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America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

## *Rethinking Vulnerability: Structural Inequality as National Insecurity*

Essay by **Jason Ludwig** and **Rebecca Slayton**, Cornell University

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### *Introduction*

As 2021 begins, the United States confronts two immediate threats. First, the COVID-19 pandemic has killed more than 400,000 Americans, and is projected to kill more than 500,000 by the end of February 2021, even if states respond to growing infection rates by issuing social distancing mandates.<sup>1</sup> This means that one year of the pandemic has already killed roughly the same number of Americans as were killed in all four years of World War II, and the pandemic death toll will of course continue to rise. It has also created a recession that has seen the unemployment rate reach its highest level since the Great Depression.<sup>2</sup> Second, the legitimacy of the U.S. government and democratic institutions are in crisis. After months of false claims from former President Donald Trump and his allies, nearly one-third of Americans erroneously believe that President Joe Biden only won the 2020 election through voter fraud.<sup>3</sup> And on 6 January 2021, an angry mob that had been so deceived stormed the Capitol Building and effectively took it over for several hours, in a direct assault on the U.S. Congress and democratic institutions that left five people dead and many more injured.

U.S. intelligence and security agencies have long recognized threats to public health and American democratic institutions. For example, in 2017, the U.S. National Security Strategy highlighted the potential for disinformation campaigns to “undermine faith and confidence in democratic institutions,” as well as the need to combat pandemics.<sup>4</sup> And yet the United States has failed to stop these threats, and as a result, has failed to achieve key goals that were outlined in the 2017 National Security Strategy: protecting the American people and way of life, promoting American prosperity, and advancing American influence in the world.<sup>5</sup>

We argue that the U.S. approach to national security has failed because it has focused primarily on countering threats, while ignoring the need to mitigate the vulnerabilities that those threats exploit. Threats are necessary but insufficient to endanger national security; without vulnerabilities to exploit, threats are powerless. Furthermore, we argue that vulnerabilities lie not only in military-industrial infrastructure, but in structural inequalities that are embedded within civil society and its technological infrastructures. These include

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<sup>1</sup> Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) COVID-19 Forecasting Team, “Modeling COVID-19 scenarios for the United States,” *Nature Medicine*, 23 October 2020, <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41591-020-1132-9>. Specifically, this paper modeled a scenario in which states issued social distancing mandates when the death rate exceeded 8 per million in their populations, and concluded that under this scenario 511,373 people would be dead by the end of February 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Carmen Reinicke, “Unemployment Surged to 14.7% in April as the US Lost a Record 20.5 Million Jobs,” *Business Insider*, 8 May 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/april-jobs-report-unemployment-rate-payrolls-record-us-economy-coronavirus-2020-5>.

<sup>3</sup> Monmouth University Polling Institute, “More Americans Happy About Trump Loss Than Biden Win,” 18 November 2020, [https://www.monmouth.edu/polling-institute/reports/monmouthpoll\\_us\\_111820/](https://www.monmouth.edu/polling-institute/reports/monmouthpoll_us_111820/).

<sup>4</sup> The White House, “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” December 2017 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905-2.pdf>, 31.

<sup>5</sup> These are three of the four goals identified in the strategy; we do not attempt to evaluate its success or failure in the additional goal of preserving “peace through strength.”

inequalities between internet users and the companies that sell and manipulate their information, between White and non-White populations in the United States, and between wealthy and poor communities.<sup>6</sup>

Importantly, the vulnerabilities experienced by particular communities within the United States must be understood as a vulnerability for the security of the nation as a whole. As a result, the conception and practice of national security will only be effective when it goes beyond the identification and countering of threats, and mitigates the vulnerabilities that those threats so easily exploit.

In what follows, we analyze how the U.S. response to election interference and the coronavirus has so spectacularly failed to secure U.S. democratic institutions and American public health. In each case, we argue that a national security strategy that focuses solely on these threats, rather than mitigating the vulnerabilities that these threats exploit, has been ineffective. Furthermore, we argue that structural inequalities have not only created particularly vulnerable communities within the United States but have contributed directly to national vulnerability. National security can only be achieved by reducing these structural inequalities.

### *Election Interference, Redux*

In the aftermath of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, leaders in U.S. military and intelligence organizations focused growing attention on the threat of foreign disinformation campaigns that were designed to manipulate and undermine confidence in government institutions. Bolstered by the new strategy of persistent engagement and defending forward, which has given U.S. Cyber Command more freedom to conduct offensive cyber operations, Cyber Command actively worked to shut down Russian and other foreign disinformation operations in both the 2018 midterm elections and the 2020 presidential election.<sup>7</sup> These efforts have been lauded by many as successful, not only in curbing disinformation, but in ensuring that polling stations were not hacked.<sup>8</sup>

And yet considerable evidence suggests that the greatest threat to the legitimacy and fairness of the U.S. election has come not from foreign actors, but from domestic actors. In the months leading up to the 2020 election, President Donald Trump repeatedly claimed that mail-in ballots, a well-established voting technology that saw a dramatic increase in use due to the pandemic, were “a whole big scam” that would lead to the “most INACCURATE & FRAUDULENT Election in history.”<sup>9</sup> He instructed his supporters to “go into the polls and watch very carefully,” raising concerns about voter intimidation.<sup>10</sup> And following Biden’s victory, Trump and his closest allies have repeatedly alleged voter fraud, filed numerous lawsuits, and pressured Republican legislatures to overturn the results.<sup>11</sup> While these efforts have largely failed to change the election results—the courts have rejected the lawsuits as baseless and most Republican officials have

