

“I’m Not Here to Make Friends.” Scott Atlas Is the COVID Point Man We Could Have Only Wished For

Description

by [Philip Wegmann](#)

It’s not just that the guy is mainly right, but that he has spirit and a fight uncommon in an egghead



Dr. Scott W. Atlas joined the president’s coronavirus task force in August, but after two months, he has yet to sit for [a photo shoot](#) or throw out [a first pitch](#) or inspire [a single artisanal cocktail](#). No one has [impersonated him](#) on “Saturday Night Live” either, and there certainly isn’t any grassroots campaign to get him [nominated](#) as People magazine’s “Sexiest Man Alive.”

Although he has a medical degree from the University of Chicago, Atlas is the other doctor, and he knows it. “I’m not here to make friends. Okay?” he tells RealClearPolitics in a rare interview. “I’m here to help the president save American lives. Period.”

Every other member of the commission would say the same. Combating the coronavirus is the whole point, and saving lives through disease mitigation and prevention remains their goal. But Atlas, a neuro-radiologist and senior fellow at Stanford University’s Hoover Institution, has different ideas about how

to beat COVID-19. He says publicly that children do not frequently spread the virus. He questions the efficacy of mask mandates. He condemns lockdowns as not just ineffective but deeply destructive.

In short, Atlas is a walking/talking ambassador for Trump's the-cure-can't-be-worse-than-the-disease argument. Those views and his proximity to an impressionable president, critics argue, make Atlas a public health threat. Hence, his unpopularity in some circles.

"Everything he says is false," Dr. Robert Redfield said during a recently overheard phone conversation. Asked who he meant, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [confirmed to NBC News](#) he was talking about Atlas. Later, during [a CNN interview](#), Dr. Anthony Fauci said that most of his colleagues were "working together." But the more visible and most adored member of the task force added, "I think you know who the outlier is."

That outlier happens to have the ear of the president for now, and he does not appreciate the-less-than-collegial criticism. "I think a lot of people honestly have other motivations," Atlas responds, "whether they feel their own stature is threatened by someone who challenges their opinions with data, whether they are simply used to groupthink and not to informed people who have a critical thought process, or whether they are interested in maintaining their own media connections. That's not me."

Another thing Atlas is not: an epidemiologist or an expert in the study of infectious diseases. He finds that fact, whispered by critics and oft-repeated in the press, both annoying and "absurd."

Lockdowns were the early prescription in the spring when comparatively little was known about the virus. At the recommendation of the task force in March, the White House and the president issued aggressive guidance to combat COVID: ["15 Days to Slow the Spread."](#) Stay home, Trump encouraged the country, and avoid groups of more than 10 people.

"If everyone makes this change, or these critical changes, and sacrifices now, we will rally together as one nation and we will defeat the virus," the president said in the White House briefing room. Two weeks later, he announced that 15 days of social distancing had to become 45 days. "The better you do," Trump promised a second time, "the faster this whole nightmare will end." It didn't.

And that approach is what Atlas thinks is absurd. He believes that the recommended lockdowns constitute "one of the biggest failures of the faces of public health in this country." The experts, he believes, adopted "a unidimensional view of the pandemic" and focused on "stopping COVID cases at all costs," a decision that "recklessly disregarded the harms the prolonged lockdowns have on society and average Americans."

Sustained lockdowns, he believes, harm those already sick with other illnesses by discouraging treatment, harm the poor by keeping them from the workplace, and harm the mental development of children by shutting down the schools. "The lockdown," he has concluded, "is a luxury of the rich."

A better strategy, says the populist doctor who has the ear of the populist president, would be to focus on protecting those most at-risk for the illness — the elderly and those with weakened immune systems — while the rest of society takes precautions but proceeds with their lives as researchers race to develop a vaccine.

