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OUR OPINION

Charging without a plan won't work

The battle cry for those rushing to lift restrictions meant to slow the coronavirus might as well be "Leeroy Jenkins!"

For those unfamiliar with the 15-year-old internet meme, it originated during a disastrous session of the online role-playing game "World of Warcraft."

The meme is a video showing a group of players plotting an attack on a monster to help "Leeroy Jenkins" get a piece of treasure. The player controlling the Jenkins character is away from his computer making chicken during the strategy stage.

Upon his return, and apparently unaware of the plan, Jenkins immediately charges into the battle shouting "Leeroy Jenkins!"

The other players hurry after him to help, but get wiped out in spectacular fashion.

Heedlessly charging into the fray without a plan is no way to win a video game with low stakes. It's certainly no way to approach a pandemic that is killing people around the world.

As of Tuesday evening, there had been more than 290,000 deaths worldwide, including more than 82,000 in the United States. Ohio reported 1,436 deaths from confirmed or probable COVID-19 cases, including 44 in Lorain County.

Ignoring federal guidelines in a rush to reopen would lead to "suffering and death that could be avoided," National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci warned during a Senate hearing Tuesday.

One of the guidelines is that states should await significant declines in the number of new cases before lifting restrictions. Although Ohio's strong response has slowed the spread, the state hasn't quite accomplished that feat.

Nevertheless, Gov. Mike DeWine has moved forward with a slow reopening.

Retail stores opened back up Tuesday. Personal care services and outdoor dining will return Friday, with indoor dining later this month.

Some things, however, remain closed, including day care centers, whose reopening DeWine has delayed making a decision on.

That measured approach helps explain a Washington Post-Ipsos poll released Tuesday that showed DeWine had the highest approval rating — 86 percent — of any governor in the country for his handling of the pandemic. Nationally, 43 percent approved of Trump's performance.

While DeWine appears to agonize over every decision, Trump, who has declared Americans "warriors," appears more interested in how the virus affects him. That was evident in his performance at a news conference Monday in which he declared that the nation had "prevailed" in its efforts to ramp up testing, something public health experts insist is necessary to safely reopen the country. It did not go well.

"You've said many times that the U.S. is doing far better than any other country when it comes to testing," Weijia Jiang of CBS News said. "Why does that matter? Why is this a global competition to you if every day Americans are still losing their lives and we're still seeing more cases every day?"

"Well, they're losing their lives everywhere in the world," Trump responded before suggesting that Jiang, who grew up in West Virginia, pose the question to China. Soon thereafter he bolted from the Rose Garden.

It is true that the United States had completed roughly 9 million tests as of Sunday, but that works out to only about 2.7 percent of the population. Moreover, the total number of tests is far different from the number of tests per capita.

Iceland, although a far smaller nation, had tested 15.4 percent of its population, The Post reported.

It's obvious that there isn't enough testing, despite Trump's insistence that everything is going swimmingly on that front.

DeWine said Monday that it was "unlikely" Ohio could meet a federal recommendation that every nursing home resident and employee in the state be tested within the next two weeks.

Meanwhile, the coronavirus has infiltrated the White House, infecting several staff members and prompting mandates for masks and increased testing to protect the health of Trump and other officials. Trump himself is apparently exempt from the mask requirement. His vanity won't allow it.

Even if testing and other key measures that the president's advisers have said are needed, and that they themselves have access to, were all in place for the rest of the country, a successful reopening comes down to how much faith people have that he can safely reemerge from their homes. That's something no politician can mandate.

When DeWine was asked Tuesday whether he would go out for a sit-down meal, he initially replied, "We'll see." He circled back later in his daily briefing to say he and his wife had been talking about getting some food from a chicken joint.

It was a fitting choice.

When the other "Warcraft" players complained about their defeat, Jenkins replied, "At least I have chicken."

There wasn't much comfort in that reply, either.



