



The Spanish Influenza, 1918-20

by Brendan D. Shull and Alex Beschler
Alumni, Old Dominion University Model United Nations Society

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Introduction

At the very end of the Great War (World War One as it later would become known), a new threat emerged. This threat was more fatal than any gas attack, any zeppelin, or any machine gun. Worse, humanity knew nothing about treatment of the disease. This hidden enemy would end more lives than the war itself and probably became the deadliest pandemic in human history (Brown 2019).

Estimates suggest around 500 million infected. Fatalities probably were 25 to 50 million. High

and lower estimates exist. In the United States, where this crisis simulation is set, the Spanish flu caused 500,000 to 850,000 deaths (US Dept. of Health and Human Services, n.d.).

At ODUMUNC 48, experts from a variety of backgrounds are set to convene, hoping to stop the disease's spread before it begins to interrupt the war effort. Will they succeed in changing the course of the world's worst medical crisis, or is history doomed to repeat itself?

Background to the Crisis

Origins: At the time it was universally known as the Spanish Flu (influenza), because that is where it first got international attention. Later research shows there is no evidence that the epidemic originated in Spain. Due to wartime censorship laws across the participating nations, the press was restricted from publicizing the presence of a rapidly spreading, deadly disease in order to preserve national morale. There was concern that the war-weary public would panic.

Spain, however, was a neutral nation and thus was free to warn the world of the worrying outbreak. There are three leading theories as to the Spanish influenza's origin, each one implicating the Great War as a significant contributing factor (Brown 2019).

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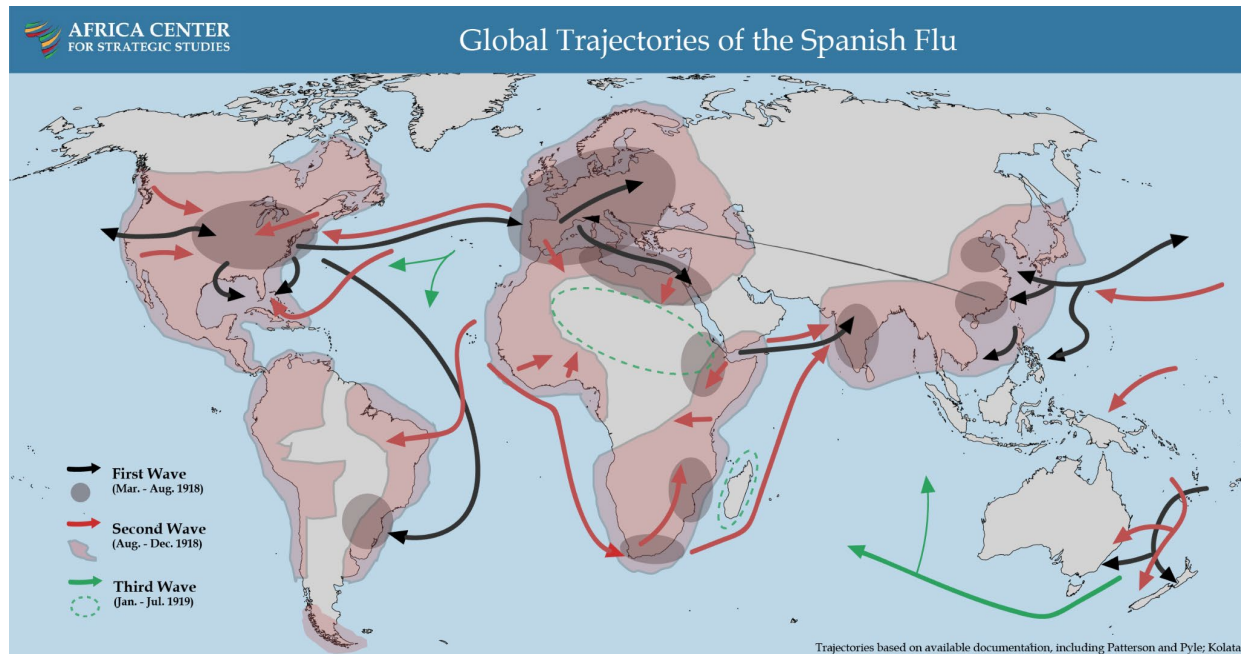


Figure 1: Probable global spread of the 1918-19 Spanish Flu
 Source: *Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2020.*

When America entered the First World War in 1917, newly recruited U.S. Army soldiers were sent to military bases for training, after which they were sent to the western front. One of these bases was Camp Funston, Kansas, a rapidly constructed town of closely placed wooden barracks which trained over 50,000 troops between 1917 and 1918.