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<sup>6</sup> In this essay we capitalize both Black and White when referring to racial categories, out of recognition for power that both of these categories have in a society that is structured by systemic racism. While scholars have long capitalized “Black” to signal communities, it is relatively recently that scholars of race have begun to argue for capitalizing “White,” as a means of recognizing that it is not an invisible or neutral category. See Eve Ewing, “I’m a Black Scholar Who Studies Race. Here’s Why I Capitalize ‘White,’” 3 July 2020, <https://zora.medium.com/im-a-black-scholar-who-studies-race-here-s-why-i-capitalize-white-f94883aa2dd3>.

<sup>7</sup> Ellen Nakashima, “U.S. Undertook Cyber Operation Against Iran as Part of Effort to Secure the 2020 Election,” *Washington Post*, 3 November 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/cybercom-targets-iran-election-interference/2020/11/03/aa0c9790-1e11-11eb-ba21-f2f001f0554b\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/cybercom-targets-iran-election-interference/2020/11/03/aa0c9790-1e11-11eb-ba21-f2f001f0554b_story.html).

<sup>8</sup> Nakashima, “U.S. Cyber Force Credited with Helping Stop Russia from Undermining Midterms,” *Washington Post*, 14 February 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-cyber-force-credited-with-helping-stop-russia-from-undermining-midterms/2019/02/14/ceef46ae-3086-11e9-813a-0ab2f17e305b\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-cyber-force-credited-with-helping-stop-russia-from-undermining-midterms/2019/02/14/ceef46ae-3086-11e9-813a-0ab2f17e305b_story.html).

<sup>9</sup> Eugene Kiely and Rem Rieder, “Trump’s Repeated False Attacks on Mail-In Ballots,” 25 September 2020, <https://www.factcheck.org/2020/09/trumps-repeated-false-attacks-on-mail-in-ballots/>.

<sup>10</sup> Daniella Silva, “Trump’s Call for Supporters to Watch Polls ‘Very Carefully’ Raises Concerns of Voter Intimidation,” 30 September 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/trump-s-call-supporters-watch-polls-very-carefully-raises-concerns-n1241613>.

<sup>11</sup> Kyle Cheney, “Trump Calls on GOP State Legislatures to Overturn Election Results,” *Politico*, 21 November 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/11/21/trump-state-legislatures-overturn-election-results-439031>.

resisted political pressures to overturn the result—they have succeeded in casting doubt on the legitimacy of the next presidency and slowing the transition of power far more than Russian disinformation efforts. Indeed, Russia has amplified false claims of election fraud that originated in the United States.<sup>12</sup>

How did the United States become so vulnerable to disinformation and electoral interference? Some vulnerabilities lie in interactions between human psychology and the technological affordances of the internet, which readily contribute to the formation of echo chambers, polarization of society, and a situation in which falsehoods spread more rapidly than truth.<sup>13</sup> Other vulnerabilities can be found in a techno-legal regime which makes it impossible for internet users to understand how their information is exploited, or to judge the authenticity of political advertising. Congressional efforts to pass legislation that would reduce some of these vulnerabilities, for example by increasing the transparency of political advertising, have largely failed to pass the Republican-controlled Senate.<sup>14</sup>

But perhaps the most fundamental vulnerability that disinformation campaigns target are fault lines within American society, and particularly those arising from structural racism—the systems that place communities of color at greater risk of disease, unemployment, poverty, political repression, and other harms, relative to White communities. The Senate Intelligence Committee’s report on Russian interference during the 2016 election concluded that no single group was targeted by disinformation operatives more than African Americans, and no single issue focused disinformation campaigns so much as racial inequality.<sup>15</sup> One “troll factory” in St. Petersburg, for example, spent upwards of \$100,000 in promoting more than 3,000 political ads from June 2015 to May 2017, with about half of the budget going to social posts touching on racial issues, particularly several high-profile police killings of Black people.<sup>16</sup> Other posts shared conspiracy theories meant to incite White violence against protest movements like Black Lives Matter.<sup>17</sup> An estimated 10 million Americans saw at least one of the posts associated with the Factory, which sought to erode trust in American political institutions, discourage African Americans from voting, and encourage racist violence.<sup>18</sup> By discouraging Black people from voting, the Russians aimed to help the chances of Donald Trump, a candidate who was opposed by the overwhelming majority of African Americans in 2016.<sup>19</sup> And

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<sup>12</sup> Sheera Frenkel, “Russian Internet Trolls are Amplifying Election Fraud Claims, Researchers Say,” *New York Times*, 3 November 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/03/us/politics/russian-internet-trolls-are-amplifying-election-fraud-claims-researchers-say.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Social media contribute to the establishment of echo chambers and polarization, although the effects may not be as dramatic as some assume, as users already tend to seek out information that confirms their own views independently of social media, and this form of news consumption predominates over the consumption of news generated by social media. See Seth Flaxman, Sharad Goel, Justin M. Rao, “Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Online News Consumption,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 80:S1 (2016): 298-320, <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfw006>. For more on the reasons that fake news spreads more quickly than true news, see Peter Dizikes, “On Twitter, False News Travels Faster than True Stories,” 8 March 2018 <https://news.mit.edu/2018/study-twitter-false-news-travels-faster-true-stories-0308>.

