

Fintan O'Toole: Donald Trump has destroyed the country he promised to make great again

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The world has loved, hated and envied the US. Now, for the first time, we pity it

Sat, Apr 25, 2020, 06:00



Fintan O'Toole Follow

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US president Donald Trump has claimed he was being sarcastic and testing the media when he raised the idea that injecting disinfectant or irradiating the body with ultraviolet light might kill coronavirus.

Fintan O'Toole: Donald Trump has destroyed the countr... 09:12



Over more than two centuries, the United States has stirred a very wide range of feelings in the rest of the world: love and hatred, fear and hope, envy and contempt, awe and anger. But there is one emotion that has never been directed towards the US until now: pity.

However bad things are for most other rich democracies, it is hard not to feel sorry for Americans. Most of them did not vote for Donald Trump in 2016. Yet they are locked down with a malignant narcissist who, instead of protecting his people from Covid-19, has amplified its lethality.

Will American prestige ever recover from this shameful episode? The US went into the coronavirus crisis with immense advantages: precious weeks of warning about what was coming, the world's best concentration of medical and scientific expertise, effectively limitless financial resources, a military complex with stunning logistical capacity and most of the world's leading technology corporations.

As the American writer George Packer puts it in the current edition of the Atlantic, "The United States reacted ... like Pakistan or Belarus - like a country with shoddy infrastructure and a dysfunctional government whose leaders were too corrupt or stupid to head off mass suffering."

It is one thing to be powerless in the face of a natural disaster, quite another to watch vast power being squandered in real time - wilfully, malevolently, vindictively. It is one thing for governments to fail (as, in one degree or another, most governments did), quite another to watch a ruler and his supporters actively spread a deadly virus.

The grotesque spectacle of the president openly inciting people (some of them armed) to take to the streets to oppose the restrictions that save lives is the manifestation of a political death wish.

Other than the Trump impersonator Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, who is now looking to the US as the exemplar of anything other than what not to do? How many people in Düsseldorf or Dublin are wishing they lived in Detroit or Dallas?

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How many people in Düsseldorf or Dublin are wishing they lived in Detroit or Dallas?

If the plague is a test, its ruling political nexus ensured that the US would fail it at a terrible cost in human lives. In the process, the idea of the US as the world's leading nation - an idea that has shaped the past century - has all but evaporated.

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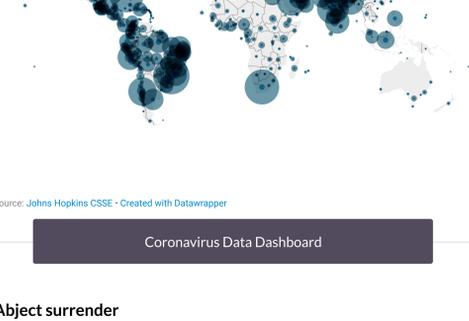
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Coronavirus COVID-19 confirmed & recovered cases

Number of people confirmed to have COVID-19 and number of people who already recovered. This map gets updated multiple times each day with data by Johns Hopkins. To zoom, use the zoom buttons or hold CTRL while scrolling.



Source: Johns Hopkins CSSE - Created with Datawrapper

Coronavirus Data Dashboard

Abject surrender

What used to be called mainstream conservatism has not absorbed Trump - he has absorbed it. Almost the entire right-wing half of American politics has surrendered abjectly to him. It has sacrificed on the altar of wanton stupidity the most basic ideas of responsibility, care and even safety.

Thus, even at the very end of March, 15 Republican governors had failed to order people to stay at home or to close non-essential businesses. In Alabama, for example, it was not until April 3rd that governor Kay Ivey finally issued a stay-at-home order.

In Florida, the state with the highest concentration of elderly people with underlying conditions, governor Ron DeSantis, a Trump mini-me, kept the beach resorts open to students travelling from all over the US for spring break parties. Even on April 1st, when he issued restrictions, DeSantis exempted religious services and "recreational activities".

There is, as the demonstrations in US cities show, plenty of political mileage in denying the reality of the pandemic

Georgia governor Brian Kemp, when he finally issued a stay-at-home order on April 1st, explained: "We didn't know that [the virus can be spread by people without symptoms] until the last 24 hours."

This is not mere ignorance - it is deliberate and homicidal stupidity. There is, as the demonstrations this week in US cities have shown, plenty of political mileage in denying the reality of the pandemic. It is fuelled by Fox News and far-right internet sites, and it reaps for these politicians millions of dollars in donations, mostly (in an ugly irony) from older people who are most vulnerable to the coronavirus.

