



Written by [Charles Scaliger](#) on January 27, 2020

Quarantine and Wuhan: Government Power in Times of Epidemic

On January 23, 2020, 11 million people were taken captive. On that day, the Communist government of the People's Republic of China decided to quarantine the entire city of Wuhan in response to the spread of a novel coronavirus that appeared to have originated there the previous month. In a single day, China's seventh-largest city (with three million more people than New York City) was effectively turned into a vast open-air concentration camp, with all air, rail, and road traffic out of the city ended.



Over the next few days, the quarantine was extended over a number of other nearby cities. By January 25, almost 50 million people — a population roughly equivalent to the combined populations of California and Georgia — were under quarantine, prevented by their government from leaving their cities. In Wuhan, all cars were banned from the downtown area, and city authorities rushed to erect a makeshift hospital to accommodate an anticipated influx of patients. The American government managed to evacuate its consular staff and many American citizens from Wuhan.

Quarantines have been practiced for centuries, but never before on a scale anywhere near what is being carried out right now on the Chinese mainland. The Chinese government is methodically shutting down many forms of travel all over the country, prohibiting all group tours, for example. Tens of millions of Chinese have canceled vacation plans during the Chinese New Year holiday. Millions of breath masks have been sold, and the streets of most major cities are practically empty. Those people who do venture out mostly wear surgical masks. Anyone with flu or cold-like symptoms is subject to involuntary quarantine. In a word, panic and mass hysteria, fanned by the actions of the government, are the order of the day.

What is the dreaded new coronavirus? In spite of the scary-sounding name, it is essentially a type of common cold, albeit one packing a little more punch than the usual varieties. So far, it is unclear whether this particular strain is even as dangerous as the annual influenza bouts that take a predictable global toll on the aged and infirm. Nearly every known victim so far has been over 60 years old, typical of influenza and other pathologies that often induce pneumonia and other secondary infections in those with weakened immune systems. Added to this is the fact, little-known outside of China, that most Chinese do not understand the relationship between keeping warm and avoiding (or mitigating) illness. Most Chinese believe that fresh air, even in the dead of winter, is a key to good health; consequently, the first thing that Chinese do when a person falls ill — at home or in hospital rooms — is open all the windows, even if the outside temperature is below freezing. Many Chinese also despise artificial heating because it dries out the air and is allegedly bad for the skin. Thus in China, a rather unique combination of cultural aversion to “inside air” and to indoor heating has created optimal circumstances for the spread of diseases such as influenza and the Wuhan coronavirus during the cold Chinese winter months.



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Leaving aside the etiology of the disease, the extreme actions of the Chinese government in response to this crisis, and the consequent deteriorating conditions in China, should be instructive for all Americans concerned with the growth of federal government power. Epidemics, like war and natural disasters, are legitimate concerns of the state — and, under the wrong circumstances, can also provide a deadly pretext for the illegitimate expansion of government power.

No crisis, not even war, has quite the emotional impact of a seemingly unstoppable disease. Modern Western civilization was created on the ruins of the High Middle Ages, which met an abrupt and terrifying end in the Black Death pandemic. Those who experienced the event were convinced that the end of the world had come. The plague was indiscriminate in choosing its victims; lord and vassal, king and peasant, were equally afflicted. Some of those who survived, such as Italy's Petrarch, were motivated to seek a rebirth of civilization, whence the Renaissance.

Far more devastating in terms of global mortality was the great Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918-1919. But to a world already devastated by the greatest war in history, the flu seemed to be just a continuation of unending misery visited on the emerging modern world. In more recent history, the terrifying outbreak of Ebola from 2013 to 2016 across West Africa provoked understandable concern worldwide, given the mortality rate and horrific symptoms of this exotic disease.

Within living memory, outbreaks of smallpox, measles, and many other serious diseases were a dreary fact of existence, even in the developed world. Only in the past few decades has medical science progressed to the point of beating back most of these deadly scourges. Even so, various strains of influenza continue to exact an annual toll in the tens of thousands among the elderly and otherwise immunodeficient.

Communicable diseases pose clear and present public health hazards that governments have certain responsibilities to try to contain. In early America, however, quarantines were carried out by local governments, presumably out of fear for how quarantine powers might be abused by the federal government. The first quarantine station and hospital in the United States was constructed in Philadelphia in 1799, a belated reaction to the devastating 1793 yellow fever outbreak in that city. New York City opened a similar facility on Staten Island the following year. For the next 80 years, quarantines were managed exclusively by city and other local governments, though not without controversy.

The Staten Island facility, known as the New York Marine Hospital and the largest quarantine facility in the United States at the time, proved especially contentious. Staten Island residents resented the fact that it depressed property values, posed a threat of contagion to the community, and often took actions that trespassed on personal liberty. The local community of Castleton even passed a resolution in September of 1858 declaring the quarantine facility to be a "pest and a nuisance of the most odious character," and encouraging residents to take measures to rid themselves of it. The following two days, mobs of locals attacked the facility and set it on fire, desisting only when a massive, heavily armed police contingent arrived to restore order. The so-called Staten Island Quarantine War is but one instance of the controversy that the practice of quarantines has generated in the United States.