<sup>14</sup> Lauren Feiner and Megan Graham, “Congress Has failed to Pass Big Tech Legislation in 4 Years Leading up to the Next Election,” 31 October 2020 <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/10/31/congress-fails-to-pass-big-tech-legislation-ahead-of-election.html>.

<sup>15</sup> United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, “Report on Russian Active Measures Campaign and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election,” 2019, [https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report\\_Volume2.pdf](https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report_Volume2.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Polina Rusyaeva and Andrey Zakharov, “RBC Investigation: How the ‘Troll Factory’ Worked in the US Elections,” *RBC Magazine*, November 2017, <https://www.rbc.ru/magazine/2017/11/59e0c17d9a79470e05a9e6c1>.

<sup>17</sup> Spencer Ackerman, “How Russia Is Exploiting American White Supremacy,” *The Daily Beast*, October 9, 2018, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-russia-exploits-american-white-supremacy-over-and-over-again>.

<sup>18</sup> Rusyaeva and Zakharov, “RBC Investigation: How the ‘Troll Factory’ Worked in the US Elections.”

<sup>19</sup> Alec Tyson and Shiva Maniam, “Behind Trump’s Victory: Divisions by Race, Gender, Education,” 9 November 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/behind-trumps-victory-divisions-by-race-gender-education/>.

for the same reason, in 2020 Trump has falsely alleged voter fraud in predominantly Black cities, hoping to throw out their ballots and thereby claims victories in battleground states such as Michigan, Georgia, and Pennsylvania.

Foreign disinformation efforts aimed at racial inequalities are not new. Russian propaganda has highlighted racial violence and injustice in the United States since at least 1930, as a means of destabilizing the nation and diminishing America's international standing.<sup>20</sup> In 1997, Alexander Dugin, an influential Russian political strategist, recommended fomenting "all kinds of separatism and ethnic, social and racial conflicts, actively supporting all dissident movements—extremist, racist, and sectarian groups, thus destabilizing internal political processes in the U.S."<sup>21</sup> Efforts to exploit vulnerabilities associated with structural racism in the United States continue today.<sup>22</sup> Their success in amplifying divisions demonstrates the ways in which the vulnerability of populations within the United States, particularly African American communities who continue to experience structural racism, is simultaneously a vulnerability for the security of the nation as a whole.

And yet, ironically, U.S. intelligence and security agencies tend to treat these communities as potential *threats* rather than a source of national *vulnerability*. Beginning in the 1950s, the FBI targeted Black organizations that were working for racial equality, including groups that were explicitly committed to non-violent action.<sup>23</sup> Surveillance of Black activists continues today. In the fall of 2014, as protesters demonstrated against the killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager in Ferguson, Missouri, the FBI surveilled the protestors and targeted at least two with a sting operation.<sup>24</sup> By 2017, an FBI report argued that "perceptions of police brutality against African Americans" had become the primary drivers of a "Black Identity Extremist" movement, citing six instances of violence or planned violence against police between 2014 and 2017.<sup>25</sup> Yet these six incidents were unrelated and were not conducted on behalf of any organized group, thus hardly comprising a "movement." They are also dwarfed by the rise in hate crimes over the same period, which have consistently targeted Black Americans more than any group. For example, 1,930 of 7,314 hate crimes targeted Black people in 2019.<sup>26</sup>

Distorted perceptions of threat are evident in law enforcement's failure to adequately prepare for the recent assault on the Capitol by a predominately white and male pro-Trump mob, which dramatically contrasts with their militarized preparation for and response to largely-peaceful activists protesting the killing of George Floyd and other forms of police brutality in the summer of 2020. In the days leading up to the Capitol attack, Trump supporters used public websites to openly discuss plans for storming the Capitol and forcing an evacuation that would prevent Congress from certifying Biden's electoral victory.<sup>27</sup> They cited statements by Trump as calling for a violent takeover. Yet many law enforcement officers dismissed these discussions as hyperbolic. After the attack Washington police chief

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<sup>20</sup> Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Ackerman, "How Russia Is Exploiting American White Supremacy."

<sup>22</sup> Žilvinas Švedkauskas, Chonlawit Sirikupt, and Michel Salzer, "Russia's Disinformation Campaigns Are Targeting African Americans," *Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/07/24/russias-disinformation-campaigns-are-targeting-african-americans/>, accessed 12 November 2020.

<sup>23</sup> ACLU, "More about FBI Spying," <https://www.aclu.org/other/more-about-fbi-spying>, accessed 28 November 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Alice Speri, "Fear of a Black Homeland: The Strange Tale of the FBI's Fictional 'Black Identity Extremism' Movement," *The Intercept*, 23 March 2019, <https://theintercept.com/2019/03/23/black-identity-extremist-fbi-domestic-terrorism/>

<sup>25</sup> Jana Winter and Sharon Weinberger, "The FBI's New U.S. Terrorist Threat: 'Black Identity Extremists,'" *Foreign Policy*, 6 October 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/06/the-fbi-has-identified-a-new-domestic-terrorist-threat-and-its-black-identity-extremists/>.

