Title
Unmasking History: Who Was Behind the Anti-Mask League Protests During the 1918 Influenza Epidemic in San Francisco?

Journal
Perspectives in Medical Humanities, 5(19)

Author
Dolan, Brian

Publication Date
2020-05-19

DOI
10.34947/M7QP4M

Perspectives in Medical Humanities

Unmasking History: Who Was Behind the Anti-Mask League Protests During the 1918 Influenza Epidemic in San Francisco?

Brian Dolan[1]
[1] University of California, San Francisco
brian.dolan@ucsf.edu

Citation: Dolan, Brian. (2020) Unmasking History: Who Was Behind the Anti-Mask League Protests During the 1918 Influenza Epidemic in San Francisco? *Perspectives in Medical Humanities* (UC Medical Humanities Consortium, May 19, 2020)
https://doi.org/10.34947/M7QP4M

Received: May 5, 2020
Accepted: May 5, 2020
Published: May 19, 2020
Revised: August 12, 2020 (see Errata at end of article)

Peer Review:
This article has been peer reviewed by a collaborative review process through a platform provided by the UC Medical Humanities Consortium consisting of a multi-disciplinary faculty editorial board. More information about collaborative review can be found at: http://ucmedicalhumanitiespress.com/

Abstract

On April 17, 2020, San Francisco Mayor London Breed did something that had not been done for 101 years. She issued an order that face masks be worn in public as a measure to help prevent the spread of infectious disease in the midst of a pandemic. This act promptly raised questions about how things were handled a century ago. The media soon picked up on the antics of an "Anti-Mask League" that was formed in San Francisco to protest this inconvenience, noting some historical parallels with current public complaints about government overreach. This essay dives deeper into the historical context of the anti-mask league to uncover more information about the identity and possible motivations of those who organized these protests. In particular it shines light on the fascinating presence of the leading woman in the campaign—lawyer, suffragette, and civil rights activist, Mrs. E.C. Harrington.

Introduction

On March 16, 2020, the San Francisco Bay Area was the first place in the United States to implement "social distancing" orders to residents, a directive reinforced three days later when California Governor Gavin Newsom issued a statewide executive order for shelter in place.[1] These actions prompted swift historical investigation of past pandemics querying the effectiveness of social distancing in efforts to slow the transmission of communicable diseases. Now, the world is currently contemplating the consequences of "flattening the curve" in the spread of COVID-19, and once again wondering what history says about easing the restrictions that were imposed to help control the disease.

While saluting the apparent success of the orders put in place in San Francisco—which in addition to shelter in place orders also early on required wearing face masks in public—Mayor London Breed cautioned against celebrating too soon. During an interview with MSNBC host Chris Hayes,

1. Gavin Newsom, Executive Order N-33-20.

NEWS.
d Advertisements

San Francisco Chro

SAN FRANCISCO, CAL., FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 22.

San Francisco Joyously Discards Masks in Twinkling Faces Beam as Gauze Covers Come Off at Time Fixed

Gee! Don't They Look Great Now?—Here are a few of the happy faces that have been hidden for a month behind gauze "flu" masks. They peeped out yesterday and everybody had a treat. Anyone can see the girls in the picture are glad.

Influenza Disappearance Signaled by Whistle Blast at Noon

Freedom to Breathe Ozone-Filled Air Brings Joy to Populace

Figure 1: From San Francisco Chronicle, November 22, 1918

she said, "Well, I do think it's important that we also remind people of history. The Spanish flu in San Francisco in 1918 when the city had a big party and threw away their masks and celebrated, and then a few days later, two thousand people died."[2]

2. MSNBC, All In With Chris Hayes, 4/14/2020.

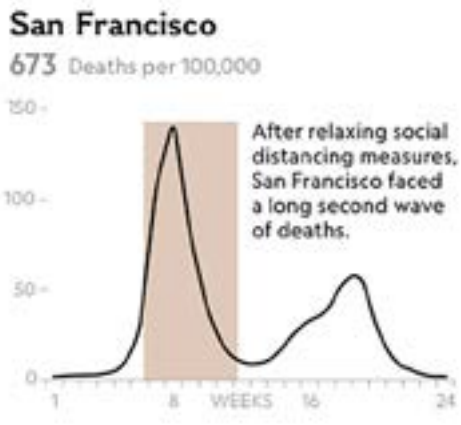


Figure 2: Two waves of influenza in San Francisco.
Source: *National Geographic*

Mayor Breed, fudging the numbers, was referring to celebrations in November 1918 when San Francisco residents were allowed to remove their face masks after the health department announced that the epidemic which ravaged the city for the previous month was "virtually over," thanks to the face masks. However, within weeks the number of influenza cases spiked again, prompting a decision to reinstate the mask ordinance. It was at this moment that a self-styled "Anti-Mask League" was created. The same people who celebrated their bare-faced "liberation" when allowed to remove face masks in November 1918, now organized protests against the return of this public health measure.

Many of the original newspaper reports from 1918 and 1919 do cast an eerie historical shadow on our present reporting of social distancing, mask wearing, and protests. The media has become interested in these parallels with the past—from the preventive measures quickly taken by San Francisco to the protests against government overreach. As a medical historian and professor in the school of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), I was interviewed by reporters from *The Guardian* newspaper and BBC World Service about what history teaches us about the current challenges we face. I did some research and made some perfunctory remarks about the importance of clear and consistent messages, about historical evidence for mask effectiveness, and caution in declaring victory too soon. But the more I looked into it, the more nuanced the story became.

