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OPINION | COMMENTARY

# Why Operation Warp Speed Worked

The successful vaccine program followed the model of U.S. mobilization in World War II.

By Arthur Herman

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Gen. Gustave F. Perna during an Operation Warp Speed press briefing in Washington, Nov. 19, 2020.

PHOTO: CHRIS KLEPONIS/ZUMA PRESS



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Every day new questions and criticisms arise about Operation Warp Speed, the public-private vaccine development initiative launched by presidential order in May 2020. Most of that criticism focuses on the distribution bottlenecks that have developed in different states, as Americans are impatient with the slow pace of the rollout. Jen Psaki, President Biden's press secretary, has claimed to see an "urgent need to address failures of the Trump team approach to vaccine distribution." Some in the new administration even want to rename the program.

Nearly all these claims rest on a misunderstanding both of Operation Warp Speed's mission and its nature as a government program. While President Trump's Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar and others dubbed the original project MP2, or

Manhattan Project 2, after the crash effort to build an atomic bomb, Operation Warp Speed's leadership borrowed a more practical model: the industrial mobilization during World War II that produced the so-called Arsenal of Democracy.

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That model can still push the vaccine rollout over the finish line. Governors and other state officials in particular need to realize the federal government is operating in the wake of a health-care version of Pearl Harbor, and adjust their operations accordingly.

From the beginning the principal mission of Operation Warp Speed was the development, manufacturing, and distribution—i.e., shipping—of coronavirus vaccines. To date, the program has managed to produce and deliver about 50 million vaccine doses—all made in the U.S.—with hundreds of millions more on the way. It also had 97,000 certified receivers distributing the vaccine across the U.S.

It is the most remarkable achievement in modern medicine, made possible by following the model of the World War II mobilization effort. That model rests on three principles.

First, set a clear target and a firm deadline. Operation Warp Speed's goal was 20 million vaccine doses by December 2020. Aiming at that target enabled the program's leaders, Gen. Gustave Perna and Dr. Moncef Slaoui (who resigned last month at the Biden administration's request but will stay on as a consultant), to focus everyone in Operation Warp Speed on achieving a single result.

Second, mobilize the best pharmaceutical and drug manufacturing companies to hit the target, so that private industry invests its energy and productivity in the plan. During World War II, the big automotive and electrical companies became the driving engine of the mobilization effort, though many had never before produced arms or weapons.

In Operation Warp Speed's case, the vaccine effort went from a single manufacturing facility in the U.S. to a network of facilities where the country's drug companies could pool efforts to develop and manufacture vaccines. What traditional health-care experts thought of as a laboratory process became an industrial process—with prodigious results. Companies like FedEx and UPS were pressed into service to deliver the finished product.

Third, maintain government oversight from start to finish. The Commerce, Defense, and Health and Human Services departments invoked the Defense Production Act 18 times to prioritize materials and supplies for Operation Warp Speed, and get government contracts for vaccine development and manufacturing to the head of the line. The use of federal authority to guide but not micromanage the private economy's efforts was key to producing victory in World War II and to creating the Covid vaccine in record time.

In the U.S. federal system, however, state governments can't be steamrolled by Washington. The Arsenal of Democracy was able to ship its goods to two all-powerful federal agencies, the War and Navy departments, which knew how to get those weapons to the soldiers, sailors and airmen who would use them. There's no corresponding federal agency in this case.

About 50 million vaccination doses have been made and shipped, but only half have been administered, while fewer than six million people have received second doses. While some states have dealt with the crisis well, many have found the process of getting shots into arms overwhelming.

It isn't too late to turn things around, if governors start using the World War II model. One step would be appointing their National Guard adjutants general as vaccine czars with clear authority to override state agency procedures and coordinate with federal leadership.

A second step would be to set a statewide target for inoculation aimed at twice the number of inoculations in half the time recommended by state health-care bureaucrats and experts. An urgent deadline can focus minds and trigger innovative thinking in ways that can transform the effort.

Another step would be to turn major businesses with large distribution networks into links in a logistical chain that can put as much vaccine as Operation Warp Speed can supply into as many arms as need it. With some 97,000 approved distribution centers

already on the books there are plenty of opportunities for speeding up dispersal as part of an all-state government effort.

Some states are doing so. West Virginia has distributed nearly 90% of its first vaccine shot supply. But much more can be done in every state by combining planning with authority and imagination—and relying on guidance from the Arsenal of Democracy model.

There's still plenty to be done on manufacturing. The Novavax and Johnson & Johnson vaccines look promising and could be available this spring. One could argue that Moderna and Pfizer should focus now on making booster shots for the South African strain. The original architects of the World War II mobilization model would see all these issues as opportunities not obstacles. Thanks to Operation Warp Speed, America has established clear leadership in vaccine manufacturing. It is now poised to do the same for getting that vaccine to every American, starting with those who need it most.

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