<sup>26</sup> "US Hate Crime Highest in More than a Decade—FBI," 17 November 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-54968498>

<sup>27</sup> Craig Timberg, Drew Harwell and Marissa J. Lang, "Capitol Siege Was Planned Online. Trump Supporters Now Planning the Next One," *Washington Post*, 9 January 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/01/09/trump-twitter-protests/>.

Robert Contee stated that “There was no intelligence that suggested there would be a breach of the U.S. Capitol.”<sup>28</sup> The Capitol police declined offers of help from the Pentagon in the days preceding the attack, as well as offers of assistance from the FBI as the mob began to surround the Capitol.<sup>29</sup> Without adequate preparations, the Capitol police were readily overcome by the mob, which quickly entered the Capitol building and spent hours roaming freely inside, vandalizing and ransacking the building.

By contrast, mostly peaceful racial justice demonstrations in the summer of 2020 were met by National Guard troops patrolling the streets and military helicopters overhead.<sup>30</sup> The Washington D.C. police made only 61 “unrest-related” arrests at the pro-Trump demonstration that led to the assault on the Capitol building, compared to 316 “unrest-related” arrests at a racial justice demonstration on June 1st, the day that Trump dispersed a peaceful protest with tear gas so that he could pose for a photo op—a more than five-fold difference.<sup>31</sup>

The tendency of law enforcement institutions to frame Black communities as a source of threats ironically increases the vulnerability of those same communities. For example, Black men are 2.5 times more likely than White men to be killed by police over their lifetime; Black people shot by police are twice as likely as White people to be unarmed; and officers, particularly White officers, are statistically more likely to use a gun in predominantly Black neighborhoods.<sup>32</sup> The FBI’s “Black Identity Extremist” report consistently prefaces all references to racial inequalities with words such as “perceived,” suggesting a kind of stubborn refusal to acknowledge well-documented inequalities.

The vulnerabilities experienced by Black Americans have national security implications, as demonstrated by Russia’s information operations targeting Black Americans. And activists targeted by Russian disinformation campaigns predict that continued election interference by foreign actors will only increase the hyper-surveillance of Black protest movements. Micah White, an activist and lecturer at Princeton University who was contacted by a Russian-backed Black Lives Matter Website, stated that such Russian disinformation efforts might call into question the legitimacy of Black protest politics: “From this point forward, I think that people will have to say, ‘Wait, is that a real protest or is that a Russian-funded protest?’ ...by undermining the legitimacy of protest in America, you actually undermine American democracy.”<sup>33</sup>

And yet the deception and disinformation campaigns launched by adversaries like Russia, China and Iran would be much less effective if not for structural racism. And while the National Security Agency (NSA) and Cyber Command may reduce electoral interference from foreign adversaries, structural inequalities have already undermined democracy. Racialized voter suppression remains endemic to American political system. According to an analysis by the Center for American Progress, 9.5 million American adults—most of whom

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<sup>28</sup> Aruna Viswanatha and Sadie Gurman, “Ahead of Capitol Riot, Police Miscalculated Risk,” *Wall Street Journal*, 8 January 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/actions-by-police-before-trump-supporters-attacked-capitol-backfired-spectacularly-11610064600>.

<sup>29</sup> Colleen Long, Lolita Baldor, Michael Balsamo, Nomaan Merchant, “Capitol Police Rejected Offers of Federal Help to Quell Mob,” *US News and World Report*, 7 January 2021, <https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2021-01-07/capitol-police-rejected-offers-of-federal-help-to-quell-mob>

<sup>30</sup> Brakkton Booker, “Protests In White And Black, And The Different Response Of Law Enforcement,” *NPR*, 7 January 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/07/954568499/protests-in-white-and-black-and-the-different-response-of-law-enforcement>.

<sup>31</sup> Casey Tolan, “DC police made far more arrests at the height of Black Lives Matter protests than during the Capitol clash,” 9 January 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/08/us/dc-police-arrests-blm-capitol-insurrection-invs/index.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Lynne Peoples, “What the Data Say about Police Brutality and Racial Bias — and which Reforms Might Work,” *Nature*, 19 June 2020, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01846-z>

<sup>33</sup> Lydia Emmanouilidou, “Russian Trolls Tried to Recruit a Prominent US Activist. He Didn’t Take the Bait, but Others Did.,” *PRI*, 24 October 2017, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-10-24/russian-trolls-tried-recruit-prominent-us-activist-he-didn-t-take-bait-others-did>.

were people of color—lacked full voting rights in 2016.<sup>34</sup> Their disenfranchisement has taken a multitude of forms, including restrictive voter ID legislation, the elimination or last-minute changes to polling sites in minority districts, purges of voter rolls, and denial of voting rights due to a felony conviction.<sup>35</sup>

In sum, the United States is currently in the ironic situation of investing substantial effort into combatting foreign election interference, while at the same time ignoring the racial and structural inequalities that have created the opportunities for such interference and already undermined democratic institutions more adeptly than any foreign adversary could.<sup>36</sup> Resources need to be placed not only into protecting American political institutions from foreign interference, but also into dismantling the domestic political repression that has disenfranchised Black and other marginalized communities.

