, join the AMA in condemning “highly offensive claims that physicians are inflating the number of COVID-19 cases to increase (their) incomes.” Third, lend your skills to help Wisconsin manufacture N95 masks and freezers for vaccine storage. Important for rural hospitals.

Wisconsin is on its own until January. Wearing masks and social distancing (no holiday gatherings, political demonstrations) could help check the COVID-19 surge while vaccine developments advance.

-Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C., for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 - 2009.