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Outbreak: The Need for a Stronger U.S. Biodefense

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This year marks the hundredth anniversary of the Spanish Flu pandemic, which killed at least 50 million people worldwide. In 2014, there was an outbreak of Ebola in West Africa that killed about 11,000 people in less than three years. In the United States, we seem to have a cultural fascination with infectious diseases. Box office hits like “Contagion” and “Outbreak” evidence the hold they have on our collective imagination.

Although they made for great films, how prepared is the U.S. for another major virus like the Spanish Flu? We currently spend nearly \$700 billion annually on defense. But such expenditure focuses primarily on military base maintenance, designing and building new ships and aircraft, weaponry, personnel costs, and strengthening cyber defense. An

almost negligible amount goes into biodefense. Given the ability of disease to tear through a population, there needs to be a policy shift toward a focus on biodefense so that a new outbreak cannot ravage the U.S. and other countries, including our allies.

The relatively recent Ebola outbreak demonstrates that the United States is not nearly as prepared as it ought to be. The problem rests, in part, in the fact that the disease spread quickly. There was too little time to respond and prevent the death of 11,000 people. In our interconnected and global economy, people can travel halfway across the world in a matter of hours. Although that is good for business, it’s a serious problem in fighting the spread of diseases.

Imagine the effects a breakout like the Spanish Flu would have on the

modern world. In 1918, global travel was possible and it did contribute to the crisis. Soldiers returning from Europe after World War I helped spread the virus, but they had to spend many days at sea to get home. Today, a sick person can go from New York to London in six hours. This amplifies the rate of contagion. That a disease can now spread across the world in a matter of hours gives governments little or no time to react.

We cannot and should not allow the threat of disease to isolate us from the rest of the world. We gain too much in exchange -- culturally and economically -- to risk cutting ourselves off. Although vaccinations and quarantines help minimize the risk of disease entering the country, we need a more robust strategy. I believe that

increasing spending on public health, sanitation, and biological research is the best way to preemptively fight these diseases and viruses.

The United States must allocate more resources to public health organizations. Moreover, we must invest in better health and sanitation infrastructure. Increased spending on research and development of vaccines is also critical. While there may not be a cure for Ebola and other viruses, vaccines must be developed to help stop their spread. In a world facing the threats of terrorism and nuclear war, viruses often go under the radar. They are not talked about until they appear—killing thousands. When the threat is gone, we go about our daily lives. But they remain a very real threat, and the U.S. must do a better job in preparing for the worst.

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The 2018 Midterms and Legislative Limbo

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This week, Americans go to the polls to decide the composition of the next Congress. President Trump’s upset victory over Hillary Clinton two years ago generated a surge of political engagement on both sides. Because this political fervor continues, the 2018 election has been perhaps the most highly anticipated midterm of our lifetimes.

Both campaign expenditures and projected voter turnout—I am writing a few days before the election—reflect this increased interest. According to one CNN report, “The 2018 Midterms will go down as the most expensive in U.S. history.” Moreover, total spending “will surpass \$5.2 billion by November 6th—a 35% jump over the 2014 midterms and the largest leap in at least two decades.” Even the youngest voters, a traditionally apathetic group as a whole, have begun to care more about politics. As Olivia Paschal and Madeleine Carlisle wrote in *The Atlantic*, “new polling suggests that young people will vote in next week’s midterms at levels not seen in at least three decades.” Since we are so heavily invested in its outcome, it is worth examining more closely the potential implications of this year’s vote.

Looking first at the House of Representatives, the situation seems quite grim for the GOP. While they currently hold 235 seats to the Democrats’ 193 (there are several vacancies, mostly in districts they won in 2016), the Republicans

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have only a 15 percent chance of keeping their majority, according to FiveThirtyEight, a reputable punditry site and polling aggregator. Three main factors contribute to the Democrats' advantage in the House: their 7.5-point lead in the generic ballot, Trump's inability to maintain an approval rating above the low 40s as measured by polling averages (it has been below 43 percent since March), and the poor track record the party holding the presidency has in midterms.

Still, some commentators argue that Republicans have more reason for hope than these numbers initially suggest. John R. Petrocik and Daron R. Shaw, for example, contend at Sabato's Crystal Ball (centerforpolitics.com) that neither increased turnout among liberal voters nor anti-presidential backlash will greatly benefit Democrats in the race for the House, contrary to the expectations of many. In their view, the midterms' frequent tendency to seriously harm the president's party results largely from that party's success during presidential election years in winning House seats that don't normally belong to them. Because the Republicans not only failed to gain but actually lost seats in 2016, the authors conclude, they are less likely to suffer large losses this year as, for example, the Democrats did in 2010. While their interpretation is somewhat unorthodox, other pundits such as Sean Trende of RealClearPolitics also admit that, as Trende wrote recently,

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"There really are believable scenarios [in which they hold the House] that don't require Republicans to win districts that they have written off."

However, the focus on which party will win the House ignores the power a slim majority would give either side. Even the rare accounts favorable to the GOP usually acknowledge that their current majority will shrink considerably. Trende's scenario (he has also written a competing one in which the Democrats make large gains, for more than a slight majority) concludes that Democrats will pick up 22 seats--one short of a majority--or possibly as few as 19, which would reduce the Republican House margin by more than three-quarters. As

recent congressional gridlock reveals, accomplishing legislative priorities often requires a "working majority," not a mere numerical one. The Tax Cut and Jobs Act of 2017, for example, probably the most important conservative policy change of the Trump era, had eleven Republican dissenters in the House. Similarly, the attempted "skinny" (or partial) repeal of the Affordable Care Act passed the House by only four votes before losing in the Senate. It seems clear that even a surprisingly bad performance for Democrats would substantially enhance their capacity to block President Trump's proposals.

At the same time, the Senate is about as bad for Democrats as the House is for Republicans. While the Democrats

benefit even there from President Trump's unpopularity, the extremely lopsided Senate map presents them with serious problems. Ten Democrats are up for re-election in states he won, while only one Republican is up in a Clinton-supporting state (Nevada). Because of Vice President Pence's tie-breaking vote, the Democrats need a net gain of two seats to take the Senate. Their most plausible path entails winning every state with a tossup race (Nevada, Arizona, Missouri, Indiana, and Florida) and at least one where they trail significantly (North Dakota, Texas, or Tennessee).

Additionally, the Senate Republicans are likely to shift a bit to the right. Bob Corker and Jeff Flake, two of the most moderate conservatives, are retiring. With John McCain's death and Lindsey Graham's apparently growing loyalty to Trump, Lisa Murkowski and Susan Collins are the only senators in their party with a decent chance of siding with Democrats more than occasionally. If the Republicans gain any seats in the upper chamber, as is likely, it would allow them to continue transforming the judiciary (not just the Supreme Court, but lower courts as well) and to stop most liberal bills from even reaching Trump's desk. Of course, we cannot predict election results with great accuracy or certainty. Yet whether the Republicans or the Democrats celebrate on Tuesday night, we should expect the spiral of congressional paralysis to deepen for at least two more years.

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