In particular, I was intrigued by the "Anti-Mask League." What struck me was that the individuals who organized the protests and went as far as to establish an organization, complete with president, secretary, treasurer, and vice-presidents, were all women. It was reminiscent of the fourteen portraits printed on the front page of the *Chronicle* in November 1918 showing a group of "beaming" faces freed from gauze masks: the revelers were all women. I

wanted to know more about who organized these protests. What motivated them to do so? What was their complaint about masks? Were face coverings really the issue, or was it a symbolic cover, "masking" other concerns about government authority?

This essay dives deeper into the history of the Anti-Mask League, and suggests that the protests may have been more politically motivated than medically. While evidence does suggest that the group was concerned about conflicting reports regarding the hygiene and utility of masks, I suggest that union interests and political proclivities were another motivating factor. This in itself provides us with some potential lessons about public health decisions, and what stimulates public reaction to government interventions.

The Rising Numbers

First, a little background to the problem. In October 1918, Dr. William Hassler, San Francisco City Health Officer, wrote an article for the *California State Journal of Medicine* which was reprinted in the *Municipal Record* on October 10, 1918, regarding "the influenza situation." It warned of alarming reports from the Atlantic coast of the spread and rapid onset of the flu, its mortality rate, and of the importance of all physicians to report new cases and their patients' contacts. Noting that it was a respiratory disease, Hassler wrote that patients and carers "should be warned regarding sneezing and coughing, as droplet infection is a direct means of spreading the infection."[3]

No sooner had the ink dried on Hassler's article when it became apparent that influenza had arrived on the West coast with force. Just one week later, the Board of Health reported 1,654 cases in San Francisco. By the end of the month there were over 7,000 cases in the city. According to the State Board of Health, there were already over 60,000 cases state-wide.[4]

While the Board of Health initially opted to issue public advice on social distancing and self-quarantine if sick, on October 18 all schools, churches, bars, and businesses were closed to limit public mingling. A further step was taken on October 22 when Bill Number 5068, "The Mask Ordinance," was signed by San Francisco Mayor James Rolph. (Figure 3) It was the first such intervention to mandate civic responsibility for preventive health in the state. The ordinance stated that any person appearing in public, "shall wear a mask or covering, except when partaking of meals, over the nose and mouth, consisting of four-ply material known as butter cloth or fine-mesh gauze." Failure to comply would result in a fine between $5 and $100 or imprisonment not to exceed 10 days.

3. Municipal Record, October 10, 1918, p. 329.

4. *Municipal Record*, November 7, 1918, p. 356.

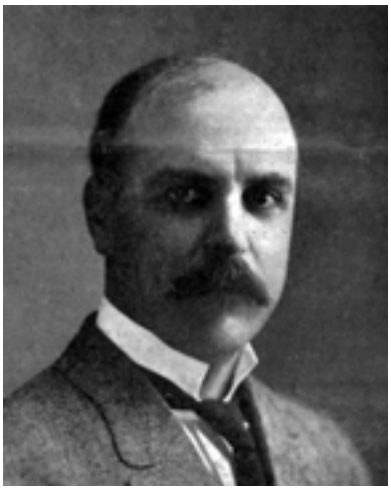


Figure 3: San Francisco Mayor James "Sunny Jim" Rolph, Jr., mayor from 1912-1931.

The importance of complying with what Fred Morse,[5] Commissioner of the Oakland Department of Public Health, called the "anti-expectorating ordinance," was underscored by advertisements immediately published by the Red Cross. (Figure 4) "A gauze mask is 99% proof against influenza," the ad declared, adding that not wearing a mask made one "a dangerous slacker." Soon drug stores throughout the city were sold out of gauze. Another appeal by the Red Cross asked for donations of cloth and volunteers to sew masks in a commandeered gymnasium at UC Berkeley. Local jeans manufacturer Levi Strauss began turning pockets into face protectors.

Not everyone complied. Newspapers reported that at first the police issued tickets at $5 but gradually increased the fine as days went by. On one particularly disobedient Saturday, 700 people were arrested for not wearing masks. As the *San Francisco Chronicle* observed, "The City Jail was congested, and Police Justices had to work at night and on Sunday to clear the cases."[6] On

5. *Oakland Tribune*, 23 October 1918.

6. *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 22, 1918.

Figure 4: An ad from the Red Cross campaign to urge the use of masks in *San Francisco Examiner*, October 25, 1918

November 6, a petition was filed with Berkeley's city council to repeal their mask wearing ordinance. The short text of the petition stated: "As voters, we, the undersigned, do hereby protest against the wearing of masks because they are unsanitary."[7]

Nevertheless, the measures seemed to be working. By the end of October, Dr. Hassler was reporting that the influenza was "on the wane" in the city. Impressed by such progress, the Board of Health was "flooded with telegrams" from officials in cities across America wanting information on what measures were taken to control the disease. Hassler wired back the simple answer: "gauze masks." Consequently, "the majority of large cities and towns of the country are following San Francisco's lead by passing compulsory mask-wearing ordinances."[8]

On November 13—just over three weeks after businesses closed and masks were donned—only six new cases were reported in San Francisco, a number interpreted by the Board of Supervisors to mean that "the epidemic of disease was practically over." This figure also prompted the Board of Health to relax restrictions on social gatherings, allowing theaters and "other places of amusement" to reopen a few days later, on Saturday. Churches would hold service on Sunday and most schools would reopen on Monday. The one caveat was that masks were still required to be worn in public until further notice.

That notice came one week later. On November 21, after four weeks of "muzzled misery," the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported that at the blast of a whistle at noon, people ripped off their masks, one with a "jerk that nearly ruptured his ear," throwing them to the ground and stomping on the masks with both feet. Thousands of thankful citizens enjoyed "congratulatory libations" in what the newspaper characterized as an exaggerated public display of gasping for breath, faces radiating in newfound liberty. The front page of the paper printed a large montage, a portrait of fourteen women revealing "happy faces that have been hidden for a month behind gauze 'flu' masks."[9] The story ended with the note that while the epidemic seemed "virtually over," it was also deemed "advisable" to maintain the ordinance "until every vestige of the disease had disappeared." It suggested there would be more of the story to come.

