

Two Countries, Two Choices, Two Outcomes

By Don Sutherland

On December 31, China [notified](#) the World Health Organization (WHO) of cases of “pneumonia unknown etiology” in Wuhan City. Three weeks later, on January 21, South Korea and the United States both reported their first confirmed COVID-19 cases.

On January 31, the WHO [declared](#) the novel coronavirus outbreak a “public health emergency of international concern.” The WHO stated that it was “still possible to interrupt” the spread of the virus if “countries put in place strong measures to detect disease early, isolate and treat cases, trace contacts, and promote social distancing measures commensurate with risk.”

South Korea launched a strategy labeled “[TRUST](#)” (transparency; robust screening and quarantine; unique but universally applicable testing and; strict control and treatment) and pursued the most aggressive testing regime in the world beginning in early February.

In the United States, President Donald Trump [dismissed the threat](#) and gambled that the virus would simply disappear. On February 25, he declared, “You may ask about the coronavirus, which is very well under control in our country. We have very few people with it, and the people that have it are ... getting better. They’re all getting better. ... As far as what we’re doing with the new virus, I think that we’re doing a great job.” On February 28, he predicted, “It’s going to disappear. One day, it’s like a miracle, it will disappear.”

There was no miracle. By mid-March, as the White House dithered in the face of the accelerating spread of the COVID-19 virus, a growing number of the nation’s Governors stepped into the leadership void and implemented tough social distancing requirements that shuttered all but essential businesses. U.S. economic activity crumbled and 22 million people filed for unemployment over a four-week period.

Through April 15, South Korea had recorded 10,591 COVID-19 cases (about 207 cases for every million persons). The United States had experienced 644,089 (approximately 1,946 cases per million persons). At the same time, the U.S. per capita fatality rate was more than 20 times that of South Korea’s.

In its April 2020 [World Economic Outlook](#), the International Monetary Fund predicted that the U.S. economy would contract at a 5.9% real rate in 2020. South Korea’s would shrink by 1.2%. In the U.S., the unemployment rate was forecast to be 10.4% at the end of 2020. In South Korea, it was projected to be 4.5%.

It didn’t have to be this way in the United States. The United States could have chosen a different path.

President Donald Trump should have treated the rising pandemic in a serious fashion and heeded the WHO’s specific advice. Now, with the consequences of his chosen course

having become starkly and irreversibly clear, he is blaming the WHO for his own passivity and the news media for covering it.

Once tragedies are unleashed, there are no “do-overs” or “replays.” History and historic responsibility cannot be erased.

The choices leaders make are consequential. The costs of leadership failure are catastrophic.