### *Going Viral: Deadly Disinformation and the Coronavirus*

The coronavirus pandemic is perhaps the largest threat to national security in living memory. In keeping with its threat-oriented approach to national security, the Trump administration's primary response to the virus has been directed towards other nations and peoples. Well after coronavirus began spreading within the United States, Trump framed it as the "Chinese virus" and attempted to fight it by blocking foreigners from entering the United States. The administration closed U.S. borders to most foreigners who were traveling from China on January 31, and closed borders to foreigners coming from 26 European states on March 11.<sup>37</sup>

But viruses do not distinguish between citizens and foreigners, and symptom-based screening efforts failed to prevent American citizens who were carrying the virus from entering the country and spreading it to others. In fact, coronavirus was already spreading in the United States in January 2020 and possibly earlier, well-before any travel restrictions were imposed. This is hardly surprising; between November 17, when the virus first emerged in China, and February 1, 2020, 3,357 flights carried passengers from mainland China to the United States, amounting to nearly one-million passengers.<sup>38</sup> And most of the cases in New York City, by far the worst outbreak in the United States, came from Europe or other U.S. citizens—not China.<sup>39</sup> In a highly interconnected world, a sole focus on external threats is utterly ineffective at defending the United States from a pandemic.

By contrast, an approach that is focused on reducing national vulnerabilities to pandemic can be highly effective, as demonstrated by the successful suppression of coronavirus after early surges in many nations. Multiple methods have proven successful. For example, New Zealand adopted an early shutdown and testing program which succeeded in largely eliminating coronavirus from the nation within about

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<sup>34</sup> Danyelle Solomon, Connor Maxwell, and Abril Castro, "Systematic Inequality and American Democracy," Center for American Progress, 7 August 2019, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/reports/2019/08/07/473003/systematic-inequality-american-democracy/>.

<sup>35</sup> In the 2020 presidential election, an estimated 5.17 million Americans were disenfranchised due to felony conviction, despite the passage of legislation in many states to expand voting access to this group in the last two decades. See: Chris Uggen et al., "Locked Out 2020: Estimates of People Denied Voting Rights Due to a Felony Conviction," *The Sentencing Project*, 30 October 2020, <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/locked-out-2020-estimates-of-people-denied-voting-rights-due-to-a-felony-conviction/>.

<sup>36</sup> Tim Starks, "Cyber Winners and Losers from Trump's Budget," *Politico*, 11 February 2020, <https://politi.co/2OKAtuK>.

<sup>37</sup> Jane Timm, "Fact-Checking President Donald Trump's Claims about Coronavirus," 2 April 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/fact-checking-president-donald-trump-s-claims-about-coronavirus-n1174356>

<sup>38</sup> Morgan McFall-Johnsen and David Slotnick, "The Coronavirus Was Likely in the US Before Anyone Knew it Existed. It's Now Hard to Believe We Ever Assumed Otherwise," 7 June 2020 <https://www.businessinsider.com/coronavirus-arrival-united-states-december-2020-6>

<sup>39</sup> "Study Finds Most Cases of COVID-19 in NYC Came From Europe, Other Places in US," 9 April 2020, <https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/coronavirus/study-finds-most-cases-of-covid-19-in-nyc-came-from-europe-other-places-in-us/2368010/>

seven weeks.<sup>40</sup> South Korea, by contrast, has largely avoided lockdowns, instead relying upon rapid and automated contact tracing to substantially suppress the virus.<sup>41</sup>

While the vulnerability-mitigation strategies of New Zealand and South Korea differ, at least three factors were key to their success. First, both nations demonstrated a rapid, decisive, and science-based response by the federal government. Second, the general population trusted government and media institutions enough to comply with mandates and follow good advice. And third, both of these nations have a substantial public health infrastructure, including universal health care, which enabled the rapid deployment and financing of testing and guaranteed affordable care for all citizens.

By contrast, the United States lacks each of these essential aspects of vulnerability mitigation. The first sign of poor executive leadership came in 2018, when the National Security Council Directorate for Global Health Security and Biodefense, which had been created in the aftermath of the 2014 Ebola epidemics, was closed.<sup>42</sup> This decision, which was criticized at the time, left the United States less prepared to rapidly detect and respond to disease outbreaks such as coronavirus. Additionally, even after the coronavirus began to spread like wildfire through the United States, Trump refused to take decisive action to slow transmission rates. Instead, Trump has repeatedly downplayed the seriousness of the virus,<sup>43</sup> holding campaign rallies in virus hotspots,<sup>44</sup> mocking those who wore masks,<sup>45</sup> and repeatedly urging governors to re-open state economies rather than adhere to the social distancing procedures recommended by health experts.<sup>46</sup>

Executive actions also greatly exacerbated a second vulnerability in the United States: widespread mistrust in legitimate news and government institutions. Mistrust in journalistic institutions certainly did not begin with the election of Trump, but he has done much to exploit and increase this mistrust, repeatedly calling news organizations the “the enemy of the people” who purvey “fake news” when he dislikes the facts they report. By 2018, 65% of Republicans polled stated that they had “hardly any” confidence in the media, compared

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<sup>40</sup> Specifically, New Zealand implemented a stringent lock-down on March 25, 2020, which was eased after five weeks as new cases rapidly declined, and then ended after an additional two weeks of less stringent restrictions. By 8 June 2020 the pandemic was effectively over in New Zealand, with nearly all new cases coming from travelers who undergo stringent testing and quarantining measures. See Michael G. Baker, Nick Wilson, Andrew Anglemyer, “Successful Elimination of Covid-19 Transmission in New Zealand,” *New England Journal of Medicine*, 7 August 2020, <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMc2025203>