7. *Oakland Tribune*, November 6, 1918, p. 9.

8. *Municipal Record*, November 7, 1918, p. 356.

9. *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 22, 1918.

Holiday Cheer

During the week that ended November 23, 1918, San Francisco reported 164 new influenza cases. Curiously, this statistic qualified as an indication to the Board of Supervisors that the epidemic had been "completely stamped out." The entire number of influenza cases reported throughout the state up to that

date was 150,615; in San Francisco, the total number was 23,786.[10] As a result, it was reported that "All State Board restrictions issued for the control of the influenza epidemic are herewith declared removed at the discretion of local health officers, except the requirement for the wearing of masks by all persons in close association with influenza patients."

10. *Municipal Record*, November 28, p. 380.

That proved to be a premature decision. At the end of the first week of December, 722 new influenza cases were reported in San Francisco. By the end of the following week, an additional 1,517 cases were reported. It was unclear how many deaths were attributed to influenza, but according to data provided by Dr. Hassler that week, overall deaths were substantially higher when compared with numbers from the same months of the previous year:

1917	**1918**
October, 537 deaths	October, 2011 deaths
November, 567 deaths	November, 1346 deaths

On December 4, select members of the Board of Health held an emergency conference in the mayor's office attended by "a committee of downtown business men," headed by restaurateur John Tait and advertising guru F.S. Nelson. These men were close to Mayor Rolph, sharing membership in the city's elite social clubs and through Rolph's presidency of the Merchant's Exchange. Both Tait and Nelson were well-connected with the city's elite and were heavily involved in promoting San Francisco as a desirable destination for tourists and businesses while being rebuilt in the years following the 1906 earthquake. Tait was once steward of the University Club, established "haute cuisine" restaurants and bars at the Olympic Club and Pacific Union Club, was proprietor of the Cliff House, and was a pioneer in catering to "café society."[11]

11. Obituary, *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 10, 1952.

Nelson was a marketing executive at O'Connor, Moffatt & Co, a famous department store that built the imposing Union Square building (later acquired by Macy's). He was also Secretary of the Advertising Association of San Francisco and had been centrally involved in promoting the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco in 1915.[12]

12. *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 1, 1915, p. 11.

Both men were representatives of business interests as well as attentive to the optics of the city looking attractive to the world, whose eyes were now fixed on the ordinance to cloak everyone in gauze in avoidance of disease. With Christmas around the corner, they were concerned about the impact of masks on commerce. One obvious concern was that a public forced to wear masks was a public that preferred to stay home. As Dr. E.J. Banzhaf, assistant

director of the department of preventive medicines of the New York Health Department and an outspoken critic of the mask policy later said: "The mask tends to keep people at home when they need to be out in the sunlight."[13]

At the business meeting, Dr. Hassler advised that the mask ordinance be immediately resumed. Tait and Nelson, proffering the views of the city's merchants, claimed that "the number of reported cases of influenza had not greatly increased, and that as other communities had refused to enact mask ordinances San Francisco should not mask for the holiday season unless the situation plainly demanded it." Hassler replied that over the last ten days the number of new cases averaged about 155 a day and that he was "unwilling to take the responsibility of postponing the enactment."

Others chimed in. Both the vicar-general of the Roman Catholic archdiocese and a representative from the Associated Charities representing nurses favored the masks. However, a representative from the Christian Sciences said that the people of San Francisco were ready to obey the laws, but he questioned the right of the Supervisors "to enact a theory into law," saying that he was not convinced that the masks had proven effective.[14] (He would later preach that humanity's defense against disease is "to close the door of thought against it, [and] evil vanishes and ceases to be," rather like a miracle.)

Another week passed and another 1,828 cases emerged. The Board of Supervisors reported that the U.S. Public Health Service had been deluged with alleged cures for influenza and pneumonia, ranging from sprinkling sulfur powder in shoes to sipping raw onion juice three times a day. The message conveyed by the health service was simple: "Do not take patent medicines or nostrums of any kind. As yet there is no specific cure for influenza." The Board of Supervisors added its own health advice: seek sunshine. "Public health officials have found out that fresh air and sunshine are wonderful preventive and healing agencies in both influenza and pneumonia," they wrote. "If only people who are afflicted with these diseases could be bathed in God's air and sunlight under proper medical care and treatment, the death rate would be materially lowered." [15]

On December 16, a meeting of the Board of Supervisors was primarily dedicated to discussions about reinstituting the mask ordinance, with lively public engagement. Dr. Hassler declared that if the supervisors declined to vote on re-enactment, "drastic action" would be taken for public health. Objections to this tone were taken by Supervisor E.E. Schmitz and a Mrs. C.E. Grosjean, who said she represented "indignant citizens" who stood opposed to another mask ordinance as well as Dr. Hassler's "domination."[16] The city supervisors

13. Quoted in *Los Angeles Times*, February 1, 1919, p. 11.

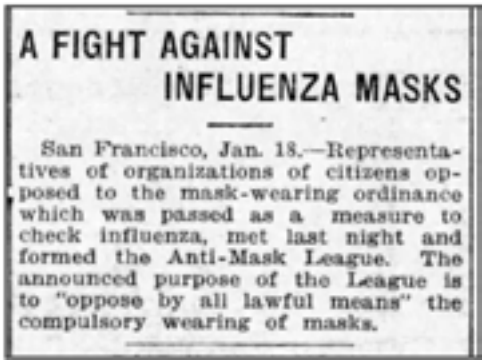
14. *Municipal Record*, December 12, 1918, p. 399.