It draws on a concoction of conspiracy theories, hatred of science, paranoia about the "deep state" and religious providentialism (God will protect the good folks) that is now very deeply infused in the mindset of the American right.

Trump embodies and enacts this mindset, but he did not invent it. The US response to the coronavirus crisis has been paralysed by a contradiction that the Republicans have inserted into the heart of US democracy. On the one hand, they want to control all the levers of governmental power. On the other they have created a popular base by playing on the notion that government is innately evil and must not be trusted.

The contradiction was made manifest in two of Trump's statements on the pandemic: on the one hand that he has "total authority", and on the other that "I don't take responsibility at all". Caught between authoritarian and anarchic impulses, he is incapable of coherence.

Fertile ground

But this is not just Donald Trump. The crisis has shown definitively that Trump's presidency is not an aberration. It has grown on soil long prepared to receive it. The monstrous blossoming of misrule has structure and purpose and strategy behind it.

There are very powerful interests who demand "freedom" in order to do as they like with the environment, society and the economy. They have infused a very large part of American culture with the belief that "freedom" is literally more important than life. My freedom to own assault weapons trumps your right not to get shot at school. Now, my freedom to go to the barber ("I Need a Haircut" read one banner this week in St Paul, Minnesota) trumps your need to avoid infection.

Usually when this kind of outlandish idiocy is displaying itself, there is the comforting thought that, if things were really serious, it would all stop. People would sober up. Instead, a large part of the US has hit the bottle even harder.

And the president, his party and their media allies keep supplying the drinks. There has been no moment of truth, no shock of realisation that the antics have to end. No one of any substance on the US right has stepped in to say: get a grip, people are dying here.

If he is re-elected, toxicity will have become the lifeblood of American politics

That is the mark of how deep the trouble is for the US - it is not just that Trump has treated the crisis merely as a way to feed tribal hatreds but that this behaviour has become normalised. When the freak show is live on TV every evening, and the star is boasting about his ratings, it is not really a freak show any more. For a very large and solid bloc of Americans, it is reality.

And this will get worse before it gets better. Trump has at least eight more months in power. In his inaugural address in 2017, he evoked "American carnage" and promised to

# Fintan O'Toole: We must not allow coronavirus pandemic to rob us of grief

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There is no such thing as mass death – people die one by one and each is unique

Tue, Mar 24, 2020, 05:00



Fintan O'Toole

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The great vindictiveness of the virus is that it robs us of the rituals of grieving: no wakes, no big funeral Masses or secular celebrations. Photograph: iStock

Fintan O'Toole: We must not allow coronavirus pandem... 06:00

My grandfather died of an infectious disease, tuberculosis, in 1932 when he was in his early 30s. My mother's little sister Frances died in 1939 when she was three years old, from diphtheria, an acute bacterial infection. My little brother Colm died in the Coombe hospital in 1965 when a gastric infection swept through a neonatal unit. This is what happened in families before mass vaccination and medical breakthroughs made death from airborne viruses and bacteria rare.

The cruel capriciousness of infection receded to the margins of experience. The terror of germs was forgotten. But the dead were not. I never knew my grandfather or little Frances or baby Colm. But I knew the grief they left behind. My father was two when his father died and he had no memory of him. But once, when we were on the bus to Bray, we passed the old Crinken sanatorium. He shuddered involuntarily. An image from the deep past had come to him: he was walking up the driveway to that building holding his mother's hand. His father died there, leaving five children.

“ We may think we travel light, but we all carry some of the burden of grief from the generation that lived – and died – before us

And my mother would still cry when she remembered her little sister. She was nine when Frances died and she had doted on her. For my part, I remember, when I was seven, how my mother's beautiful face became haggard and gaunt in those weeks when Colm died. I can picture it precisely as I write.

## Burden of grief

These deaths shaped the feelings of my parents and therefore they shaped mine. We may think we travel light, but whether we know it or not, we all carry some of the burden of grief from the generation that lived – and died – before us. This imprinted sorrow is a big part of what makes us human. Our conscious brains may forget – may, indeed, never have known in the first place – but there is a deeper layer of memory, a subsoil of emotion, in which the dead are still with us.

