

## GUEST ESSAY

# I Was the Architect of Operation Warp Speed. I Have a Message for All Americans.

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By Alex Azar

Mr. Azar was secretary of health and human services under President Donald Trump. He oversaw Operation Warp Speed, the program to expedite Covid-19 vaccines.

Among the many debatable issues around Covid-19 is one unassailable fact: The coronavirus is nonpartisan. It makes no judgment about one's political leanings. The vaccines that were developed to fight this virus have no political bias, either.

And yet the reluctance and even refusal of many Americans — including many of my fellow conservatives and Republicans — to get a Covid-19 vaccine is a frustrating irony for those of us who worked to expedite these vaccines. While the vaccines have had doubts cast upon them by politicians throughout their production and rollout, whether a person lives in a red or a blue state has no bearing on the vaccines' efficacy. They work incredibly well, and more than 160 million fully vaccinated Americans are proof.

Whether such skepticism is rooted in political misgivings, conspiracy theories or lack of accurate and timely information, there are still millions of Americans unwilling to take the simplest of steps to end this pandemic. That makes it incumbent upon all leaders and health experts to be honest about how safe and effective the vaccines are and urge vaccination.

I know the vaccines' features intimately because as secretary of health and human services, I oversaw their development, testing, approval and distribution from April of 2020 until January of this year. After leaving office, I watched with pride as vaccination rates rose through the early months of the year, and then with dismay as the daily number of vaccinations declined.

Any claims that the vaccines are unsafe or ineffective, or that corners were cut are not true. Americans should understand that the process by which our team helped expedite these vaccines was called Operation Warp Speed for good reason. With the numbers of cases and deaths climbing in April of 2020 and the economy contracting, we had no time to lose. Masks and social distancing could offer only so much protection. Lockdowns, which devastated economies around the world, could only forestall the virus's inevitable spread.

## OPINION CONVERSATION

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Two academics who have studied the disease make a case for tying specific goals to every new Covid-19 policy.

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Two writers from the A.C.L.U. argue that actually, it's quite the opposite.

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Judith Danovitch, a research psychologist, explains why there's little reason to worry, and why face coverings may even offer unexpected benefits.

Safe and effective vaccines were our best hope of liberating America from the pandemic. As hospital wards filled beyond capacity, we needed to develop the vaccines much faster than the typical timeline would allow. At the same time, we made sure that there was no compromise on safety by conducting some of the largest and most extensive vaccine clinical trials ever.

After the U.S. government committed to spending more than \$2 trillion on Covid-19 relief, I set a stretch goal that was intended to be both audacious and motivational — a “moon shot” — similar to President John F. Kennedy's 1961 proclamation that we were going to the moon by the end of the decade. In this case, our goal was to produce 300 million vaccine doses by January 2021.

Operation Warp Speed committed to funding upfront various stages of development, including testing vaccines in humans to prove they are safe and effective, as well as the manufacturing of the vaccines.

We provided funding to test vaccines in large populations, and we got results faster than ever before. The vaccines produced remarkable protection against Covid-19 and were extremely safe. After studying all the data in depth, the Food and Drug Administration granted emergency use authorizations.

Some who are hesitant to get vaccinated point to the fact that the vaccines remain under emergency-use authorization rather than full approval. It's vital for Democratic and Republican leaders to explain clearly and repeatedly that the F.D.A. held these vaccines to such high standards that the only real difference is that full approval requires steps like analyzing longer-term safety and efficacy data, and inspecting manufacturing facilities. Hundreds of millions of doses of these vaccines have now been given to Americans over the past year, providing us with some of the most robust real-world evidence of their safety and efficacy that we've ever had for new vaccines. A vast majority of adverse events with the vaccines occur in the first 42 days or so.

The current and former leadership of the F.D.A. and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention — of both parties — are unanimous in encouraging all eligible Americans to take the vaccines. Political, public health and thought leaders must educate about the benefits of the vaccine, not hector or preach. This information must come from respected and trusted figures in the various hesitant communities.

We did not reach our stretch goal of producing 300 million doses by January, but we hedged our bets by investing in a portfolio of vaccines and had tens of millions of doses of vaccine in production by the end of January. Many governors were able to begin general vaccination programs by March, and we had a surplus of vaccine by the end of the second quarter.

As I reflect, we could have done a better job in reminding the media and the public of all that could go wrong with vaccine development and manufacturing. We also should have explained more clearly the operational complexities that would accompany a large scaling up of distribution.

We could have done more to address vaccine hesitancy. We focused a great deal of our efforts at the start on the groups that we thought might be most hesitant. We demanded all clinical trials included a diverse, representative sample of participants, and the Department of Health and Human Services provided funding for an effort by the Morehouse School of Medicine to coordinate a network of national, state, territorial, tribal and local organizations to deliver trusted information to racial and ethnic minority communities.

But we did not predict the politicization of vaccines that has led so many Republicans to hold back. As of mid-July, 43 percent of Republicans said that they have not been vaccinated and definitely or probably wouldn't be, versus 10 percent of Democrats, according to a poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. I'm glad former President Donald Trump got vaccinated, but it would have been even better for him to have done so on national television so that his supporters could see how much trust and confidence he has in what is arguably one of his greatest accomplishments.

The vaccines could be a victory lap for the Republican Party, and I call upon all party leaders and conservatives to double down on encouraging vaccination. Party leaders like Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida are making clear that vaccines save lives. Sean Hannity of Fox News is now telling viewers to "please take Covid seriously." Representative Steve Scalise of Louisiana shared a photo of himself recently getting vaccinated. I urge more of this from trusted voices on the right.

More than 600,000 Americans have died of Covid-19, but vaccines can prevent more loss. Getting vaccinated is an absolute necessity to end the pandemic.

Conservatives need to do our part, and the Biden administration must find voices that will be trusted in conservative communities to explain the data and integrity of the vaccine programs. They would also do well to continue to acknowledge the historic achievement of the Trump administration in expediting these vaccines. I'm not naïve about the partisan issues and the mistrust between parties at play — but a measure of political graciousness could go a long way to depoliticize the issue.

In seeking to end this pandemic, the Biden administration is exhorting all unvaccinated adults in our country to get their shots, and I fully support it in this call. It would be tragic to see more lives needlessly lost when we are so close to beating this virus once and for all.

Alex Azar was secretary of health and human services under President Donald Trump. He oversaw Operation Warp Speed, the program to accelerate the development, manufacturing and distribution of Covid-19 vaccines and drugs.

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