15. *Municipal Record*, December 18, 1918, p. 412-413.

16. *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 17, 1918, p. 1.

AN ANTI-MASK LEAGUE IS ORGANIZED IN S. F.

United Press]
SAN FRANCISCO, Jan. 21.—"Sanitary Spartacans" have broken out in San Francisco in protest of the influenza mask wearing ordinance. A league was organized last night which is to be known as the "Anti-Mask League." Its members declare the mask insanitary and useless. At a meeting in the Pacific building $350 was raised to aid in fighting the board of health's enforcement of the mask-wearing ordinance.



A FIGHT AGAINST INFLUENZA MASKS

San Francisco, Jan. 18.—Representatives of organizations of citizens opposed to the mask-wearing ordinance which was passed as a measure to check influenza, met last night and formed the Anti-Mask League. The announced purpose of the League is to "oppose by all lawful means" the compulsory wearing of masks.

Figures 5 and 6: Reporting on "Sanitary Spartacans" from *Stockton Daily Evening Record* (January 21, 1919) to the Canadian *Victorian Daily Times* (January 18, 1919)

decided to refer the matter back to the Board of Health, and no action was taken for the rest of the year. The city's commercial interests were protected for the holiday season. But in January, 1919, Mrs. Grosjean and other indignant citizens were active again, when they formed the "anti-mask league." [17]

17. *Sacramento Bee*, January 18, 1919, p. 4.

The Anti-Mask League

The San Francisco Board of Health had made numerous declarations at meetings and in the press about the dangers of coughing or sneezing near others because it spread germs. Their claim was that masks mitigated against public transmission of viral elements. It was a position that was affirmed by the American Public Health Association when discussed at their annual meeting in Chicago between December 9 and 12, 1918. A summary of the meeting was published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (*JAMA*) on December 21, 1918. It stated that laboratory tests had not yet confirmed what the exact pathogen was that caused the influenza pandemic (whether virus or another micro-organism) but they accepted as a basic premise that the sole means of person-to-person transmission was discharges through the nose and/or throat of infected individuals.

The Association recommended that masks be worn by all doctors, dentists, barbers, in short anyone with close contact to another person. But interestingly they also said "the evidence … as to beneficial results consequent on the enforced

wearing of masks by the entire population at all times was contradictory." As a result, they did not recommend a sweeping policy of mask wearing. They simply said that if a person wanted to wear a mask in their own interests, they should be instructed in how to wear one properly.

In a follow-up comment to that report which was also published in *JAMA*, it was noted that the issue of wearing masks was a matter of some debate—confusing "fact" with "opinion." They acknowledged evidence that masks had prevented the spread of the epidemic in institutions and that "the face mask has value in the prophylaxis of influenza." But they also questioned whether it was possible to mask entire communities. They specifically referred to San Francisco as being a large metropolitan area that mandated mask wearing among the general public. The problem observed here was not whether masks offered protection *per se*, but whether there could ever be enough public compliance and understanding of how to wear masks correctly to be beneficial. The anti-mask league was an example of the weakest link that would break the authoritarian chain of command for a successful public health measure.

Mayor Rolph was not eager to reimpose a law on wearing face masks. It was clear that parts of the public were hotly passionate about the economic impact of the garment. On December 17 federal authorities were asked to investigate a bomb that was left on the steps of Hassler's office. When asked to comment, Hassler said, "It is probably due to the fight I am making to compel the wearing of influenza masks." He added that "I have received a great number of anonymous letters threatening me [by] people who claim to have lost money during the period from October 21 to November 23."[18]

While the Supervisors' recommendation to compel mask wearing was not implemented officially by the mayor, the number of new cases presented in early January were grim. On January 12, 1919, Mayor Rolph issued a public appeal asking for the public's voluntary cooperation in resuming mask wearing. "After San Francisco had successfully stamped it out, the infection was brought to us once more by persons coming into this from other cities," Rolph said. He said that the Board of Health implored him to "respectfully urge and request all persons, men, women, and children in San Francisco, to wear the protecting mask, as they did at the height of the former epidemic."[19]

Throughout the week a number of letters from the public were sent to the Chronicle presenting different opinions on the matter. Some questioned the need for a law for mask use when the utility of the measure was unproven. "What doctors don't know about this epidemic of influenza would fill a decent-sized library. And yet they have the 'gall' to force us to wear masks as a

18. *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 18, 1918, p. 6.

19. *San Francisco Examiner*, January 12, 1919, p. 10.

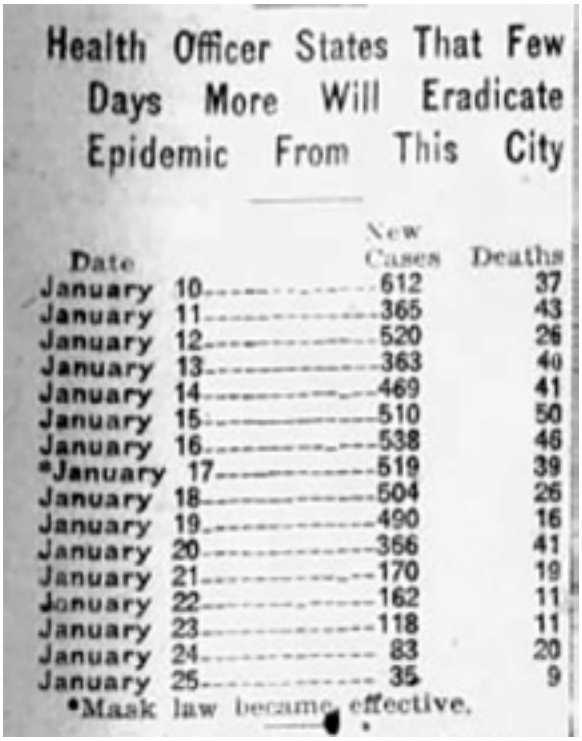
20. *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 12, 1919.