As an illustration, Atlas points to colleges and universities. Although infections have spiked on some

campuses, significant numbers of hospitalization and deaths among students have not followed. Young people are simply less susceptible to the virus's worst impact. "I'm not minimizing anything," Atlas says in reference to the handful of students hospitalized and the need to protect teachers, "but what I'm saying is that it is irrational to start seeking out cases in low-risk populations for people who are generally in low-risk environments. It is the exact opposite of logic and common sense."

And while Atlas isn't an epidemiologist, as his critics emphasize, he relies on the work of infectious disease experts the world over. He cites Sunetra Gupta, a professor of theoretical epidemiology at Oxford University [who maintains](#) that remaining in lockdown is "extremely dangerous from the point of view of the vulnerability of the entire population to new pathogens." And he points to Katherine Yih, an epidemiologist at Harvard Medical School [who argues](#) that a broad public-health approach is needed "to minimize the number of cases of severe disease and death over the long run."

Maybe Trump doesn't read medical journals (he [once suggested](#) injecting disinfectants into the human body to fight the disease). But the president, Atlas insists, does listen to scientists: "We are learning, we are listening, and that is why we have a state-of-the-art understanding about the science that is consistent with the exact policy of the president," he says, referring to Trump's stated preference to implement strict protections for the vulnerable and a return to business for the rest of the society.

Atlas is getting good at making this argument. He's made it on Fox News, and then after the president invited him to join the task force, he made it inside the administration. But then Trump got sick.

If the federal government, with all of its resources, can't keep the president safe from the virus, how can the country be expected to protect the most vulnerable? That was the question RCP planned to put to Atlas the Friday that the COVID-positive president was admitted to Walter Reed medical center. But the interview was scuttled, and rescheduled for two days after Trump was discharged.

The first question put to him then: Doesn't Trump's own diagnosis upend Trump's prescription of reopening society?

His response: "Not at all. If anything, the First Patient has solidified his pandemic thesis.

"The president's case illustrates some very important things. Number One: The virus is not eliminated by mitigation; the virus is not eliminated by a lockdown." All the handwashing and social distancing and mask wearing in his own inner circle were not enough to keep the president safe. Again, he adds, how it possible to protect the most vulnerable who aren't nearly as insulated as the leader of the free world? Atlas points to the president a second time, noting the "very secure special environment in the White House," where an audience with the president requires a negative COVID-test.

"But the virus is still there," he concedes, and "none of these systems are infallible." A second point the public should learn from the president's case, according to Atlas: "This is not March or April. We've learned a tremendous amount about the virus — who is at risk, who is not; who to protect and who is at very low risk."

Trump has now added his professed clean bill of health to his election platform, even though some of the drugs that apparently helped his recovery are unavailable to the public. Democrats, meanwhile, argue the opposite. The whole episode, in their view, illustrates a recklessness that finally caught up with a president who mocks masks and flaunts CDC guidelines to host packed rallies amid a pandemic.

Isn't Trump being careless? And isn't he downplaying the virus by claiming a miraculous recovery? "He has a tremendous, I would say, respect for the seriousness of the disease," Atlas responded, "but that does not mean that a leader can be afraid or can hide in the basement."

Asked about the wisdom of holding a packed ceremony in the Rose Garden, where few attendees wore masks and which Fauci later described as a "[super-spreader](#)" event, Atlas insisted that Trump "wears a mask when he needs to and when he cannot socially distance." Behavior that critics condemn as careless, Atlas calls the actions of someone who "knows that his job is essential." And what Trump is saying with words and his subsequent return to the crowded campaign trail, he adds, "is to not be paralyzed by fear."

Meanwhile, with less than three weeks to go until Election Day, Trump is a very active candidate. Cleared by his physicians, the president is campaigning at a frenzied pace, with stops planned in Pennsylvania and Iowa and North Carolina. If he feels any fatigue, he doesn't show it. Trump told a Florida crowd on Monday night that he felt "so powerful," claimed he was "immune," and offered "to kiss everyone in that audience. I'll kiss the guys and the beautiful women, and everybody. I'll just give you a big, fat kiss." He ended the night by dancing off stage to the "YMCA."

