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Bill Kaplan: Trump rally amid COVID-19 tsunami

Posted on Monday, Oct 19, 2020

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Early on, a prominent Wisconsin doctor presciently told me that a COVID-19 "tsunami" would afflict Wisconsin. There have been about 170,000 cases, putting Wisconsin in national headlines. And, deaths are nearly 1,600. Daily case, death and hospitalization records are being broken. No zip code is immune: "In Wisconsin, rural counties in the state's northeast, as well as midsize metropolitan areas like Oshkosh, Appleton and Sheboygan, are reporting the most discouraging data" (NYT). Suburbs, including the WOW counties, have been hit hard. Waukesha Republicans, County Executive Paul Farrow and state legislator Scott Allen, became infected.

However, Trump and Wisconsin GOP Senator Ron Johnson continue to ignore or revile sound nonpartisan medical advice. Doctor Anthony Fauci, the leading infectious disease expert, warned of the consequences of holding mass political rallies: "We know that is asking for trouble when you do that." Wisconsin health officials and doctors have pleaded with the Trump campaign to reconsider planned campaign rallies – to no avail.

On Saturday, Trump spoke at a massive rally in Janesville, There was no social distancing with the crowd packed together. Masks were optional; those closest to Trump wore them. Trump ignored Wisconsin's soaring disease toll, saying the nation is "rounding the corner". Johnson chimed in: "I don't think (the rally) is particularly dangerous at all." Nevertheless, big rallies are COVID-19 super-spreader events. The Washington Post reported: "Annual biker rally drew 500,000 to (Sturgis) South Dakota; many left with infections." Cases spread throughout the Midwest.

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Until everyone takes public health advice – mandatory masks, social distancing and hygiene – seriously, the COVID-19 spread won't be contained. An out-of-control pandemic will prevent economic recovery. Wisconsin Democratic Governor Tony Evers has tried, but GOP state legislative leaders have been recalcitrant and reckless. However, former GOP Wisconsin GOP Governor Tommy Thompson, now President of the UW System, gets it. He made masks mandatory, implemented social distancing and widespread testing. The choice is not closing or opening the economy, but heeding common sense public health measures.

Right now, the economy is faltering. "Nearly 78 million adults (997,000 in Wisconsin) are having trouble paying for usual household expenses (food, rent or mortgage, car payments, medical expenses or student loans) …" (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities). The NYT reports: "After an ambitious expansion of the safety net in the spring saved millions of people from poverty, the aid is now largely exhausted and poverty has returned to levels higher than before the coronavirus crisis … ."

But Trump told the crowd in Janesville: "If (Biden) gets in you'll have the greatest depression in the history of the country. Your stocks will go to hell." And, he talked up Foxconn. However, most Americans own little in stocks (top 10 percent own 84 percent of the value of all shares). And, Foxconn is a mirage: the promised 13,000 jobs – another lie. It is not the "eighth wonder of the world". Voters are on to Trump.

Nebraska GOP Senator Ben Sasse said: "We are staring down the barrel of a blue tsunami" (November 3).

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