On 4 March 1918, Private Albert Getchall, a U.S. Army cook stationed at Camp Funston, Kansas, reported to the medical post complaining of a headache, muscle pain, a cough, and a sore throat. By the end of the day, another 107 soldiers had visited the post complaining of similar symptoms; three weeks later, over 1,100 soldiers were hospitalized

(Smith 2019). Soldiers finishing their training at Camp Funston would then be sent to different military bases, or to France to take part in the conflict (Brown 2019).

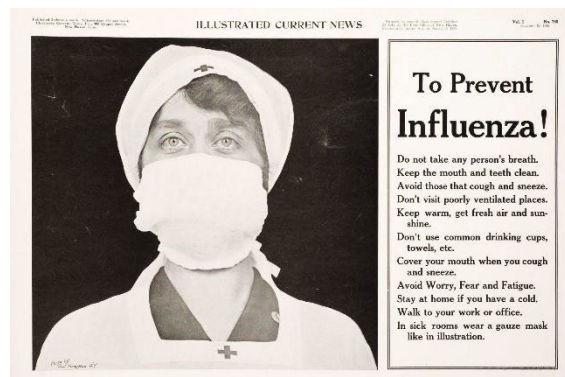
While the world called it “Spanish Flu” or “Spanish Lady,” the Spanish referred to the illness as the “French Flu,” and perhaps they had a point (Andrews 2016). A short distance away from the brutal frontlines of WW1 stood the Étaples Army Camp, a large military base which served as a general hospital for wounded soldiers, a prisoner of war facility, a supply/shipping depot, and a deployment site from which new soldiers would be sent to the frontlines. The crowded, dirty wards bore witness to a sudden, severe outbreak of

“purulent bronchitis.” The outbreak was resistant to treatment and had a high mortality rate. As a major hub for movement of new troops, supplies, and sick/injured soldiers, Étaples stands out as a possible origin of the global illness (Arnold 2020).

To meet the increasing demand for manpower to fuel the war effort, Great Britain utilized its colonial power to recruit more than 140,000 workers from Northern China over the course of the conflict. These workers were typically stationed at the British Army Camp in Montreuil, France, a mere 7 miles away from Étaples. The presence of these workers in France coincides with reports from the New York Times in June 1918 warning of a “curious epidemic resembling influenza” spreading across the Northern regions of China.

Treatment: With the study of bacteriology predating that of virology by several decades, two microbiologists in Berlin improperly identified *Bacillus influenzae* as the bacterium responsible for viral influenza. This misidentification led many scientists and physicians to conclude that their patients were not afflicted by influenza due to the absence of *B. influenzae* in their blood cultures. In the absence of a uniform diagnosis, clinicians struggled to treat their patients with traditional treatment modalities. In fact, some treatments may have caused more harm than good.

Medications such as acetylsalicylic acid (Aspirin) and quinine were widely prescribed (Klein 1918), with the latter now believed to have contributed to higher mortality rates during the pandemic (Starko 2009). As doctors struggled to treat the mounting numbers of sick and dying, desperate people sought out alternative methods of treatment, such as bloodletting, inhalation of chlorine gas (Rogers 2020), alcohol consumption, and garlic (Kemp 2022).



Public Health Initiatives: Local and national public health agencies enacted drastic efforts to stop the spread of the 1918 pandemic. Nobody called it social distancing a century ago, but that was the idea.

Health boards shut down public gatherings, schools, stores, saloons, and theaters. While some cities turned to extreme measures, others chose more conservative measures such as staggering store opening times, mandating hygiene methods, and passing mask mandates. Unfortunately, in some locations, influenza spread so quickly that these measures were passed too late to prevent mass illness. While shutdowns were a necessary component of the public health response, it was not without cost. The closure of various businesses proved detrimental to local economies.

Hygiene Measures: Public health departments passed various personal hygiene measures in hopes that they could prevent the spread of the dreaded pandemic. “Anti-spitting laws” were created to discourage spitting, coughing, and sneezing in public spaces. These laws were often passed to prevent business closures, with coughing or sneezing patrons escorted out of local establishments. Mask mandates were passed to prevent respiratory droplets from spreading. These too were passed as a means to delay shutdowns, but also to reintroduce the public following their conclusion.



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As a means of social enforcement public advertisements took aim at people who did not obey these laws, encouraging them to do their part in stopping the spread (Tomes 2010). A 2007 analysis found that, collectively, these interventions likely caused a 30-50% reduction in transmission rates in four major U.S. cities (Bootsma & Ferguson 2007).