<sup>41</sup> In Korea, the government releases anonymized information about the past movements of individuals with a confirmed infection (e.g. when they used public transit or visited public businesses). This information is then pushed out to the public, which can then determine for themselves whether they are at risk. For the most part individual privacy has been maintained, and South Korea has not closed down businesses. Max S. Kim, “Seoul’s Radical Experiment in Digital Contact Tracing,” *The New Yorker*, 17 April 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/seouls-radical-experiment-in-digital-contact-tracing>

<sup>42</sup> Beth Cameron, “I Ran the White House Pandemic Office. Trump Closed It,” *Washington Post*, 13 March 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/nsc-pandemic-office-trump-closed/2020/03/13/a70de09c-6491-11ea-acc8-80c22bbee96f\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/nsc-pandemic-office-trump-closed/2020/03/13/a70de09c-6491-11ea-acc8-80c22bbee96f_story.html)

<sup>43</sup> Adam Nagourney and Jeremy W. Peters, “Denial and Defiance: Trump and His Base Downplay the Virus Ahead of the Election,” *The New York Times*, 21 September 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/21/us/politics/trump-base-virus.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Natasha Korecki, “Coronavirus-Ravaged Wisconsin Sweats Trump Rallies,” *POLITICO*, 1 October 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/10/01/trump-rallies-wisconsin-covid-424650>.

<sup>45</sup> Libby Cathey, “Trump, Downplaying Virus, Has Mocked Wearing Masks for Months,” *ABC News*, 2 October 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-downplaying-virus-mocked-wearing-masks-months/story?id=73392694>.

<sup>46</sup> Felicia Sonmez, Meryl Kornfield, and Katie Mettler, “Trump Says It’s Safe to Reopen States as Governors Grapple with Loosening Restrictions,” *Washington Post*, 3 May 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-says-its-safe-to-reopen-states-as-governors-grapple-with-loosening-restrictions/2020/05/03/013ee34a-8d64-11ea-a0bc-4e9ad4866d21\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-says-its-safe-to-reopen-states-as-governors-grapple-with-loosening-restrictions/2020/05/03/013ee34a-8d64-11ea-a0bc-4e9ad4866d21_story.html).

with 28% of Democrats.<sup>47</sup> Trump has similarly dismissed reporting on coronavirus; in October 2020, with infections surging throughout the United States, he dismissed reports on the surge in infections as a “Fake News Media Conspiracy.”<sup>48</sup> Disinformation has created an “infodemic” on social media sites that has resulted in poor public understanding of COVID risks, leading some Americans to refuse to wear masks and comply with social distancing guidance, even as COVID-related hospitalizations and deaths have surged in their areas.<sup>49</sup> In the context of the pandemic, the vulnerability of Americans to disinformation has proven deadly.

Third, the United States is fundamentally more vulnerable to pandemics because of a complex and inefficient health care system, one that provides the least protection to the individuals who are most at risk. Essential workers are at the greatest risk of infection, yet they are also most likely to be uninsured and unable to pay for care. These inequalities intersect strongly with race, with Black workers doing a disproportionate amount of low-paying essential work that puts them at risk, while also having less access to health care. The Affordable Care Act substantially reduced the uninsured rate among Black Americans, from 18.9 percent in 2013 to 11.7 percent in 2016, but this uninsured rate is still higher than it is for White people (7.5 percent) and Asian Americans (6.3 percent).<sup>50</sup> Black and Hispanic Americans have been more vulnerable not only due to their greater exposure to infection and lower access to health care, but also due to other longstanding systemic inequalities that have led to higher rates of underlying conditions such as diabetes and heart disease. These are among the reasons that Black, Hispanic, and indigenous populations all have an age-adjusted death rate that is three or more times higher than that of White Americans.<sup>51</sup>

Crucially, failures to protect the most vulnerable groups affect national security as a whole. In December 2020, with coronavirus infections soaring and many hospitals nearing capacity, the health of the American public depends upon the well-being of millions of medical professionals. Roughly 30 percent of Licensed Professional Nurses and Licensed Vocational Nurses—the people who provide the most basic care—identify as Black or Hispanic, groups that have disproportionately impacted by COVID.<sup>52</sup> The nation also depends upon agricultural workers who have been hard-hit by the virus, in no small part because they lack basic workplace protections such as paid sick leave. More than 44,000 workers in the meatpacking industry have tested positive for the coronavirus, and more than 200 have

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<sup>47</sup> Marc Hetherington and Jonathan M. Ladd, “Destroying Trust in the Media, Science, and Government has Left America Vulnerable to Disaster,” 1 May 2020 <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2020/05/01/destroying-trust-in-the-media-science-and-government-has-left-america-vulnerable-to-disaster/>

<sup>48</sup> Berkeley Lovelace, “Trump Claims the Worsening U.S. Coronavirus Outbreak is a ‘Fake News Media Conspiracy’ Even as Hospitalizations Rise,” 26 October 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/10/26/coronavirus-trump-claims-the-worsening-us-outbreak-is-a-fake-news-media-conspiracy-even-as-hospitalizations-rise.html>

<sup>49</sup> Fabio Tagliabue, Luca Galassi, and Pierpaolo Mariani, “The ‘Pandemic’ of Disinformation in COVID-19,” *SN Comprehensive Clinical Medicine*, 1 August 2020, 1–3, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42399-020-00439-1>; Jane Galvão, “COVID-19: The Deadly Threat of Misinformation,” *The Lancet Infectious Diseases* (5 October 2020), [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099\(20\)30721-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099(20)30721-0); Joel Achenbach and Lori Rozsa, “Some Americans Refuse to Wear Masks Even as Their Hometowns Become Covid-19 Hot Spots,” *Washington Post*, 27 October 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/mask-wearing-coronavirus-hot-spots/2020/10/27/71001546-1883-11eb-82db-60b15c874105\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/mask-wearing-coronavirus-hot-spots/2020/10/27/71001546-1883-11eb-82db-60b15c874105_story.html).

