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## Thoughts Moving Forward: Rethinking the Pandemic and Our Nation's Health

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At this moment, 245,578 Americans have tragically lost their lives to COVID-19. Although the entire world has been struck by this devastating virus, such a high number of cases and deaths has distinguished the United States not only as the leading nation in the pandemic's toll, but also as the one most criticized as failing its citizens. After the historic

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presidential election, and with Joe Biden as president-elect, our country and the world are closely watching and wondering whether we'll be able to turn our COVID response around.

The media, and the rest of us, can't really come to a consensus on why the U.S. has been plagued worse than most countries. Some claim that President Trump's, and his administration's, failure to adequately institute social distancing and mask mandates at a national level are the reason for our staggering numbers. Others posit that a deficiency of empathy and an individualistic mindset in America are the reason why we've come to accept the fate of this pandemic. Many others still question whether we're at fault at all, citing the Chinese government's lack of transparency about the virus early-on as our source of peril.

But largely overlooked by politicians across the spectrum, and by virtually all mainstream media, are several factors which place a person at major risk of dying from COVID. The frequency of some of those underlying medical conditions doomed our nation to a high death toll from the beginning.

Among the list of health conditions which place an individual at significant risk of dying from COVID, obesity is among the most threatening. According to new CDC data, obesity increases the risk of death by about 48 percent -- a disturbing statistic. Pairing that number with the prevalence of obesity in the U.S., where a shocking 40 percent of adults are obese, it's safe to say that in addition to COVID, we have been facing a food issue for quite some time now.

While obesity in itself is a major risk factor, it also poses an increased risk for other health conditions which similarly make people more vulnerable to COVID: diabetes, heart disease, a weakened immune system, and perhaps asthma, among others. Discourse on

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this issue has been highly stigmatized, which may explain why there is so little coverage of and focus on how our

## The Revolution of Emmanuel Macron and the Polarization of America

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Emmanuel Macron, the 25th president of France, is as much a controversial figure as he is a revolutionary one. Last June, his approval rating was only 40 percent (still better than his all-time low, 23 percent at the end of 2018). Even Donald Trump's approval ratings haven't fallen quite that low. So then, what's different about Macron?

First of all, upon entering the presidential race in 2016, he formed his own political party, "La Republique En Marche" (which loosely translates to "The Republic Forward" or "Onward"). This relatively centrist movement has grown to be France's single most popular party, an impressive feat in its own right.

It's important to note that in France, political parties are much more loosely defined and free-form than the typical Democrats and Republicans in America. It's therefore relatively common for an individual politician to form their own political party and actually have a chance of winning the presidency with it. This has been the case only relatively recently, because the French left/right divide has historically been even more polarized than America's. But fortunately for Macron, that divide has gradually been fading since the 1990s, and this is one factor that made France ripe for his victory in 2017. Despite those developments, Macron is controversial because his party holds a more centrist ideology than any party that has previously won the French presidency.

In addition, Macron has no formal training in politics or government. He started off as an investment banker, and began his career as a public servant when he became Minister of the Economy. Coming from a non-traditional background that isn't rooted in politics does have its

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nation’s general health would naturally have affected our death rate, no matter how we handled the initial outbreak.

None of this is to say that our government’s early, and current, response to COVID shouldn’t be analyzed and criticized. We have an obligation to continuously question the actions and efforts of our government at both the national and local levels, and to demand policy changes as deemed fit. But it isn’t productive to simply name-call and assign blame to politicians and governmental

entities without addressing a health issue which has affected the American population for so long.

Our discomfort when speaking of this issue does our nation a disservice, because even after COVID is long gone, it will persist and will continue to harm the health of millions.

When we think about COVID and how to improve our response, we cannot conveniently ignore the fact that our population is already disproportionately unhealthy as compared with many other countries.

Politicians on both sides of the political discourse have distracted us from, and divided us about, fundamental issues in American health care. Whether you favor universal health coverage or private insurance, obesity and related conditions lie at the root of a large percentage of our health concerns. We must join together as a nation to think of more productive and long-lasting solutions to address this massive health problem, rather than simply dismiss it as an uncomfortable topic.

THE REVOLUTION . . . cont.

advantages—Macron carried with him a bit of intrigue and freshness that most of his more bureaucratic competitors lacked, which made him more interesting to voters. In France, as in America where some people were enthralled by Trump’s outsider status, there was likely the hope that a politician from a non-political background would end up being less corrupt than the normal, factory-made ones (although this is rarely the case). And while the French and American governments are quite different, both countries have recently chosen a president with

the same side of the political spectrum.

Macron survived the first round with 24 percent, along with Marine Le Pen (21 percent), a far-right candidate of the National Front party. The second round ended, obviously, with a victory for Macron (66 percent to 34 percent), but many French political pundits claim that he did not truly win. One of his competitors from the first round, François Fillon, put it best: “there was no other choice but to vote against the far-right” (Le Pen), citing this as the real reason for Macron’s victory. In the first round of voting, his margin was

experiences an ebb-and-flow of support, his achievement of dissolving traditional left/right boundaries still stands, contributing greatly to the ongoing decline in French political polarization.

So, does this tell us anything about the polarization in America? Would a centrist candidate akin to Macron be the key to begin bridging the gap between Democrats and Republicans? As the American political process exists today, a centrist candidate not affiliated with either side wouldn’t stand a fighting chance. A center-leaning Democrat or Republican may be able to sway some voters from

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a uniquely non-political background. However, both of these presidents have proven to be highly controversial.

Interestingly, both Macron and Trump scraped by with a slim victory over their opponents (some don’t even count Trump’s, since he lost the popular vote in 2016). In France, there are two rounds of voting for president. The first is similar to our primaries, although it’s more common for candidates to be affiliated with new, little-known political parties. The second round is between the two (in some cases, three) candidates who did best in the first round. And since France does not have a strict two-party system, it’s also possible that the final two or three candidates could be from

small: he beat Le Pen by just 3 percent and Fillon by 4 percent. Of course, not everyone who voted for Macron would agree with all of his policies, but it’s hard to sink to an approval rating of 23 percent, as he did two years ago.

Interestingly, 23 percent is about equal to his support in the first round, which suggests that the additional 42 percent who chose Macron in the second round did not truly support him (or no longer did by late 2018): only those who were Macron loyalists from the start remained unwavering supporters. Therefore, his controversial position as the most centrist French president is caused mainly by the fact that he lacks much authentic support from either side. Although his administration

the other side, but not enough to inspire the type of revolution that we need. Even if the American political process made it easy for a centrist candidate to be elected, unifying previous supporters of the extremes behind a candidate of compromises would be impossible, given the extreme polarization of discourse in this country. But this raises a question on its own: is French society really unified behind Macron, or is his supposed “base” just a facade of centrists and mostly right-hating leftists? If this is true, then America doesn’t need a centrist candidate: America needs to lead itself towards a revolution of understanding, acceptance, and discourse. Only then will the majority of our country unite behind a single president.

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## CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

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