First World War: The 1918 influenza pandemic nearly killed twice as many U.S. soldiers and military personnel (45,000) than those who died on the frontlines of Western Europe (26,000) (Wever & van Bergen 2014). Training schedules were altered, supply lines were hampered, and soldiers were dead before they left American soil. Mass mobilization meant the movement of thousands of young men throughout the United States and Europe, and with them followed the pandemic. To meet the needs of the war and maintain combat effectiveness, the military readily absorbed more than 30% of American physicians, thus creating gaps in care across the country (Byerly 2010).

U.S. President Woodrow Wilson directed his attention primarily to the war, worried that focusing on the pandemic would hurt morale and be detrimental to the war's progression. Wilson made no official statement regarding the health crisis, nor did he order any official response to it (August 2020). The chaos created by the war hampered large scale public health efforts, which prevented the Office International Hygiene Publique (predecessor to today's World Health Organization) from intervening during the pandemic (Tognotti 2013).

Conspiracy: Between the raging fury of the first world war, clinicians' limited capacity to respond to the crisis, a president who did not acknowledge the crisis, and anguish amongst the loss of loved ones, the pandemic became a hotbed of conspiracy. Did the Germans create the disease as a bioweapon? Is the government using the crisis to express overreach with mask

mandates and restrictions to churches? Is the pandemic even that big of a deal?

These were all questions asked by some people during the pandemic. Anti-masking leagues were created in some cities to protest legal restrictions and mask mandates (Navarro 2020). Conspiracies spread of German U-boats released germs across American cities, of tainted aspirin pills from the Germany pharmaceutical company Bayer (Malešević 2020). These conspiracies served only to cause more chaos and confusion during a crisis of monumental proportion.

The Body at ODUMUNC 48

The United States Public Health Service (USPHS or PHS)

Our ODUMUNC 48 crisis simulation replicates the USPHS during the Spanish Flu epidemic. This body is meeting at the nation's capital of Washington, D.C. to discuss how the United States should respond to the 1918 Influenza pandemic. In the years 1918-20 policy-making on these issues was controlled by the states, not the federal government.

Created by Act of Congress in 1912, the USPHS is based on previous ordinances and public appeals. The Surgeon General wishes to bolster the ranks of civilian doctors and nurses in the wake of war-driven personnel shortages (Gernhart 2015). federal medical agencies. The chartering law broadened the powers of the new agency by authorizing investigations into human diseases, sanitation, water supplies, and sewage disposal.

At ODUMUNC 48 the USPHS will be able to investigate, deliberate and advise. It can make recommendations to city, state, and national public health and government agencies, coordinate emergent medical responses, and



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encourage policies. It also can give professional advice to other executive agencies including the armed services on how the war effort should be managed in consideration with the pandemic.

The USPHS cooperates with foreign allies, local jurisdictions, and military medical resources to enact a response to the 1918 Influenza Pandemic. It does not have direct control over military forces, including the state-controlled National Guard, nor will it act as an international body.



Royal S. Copeland, ND
President of the New York City Board of Health

A homeopathic doctor (not a medical doctor), Dr. Copeland is most concerned by the panic raised by the pandemic than disease itself (Tomes 2010). As a homeopath, he specializes in healing through homeopathy, use of natural substances to trigger the body's own natural self-healing abilities. Copeland has made several predictions that the pandemic was soon to end, but none have come true so far (New York American 1918).

Copeland does not want to resort to closing New York businesses, instead asking for them to stagger their hours (Tomes 2010). He has opted instead to increase hospital capacity, hire more nurses (Tomes 2010), and pass public health education measures and hygiene ordinances (Egge 2021). Dr. Copeland has required all incidences of Influenza in the city to be reported (Tomes 2010).

Characters



Surgeon General Rupert Blue, MD
Fourth Surgeon General of the United States

After initially downplaying the severity of the influenza (August 2020), Dr. Blue led the USPHS' response to the pandemic. His plan for management of the pandemic includes a 4-tiered response of



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Henry P. Davison, Chairman
The American Red Cross

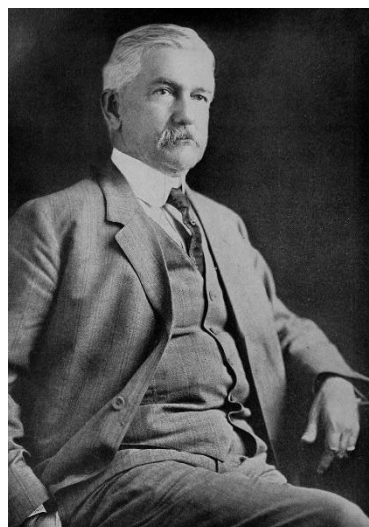
Davison was named chairman of the American Red Cross to address the additional needs of care during the Great War (Davison 1919). He believes it is important to have a variety of different professionals from different backgrounds sharing information to improve healthcare policy (Moorehead 1999). Mr. Davison's Red Cross currently handles emergencies on a local level, providing food and transportation for influenza patients and their families (Jones 2010).