<sup>50</sup> Peggy Bailey, Matt Broaddus, Shelby Gonzales, Kyle Hayes, “African American Uninsured Rate Dropped by More Than a Third Under Affordable Care Act,” 1 June 2017, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/health/african-american-uninsured-rate-dropped-by-more-than-a-third-under-affordable-care>.

<sup>51</sup> “The Color of Coronavirus: COVID-19 Deaths by Race and Ethnicity in the U.S.,” 12 November 2020, <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/covid/deaths-by-race>. More than 1 in 1000 Black Americans have died of COVID, which is roughly twice the mortality rate experienced by white Americans. However, when these figures are adjusted for age, the disparity appears to be much larger.

<sup>52</sup> Janet M. Coffman, Krista Chan, Timothy Bates, “Profile of the Licensed Practical Nurse/Licensed Vocational Nurse Workforce, 2008 and 2013,” 6 July 2020, [https://healthworkforce.ucsf.edu/sites/healthworkforce.ucsf.edu/files/Report-Profile\\_of\\_the\\_Licensed\\_Practical\\_Nurse\\_Licensed\\_Vocational\\_Nurse\\_Workforce\\_2008\\_and\\_2013.pdf](https://healthworkforce.ucsf.edu/sites/healthworkforce.ucsf.edu/files/Report-Profile_of_the_Licensed_Practical_Nurse_Licensed_Vocational_Nurse_Workforce_2008_and_2013.pdf)



died.<sup>53</sup> While the United States has yet to experience major food shortages, the economic impacts of vulnerable agricultural workers are substantial; at the height of infections in the meatpacking industry, U.S. beef and pork production were down 40%.<sup>54</sup>

While wealthy individuals remain well-positioned to avoid infection and to receive excellent care if they are infected, they are nonetheless impacted by high rates of infection and death among more vulnerable populations. Because the virus has been insufficiently suppressed in the United States, even the president and his associates were faced with a stark choice: curtail business as usual or risk infection. They chose the latter, with the result that Trump and many top officials have been infected, and by mid-November 2020, more than 130 Secret Service agents had also been infected or forced into quarantine.<sup>55</sup>

More broadly, national security has traditionally relied upon the military, which has been forced to modify or curtail exercises and operations to cope with the virus. While the relative youth of many in the armed services reduces their risk of death from COVID, military units remain vulnerable to rapid transmission of the virus because they are often unable to apply social-distancing measures. For example, despite taking early precautions, more than 1,200 sailors became infected, and one sailor died, after coronavirus breached the USS *Theodore Roosevelt*.<sup>56</sup> This involved only one-quarter of the ship's crew, but the ship was nonetheless forced out of operation for more than two months.<sup>57</sup> More than 79,000 U.S. military personnel have tested positive, including those stationed in combat zones in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria.<sup>58</sup>

Finally, while the ultimate economic consequences of the United States' poor pandemic management will remain unknown for some time, it is becoming increasingly clear that it has undermined American prosperity—a key goal of the 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy. By contrast, although widespread lockdowns saw factories and businesses in China remained closed for the early months of the year, the country's industrial sector has since bounced back, accomplishing a V-shaped recovery that has seen China's trade surpluses grow.<sup>59</sup> This is just one way in which the Trump administration's failure to address vulnerabilities has substantially reduced American global economic influence and competitiveness.

In short, the novel coronavirus pandemic demonstrates the ways in which vulnerabilities within particular segments of the U.S. population are simultaneously vulnerabilities for the entire nation. When judged by its stated goals of protecting the American people and

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<sup>53</sup> Jacey Fortin, "After Meat Workers Die of Covid-19, Families Fight for Compensation," *The New York Times*, 6 October 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/06/business/coronavirus-meatpacking-plants-compensation.html>.

<sup>54</sup> Stephen Joyce and Megan U. Boyanton "Reeling Midwest Farmers Look for Lawmakers' Plan B as Aid Stalls," 16 September 2020, <https://about.bgov.com/news/reeling-midwest-farmers-look-for-lawmakers-plan-b-as-aid-stalls/>

<sup>55</sup> Carol D. Leonnig and Josh Dawsey, "More than 130 Secret Service Officers are Said to be Infected with Coronavirus or Quarantining in Wake of Trump's Campaign Travel," *Washington Post*, 13 November 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/secret-service-coronavirus-outbreak/2020/11/13/610eebcc-2539-11eb-8672-c281c7a2c96e\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/secret-service-coronavirus-outbreak/2020/11/13/610eebcc-2539-11eb-8672-c281c7a2c96e_story.html)

<sup>56</sup> Kasper, Matthew R., Jesse R. Geibe, Christine L. Sears, Asha J. Riegodedios, Tina Luse, Annette M. Von Thun, Michael B. McGinnis, *et al.*, "An Outbreak of Covid-19 on an Aircraft Carrier," *New England Journal of Medicine* (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMoa2019375>. <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMoa2019375>.

