

Covid Crimes

While suppression of discourse is dreadful, uninhibited despotism is worse

By PAUL E. PETERSON



Empty playgrounds were a common sight across the U.S. in 2020, an example of public restrictions during the Covid era.

“The peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is that it is robbing . . . those who dissent from the opinion, still more those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose . . . the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.”

—John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, Ch. 2. (1859)

“The worst of all tyrannies is the tyranny of the majority.”

—James Madison, *Federalist*, 10

FOR A DEVOUT post-modernist, open discussion is subordinate to a single-minded pursuit of justice. Long a debating point within elite universities, post-modernism escaped, like a laboratory leak, into the real world of Covid politics at the beginning of this decade. To protect innocents from harm, our thoroughly post-modern masters silenced dissent and encouraged falsehoods. Public health officials took upon themselves the burden of convincing parents and politicians that schools must be closed, masks worn, and social distancing practiced—even when supporting evidence was thin at best. Those who objected were denied platforms in legacy and social media outlets.

As they tell this story in their new book, *In Covid's Wake*, Princeton professors Stephen Macedo and Francis Lee hoist their flag to John Stuart Mill's standard. A democratic republic that denies itself discourse about the central issue of the day risks becoming a tyranny of the majority, they argue. Suppression of dissent proved to be the worst of all Covid co-morbidities.

In their account, tables and figures show the extent to which government and citizen responses to Covid's spread were driven more by politics than science. Democratic governors and mayors locked down businesses, closed school doors, and

imposed restrictions on general assemblies; Republican leaders did not. As masks were worn in parks and wildlife reserves in California, motorcyclists rode through the hills and plains of deep-red South Dakota in the Covid summer of 2020 to the dances and beer festivals of Sturgis. Democrats wore face masks, refused to shake hands, and took wide circles to avoid meeting one another; Republicans tossed the masks away while embracing. Democrats tested themselves each time the sun came up; Republicans searched for the double-red line only when forced to do so. Democratic citizens got double vaccinations with a third booster shot; Republicans became increasingly hesitant.

Meanwhile, public health officials and the governments beholden to them crushed dissent and lied knowingly. Two events, highlighted by Macedo and Lee, continue to resonate. In August 2020, a small group of dissenting public health professionals gathered in the Berkshire hills of Massachusetts to call for an end to school closures and business lockdowns. Not much could be done to halt the spread of Covid until a vaccine was deployed, they announced. The virus was lethal mainly for those who were very old or had comorbidities. What came to be known as the Great Barrington Declaration insisted that health policy should concentrate on protecting the vulnerable and sick.

Nothing in that Declaration diverged from what was scientifically probable or already the guiding practice both in Sweden and in those parts of the United States colored red on the political map. Yet Francis Collins at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and Anthony Fauci at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases persuaded news outlets and social media platforms to ignore the writers of the Declaration on the grounds their bizarre advice was beyond the



In Covid's Wake: How Our Politics Failed Us

by Stephen Macedo and Francis Lee

Princeton University Press,
2025, \$29.95, 392 pages



Frances Lee and Stephen Macedo

scientific mainstream. How ironic that one of the Declaration's principal signers, Jay Bhattacharya, would later be confirmed as NIH director after promising the Senate he would sustain free, full, open inquiry about vaccines and viruses.

Particularly riveting is the book's cutting-edge discussion of Covid's origins. Assembling their account from private emails and obscure publications, the authors describe Collins and Fauci's incentives to flaunt the theory that Covid-19 originated in bat caves, not in a laboratory in Wuhan, China, and how the duo demonized those who posited the lab-leak theory. Not until the end of the Biden administration did the CIA identify the lab as the more probable source.

In Covid's Wake is a must read for those who want to understand why the United States, and much of the world, chose a self-destructive path when responding to Covid. A generation of schoolchildren lost a year's worth of learning, with the largest setbacks concentrated on those with the greatest educational needs. Steep inflation and massive government spending has left the United States with a national debt exceeding levels necessitated by World War II.

I have two quibbles. The authors demonstrate beyond a doubt that the country's response to

Covid divided along partisan lines, but they offer little in the way of explanation for it. Are Republicans inherently risk-takers? Are Democrats safety-firsters? Or was it a class conflict? Did upper middle class, Democratic office-workers enjoy privileges (like remote work) denied Republican truck drivers and check-out clerks? Or was it simply the dynamics of party politics? Does the opposition party always blame a crisis on the party in power?

Also, I am less than fully convinced that, as Macedo and Lee argue, the threat to free speech was the worst Covid crime. It may seem so for those in the minority who work at Princeton and Harvard, or live in Boston, New York, or San Francisco. But most ordinary people never took Fauci and Collins all that seriously. They did take note of the governor of California celebrating, maskless, with supporters at a crowded high-end restaurant in Napa Valley. They were aware of mayors and school board members who vacationed abroad amid warnings against international travel.

Worse than the free-speech threats by federal officials were state and local abuses of the police power. Governors, mayors, and school boards wielded authority to control normal social behavior that is otherwise saved for wars and natural disasters. States ordered old people in nursing homes to be closeted in their rooms—essentially jailed in solitary confinement—sometimes dying without the comfort of family and friends. Young people were denied opportunities to play with friends on streets and playgrounds. On one occasion, I saw a policeman harass two teenagers quietly fishing in a lake; another day, I saw an officer order a *solitary* young

man to stop hitting balls at a school's batting cage. No wonder anxiety, depression, and suicide among the young have escalated.

Suppression of open inquiry was inexcusably dreadful, but uninhibited despotism was the greatest Covid crime of all.

Paul E. Peterson is the Henry Lee Shattuck professor of government at Harvard University and director of its Program on Education Policy and Governance. He is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University.

This [article](#) appeared at EducationNext.org on June 17, 2025.