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### Covid-19 deaths in Ireland

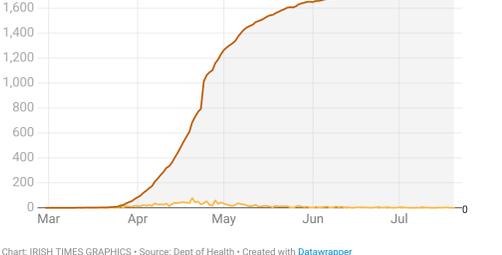


Chart: IRISH TIMES GRAPHICS • Source: Dept of Health • Created with Datawrapper

New cases	Total cases	New deaths	Total deaths
6	25,766	0	1,753

Source: Department of Health • Created with Datawrapper

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## Coronavirus - Protect Yourself

### Wash Hands

Regularly and thoroughly clean your hands with an alcohol-based hand rub or wash them with soap and water

**Why:** Scrubbing your hands for more than 20 seconds at a time kills the viruses that may be lurking there

### Cover up

Cover your mouth and nose with your bent elbow or tissue when you cough or sneeze and dispose of the used tissue immediately

**Why:** Droplets spread viruses. By following good respiratory hygiene you protect the people around you from viruses such as cold, flu and COVID-19.

### Mask

Wear a face mask and avoid close contact with people who are sick

**Why:** Sneezing and coughing can spread viruses

A Flourish data visualisation

Confronting Coronavirus

Confronting Coronavirus: a recovered Irish Ti...

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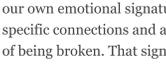
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And so, there are children not yet born who will, though this subtterranean kind of recollection, remember the dead of the pandemic to 2020. Many of us, in the months we are now facing, will lose someone to the arbitrary malice of an infectious disease. In the way we will have to record these losses in the public realm, they will be charts and graphs, shifting percentages and mortality rates, numbers rising and (we hope) falling.

“ Each of us will most probably lose a family member or a neighbour or a co-worker or a friend

We are about to experience a time of mass death. But in the other reality – the micro-reality of love and affection – we all know that there is no such thing as mass death. We die one by one. And because each of us is imitable, we leave our own emotional signature at the bottom of the page, a unique identifier of specific connections and associations, each one made more potent in the act of being broken. That signature is grief. We must treasure it.



The mass murderer Josef Stalin said that one death is a tragedy but a million deaths is a statistic. The statistics generated by Covid-19 will be of great importance to scientists and public health managers and government ministers. They will need to be cold, rational, maybe at times ruthless.

But for our society to survive, the rest of us must continue to feel the tragedies one by one. Each of us will most probably lose a family member or a neighbour or a co-worker or a friend. We must find a way to feel the pain of every loss.

## Absence of pain

Civilisation is defeated when grief has become impossible. The darkest times and the darkest places are characterised by numbness. People survive by anaesthetising themselves. Death is happening on a scale that overwhelms the uniqueness of each life. When there are only numbers, there is only numbness. This is the paradox: the worst thing is not the pain, it is its absence.

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“ Ours is a funerary culture – we are good at collective grieving. We will have to find ways to reinvent that culture

This won't happen to us in the coming months, but we cannot let any hint of it seep into our collective consciousness. We cannot even begin to tolerate the attitude that is already creeping furtively around the edges: that it is “only” an old person who has died. No life is “only” anything. Each has its specific gravity, its own irreplaceable weight in the world. We don't just lose a member of the community – if we do not pause to feel that weight, we lose, bit by bit, the community itself. We must not let that happen. We will be, in the coming months, sadly depleted. But we must not allow ourselves to be diminished.

This will be especially hard, not just because the statistics will dominate, but because the great vindictiveness of the virus is that it robs us of the rituals of grieving: no wakes, no big funeral Masses or secular celebrations, no queuing up to shake a hand and mutter “I'm sorry for your troubles”. Ours is a funerary culture – we are good at collective grieving. We will have to find ways to reinvent that culture. For the real proof that we have not been defeated by this thing is that, 50 years from now, our grandchildren will carry in their blood a small strain of our specific, intimate sorrows.

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Across the road from my house, there is a block of slightly taller buildings. The extra storey was for people living over the shops below: a butcher, a grocer, a hairdresser. But the house that directly faces me has an extra layer on top of that again. It now looks super-cool. The unit has been converted into expensive flats and this eyrie has a curved glass front giving on to a balcony with, I imagine, lovely views across the city to the mountains.

