

Who is Scott Atlas, Trump's new adviser on the COVID-19 pandemic?

By Benjamin Mateus
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The misinformation, lack of action, and utter disregard for human life as espoused by the White House's response to the pandemic have led to over five and a half million unnecessary COVID-19 infections and over 170,000 deaths. All aspects of social life have been subordinated to keeping the financial markets afloat. The school openings this fall come at a critical intersection for Trump, who sees his reelection intimately tied to the state of the economy.

Despite the high concentration of community transmission that has seen more than 50,000 new cases and over 1,000 deaths daily, the Trump administration falsely insists it is vital for the welfare of children to reopen schools and allow millions of students and teachers to face the consequences of the pandemic, a reckless policy supported by both the Democrats and Republicans.

Enter stage right, Dr. Scott Atlas, introduced last week by Trump at the coronavirus task force press brief as a new member and adviser to the president on the pandemic. Trump declared: "The gentlemen, this is Scott Atlas ... he is working with us and will be working with us on the coronavirus. He has many great ideas, and he thinks what we've done is really good, and now we will take it to a new level."

After butting heads with his medical adviser Dr. Anthony Fauci for several months and more recently upset by the warnings from Dr. Deborah Birx, coordinator of the White House task force, about the consequences of the pandemic, the White House has turned to a stalwart of reaction. Dr. Scott Atlas has supported Trump's policies on masks, opening the economy and calling for school reopening. Not to mince words, ultra-right talkshow host Rush Limbaugh said last week, "Scott Atlas is now part of the coronavirus task force meeting with the President. And he is countering Fauci."

White House sources told CNN that Dr. Atlas had been informally advising Trump for many weeks after Trump saw him speaking on Fox News, echoing the President's position on school reopening and general skepticism toward the pandemic and the president's medical experts. His medical credentials will now allow Trump to align his policy with "medical advice."

Dr. Atlas, who has been busy making the media circuit among conservative outlets, always prefaces his comments with remarks about strictly adhering to science and data behind the issues, before diving into a tirade against proponents of lockdowns and school closures. On Fox News, he has admitted that the goal of the administration is not to prevent infections, claiming that young people mostly have no risk of dying, and therefore whether they are infected or not is immaterial.

In an interview with former Congressman Andy Biggs of Arizona, Dr. Atlas spewed many unsubstantiated facts and calling actions that attempt to contain the virus as causing more harm or deaths. In one of

his inflammatory statements from April, he said, "In the absence of immunization, society needs circulation of the virus, assuming high-risk people can be isolated." This has been the essence of the herd immunity policy that has had disastrous consequences for the population of those countries adhering to them.

On May 25, in an opinion piece for the *Hill*, Dr. Atlas wrote, "Although well-intentioned, the lockdown was imposed without consideration of its consequences beyond those directly from the pandemic. The policies have created the greatest global economic disruption in history, with trillions of dollars of lost economic output. These financial losses have been falsely portrayed as purely economic. To the contrary ... we calculate that these policies will cause devastating non-economic consequences that will total millions of accumulated years of life lost in the United States, far beyond what the virus itself has caused."

In response to his claims, in an article published on June 16, the authors Tracy Mayne (HIV epidemiologist at the NYC Department of Health) and Jeremy Mayer (Professor of Policy and Government at George Mason University) began to take apart Dr. Atlas' economic calculations noting the use of outdated and statistically invalid figures for his computations. They then cite that recent data shows an inverse relationship between economic downturns and mortality. Furthermore, they point out that Dr. Atlas' claims regarding treatments for strokes and cancer screenings have been exaggerated and misrepresented for political purposes.

A trained medical doctor who attended the University of Chicago, former chief of neuroradiology at Stanford University Medical Center from 1998 to 2012, Atlas is currently a senior fellow at the ultra-conservative Hoover Institution. His writings attacking Obamacare and Medicaid from the right established him as an adviser to Republican politicians on health policy, and he has been at the forefront of opening the economy and schools during the pandemic.

Atlas is closely connected with Dr. John Ioannidis, Professor of Medicine, Health Research and Policy, and of Biomedical Data Science at Stanford University School of Medicine, whose attempt to play an advisory role in Trump's administration COVID-19 response, discussed below, cannot be understated. Dr. Ioannidis is the credited author of the now very discredited Santa Clara study that has been severely berated for its flawed analysis and unethical conduct.

To place Dr. Atlas and the Stanford scientist in context, in May of this year, at the height of the pandemic in the United States, Stephen C. Meyer, founder of the Discovery Institute, a right-wing think tank based in Seattle, Washington that carries out pseudo-scientific propaganda against the theory of evolution, under the label "intelligent design," published an attack on the scientific advisers to

the White House.

