

# Why Fauci's COVID legacy is a failure

## *A science worth following must lead*

By ARI SCHULMAN

In 2019, Anthony Fauci was seen as a charming but no-nonsense doctor who had served the public for five decades. He'd been cited as a hero by the first President Bush and awarded the nation's highest civilian honor by the second. So how by 2022 did Dr. Fauci become, to so many, a villain? Right-wing politicization, misinformation, fear of science, callousness to mass death and Donald Trump's personal vendetta are common answers. There is much truth in these accounts. We can see it in the fever dreams about Fauci where he was a mastermind scheming to inject us all with microchips, and in the vile slander and disturbing hatred he was subjected to.

But, however much truth there is to the story that Fauci was a victim of our polarized era and broken media environment, it is also partial and simplistic. It amounts to insisting that skepticism of the good doctor must have been everyone's fault but his own.

And attachment to this story is peculiar because there has been a growing willingness by mainstream observers, and even the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, to admit that the public health response to COVID-19 was in many ways a failure.

It failed the million Americans who died. And it failed the living by being bumbling and incoherent.

No one seemed able to define what counted as a victory, and for much of the pandemic the response was fixated on restrictions and halfhearted about tools like rapid testing and ventilation that could relieve those restrictions. One of the best national data dashboards was made not by the government but by the Atlantic.

Fauci became the face of American public health's incoherent response to the pandemic. He urged the country to shut down weeks after dismissing early COVID worries as a baseless fear of "going to a Chinese restaurant"; he encouraged masking weeks after counseling against it; he aggressively cast the lab leak theory as fringe (though possible) despite many scientists wanting more to be done on lab safety. Just this April, Fauci said one day that we were "out of the pandemic phase" and the next day that we were "still experiencing a pandemic."

Might Americans have mistrusted Fauci not only because of nefarious political forces but also because he gave them reason to believe that something was amiss in

the citadels of science? Instead, it was often implied, even by Fauci himself, that people just don't understand how science works. "As the information changes, then you have to be flexible enough and humble enough to change how you think about things," he told Mark Zuckerberg in an interview about the masking firestorm in July 2020. "When you're dealing with something that's changing in real time, Mark, that's really the nature of science."

This seems a gratifying answer. It appeals to a noble vision of science, the kind where astronomers discover galaxies flying away and bravely reject their belief in a static universe. But this response obscured the pragmatic and, yes, political considerations that inevitably drive public health guidance in epidemics.

Consider the flip-flop on masking. In that interview with Zuckerberg, Fauci said that he had initially advised against widespread masking because scientists then did not know that homemade cloth masks worked and needed to preserve professional-grade masks for health care workers.

This is a reasonable-sounding explanation that is simply not what he said in February and March of that year: that even store-bought masks did not offer good protection, that "people keep fiddling with the mask and they keep touching their face," and that unless you were infected "there is absolutely no reason whatsoever to wear a mask." He also said in July that scientists changed guidance once they learned the extent that COVID could spread asymptotically — even though he had said in January there was "no doubt" it could.

There was nothing stopping Fauci in those chaotic early weeks from saying "Masks might help, but doctors and nurses need them more now," or even just "We're not sure yet." This would have been far closer to accurately representing scientific understanding and would have done wonders in case the answer later changed, as many elements of guidance were bound to.

Talking to Zuckerberg, Fauci toed a perilous line by invoking the scientific method as justification for the inconsistencies. This suggested that because science is all about change, scientists' mistakes aren't really failures.

In 2021 he would say that his foes were "really criticizing science, because I represent science," implying that the only possible reason to criticize him was animus toward science.

It was this that became so destructive to trust: the idea that science is a force that demands things of the public yet relieves leaders of accountability.

Think back to fall 2021 and the emergence of omicron. While Americans desperately scraped empty rapid testing shelves, the public health establishment dragged its feet on expanding rapid testing production so as to preserve its institutional

prerogatives. Not long before Christmas, the White House press secretary, Jen Psaki, sarcastically dismissed the idea of mailing Americans free rapid tests. At the same time, Fauci warned about the dangers of holiday travel and large parties — the types of activities that rapid testing might have made safer.

There's something appealing about the view that science floats loftily above us all, accessible to a select few with years of rigorous training in its methods. But, as romantic visions often do, it fell hard to earth. The follow-the-science logic we have lived under during COVID demands wartime sacrifices from the public while rationalizing sloth from leaders and institutions in mobilizing tools to relieve the burden. It became an easy out for bureaucratic turf protection, lost dynamism and institutional fecklessness. "Follow the science" became a failure to lead, a way to shift the onus of responsibility from presidents, Congress, health authorities and school boards onto the public.

This is a bad place for us to be. While Fauci has unfairly borne the burden of a failure that belongs to the entire public health system, he has also embraced his role as its figurehead, and is still held up by it as an idol. And while public health leaders are now gingerly attempting to confront their mistakes, what we have seen in, say, the CDC's new internal report are halfhearted, proceduralist ideas. The public health establishment will not be able to do better than this without real soul-searching. And that will require swallowing a bitter pill: labeling Fauci's COVID legacy and the approach it embodied a failure.

His retirement is an opportune moment to move on from the view of science he stood for throughout the pandemic to something new.

There's another way of thinking about science, one that might flourish as America's most recognizable scientist hangs up his lab coat. We should see science as something people do: as a way of solving problems, a project that does not just describe the world but brashly wants to change it. A science that people will follow must lead. If in the next pandemic we want something else from our public health leaders — to save lives and not tear the country apart in the process — we must learn to see science as a vehicle, not a dodge, for human agency: something we are right to make demands of, right at times to get angry at, whose terrible failures it must own along with its triumphs.

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