Even separated we can pull together



CLARE ROSSER

A day defined by death, destruction and pain was also a day when a suicide hotline went quiet. On September 11, 2001, and in the days immediately following, calls to a national suicide hotline reached an all-time low. Indications are that, as the nation collectively mourned and stood together against terrorism, fewer people died by suicide. On that day, people pulled together to face tragedy. Those suffering from suicidal thoughts — they stayed with us. It's a testament to the power of connection and solidarity.

Researcher Dr. Thomas Joiner cites the low suicide rate on 9/11 when he describes how feelings of isolation can be a major risk factor for suicide. Suicides go down during times of collective hardship, arguably because we have a strong sense of togetherness and belonging. We are all in this together. He also notes that suicides go down during times of celebration. (The notion that winter holidays are times of increased suicides? A myth. December usually has the lowest number of suicides.)

Pulling together — as a faith or family during holidays, or as a nation during a crisis — is a protection for our mental health and well-being.

Recent news stories compare the devastation. Deaths from the coronavirus, in New York City alone, exceed the lives lost in the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Those of us in the behavioral health field look to other data from Sept. 11 — the impact of grief, loss and national anxiety on the weeks and months that followed, when rates of depression and substance use rose, cases of PTSD emerged, and our lives changed.

In March, the Mental Health, Addiction and Recovery Services Board of Lorain County started promoting stress and anxiety management resources with increased urgency. We shared the Crisis Text Line, available by texting 4Hope to 741741, and the Disaster Distress Helpline at (800) 985-5990. Now, Ohio offers the COVID Careline at (800) 720-9616. Our

network expanded telehealth care, creatively updated prevention resources for students and families, developed online options for recovery support and made other positive adaptations for our changing reality.

When we struggle to meet basic needs, our mental health can suffer. Deeper psychiatric crises can develop. In disasters, we need tools to cope, to stay resilient.

Another thing we typically promote is social connection. Spend time with friends and family, and doing activities you enjoy. COVID-19 changes that. "Social" is now about "distance," not connection. The closest we can be is six feet apart.

Social connections protect our health, wealth and happiness. Having someone we can call, and count on, softens the blow of a loss or abrupt life change. If nothing else, we commiserate. Often, we trade skills and help each other through our rough patch.

Tony Coder of the Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation puts it this way: "Making sure that we are there for one another can make a difference to all who are struggling with this reality we are living. Reach out through a phone call, a video call, text message or social media. It might be just what someone needs, and it might save a life."

The MHARS board is encouraging connection through the Strive for 5 Challenge. It's simple: find five people to check in with every day for 30 days, by phone, letter or any other safe but social way. #OHStrive5 reminds us to make daily connections.

You might not think that a daily phone call to a friend or family member is sui-

cide prevention, but it could be. Plus, even if a person is not distressed, your call and connection boosts their well-being and your own. It does not hurt, and might help more than you know.

Today, I ask that residents of Lorain County find their five, and join Ohio's Strive for 5. Find out how at mharlorain-county.org/blog/ohstrive5. Find others who need a caring connection: people who have lost a loved one, or job, first responders and crisis workers, people who live alone, or struggle with depression, anxiety or substance use. Alongside appropriate healthcare, these connections protect our friends and family.

In a recent article in the Journal of the American Medical Association, Joiner and other authors noted that while the risk for increased suicides is present, there may be a "silver lining" that emerges from the pandemic. They wrote about pulling together, saying, "... individuals undergoing a shared experience might support one another, thus strengthening social connectedness. Recent advancements in technology (such as video conferencing) might facilitate pulling together. Epidemics and pandemics may also alter one's views on health and mortality, making life more precious, death more fearsome, and suicide less likely."

Past events of shared grief and loss show: our mental health and recovery network will be serving new and additional clients. People wrestling with grief, fear, loss, substance use or isolation may need mental health and recovery services for the first time. That's OK. We are here, ready to help.

Just as we pull together during a tragedy, we show creativity and resilience. We operationalize hope.

We stand together, even when standing 6 feet apart.

Clare Rosser is the Director of Communications and Community Relations with the Mental Health, Addiction and Recovery Services (MHARS) Board of Lorain County, and is a suicide prevention educator.

U.S. needs to lead fight against virus

For critical weeks in February and early March President Donald Trump claimed COVID-19 would magically disappear by itself or with warmer weather.