In 1878, Congress passed the National Quarantine Act, which granted quarantine authority to the federal government for the first time. By 1970, the CDC maintained 70 quarantine stations across the United States. But by the end of that decade, the number of such stations had been drastically reduced, because of the perception that outbreaks requiring quarantine were largely a thing of the past. After 9/11 and the subsequent anthrax attacks in Washington, however, the number of quarantine stations



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was raised to 20, reflecting ongoing concern that weaponized pathogens might be part of future terrorist attacks.

All of which brings us back to the unfolding situation in China. If the U.S. government possesses — and has exercised — the authority to institute quarantines, cannot the same be said of China and of any other government? The answer is a qualified “yes,” but in the case of the Wuhan quarantine, China’s actions point out the stark contrasts between an authoritarian communist regime and our own government, federal and local. First of all, the history of quarantines in America has always been fraught with controversy, as such a potentially freedom-endangering subject ought to be. Secondly, in the United States most quarantine activities have been directed either at individuals already ill and in need of treatment and isolation or at preventing dangerous communicable diseases from entering the United States. Screening is being carried out currently at various American ports of entry in order to prevent visitors from China carrying the Wuhan coronavirus from entering the United States. All such activities would seem to be well within the purview of government’s role in defending national borders and in protecting the public from those posing a clear and present danger to public health.

A somewhat different, and more alarming take on the role of quarantines in America was on view during the dark days of World War I, when the federal government took the unprecedented step of jailing tens of thousands of prostitutes in an effort to prevent the spread of venereal disease. This action was styled by one historian “the most concerted attack on civil liberties in the name of public health in American history.” But overall, the American approach to quarantines has been to take action exclusively 1) at those wishing to enter our country from abroad and 2) at those already sick.

China, by contrast, permits no criticism of government policies under any circumstances. Moreover, the government has quarantined tens of millions of people who are not ill, under the sole pretext of preventing the spread of a disease that, by every indication, is in no way comparable in severity to pathogens of yore such as smallpox and yellow fever, or to modern-day scourges such as Ebola. The entire enormous country has been virtually shut down, with almost all public attractions, from Shanghai’s Disneyland to local theme parks, historical sites, and nature reserves closed indefinitely. In some areas, anyone exhibiting any cold or flu-like symptoms at all is subject to immediate and involuntary quarantine, along with, in many cases, anyone they share a residence or even a residential building with. Hotels and convention centers are being commandeered as quarantine facilities. China, already a police state by any definition, is now in a self-imposed state of siege by its own government.

At the same time, these extreme measures have been accompanied by the usual blasts of propaganda calculated to browbeat Chinese citizens into unquestioning compliance. Videos showing refractory citizens being compelled by righteously indignant bystanders and police to wear breath masks in public places are circulated on social media such as the ubiquitous WeChat. Infomercials urging Chinese to cooperate with authorities in reporting people with any suspect symptoms and to comply with all government demands, no matter how draconian, are reminiscent of wartime propaganda.

The Wuhan virus is only the latest crisis to afflict the Chinese Communist government in these troublesome times. Coming on the heels of a devastating trade war and ongoing Hong Kong defiance, the outbreak has afforded China’s leaders yet another opportunity to show the world, and, more importantly, their own citizens, that they are firmly in control. But all signs point to this being yet another monumental fiasco for the Chinese Communist Party’s image. The outbreak has already had a devastating effect on China’s markets, and its continuation is likely to create even more problems. Hotels, normally enjoying the profits of a busy holiday season, are mostly shut down, and schools have



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been closed at least until the middle of February. Would-be holiday shoppers and tourists are staying home, spelling trouble for China's many retailers, domestic airlines, and tourism infrastructure. And foreign visitation is likely to plunge as well, possibly resulting in diminished investments and foreign currency availability. These are outcomes China is desperate to avoid, in the context of an economy already in steep decline because of the trade war and growing general foreign skepticism over China's true intentions.

In the Chinese language, there are two words for "disaster," somewhat similar in sound but with subtle differences in meaning. One of them, *zaihai*, means a natural disaster, while the other, *zainan*, usually refers to a manmade or otherwise preventable disaster. The story of the Wuhan virus, so far, is a cautionary tale of the dangers of government power in times of epidemic, of the actions of unlimited government power turning a relatively ordinary *zaihai* into a gargantuan man-made *zainan*. It is also the latest in a string of woes afflicting Communist China, and may yet have far-reaching sociopolitical and economic effects beyond the complexities of the epidemic itself.

The hard-pressed tens of millions in Wuhan and the surrounding cities will doubtless be grateful for a speedy resolution.

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