Wade Hampton Frost, MD

Head of the USPHS Influenza Task Force

Dr. Frost is an expert epidemiologist, having assisted in stopping a Yellow Fever epidemic in 1906 (Johns Hopkins University of Public Health 2012). The Surgeon General of the US has appointed him to lead the Influenza Task Force, where he intends to use his experience fighting past diseases to conduct a thorough statistical analysis of the disease (Morabia 2013).



Army Surgeon General William C. Gorgas, MD

Surgeon General of the U.S. Army

A celebrity in the health field for halting the spread of Yellow Fever in Panama, Dr. Gorgas is greatly concerned by the spread of influenza through the ranks of the U.S. Army (Marble 2023). He is concerned by General March's continuation of troop movements to Europe and wishes to slow down troop mobilization to stop the spread of influenza (Marble 2023).



Emma M. Harrington

Chairman of the San Francisco Anti-Masking League and Attorney

A career suffragette and labor rights activist, Mrs. Harrington leads the one of the most prominent anti-masking leagues in the United States (Dolan 2020). She prioritizes the removal of the “burdensome provisions” of masking laws (San Francisco Board of Supervisors 1919, p. 50).

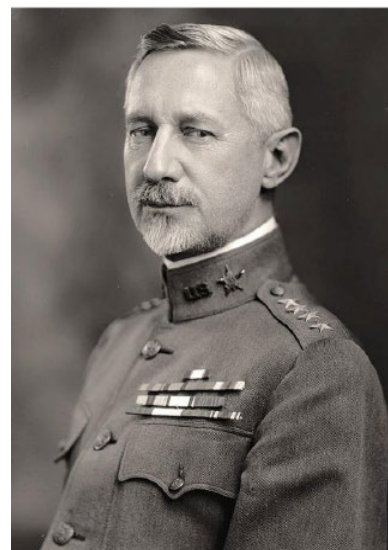


DR. WILMER KRUSEN
Director Public Health

Wilmer Krusen, MD

Philadelphia Director of Public Health and Charities

An obstetrician by training, Dr. Krusen received a political appointment as Philadelphia Director of Public Health despite having no epidemiological experience. Dr. Krusen believes the pandemic is just a bad flu season, and that it will not spread to civilian populations on a large scale (Roos 2020). He refuses to stockpile supplies and medicines to prevent the spread of panic (Clark et al. 2024). He intends to allow large war bond parades to continue and is disinterested in producing any emergency plans for mass hospitalization (Zeitz 2020).



General Peyton C. March

Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army

As commander of the US Army, General March controls most of the federal government’s actual medical resources, the US Army hospital network. As the principal organizer of the American military intervention in France 1917-18, he has been overwhelmed with the problems of organizing the American role in fighting World War, the Great War. He is most famous for the creation of the U.S.

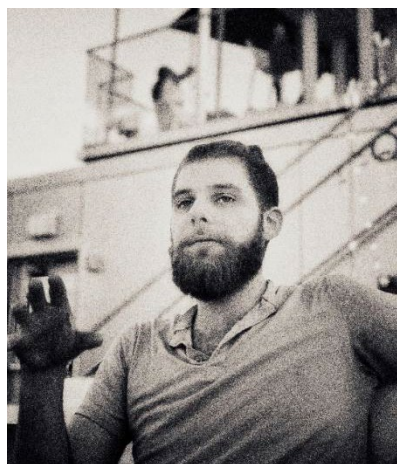


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Army Air Service, Tank Corps and Chemical Warfare Service.

General March views the pandemic as a lesser priority than the war effort. He understands that soldiers will die from influenza no matter his choice, but believes that it is imperative that the United States continues to commit its resources to the war in Europe. He wishes to continue the flow of troops to Europe at max capacity regardless of the pandemic, despite the concerns of Dr. Gorgas and Dr. Vaughan (Marble 2023).



Donald R. Rogan
Patent Medicine Doctor

Mr. Rogan is a patent medicine doctor who finished 2 years of medical school before dropping out due to the “despicable, profiteering moral decay of the medical establishment.” Mr. Rogan calls for the immediate suspension of the Pure Food and Drug Act in order to cure Americans with alternative treatments and patent medicines. He has derided modern physicians

and public health officials for their “Bolshevik influence” and mocked their inability to cure the pandemic. He personally advocates for the use of “Vick’s VapoRub,” medicinal whiskies, Vin Mariani, and Laudanum as treatments. Rumors exist that his ties to patent medicines may impact the policies he supports.



