

There are 3 possible endgames for the coronavirus pandemic

Three months ago, no one knew that SARS-CoV-2 existed. Now the virus has spread to almost every country... . It has crashed economies and broken health-care systems, filled hospitals and emptied public spaces. ... Like World War II or the 9/11 attacks, this pandemic has already imprinted itself upon the nation's psyche.

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The White House is a [ghost town](#) of scientific expertise. A pandemic-preparedness office that was part of the National Security Council was [dissolved in 2018](#). On January 28, Luciana Borio, who was part of that team, [urged the government](#) to “act now to prevent an American epidemic,” and specifically to work with the private sector to develop fast, easy diagnostic tests. But with the office shuttered, those warnings were published in *The Wall Street Journal*, rather than spoken into the president's ear. Instead of springing into action, America sat idle.

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Having fallen behind, it will be difficult—but not impossible—for the United States to catch up. To an extent, the near-term future is set because COVID-19 is a slow and long illness. ...

Italy and Spain offer [grim warnings about the future](#). Hospitals are out of room, supplies, and staff. Unable to treat or save everyone, doctors have [been forced into the unthinkable](#): rationing care to patients who are most likely to survive, while letting others die. The U.S. has fewer hospital beds per capita than Italy.

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Even a perfect response won't end the pandemic. As long as the virus persists *somewhere*, there's a chance that one infected traveler will reignite fresh sparks in countries that have already extinguished their fires. ... Under these conditions, there are three possible endgames: one that's very unlikely, one that's very dangerous, and one that's very long.

The first is that every nation manages to simultaneously bring the virus to heel, as with the original SARS in 2003. ...

The second is that the virus does what past flu pandemics have done: It burns through the world and leaves behind enough immune survivors that it eventually struggles to find viable hosts. ...

The third scenario is that the world plays a protracted game of whack-a-mole with the virus, stamping out outbreaks here and there until a vaccine can be produced. This is the best option, but also the longest and most complicated.

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