preventive, when no two authorities in the United States are agreed as to the cause, let alone the prevention or cure of the disease."[20] On January 13, a writer signing as "A Lover of Fresh Air" wrote: "The medical fraternity has impressed upon us for twenty years past that bad air is harmful to consumptives and that fresh air is the best preventive and cure. Now we are told to wear masks and breathe foul air." The real breeding places for germs were not the winds but the streets, according to Mrs. A.E.T. "Instead of forcing the public to wear the masks, the Board of Health directors ought to go around and take note of some of the dirty street corners around Polk."[21]

But a list of new cases of influenza produced by the Board of Health for showing deaths between January 10 and January 17 showed almost 4000 new cases and 327 influenza deaths.[22] (Figure 7) Enough was enough.

21. *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 17, 1919, p. 16.

22. *San Francisco Examiner*, January 20, 1919, p. 1.



Health Officer States That Few Days More Will Eradicate Epidemic From This City

Date	New Cases	Deaths
January 10	612	37
January 11	365	43
January 12	520	26
January 13	363	40
January 14	469	41
January 15	510	50
January 16	538	46
*January 17	519	39
January 18	504	26
January 19	490	16
January 20	356	41
January 21	170	19
January 22	162	11
January 23	118	11
January 24	83	20
January 25	35	9

*Mask law became effective.

Figure 7: Reporting on new influenza cases and related deaths. From *San Francisco Examiner* report, February 1, 1919, p. 5.

On January 17 Mayor Rolph signed a municipal ordinance making compulsory the wearing of masks once again. The very next day, according to reporting from the *Modesto Herald*, "representatives of citizens' organizations opposed to the mask wearing ordinance formed the Anti-Mask League." The first thing this group did was to announce a public meeting to be held on Saturday, January 25, at Dreamland Rink. (Figure 8) The intention was to

Figure 8: A call to protest by the anti-mask league. In *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 25, 1919, p. 4.

distribute petitions calling for the dismissal of Dr. William Hassler, city health officer, and threatening Mayor Rolph with recall if he did not comply with the citizens' demands. Two keynote speakers were invited to attend: Eugene E. Schmitz and Charles A. Nelson, the only two Supervisors to vote against the mask measure.

This organization set itself up to be taken seriously. At a planning meeting on January 20, they elected:

President, Mrs. E.C. Harrington;

Secretary, Mrs. William Nealon;

Treasurer, Miss Elizabeth Cook;

Vice-Presidents: Miss C. Jones, Madame C.E. Grosjean, Mrs. Mary E. Bush, Miss M.M. Scott, Mrs. Blanche Bernhardt, and Mrs. N. E. Masson.

In addition to this executive group, eight men were named members, including C.F. Welsh, the president of the Cook's and Waiter's Union who stood in notable contrast to the mayor's consultation of the restaurant owners' representative, John Tait.[23] Who were these women who formed the leadership of an organization created to protest the "insanitary and useless mask"?[24]

23. *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 21, 1919.

24. *Stockton Daily Evening Standard*, January 21, 1919.

Masking Politics

The President of the League, Mrs. E.C. Harrington, is a fascinating figure in California history. (Figure 9) Originally from Utah, she earned a degree in psychology in the 1890s before moving to California around the turn of the century. Following the California Republican Party's endorsement of women's

THE SAN FRANCISCO EXAMINER

WOMAN WOULD BE A JUSTICE

Mrs. E. C. Harrington, Candidate, Urges Free Legal Service in Civil Actions for Poor.

Distinctive ideas on litigation involving domestic relations are held by Mrs. E. C. Harrington, attorney-at-law, who is a non-partisan candidate for Justice of the Peace.

There are five Justices of the Peace to be elected in November, and as all of the other candidates are men, Mrs. Harrington said yesterday that she felt confident about her own chances. Interest of women in public matters, she thinks, is daily growing.

Continuing, she said:

I believe there should be a woman Justice of the Peace, and that she should preside over a court of domestic relations instead of such cases coming before a police court. When I am elected, I shall strive to perfect such a plan.

I also believe there should be a court held at night to accommodate working men and working women, so that their cases and their troubles may be heard and adjusted without men and women losing their day's pay.

A woman Justice of the Peace, in my opinion, should likewise preside in cases involving domestic and housekeeping problems, violations of sanitation, food and health laws, instead of having cases of this kind tried in the police courts, as is being done to-day.

FREE LEGAL AID.

I am also strongly in favor of having the courts or the Mayor appoint attorneys to prosecute and defend all civil suits for persons unable to employ attorneys. As the custom is at present, many persons lose suits because they are unable to engage counsel to defend their rights in civil actions. It would be quite feasible to correct this by having the Mayor, for example, delegate one or two of the deputies of the City Attorney to represent persons unable to retain counsel in civil actions. Such persons could be required to make affidavits or otherwise give bona fide evidence of their inability to defray the expense of engaging counsel. Many methods to provide for this could be evolved, so that abuses could be prevented against. Relief should be afforded to poor people in this direction. That is the outstanding thing to keep in mind. Most attorneys and judges know this, but nothing is done to afford the relief. A woman Justice of the Peace could lend impetus to this and many other companion movements.

MRS. E. C. HARRINGTON, candidate for Justice of the Peace, with new campaign ideas.

