A TALE OF TWO COVID SCANDALS: PHIL HOGAN AND DONALD TRUMP

A top Irish member of the EU Commission, Trade Commissioner Phil Hogan, resigned yesterday after a week of disclosures of the many ways he violated Ireland's COVID guidelines to attend a shindig at a golf course. I won't pretend to understand Irish politics yet. I'll let Henry Farrell do that:

> Hogan's political troubles began when he attended a dinner organized by a golfing group associated with Ireland's Parliament. A number of current and former politicians and officials attended the dinner, which reportedly broke Ireland's strict coronavirus rules banning gatherings of 50 or more people. When news of the dinner leaked, there was an outpouring of angry public commentary from Irish citizens, who, like people elsewhere, have endured months of restrictions on travel and social life. Ireland's agriculture minister, who was at the dinner, resigned swiftly, but Hogan declined to follow suit, initially making a statement that blamed the dinner's organizers.
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> Unfortunately for Hogan, the golf dinner was only the beginning of the story. People entering Ireland are supposed to self-isolate for 14 days to minimize the risk of coronavirus spreading. Furthermore, specific travel restrictions were recently applied to parts of the Irish Midlands, where there were a number of coronavirus clusters. It soon became clear that Hogan had traveled extensively across Ireland during the 14-day period, including within the restricted zone. Hogan

claimed in an **official memorandum to the European Commission president** that he no longer had to self-isolate after the first few days he spent in Ireland because he had received a negative coronavirus test result. He also argued he had a "reasonable excuse" for entering the restricted zone.

However, Ireland's Department of Health **disputed** his claim that he didn't have to self-isolate after the coronavirus test. Even worse, new information emerged this morning about an apparent witness who **has claimed** Hogan ate at a restaurant the evening he arrived in Ireland, instead of self-isolating as he said he did. Another person said Hogan was seen in public areas during the same period. Hogan's spokesperson declined to comment on the allegations, but it became increasingly clear over the day that his position was unsustainable.

[snip]

Because he helped defend Ireland's interests in an important policy area (setting trade policy), the Irish government initially didn't want him to leave. It has no guarantee whatsoever that his replacement will get a similarly influential position. Because Hogan was an E.U. official, the Irish government had a plausible-sounding excuse for inaction: It had no authority to sack him — his boss was the president of the European Commission.

Eventually, however, the government decided that Hogan was becoming a serious political liability, as new stories kept on emerging that seemed to contradict his previous explanations.

It has been disorienting watching the scandal

unroll. It took just one week for privileged hypocrisy and serial lies to bring down a powerful man. That's how democracy and political accountability are supposed to work, but I've forgotten how it can work.

Over the course of that same week, Trump took the next step in his six month COVID scandal, overseeing a change in CDC guidelines while Anthony Fauci was under anesthesia, in surgery, to make testing virtually useless — ending its recommendation that those exposed to COVID get tested. Multiple reports say the move came at the behest of the White House, which makes sense, given that Trump has been falsely claiming that the reason the US has the worst record among rich nations is because we test more.

But, as noted, that's just the latest event in a marathon scandal, going back to 2018 when Trump dismantled the pandemic unit inside the NSC, blew off early warnings about the virus, refused to prepare as it grew, and — even after he started trying to secure supplies — still refusing to use the Defense Production Act and instead encouraging the kind of looting that his son-in-law has mastered. Starting in March, with Kimberly Guilfoyle's birthday party, Trump held a series of public events where people were exposed to, if not contracted COVID, leading up to the event where he announced his opposition to testing, an event that may have led to Herman Cain's death. At every single stage, Trump has defied public health guidance (the sin that led to Hogan's resignation), most recently in last night's RNC event.

Trump's policies encourage the spread of COVID. Those policies have led to the deaths of 180,000 Americans, and the devastation of the US economy. His sins are not just sins of hypocrisy and arrogance (though by cowering behind a testing regime that protects him but not others, it is that, too). They are sins that have directly harmed America and Americans.

And yet there's virtually no political pressure

on Trump to change his ways, much less resign in disgrace.

Shame ceased to function in the United States (perhaps because many Republicans are willing to cheat to win the next election), at least with respect to the President, and it is getting people killed.

Back in April, the Irish Times published a column that deserves renewed attention (the column came out days after my spouse and I decided to make this move, so had nothing to do with our ultimate decision to do so, but certainly reinforced in my mind the tangential advantages of doing so; here's a version that's not pay-walled).

> Over more than two centuries, the United States has stirred a very wide range of feelings in the rest of the world: love and hatred, fear and hope, envy and contempt, awe and anger. But there is one emotion that has never been directed towards the US until now: pity.
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> However bad things are for most other rich democracies, it is hard not to feel sorry for Americans. Most of them did not vote for Donald Trump in 2016. Yet they are locked down with a malignant narcissist who, instead of protecting his people from Covid-19, has amplified its lethality. The country Trump promised to make great again has never in its history seemed so pitiful.
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> Will American prestige ever recover from this shameful episode? The US went into the coronavirus crisis with immense advantages: precious weeks of warning about what was coming, the world's best concentration of medical and scientific expertise, effectively limitless financial resources, a military complex with stunning logistical capacity and most of the world's leading technology corporations. Yet it managed to make

> itself the global epicentre of the
> pandemic.

Trump's response to COVID has solidified
Americans fall from power, with repercussions on
every aspect of life (and many of those
repercussions are just starting).

The Irish, who so long looked to America as a
land of promise when Ireland itself struggled,
now declare their pity. Some of us Irish-
Americans are even "returning," generations
later, and discovers it improves our quality of
life.

And yet Trump, who has made American the object
of pity, has evaded most accountability for the
catastrophe.

In sane countries, powerful men can be forced
from office for mere hypocrisy about public
health; even Boris Johnson can be embarrassed.
But in the United States, Trump has managed to
repeatedly contribute to the damage wreaked by
the virus, and yet he remains a viable political
force.

Update: In the latest video from Republican
Voters Against Trump, his former Assistant
Secretary for Threat Prevention talks about how
Trump's incitement of racist violence and
failures on COVID have made us less safe.