

Time for Fauci to quit?

by GWYNNE DYER

Is it time for Dr. Anthony Fauci to quit?

Brazil's health minister, Luiz Mandetta, was fired last Friday for criticising the country's mini-Trump, Jair Bolsonaro. Like Trump, President Bolsonaro needs a booming economy in order to be re-elected, and denies the threat from coronavirus because shutdowns hurt the economy.

Mandetta did what he could to control the berserker president, but eventually called Bolsonaro out on his attempts to force Brazilian state governments to end their shutdowns prematurely. He was duly fired, but it does raise the question: should Dr. Fauci do the same thing?

Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases for the past quarter-century, has served six U.S. administrations loyally through various health crises, starting with the AIDS epidemic. He's done his best to keep Donald Trump from doing the wrong thing. Sometimes he succeeds ? but sometimes the most useful thing an adviser can do is resign.

Fauci has become a familiar figure standing beside Donald Trump at media briefings, never openly contradicting him but subtly trying to steer him away from his worst ideas. It's a humiliating position to be in, but he has probably saved at least a few tens of thousands of American lives, and many people admire him for patiently, even humbly doing the best he can in impossible circumstances.

There comes a time, however, when staying on the inside and trying to limit the damage by staying on good terms with the author of the disaster shades into complicity in letting the disaster happen. Dr. Fauci undoubtedly examines his conscience on this question every single day, and fully understands how tricky his position is.

There was a revealing moment recently when Science Magazine asked him why he hadn't challenged Trump's claims to have saved millions of American lives by banning flights from China. ?Let's get real,? Fauci replied. ?What do you want me to do?... I can't jump in front of the microphone and push him down.?

Well, he could, obviously, but that would be the end of any positive influence he has on Trump. He's 79, so he's not worried about saving his job. He's ignoring Trump's exaggerations and lies so he can preserve his influence for some more important occasion. We now know what it is.

Trump bangs on obsessively about his ?China ban' decision on January 31 because it's the only thing he did about the coronavirus for the next six weeks, even as the pandemic silently spread among the U.S. population. Last week he even claimed that ?It could have been billions of people (who died) if we had not done what we did.?

Around 2,000 Americans are now dying from Covid-19 every day, so Trump clings desperately to his China story. Fauci lets the lie pass because it's just history and can't be changed. He's focussed on the decisions being made now that will determine how many Americans die in the future.

Trump is now frantically trying to end the lockdowns and get Americans back to work because he believes the economic damage is sabotaging his re-election prospects in November. He's even urging his base to demonstrate against (Democratic) state governors who take a more cautious line, texting ?LIBERATE MINNESOTA?, ?LIBERATE MICHIGAN? and ?LIBERATE VIRGINIA?.

Maybe this is the hill that Fauci should choose to die on, because ending the lockdowns early could needlessly kill an extra hundred thousand Americans. The United States now has one-third of all the Covid-19 cases in the world (with only 4% of the world's

population), and the number is still going up fast.

?Liberating' Americans from lockdown before the number of new infections is clearly in decline will just add fuel to the flames.

The rule is: never lift a lockdown until you are able to test huge numbers of people for the disease. The virus will inevitably start to spread again when you turn everybody loose, but if you test enough people, isolate the infected ones, and trace all of their recent contacts and isolate them too, then you can avoid a new spike in cases.

You will need tens of millions of test kits and hundreds of thousands of trained contact-tracers to do that. Those facilities are currently scarce or non-existent in most of the United States, and so far there is little visible effort to expand them. Ending the lockdowns without them will cause a new peak of cases and deaths by mid-summer, necessitating a new round of lockdowns.

If Fauci's resignation could prevent this carnage, he surely would not hesitate, but Trump is not as stupid as Bolsonaro. If Fauci hangs in there and stresses the inevitability of a second wave of deaths closer to election time if the lockdowns end prematurely, he might just manage to steer Trump away from this cliff.

So his long martyrdom must continue.