<sup>57</sup> "Timeline: Theodore Roosevelt COVID-19 Outbreak Investigation," 23 June 2020, <https://news.usni.org/2020/06/23/timeline-theodore-roosevelt-covid-19-outbreak-investigation>

<sup>58</sup> "Coronavirus: DOD Response," U.S. Department of Defense, accessed 12 November 2020, <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/Spotlight/Coronavirus/>.

<sup>59</sup> Jim McCormick, "Covid Crisis Has Accelerated Big Trends in China's Favour," *Financial Times*, 17 September 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/696d0406-181c-4972-a158-06b610f50dbd>.

way of life, promoting American prosperity, and advancing American influence throughout the world, the threat-oriented approach of the U.S. national security strategy has utterly failed.

### Conclusion

Since the 1990s, scholars and policymakers have argued for a shift from a narrow conception of national security as something focused on protecting borders and governments towards the more comprehensive concept of human security, which focuses on the needs of the most vulnerable people within the nation-state and seeks to reduce structural inequalities.<sup>60</sup> A human-security approach broadens conceptions of threat to include environmental hazards, disease, and political repression. It also broadens the options available for reducing insecurity, from simply countering threats, to mitigating the vulnerabilities that allow those threats to impact national security.<sup>61</sup>

The concept of human security has been criticized as too all-encompassing to provide scholars with analytical rigor, or to offer policymakers a means of prioritizing actions. Instead, scholars have suggested that human security is a new area of security studies, one which is distinct from traditional state-centric approaches.<sup>62</sup> In this essay, however, we have highlighted the *inseparability* of national security, traditionally understood, and human security.

Although the human-security framework has been used primarily to study the developing world, it is applicable to the United States. In 2019, 34 million Americans lived below the poverty line and 13.7 million households experienced food insecurity.<sup>63</sup> Inequalities are highly racialized. Due to disparities in policing and the criminal justice system, African Americans were nearly six times more likely to be incarcerated than White Americans; incarceration in turn reduces opportunities for employment and voting, has significant negative health impacts, and tears apart families and communities.<sup>64</sup> Black Americans are also exposed to 1.5 times more toxic emissions from industrial plants.<sup>65</sup> Legitimate anger over such inequalities has been exploited in disinformation by foreign adversaries, and these very evident inequalities reduce America's standing in the world.<sup>66</sup> These inequalities have also left America's essential workers disproportionately vulnerable to coronavirus.

In short, election interference and the contemporary pandemic both demonstrate that when particular communities within the United States are vulnerable, the nation as a whole is also vulnerable. As the Biden Administration seeks to undo the damages of the last four

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<sup>60</sup> The human security approach is generally traced to the 1994 United Nations Human Development Report [http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/255/hdr\\_1994\\_en\\_complete\\_nostats.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/255/hdr_1994_en_complete_nostats.pdf)

<sup>61</sup> Sakiko Fukuda-Parr and Carol Messineo, "Human Security: A Critical Review of the Literature," *Centre for Research on Peace and Development (CRPD) Working Paper* 11 (2012).

<sup>62</sup> Roland Paris, "Human Security: Paradigm Shift or Hot Air?" *International Security* 26:2 (2001): 87–102.

<sup>63</sup> US Census Bureau, "Income and Poverty in the United States: 2019," The United States Census Bureau, 2019, <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2020/demo/p60-270.html>; United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, "Food Security and Nutrition Assistance," 2019, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/ag-and-food-statistics-charting-the-essentials/food-security-and-nutrition-assistance/>.

<sup>64</sup> The Sentencing Project, "Report to the United Nations on Racial Disparities in the U.S. Criminal Justice System," 19 April 2018, <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/un-report-on-racial-disparities/>;

<sup>65</sup> Ihab Mikati et al., "Disparities in Distribution of Particulate Matter Emission Sources by Race and Poverty Status," *American Journal of Public Health* 108:4 (April 2018): 480-485, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2017.304297>.

<sup>66</sup> For example, the U.N. Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights in 2018 questioned how a nation that professes the fundamental importance of human rights could lack protections "against dying of hunger, dying from a lack of access to affordable health care or growing up in a context of total deprivation." United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, "Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights on His Mission to the United States of America," 4 May 2018, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1629536?ln=en>.

years, the physical assault on the U.S. Capitol and the horrific death toll from coronavirus must serve as grave reminders that mitigating structural inequalities and the national vulnerabilities they create should be a top priority not only for human security, but for national security.

**Jason Ludwig** is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Science and Technology Studies at Cornell University. His research interests converge around race and health, slow disaster, and the politics of science and technology.

**Rebecca Slayton** is Associate Professor at Cornell University, jointly appointed in the Science & Technology Studies Department and the Judith Reppy Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies. Her first book, *Arguments that Count: Physics, Computing, and Missile Defense, 1949-2012* (MIT Press, 2013) shows how the rise of computing expertise reshaped public policies and perceptions about the risks of missile defense in the United States. She is currently working on *Shadowing Cybersecurity*, a book which examines the history of cybersecurity expertise through the interplay of innovation and repair.

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