

# Science Gives the Nation its Best Hope to Overcome COVID-19

By Don Sutherland

On Friday, as the nation was en route to reporting more than 47,000 new COVID-19 cases, Vice President Mike Pence told reporters, “We have made a truly remarkable progress in moving our nation forward.” He added, “We’ve all seen the encouraging news as we open up.” Progress? Encouraging news?

This Orwellian disconnect from reality won’t bring the nation salvation from the pandemic that is infecting tens of thousands of Americans daily even as it has already claimed more than 127,000 lives. Science, though, offers a real chance to deliver the nation from the pandemic.

While embattled politicians seeking re-election aim to downplay the grim reality that the U.S. position has grown worse in recent days, refuse to take responsibility for their decisions and deflect blame onto others for the consequences of their historic failure to lead, science has been a consistent bright spot. Scientists at the forefront of the coronavirus battle have made discoveries, translated the new knowledge into a range of ideas for treating the virus, devised a range of approaches that have already shown promise in effectively treating the virus and reducing mortality, and have continued to make rapid progress in developing a vaccine. All of this has been done in an astonishingly quick period—months, not years.

The amazing work of the nation’s scientists and their international peers has demonstrated anew that building ties that bring people across the world together in more collaborative ways, rather than constructing walls (physical, trade barriers, withdrawal from international research projects, suspension of H1B visas even for scientists, etc.) that stifle international cooperation has the greatest potential to benefit all of humanity. Their rapidly growing body of work in the face of a novel virus that first appeared on the global scene in November or December 2019 according to the latest research provides a stark contrast to the chronic failures of the political leaders to address longstanding issues—the familiar ones that show up in public polling year after year—gives the scientists genuine credibility.

Actions speak louder than political rhetoric. Concrete achievements are far more credible than unfulfilled campaign promises. The willingness to withdraw papers when flaws are found is light years more accountable than refusals to take responsibility by elected leaders for the outcomes of bad choices. Together, the scientists have exhibited the kind of “can do” or “pioneering” spirit that has long underpinned humanity’s enormous progress.

Going forward, were national policy that is closely tied to matters of science—public health, climate, public safety (human behavior component)—led by scientists, the nation would be poised for the kind of sound policy and breakthroughs that would benefit all of its residents. Examples of the Apollo Program, mass vaccination that eliminated the scourge of small pox and the eradication of the acid rain problem, to cite just three, provide examples of how public policy anchored in science can address major challenges, lead to big accomplishments and realize enormous opportunities.

Politicization of issues is like a weed that crowds out, if not altogether excludes science. Today's rejection of science and, more broadly, truth by some in Washington (the White House and its Republican allies to be specific) is particularly pronounced. That those who have turned away from science have made choices that turned the coronavirus challenge into a crisis and then transformed that crisis into a catastrophe is no accident. When science and evidence are excluded, policy making loses its creativity. It loses its capacity to address challenges or realize opportunities. It becomes little more than a sterile exercise in preserving a status quo that cannot work in an ever-changing world.