Aside from the dancing president, Atlas is one of the most unpopular men in Washington. It probably doesn't help that his bedside manor isn't the warmest or that he is quick to criticize those who helmed the initial response to the virus and "instilled fear into the American public."

"There's been obsession after obsession after obsession in this pandemic about testing-testing-testing about cases-cases-cases about masks-masks-masks. That's not the issue," Atlas argued. "His policy is completely appropriate, and it is 100% backed by the science."

What's especially not scientific? According to Atlas, the obsession with masks and the congressional testimony of his task force colleague: "The CDC has many fine scientists, I am sure of that, but when the head of the CDC held up a mask and said a mask is better than a vaccine, that is absurd. That is not science. That is contrary to all rational thought."

Mask mandates and those who propose them, he says, "are completely contrary to rational thought." There is a time and place for the mask, namely when you can't social distance. But Atlas is clearly frustrated by their universal use: "Why in the world would you wear a mask if you're riding your bicycle all alone outside? Why in the world would you wear a mask if you're in your own car driving? Why in the world would you wear a mask if you're in the desert all alone?"

That the vaccine is forthcoming is significant reason "for optimism." Atlas says a successful vaccine could be approved as early as this month. If deemed effective by the FDA, doses would go first to "priority groups and people at high risk no later than January." He plans to eventually take it himself, and hopes the hypodermic needle will be the knife in the heart of the virus.

Some wonder whether politics plays an undue role in the Operation Warp Speed effort. Vice presidential nominee Kamala Harris has [even questioned](#) its effectiveness, saying that “if Donald Trump tells us what we should take it, I’m not going to take it.”

Unprompted, Atlas dismisses as a conspiracy theory any suggestion that the president, not the doctors, are driving development. He calls any assertion to the contrary “heinous,” an outright “sin.” He won’t attack any politician by name because “it’s not my job.” All the same and in no uncertain terms, the doctor condemns “anyone who is in a position of leadership who instills doubt and fear into the process of the vaccine.” They are guilty, he says, of “doing more harm than I could ever imagined a public figure would do.”

Whenever a vaccine becomes available, Atlas says getting it won’t be mandatory. Meanwhile, masks remain readily available. Should the president set a better example by wearing one more regularly? “He believes in freedom,” Atlas responds, “and he believes in individual responsibility, but he is doing his job to do the right recommendations.”

Medical historians will judge if Trump did enough to combat the pandemic. His critics have already concluded that he has not, and it is part of the reason Joe Biden holds [a double-digit lead](#) against him. But even if the president doesn’t win a second term, Atlas may enjoy some eventual vindication.

“We in the World Health Organization do not advocate lockdowns as the primary means of control of this virus,” Dr. David Nabarro, one of six special envoys to the WHO on COVID-19, said in an Oct. 9 interview. Lockdowns, he added, only “buy you time to reorganize, regroup, rebalance your resources, protect your health workers who are exhausted. But by and large, we’d rather not do it.”

The statement followed a proclamation written by three epidemiologists and infectious-disease experts, Dr. Martin Kulldorff of Harvard, Dr. Gupta of Oxford and Dr. Jay Bhattacharya of Stanford. Called [“the Great Barrington Declaration,”](#) it warns that letting lockdowns linger until a vaccine is developed “will cause irreparable damage, with the underprivileged disproportionately harmed.”

Days after his RCP interview, Atlas wrote to this reporter: “I hope you explicitly point out that my advisement and writings since March have now been publicly stated in that document by some of the world’s top infectious disease scientists and epidemiologists, and they are aligned with the President’s policies.”

To date, 9,366 medical and public health scientists have signed the letter along with another 24,484 medical practitioners.

Source: [Real Clear Politics](#)