Meyer wrote in the *Federalist*, “Since the COVID-19 outbreak, President Trump has relied on a small group of scientists within the federal health establishment. These experts, led by Anthony Fauci of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease, relied on early epidemiological models to craft their policies for quarantining everyone instead of the sick and vulnerable. In giving way to these experts, Trump and other politicians have tacitly accepted science as a source of authority to the exclusion of science as a deliberative process of testing and evaluation—one that requires the constant refining of models and theories and argument between scientists about how to interpret evidence.”

He goes on to argue that the administration has not given economists’ warnings of irreversible economic consequences sufficient weight because he hadn’t recruited skeptical medical scientists to counter advice provided by his present advisers. He argued that it would be prudent to recruit “dissenting medical, scientific, and epidemiological experts” from outside the federal institutions.

Specifically, he referred to the works of professors Jay Bhattacharya, Eran Bendavid, and John Ioannidis of the Stanford University Medical School, who had published the deeply flawed Santa Clara study, funded in part by David Neeleman, the founder of the JetBlue Airways, a vocal opponent of lockdowns. He also cited Dr. Scott Atlas as an excellent candidate given his years of policy work in support of Republican politicians, including Rudy Giuliani, as well as numerous articles citing his opposition to socialized medicine.

A *BuzzFeed* expose published on July 24 explains that during the initial phases of the outbreaks throughout the US, Dr. Ioannidis attempted to organize a meeting with the White House and bring an “elite group of scientists” to persuade Trump that locking the country down would pose serious dangers. The statement submitted by Ioannidis cautioned the president against “shutting down the country for a very long time and jeopardizing so many lives in doing this.” However, these recommendations were based on little more than intuition and inflated scientific credentials.

Though the meeting never took place, shortly after receiving this letter at the end of March, Trump suddenly announced during one of his coronavirus task force briefs that he had set Easter as the date to reopen the country after the nation had just entered into lockdown. In an email to his colleagues, Ioannidis wrote, “I think our ideas have infiltrated the White House.” Without testing their ideas and in complete disregard for the growing catastrophe developing in Europe and New York, these scientists allowed the social interests of big business and the Trump administration to override their scientific principles.

Despite Ioannidis’ claim that the virus posed a low risk to the population, several studies published in the following two months indicated that the lockdowns were highly effective in halting the progress of the virus, preventing millions of infections and saving millions of lives. These include the Imperial college study on *Estimating the effects of non-pharmaceutical interventions on COVID-19 in Europe* by Bhatt et al., published on June 8, and from the University of California, Berkeley, *The effects of large-scale anti-contagion policies on the COVID-19 pandemic*, by Hsiang et al., that analyzed the lockdowns in six countries, including the US, noting that lockdowns had prevented over 60 million infections in April. It should be mentioned that Ioannidis had predicted that the coronavirus would cause no more than 10,000 deaths in the US.

In the Berkeley study, Professor Solomon Hsiang wrote, “It was clear that the US didn’t turn the volume up on policies the way that everyone else did. This has been one giant slow-motion train wreck.” Sheila Jasanoff, a professor at Harvard Kennedy School who studies the role of science in politics, told *Buzzfeed*, “It creates the impression that the work that the scientists are intending to do will be shaped by a political purpose, maybe even before they have started doing the work.”

One of those invited to the meeting with Trump was Dr. David L. Katz who wrote an opinion piece on March 20, in the *New York Times* headlined, “Is our fight against coronavirus worse than the disease?” Katz was the expert cited by the reactionary *Times* columnist, Thomas Friedman who coined the slogan, “the cure should not be worse than the disease.” Dr. Katz, who has promoted the fraud science of homeopathy and “energy” medicine, endorsed the prospect of herd immunity and a precise “surgical strike”—the perspective that was the basis of the Swedish catastrophe—whereby only the most vulnerable would be isolated and the young allowed to be exposed.

Herd immunity, a concept typically described in the context of a vaccine, would require more than two-thirds of the population to be infected to confer a still undetermined immunity of uncertain duration. Many more principled epidemiologists quickly came out to oppose the policy of herd immunity, as applied to the uncontrolled spread of the pandemic, explaining that even a fatality rate of 0.5 to 1 percent would lead to the deaths of millions, to say nothing of other effects on health associated with the disease. Every reputable physician and infectious disease specialist has opposed herd immunity and called a massive public infrastructure program of testing, tracing and isolation to counter the pandemic.

Stanford University, a world-renowned institution with endowments of more than \$27 billion, has established itself as one of the wealthiest private schools in America. Surrounded by the world’s largest tech firms, Google, Apple, and Facebook, firms created for the most part by former students, it has given birth to Silicon Valley—home to 74 billionaires. At the same time, 16.3 million people across the country remain unemployed.

It is not surprising that Stanford has become the center of reaction against efforts to contain and mitigate the pandemic. It exemplifies the utter corruption of principles, where science conforms to political expediency instead of directing public policy in a humane and farsighted fashion.

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