Colonel Edward R. Schreiner, MD
Camp Surgeon at US Army Base Camp Funston

On March 9th, 1918, Dr. Schreiner cared for a U.S. Army cook, Albert Gitchell, who reported flu-like symptoms. By noon of that day, over 100 soldiers were hospitalized. Was he witness to patient zero? Colonel Schreiner is dedicated to raising the alarm to the army and securing the supplies necessary to stop the disease before it expands (Public Broadcasting Service 2000).



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Maj. Julia Stimson, RN
Superintendent of the U.S. Army Nursing Corps

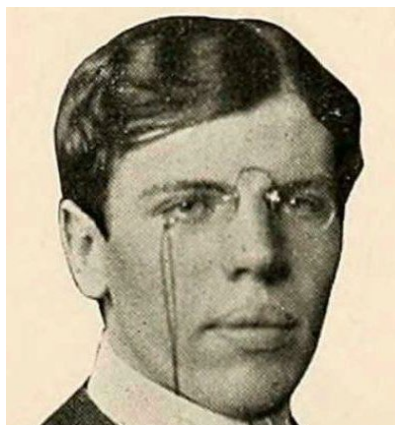
As the first woman to achieve the rank of Major in the U.S. Army, Julia Stimson manages the duties and responsibilities of registered nurses in the armed forces (Rodell 2024). At this time, she prioritizes nursing care for the armed forces as well as management of field hospitals abroad (Larsen n.d.).

samples. His background is using state-of-the-art technology—Hollerith punch card tabulators—to identify social trends. He intends to work alongside Dr. Frost to analyze their collected data on influenza mortality rates. He wishes to figure out whether the pandemic is affecting all Americans equally, and to determine if certain populations are more disposed to higher mortality rates (Boianovsky & Erreygers 2021).



Thomas D. Tuttle, MD
Washington State Health Commissioner

Dr. Tuttle leads the Washington Board of Health and recommends strict preventative protocols to halt the spread of the pandemic (Knapp 2020). He calls for an absolute cessation to all public gatherings (except for those necessary to the war movement), mask mandates, social distancing, and quarantining (Andrew 2020). His strict methods are controversial, with the USPHS challenging his quarantine regulations (Andrew 2020). The physician is active in the newspapers, sounding the alarms of the influenza's spread, despite the protestations and disbelief of fellow professionals and physicians (Knapp 2020).



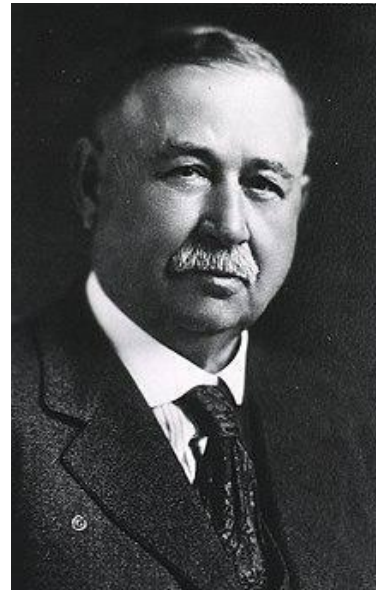
Edgar Sydenstricker
USPHS Influenza Task Force Statistician

Sydenstricker is an expert experienced in manipulation and interpretation of large data



Lutiant Van Wert, RN
Volunteer nurse, Washington D.C.

Ms. Van Wert is a volunteer nurse and young Ojibwe (Native American) woman on the frontlines of the pandemic in Washington D.C (Loofbourow 2020). She has firsthand experience with the pandemic, and so is outspoken about the conditions on the frontlines and concerned about the unavailability of resources. Having witnessed two doctors accused as German spies and as having intentionally infecting soldiers with influenza, she is concerned that the Germans may be poisoning the public with flu germs (Van Wert 1918).



Victor C. Vaughan, MD
Advisor to the U.S. Surgeon General

Former President of the American Medical Association and current colonel in the Army Medical Corps and Dean of the University of Michigan's Medical School, he has been asked by Dr. Gorgas to investigate the outbreak of influenza at a military camp (Vloet 2018). Dr. Vaughan is deeply disturbed by the pandemic's high mortality rate and is dead set on determining its cause (Vloet 2018). Without rapid intervention, he believes that civilization itself is at risk of being wiped out by the influenza. He is also quite concerned by the current state of hospitals and their poor staffing (Vloet 2018).



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