

Margaret Chase Smith Library 2022 Essay Contest

Each year the Margaret Chase Smith Library sponsors an essay contest for high school seniors. The essay prompt for 2022 asked students to consider what the proper role of government should be in responding to the current coronavirus pandemic. Essays have been edited for length.

THIRD-PLACE ESSAY

The Proper Role of Government in Response to the Current COVID-19 Pandemic

by Caroline Gentile

The COVID-19 outbreak has been nothing short of a nightmare. A nightmare specifically for small businesses, schools, and the lives of the immuno-compromised, but also for the healthy people of our world. While this outbreak has shaken up our entire population for a little more than two years now, the pandemic is not unprecedented. The pioneering female politician, Margaret Chase Smith, lived through the most recent previous pandemic, the 1918 flu pandemic, and then she dealt with worldwide cholera epidemics during her professional career in both the House and Senate. In pressing times, such as a pandemic, government officials have to put in the time and effort to implement policy, deliver messages, and converse with their superiors and colleagues to come up with the best action plan to help keep the country safe. The challenge today in the United States is that with the intense partisan political climate, cooperation and communication are harder to navigate. Regardless, citizens' health is a priority because it is essential to our society functioning at all levels. The

government has played a necessary and heavily weighted role in the COVID-19 outbreak and will need to continue to guide our country out of this pandemic.

Two years ago when COVID-19 cases were emerging in the United States, the government did not institute a functioning plan. At the time, President Trump saw the contagious virus spreading through multiple continents and appeared to think the impact wouldn't be the same in the United States. While proper preparation wouldn't have prevented this virus, it could have slowed the spread. That is where the government's role begins: preparation. On the federal level, agencies such as the CDC provide the nation with up-to-date information on the virus and how to stay safe. They are prepared with the basic steps to put in place in case of a nationwide outbreak.

When the number of COVID cases started to rise, and the number of people hospitalized became increasingly daunting, the government eventually made the right choice to mandate a lockdown. While the quarantine was the right call to stop exponential spread and

overwhelming health care workers, it had to be enforced by state governments to become effective. While Vermont may have implemented to the lockdown recommendation, Texas did not follow right away. When mask mandates were enacted by the federal government, certain state governments said, "Not here." In fact, they even implemented no-mask mandates. The state government's role when a country is trying to prevent the worst impacts of a deadly virus should be to enforce the recommendation from the highest level and same with the local government. The virus doesn't recognize state borders.

Once emergency steps have been implemented and are proven to be ineffective, the government must take further steps. How can we go back to somewhat normal life while people are still contracting and spreading the disease? At this time, once lockdown has given scientists a research period and potential vaccines have been tested, reviewed, and are ready for use, the government has the authority to require vaccinations. At the federal level, the president can implement a vaccine mandate for healthcare workers and for federal employees. It is just as right to implement the same mandate to all eligible for a vaccine for the greater good of our society. Otherwise, the physical, mental, and economic health of all will be negatively impacted ultimately. If the vaccine is safe, and not getting the vaccine perpetuates the illness and death of many people, the government should step into its role of protecting the country and mandate vaccination. While a mandate is necessary at the federal level, laws for eligibility rules and timelines should be enforced at the state level. It is the individual state's job to enforce the

mandate by making laws in ways such as students and teachers not being able to attend the public schools without the vaccine. It is then the job of local governments to take up disagreements with the town council and school board that may arise because of disagreements. Once the virus is a part of everyday lives, masks, testing sites, and tests need to be readily available to the public. The financing for these necessities should be set by Congress at the federal level, but these materials need to be distributed to all states. So state governments will carry that part of the process out through the funding they receive from the federal government. The layers of government will have to work together to reach the majority of our.

Although we are approaching the end goal—in this case, COVID becoming contained—the government’s job is not done. We have to make sure we take the proper steps to keep moving forward and not fall back. How will booster shots be distributed? Should we continue to wear masks? Is cutting the quarantine period to five days acceptable? A nation needs guidance. There are so many questions and few answers, but there are people whose job it is to lead our country. Maybe their answers will not be as effective as intended and need to change as the situation does, but their informed decision followed universally should get us moving in the right direction. So we look to our leaders. The federal government should mandate mask use when in large crowds, testing when symptomatic and quarantining for five days when you have contracted the virus. State governments should keep an eye on their cases and re-assess regularly to determine if things are getting progressively worse or better. The states should, in accordance with their health officials, create guidelines for schools and businesses to follow for now and the future

based on what is known about the basics of the virus.

Ideally these governmental roles would help contain and manage the COVID-19 outbreak. But for these responses to be successful, people will have to look past their differing views and realize partisan politics has no place in determining the best way to keep millions alive and well. We need both parties to be the “champions of unity and prudence,” to use a phrase from Margaret Chase Smith’s “Declaration of Conscience.”¹ Emergence from this pandemic will only occur when everyone understands there is an extreme issue that needs to be dealt with by taking the necessary recommended precautions: getting vaccinated if medically eligible, wearing masks, and quarantining to protect others. We will get through this together if we consider each other in our thoughts and actions. Eventually, we will look back on COVID-19 as Margaret Chase Smith looked back on the 1918 flu pandemic. COVID likely won’t go away. We may end up getting COVID shots annually just as we do with the flu. But eventually, with proper cooperation of all levels of the government, health department guidelines, and civilians, COVID will just be one small part of our potentially great lives.

NOTES

- 1 <https://declarationproject.org/?p=2181>



Caroline Gentile, originally from Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida, graduated from Cape Elizabeth High School in Cape Elizabeth, Maine. During

high school, she played soccer and tennis. She is currently attending the University of Richmond on the pre-med track.