That didn't work. So, with the death toll at more than 75,000 and rising, the president needs a new magic formula to deflect public attention from his slow and chaotic response. And to blur the blame for the tens of thousands of new deaths that will stem from reopening the country without a national testing strategy.

The miraculous formula? Blame a sneak attack by China for causing all those deaths. "This is really the worst attack we've ever had," Trump said last week. "This is worse than Pearl Harbor. This is worse than the World Trade Center. It could have been stopped in China ... and it wasn't."

And as the rhetoric soars, demand financial reparations from Beijing.

Let me be clear: I believe China made serious errors in its initial handling of COVID-19 and should be pressed to come clean by the United States in concert with our allies. But the way Trump is playing his U.S.-China blame game will hurt Americans more than it will Beijing.

First of all, Trump's wink at debunked conspiracy theories that COVID-19 is a bioweapon concocted in a Wuhan microbiology lab is dangerous. Dr. Anthony Fauci, along with a stream of leading epidemiologists, have stressed that the virus originated in nature, not in a laboratory. (China and Russia have spread rumors that it began as a U.S. bioweapon, but a democracy should not be playing this authoritarian game.)

As for claims that the outbreak might have stemmed from an accident at the Wuhan lab (which studied bat viruses), the administration has presented no evidence. U.S. intelligence agencies, along with those of its closest allies, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand — the so-called Five Eyes —



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reportedly think this "highly unlikely."

Yet, if the goal is truly to force China to cough up more information about the virus's origin, the best way would be to present its leaders with a united front of concerned nations — led by Washington — demanding answers.

Despite its attempts at face mask largesse, and its impressive revival from COVID-19, the Chinese regime has angered many countries with its lack of transparency. They are looking in vain for U.S. leadership to confront Beijing.

Instead, Trump has chosen to go it alone on COVID-19, encouraging his officials and GOP legislators to ramp up financial proposals for punishing China. Some of the initial ideas are amazingly stupid.

For example, some GOP legislators are proposing laws lifting China's sovereign immunity so Americans can sue Beijing over COVID-19 deaths, or canceling principal or interest payments on Treasury bills purchased by China.

Did no one stop to think that, if the U.S. unilaterally rules that China is not immune to lawsuits, Beijing could do the same to us with untold consequences? Or that, by repudiating U.S. debt held by Beijing, Washington would destroy the gold-standard reputation of U.S. Treasury bills?

This is what happens when foreign policy is made on the fly with an eye towards elections, not results.

Indeed, Beijing's failings expedited the tragic spread of the coronavirus, most likely because, in an authoritarian regime, Wuhan officials were reluctant to report bad news upward to their bosses in Bei-

jing. How much the overseas spread could have been checked with a faster response is unknown. That is why the United States should be leading an international full court press for more information.

True, Beijing has angrily rejected the idea of an international inquiry into the COVID disaster — suggesting a boycott of Australian goods when the idea was suggested by Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, and reacting aggressively against criticism from European nations.

But it is exactly this Chinese overreach — alienating publics from France to Italy to Vietnam and Malaysia — that opens the door to global pushback if Trump were willing to lead it. This is the moment to strengthen Western and Asian alliances to deal with China on broader issues such as the South China Sea, Taiwan and 5G.

Instead, by unilaterally ginning up anti-China hysteria in the USA, Trump encourages Beijing's reciprocal xenophobia, without any strategy to contain it. Clearly his much touted "friendship" with Xi Jinping didn't help him with COVID-19.

Nor will Trump's blame-game with China inoculate him from responsibility for failing to confront the virus in the crucial weeks of January through early March. There are too many tweets and speeches on the record revealing how he blew off the danger, too many reports of advisers and intel briefers struggling to get him to take the virus seriously.

If this pandemic was "Pearl Harbor," it was the U.S. president who failed to mobilize the nation to test, trace and isolate when it would have saved thousands of lives — and who still refuses to do so. Irrespective of the blame Chinese leaders bear, history won't absolve Trump of responsibility for those deaths.

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