It wasn't just coughs and sneezes that spread diseases – it was poverty and squalor

When we moved in 30 years ago, this top floor was starker, less sophisticated. The glass panes formed a translucent wall through which the sun must have flooded. It could have been an artist's studio. Except everyone knew it wasn't. It was a TB room. When the block was built in the early 1930s, this was the best you could do for someone (a relatively privileged someone) with tuberculosis: isolate them so the rest of the family didn't get the disease and expose them to the healing properties of sunlight. That family was gone and I never knew what happened to the patient. The curse of TB was long banished. But I still didn't need to be told what that glass-fronted crow's nest signified.

X-ray vans

I grew up in a world alive with airborne contagion. The signs on the bus said "Please do not expectorate" and I can't remember a time when I did not know that "expectorate" meant "spit". We knew "coughs and sneezes spread diseases" as well as we knew the Hail Mary. Mobile X-ray vans where you could walk in and have your chest examined for TB were parked in the city centre. There were kids in callipers and you knew that meant they had contracted polio.



"The very effectiveness of public health programmes... has allowed us to take them for granted. The most bizarre symptom of this complacency is the anti-vaccination movement among the privileged." File photograph: Sean Gallup/Getty

We all got measles and chicken pox, and mumps and rubella were common, but sometimes a kid would disappear from the classroom and you would hear dark mutterings of more serious illnesses: diphtheria, scarlet fever, whooping cough. We knew that there was always something in the air.

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Coronavirus - Protect Yourself

Wash Hands: Regularly and thoroughly clean your hands with an alcohol-based hand rub or wash them with soap and water. Why: Scrubbing your hands for more than 20 seconds at a time kills the viruses that may be lurking there. Cover up: Cover your mouth and nose with your bent elbow or tissue when you cough or sneeze and dispose of the used tissue immediately. Why: Droplets spread viruses. By following good respiratory hygiene you protect the people around you from viruses such as cold, flu and COVID-19.

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This was a grim kind of awareness but it did have one advantage. It was impossible, in such a world, not to understand health as a communal concern. Illness, in the way we thought about it, was primarily something you got from somebody else. It is one of the great paradoxes of the last 200 years for this awareness drove much of the social progress that transformed lives for the better. It forced the rich to pay attention to the lives of the poor.

Of course the well-off could to some extent protect themselves from contagion and get much better treatment if they did become ill. But they had to face the reality that, for bacteria and viruses, there was no impenetrable barrier between themselves and the fetid slums. It wasn't just coughs and sneezes that spread diseases – it was poverty and squalor.

You can't protect yourself from Covid-19 by going to the gym – it may already be there before you

This recognition led to what historians call the "great sanitary awakening" of the 19th century. It led from sewage systems to clean water, from mass inoculation to universal national health services. It led, in social democracies, to sick leave. (One of the reasons the United States will be hit so terribly by Covid-19 is that this revolution never fully took hold there: 35 million workers have no entitlement to sick pay. They will go to work because they have to and they will spread the virus.) It is impossible to disentangle social justice from hygiene.

Egotistical hysteria

But this tide has been ebbing. The idea of health has been privatised and commodified. Hygiene, a public good, has been replaced by lifestyle, a personal choice. It is not about collective systems and behaviours – it is about my diet, my exercise regime, my body. These are, of course, good and proper concerns: not all killer diseases are communicable. But the irony is that this shift has been made possible only by the success of the communal systems. The very effectiveness of public health programmes – notably the virtual eradication of old killer infections in the developed world – has allowed us to take them for granted. The most bizarre symptom of this complacency is the anti-vaccination movement among the privileged – only those who have no memory of the devastation of ordinary lives by TB or polio or whooping cough can indulge this egotistical hysteria.



"You can't protect yourself from Covid-19 by going to the gym – it may already be there before you." File photograph: iStock

And now we have our rude awakening. The coronavirus is not personal. You can't protect yourself from Covid-19 by going to the gym – it may already be there before you. The Alpine ski holiday that displays your rude good health may be the vector of the infection. We are back in the universe of contagion that every generation of humanity except the very recent ones in our privileged parts of the world has inhabited. And back with a vengeance – it is not just that the well-to-do cannot seal themselves off from the poor in their own cities, they cannot seal themselves off from the poor in cities 10,000 kilometres away. We will, as a result, have to do very fast what our societies learned to do gradually in the 19th and 20th centuries: understand that none of us is safe unless all of us are safe. Health just became public again.

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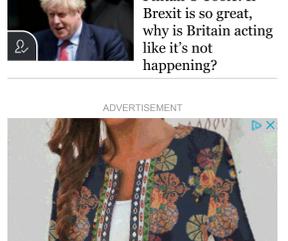
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