Figure 9: Mrs. E.C. Harrington, running for the office of Justice of the Peace, President of the Anti-Mask League.

suffrage in 1894, Harrington became a strident suffragette. Supporting a proposition to amend the state constitution to extend voting rights to women in 1911, the *San Francisco Call* reported that "Mrs. Harrington has been heard from the platform many times in this city, and is considered one of San Francisco's gifted speakers."[25] The measure passed and San Francisco became the largest city in the world in which women could vote, a civil rights victory that doubled the number of women in the United States who were permitted

25. *San Francisco Call*, March 22, 1911, p. 18.

to vote in political elections.[26]

It so happens that in 1911 Mrs. Harrington's husband was San Francisco's Department of Elections Registrar, enabling Mrs. Harrington to become the first ever registered woman voter in the Bay Area. This fueled her passion for politics. She championed labor union rights and civic reforms. She organized and headed "P.H. McCarthy Women's Clubs," a network of organizations to support and promote the work of then San Francisco Mayor Patrick Henry McCarthy.[27]

McCarthy, a member of the Republican party and a supporter of women's suffrage, was also a delegate of the American Federation of Labor and the President of a powerful local labor union, the San Francisco Building Trades Council (BTC), a dominant force in the construction industry. A champion of unionism he unified the interests of labor organizations to become mayor in 1909, promptly assembling an administration filled with members of the BTC.[28]

McCarthy had arranged the administrative position for Mrs. Harrington's husband, the accountant E.C. Harrington, as election registrar. Meanwhile, Mrs. Harrington was employed as a cashier at the Justice Court, a venue of particular interest to her because from 1910 she had been studying for a law degree. Her tripartite engagement with civil rights, law, and politics kept her busy. In 1912 not only was Mrs. Harrington the president of the Twenty First Street Improvement Club and president of the San Francisco Working Women's Club, but she also organized a reelection mayoral campaign for McCarthy and spearheaded a "Women Keep Up" Campaign for Taft. She posted notices in department store dressing rooms encouraging women to vote Taft for U.S. president.[29]

At the end of 1911 McCarthy lost his reelection campaign as mayor of San Francisco to James Rolph, Jr. Rolph had garnered the widespread support of reform-minded business men and campaigned on a vision of crafting the San Francisco world exhibition. "Sunny Jim" Rolph would serve as mayor until 1931 when he resigned to assume his single term as governor of California. When Rolph was sworn in as mayor in January 1912, Mr. Harrington was ousted as elections registrar.[30] In the years to follow, Mrs. Harrington, an outspoken critic of Rolph, repeatedly ran for a seat on the Board of Supervisors, proclaiming that she was "beyond the control of political machines and bosses."[31] She never won a seat.

In 1914 Mrs. Harrington made headline news when she passed her legal exams, successfully completing a two-day long written and oral examination

26. Robert W. Cherny, Mary Ann Irwin, Ann Marie Wilson, eds, *California Women and Politics: From the Gold Rush to the Great Depression* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011).

27. *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 9, 1911, p. 4.

28. Walter Galenson, *The United Brotherhood of Carpenters* (Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 143.

29. *San Francisco Examiner*, February 21, 1912 for improvement club; *San Francisco Call*, April 6, 1912 for Taft campaign; *San Francisco Call,* April 10, 1912, for dressing room canvassing.

30. *Municipal Register*, January 11, 1912, p. 14.

31. See for example, *San Francisco Examiner*, October 21, 1919, p. 15.

"such as is received by few aspirants to the bar," observed the *San Francisco Examiner*. She endured over 80 quick-fire questions to test her "readiness of mind and resourcefulness" whereas most candidates receive 20 or 30 questions.[32] She was admitted to the California bar, obtained her license to practice law, and opened an office downtown. A year later she was again in the papers when she earned the distinction of being the first woman to represent a defendant in a murder trial—a case she won within one hour, "one of the shortest murder trials in the history of San Francisco courts."[33]

In 1918, in the midst of the influenza pandemic, she campaigned for election to the office of Justice of the Peace. (Figure 10) She declared her intention to preside over a court that dealt with domestic relations. She proposed a plan to have a court open at night "to accommodate working men and working women." She also urged "free legal service in civil action for the poor."[34] She was one of ten candidates that year, and landed 21,000 votes, but lost to long-term incumbent Judge Frank Deasy, who was also a member of the Board of Supervisors.[35]

32. *San Francisco Examiner*, August 11, 1914, p. 7.

33. *San Francisco Examiner*, February 17, 1915.

34. *San Francisco Examiner* September 22, 1918, p. 17.

35. *Municipal Record*, Vol. 11, p. 298.

Figure 10: Mrs. Harrington's political ad seeking support for her election to office of Justice of the Peace

Seen through the lens of the political ploys of the previous decade, it may not appear surprising that the rhetoric quickly adopted by the Anti-Mask League was to call for Rolph's resignation if the ordinance was not repealed. The two supervisors who had voted against the masking measure and who were enrolled to support the League's efforts also provide an interesting angle.

Supervisor Eugene E. Schmitz was no outsider to San Francisco politics. Schmitz was a professional violinist and president of the Musician's Union in 1901 when a new labor party, the Union Labor Party (ULP), was formed as a competitor organization to McCarthy's Building Trades Council. The ULP was run by notorious city boss Abe Reuf, a lawyer and political activist. He anointed Schmitz as the ULP's candidate to run for mayor in 1901. Schmitz was regarded as handsome and well spoken, but a family man with little political acumen. With Reuf writing his speeches and running his campaign, Schmitz was elected mayor and served until 1909, with his entire political tenure littered with scandal, all driven by the machinations of Abe "Little Boss" Reuf.[36] Following a number of investigations—conducted in the chaos of post-1906 earthquake devastation—both Schmitz and Reuf were found guilty of crimes including extortion and bribery in negotiating contracts to rebuild the city. Reuf ended up serving time at San Quentin prison but Schmitz was eventually acquitted of all charges and was a free man. In the wake of scandal and lumbered with the perception that he was a political puppet, Schmitz lost his reelection to McCarthy in 1909. The ULP would eventually disband and in the 1910s Schmitz and the labor unions that supported him would align with McCarthy's Building Trades Council in opposition to Rolph.

