

World War I lasted four years, with millions of deaths. At the start, however, many people thought the war would be quick and easy. “Home by Christmas,” was what they said about their troops. A frightening number of Americans now have similar illusions about the coronavirus pandemic.

According to a CNN [poll](#) released Tuesday, a rapidly growing share of the public thinks the worst of the pandemic is behind us. This disconnect from reality is dangerous. It will not only lead to risky personal choices and dangerous policy decisions. It will also leave much of the public badly ill-prepared for what’s down the road.

According to CNN, there has been a rapid shift in public opinion in the past month. CNN reports that “a growing share of the public feels the worst of the outbreak is behind us (44%, up from 17% in April).” (An online [poll](#) by Navigator says that about the same number think the worst is behind us, but suggests that this is a falling share rather than a growing one.) According to CNN, Republicans have changed their positions the most drastically: “[l]ast month, 70% of Republicans said the worst was yet to come, now, 71% say the worst is behind us.”

That *could* turn out to be true in terms of the greatest number of deaths on any single day. But it’s probably not true in terms of the total number of deaths. There’s every reason to expect a large number of deaths between now and the end of the year, quite likely as many or more as we have seen to date. The IMHE model, which the Trump Administration has tended to favor, now predicts 134,000 deaths by early August.

According to the poll, “[r]oughly a third of Americans say they’re afraid about the potential for deaths from coronavirus to reach 100,000 or higher in the US (35%).” The other two-thirds are either “concerned but not afraid” or “not concerned.” A third of Republicans fall into the “not concerned” category. This lack of engagement seems at odds with reality. As of today, the leading coronavirus models are [predicting](#) 99,000 to 110,000 deaths by the end of this month. We’ll see if that shakes the confidence of the blasé majority.

According to CNN, the public is divided along about the same way over a “second wave” of the epidemic later in the year. Again the split is along partisan lines: “Most Democrats say they are afraid about the possibility of a second wave (58%) or the rising death toll (56%), while among Republicans just 14% and 15%, respectively, feel the same way.” A third of Trump supporters say they aren’t at all concerned about a second wave. But a serious second wave seems to be close to certain. Without a vaccine, there are still far too many Americans who lack immunity to prevent another outbreak.

People who think the worst is behind us are kidding themselves. Others seem to view only as possibilities the near-certain outcomes like more than 100,000 deaths. Much of the public's reaction seems like saying you're concerned but not afraid about a train hurtling down the tracks at you. The public's confusion leaves the country ill-prepared for the tough road ahead.

No, the World War I troops weren't home by Christmas. And this pandemic most likely will not be over by Christmas either.