

Voices

Sarah E. Wagner and Martha Greenwald

Americans won't let COVID be erased from our memories



The Kentucky COVID Memorial in Frankfort, Ky. (Bruce Schreiner / Associated Press)

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Sculptor Amanda Matthews arrived at the Kentucky COVID Memorial earlier this month prepared, ready to repair her work. Located on the grounds of the state capitol in Frankfort, the sculpture features several figures positioned around a giant silver sphere emblazoned with the state seal and motto: “United We Stand, Divided We Fall.” It’s the first official state COVID memorial in the country, and, once again, it had been vandalized.

But to Matthews’ surprise, someone had already repaired the sculpture, replacing one of the bells that chimes in the wind. With its bells and figures, green lights and reflective surfaces, the memorial was meant to echo the ritual-filled [daily pressers held by Gov. Andy Beshear](#) during the early days of the pandemic.

For someone, the vandalism of the COVID memorial was an act of contempt they couldn’t abide. And so they fixed it.

A week later, a different story of contempt was unfolding in the nation’s capital. Dr. Anthony Fauci appeared before the Republican-led Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee to face a barrage of accusations and animosity regarding his handling of the pandemic. On Thursday, the committee voted along party lines to hold him in contempt. The former head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, a man whose life’s work has saved millions upon millions of lives, before and during the COVID pandemic, is now facing the threat of jail time.

Why now? Fauci has appeared before Congress [20 times to testify about the pandemic](#). He has also been retired for two years. Why not Alex Azar, the Health and Human Services secretary under President Trump in 2020? Or why not the current

secretary, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., under whose watch the [U.S. has hit a 35-year high in measles cases](#)?

Or we could ask, to what end? With the unchecked war in Iran, allegations of rampant corruption, unaccounted shootings of American citizens by immigration agents and the skyrocketing cost of living for American families, doesn't Congress have more pressing issues to investigate?

Good-faith investigation wasn't the driver last week. As Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.) [remarked](#) after the committee hearing on July 29: "For the past 18 months, the Trump administration has been engaged in a campaign to rewrite this history. Today's proceeding, I fear, is part of that effort."

Pandemic revisionism is a popular card to play these days. Take, for example, Kennedy's recent ["falsehood-filled" interview](#) with Dana Bash on CNN. Our research team, [Rituals in the Making](#), an ongoing anthropological study of COVID death, mourning, memory and misinformation based at George Washington University, has been tracking revisionism and its effects for years. But as we've come to understand, revisionism is about more than any one virus or even the 1.2 million deaths that COVID caused: Attempts to efface, rewrite, or deny fundamental experiences of loss and suffering expose a deeper rot. A more insidious form of contempt.

We are also clear in our understanding that the people who experienced that loss — healthcare professionals, funeral home staff, clergy, hospice workers and, above all, the bereaved — aren't fooled, not for a minute, despite congressional hearings and spin doctoring.

The social media responses we've been following in the last several days refer to many of the same traumatic images and motifs: refrigerated trucks parked outside hospitals as morgues, farewells via iPad to loved ones dying in hospitals, ventilator shortages, lack of protective equipment for essential workers, endless shifts, fear of infecting

one's own family. As our research attests, these are images seared into Americans' memories. Responding to the Kennedy interview, a former ICU nurse posted on Instagram: "How dare they think we don't remember? It's only been a minute." Or another describing his sadness and now anger: "We saw so many people die ... it permanently altered my brain chemistry. We were terrified."

The Fauci hearing and the vote to hold him in contempt show just how asynchronous and unanswered this country's pandemic grief remains. The spectacle of Fauci's public pillorying is more than a national disgrace. It's a window into the machinations of revisionism and our current political climate of deflection and distraction.

But those who lost know better. When blatant and contemptuous revisionism emerges, the outrage that lives quietly beneath the surface becomes too strong to suppress. "How dare they think we don't remember?"

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