A few years later Schmitz ended up serving on the Board of Supervisors in an effort to rebuild his reputation and throughout the 1910s would run for mayor against Rolph. In fact, in 1919 Mrs. Harrington was supporting Schmitz in his mayoral campaign against Rolph, and in turn Schmitz supported Mrs. Harrington for another attempt she was making to obtain a seat on the Board of Supervisors. Another connection between them was that both campaigns were supported by the Taxpayers' Association, an organization formed by professional accounting firms and headed by Mr. Harrington.[37] In short, beyond the flu mask ordeal, Mrs. Harrington and Eugene Schmitz were allies in political maneuvers against Mayor Rolph.

Charles A. Nelson hailed from the construction industry, involved with the city's efforts to expand electricity to residential areas and implement building material requirements in new construction.[38] He was district president of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and business agent for the Building Trades

36. Lew Irwin, *Deadly Times: The 1910 Bombing of the Los Angeles Times and America's Forgotten Decade of Teror* (Lyons Press, 2013).

37. *San Francisco Examiner*, October 24, 1919, p. 6.

38. *Journal of Electricity*, V. 41, N. 12, p. 546.

Council, the powerful labor organization that had earlier put McCarthy into the mayor's office and had waged opposition to Rolph's subsequent election. Under McCarthy's mayoral administration, Nelson was made chairman of Public Buildings Committee. Noted for "taking much interest in labor organization and unionism," he was vociferous in his "insistence upon fair treatment for union workmen employed upon Civic Center buildings who deemed themselves aggrieved by contractors."[39] The links between the Building Trades Council, Nelson's service under McCarthy's mayoral administration alongside Mr. Harrington, and his shared support with Mrs. Harrington for labor organizations, all suggest more to their association than not liking masks.

39. George Meyer, Taylor Wooster, and Arthur Johnson, *Municipal Blue Book of San Francisco* (California Press, 1915), p. 21.

One thing that agitated the Anti-Mask League was the rigorous action against offenders implemented by Police Chief D.A. White at the urging of health officer Hassler. "Police Score 186 Arrests on First Mask Day," reported the *San Francisco Chronicle* on January 19, 1919. Most of the prisoners were released on $5 bail. Two "well-dressed women" were detained on Haight Street for not having masks and escorted to a local drug store where they purchased masks and were released. Attacks on the mask policy were waged on every front: from lack of scientific evidence of their effectiveness, to being unhygienic, to the idea that forcing a piece of apparel on a citizen's face was unconstitutional. (Figure 11)

Matters became murkier when Dr. Wilfred H. Kellogg, Secretary of the State Board of Health, attacked the efficacy of the mask as an influenza preventive in

Figure 11: Police enforcing the "influenza mask ordinance" among non-compliant San Francisco women. Image from San Francisco Library Historical Collection.

a special publication that was issued in January 1919.[40] Dr. Kellogg compared the infection and death rates in a number of U.S. cities, some which passed no mask ordinance and did not prohibit public gatherings, while others, notably San Francisco, had strict social distancing and mask rules. He found that some places without preventive measures had lower rates than with measures in place. He expressly disagreed with Dr. Hassler, calling masks "ineffective," a statement that Hassler was forced to publicly rebuke, calling Kellogg's remark "ridiculous."[41]

Fighting with the Secretary of the State Board of Health on a politically-charged public health measure put enormous stress on the official position of the city's governing body. On January 27, the Anti-Mask League held a protest at the offices of the Board of Supervisors. At a public meeting that day, "several hundred opponents of the masking ordinance" were in attendance and offered a standing ovation to Supervisors Eugene Schmitz and Charles A. Nelson when they took their seats. By contrast, the author of the ordinance, Supervisor Andrew J. Gallagher, a picture engraver and illustrator for newspapers, was hissed as he entered the room. At the meeting the mayor announced he would only repeal the mask measure when it was recommended by the city's Board of Health. He said that the mask "had proved its efficacy and that he had no requests for its discontinuance from either the Army or Navy or private citizens, except the anti-mask league." At the end of the meeting, as the representatives departed, the women protestors shouted cries for "freedom and liberty."[42]

When pressed on his commitment to upholding the mask-wearing requirement, Dr. Hassler's comments suggest that it was not just masks that he was defending, but also the decision to keep schools closed. While saying that the problem with "non-open air" schools was that children arrive sick and spread infections, Hassler indicated that this was not the child's fault. "Its parents, however, are very much to blame," he opined. "Parents too frequently look upon schools in the light of nurseries – convenient places to which to send their obstreperous offspring while they devote themselves to their work or pleasure."[43]

It is possible that it was comments like this that drew the ire of the Anti-Mask League's vice-president, Madame Eily Grosjean. Grosjean was the wife of a rice flour merchant and, like Mrs. Harrington, was a social activist, and above all, a school teacher.[44] She had been at Mrs. Harrington's side protesting the masks since the beginning. She was also President of the Parents' Rights League of America, along with another Anti-Mask League vice-president who was also

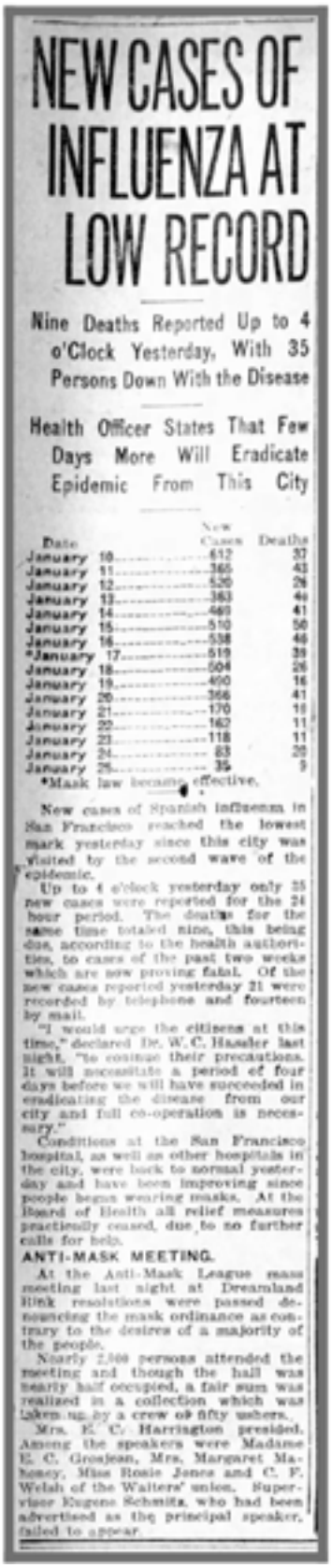
40. Wilfred Kellogg, *Influenza: A Study of Measures Adopted for the Control of the Epidemic* (California State Board of Health Special Bulletin, Number 31, 1919).

41. *Sacramento Bee*, January 20, 1919, p. 1.

42. *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 28, 1919, p. 1.

43. *Municipal Record*, January 28, 1919, p. 329.

44. *San Francisco Examiner*, July 8, 1917, p. 11.



NEW CASES OF INFLUENZA AT LOW RECORD

Nine Deaths Reported Up to 4 o'Clock Yesterday, With 35 Persons Down With the Disease

Health Officer States That Few Days More Will Eradicate Epidemic From This City

Date	New Cases	Deaths
January 10	612	37
January 11	365	43
January 12	520	26
January 13	383	40
January 14	460	41
January 15	510	50
January 16	538	46
*January 17	519	39
January 18	504	26
January 19	400	16
January 20	366	41
January 21	170	18
January 22	162	11
January 23	118	11
January 24	83	20
January 25	35	9

*Mask law became effective.

New cases of Spanish influenza in San Francisco reached the lowest mark yesterday since this city was visited by the second wave of the epidemic.

Up to 4 o'clock yesterday only 35 new cases were reported for the 24 hour period. The deaths for the same time totaled nine, this being due, according to the health authorities, to cases of the past two weeks which are now proving fatal. Of the new cases reported yesterday 21 were recorded by telephone and fourteen by mail.

"I would urge the citizens at this time," declared Dr. W. C. Hassler last night, "to continue their precautions. It will necessitate a period of four days before we will have succeeded in eradicating the disease from our city and full co-operation is necessary."

Conditions at the San Francisco hospital, as well as other hospitals in the city, were back to normal yesterday and have been improving since people began wearing masks. At the Board of Health all relief measures practically ceased, due to no further calls for help.

ANTI-MASK MEETING.

At the Anti-Mask League mass meeting last night at Dreamland Rink resolutions were passed denouncing the mask ordinance as contrary to the desires of a majority of the people.

Nearly 2,500 persons attended the meeting and though the hall was nearly half occupied, a fair sum was realized in a collection which was taken up by a crew of fifty ushers.

Mrs. E. C. Harrington presided. Among the speakers were Madame E. C. Grosjean, Mrs. Margaret Mahoney, Miss Rosie Jones and C. F. Welsh of the Waiters' union. Supervisor Eugene Schmitz, who had been advertised as the principal speaker, failed to appear.

secretary of the Parents' Right League, Mrs. Mary E. Bush.[45] Together these two women campaigned in opposition to medical tests for children in schools, saying that "it was an interference of the rights of parents and an invasion of the home."[46] Whatever the extent to which they disagreed with the medial officer's position on parenting or school medical exams, it was clear that Grosjean and Bush had a track record of protesting what they perceived as overreach against parents' rights and the management of children's health.

The day after the Board of Supervisors' meeting, January 28, reports emerged that the mayor had consulted Hassler and now felt confident that the disease was under control and would likely recommend that masks come off the next Friday, the last day of January. Despite the fact that 54 new cases were reported the previous day along with 13 deaths, Hassler said, "We have reached the end of the second wave of the epidemic, but there is still danger due to the many thousands of convalescents returning to their employment, and the arrival in the city of people from out of town where the disease is still prevailing." When questioned about the spike in cases of the day before, he said it was "due to the zeal of the physicians of this city in … reporting those cases which were delayed in the congestion."[47] (Figure 12)

The mayor echoed the sentiment. "Unless there is another flareup of influenza in the meantime, San Franciscans may doff their gauze masks Friday," reported the *Oakland Tribune*.[48] The mayor said that the mask had proved its efficacy: there were 31 new cases and 6 deaths that day, but only 4 cases and 2 deaths the day before. This was compared with an average of nearly 500 new cases a week earlier, before the ordinance went into effect. Whatever the numbers, the mayor now seemed to be losing support from all corners—from senior state health officials to his core constituency: "the hotel men, the Chamber of

45. *Sacramento Bee*, March 21, 1919.

46. *San Francisco Examiner*, February 5, 1916, p. 3; see also *Examiner* May 25, 1916, p. 7.

47. *San Francisco Examiner*, January 28, 1919, p. 13.

48. *Oakland Tribune*, January 28, 1919, p. 6.

Figure 12 (opposite side): The waning of the second wave of influenza cases. From *San Francisco Examiner*, January 26, 1919.


San Francisco Examiner

First

Pages 13 to 20

ACTION ON 'FLU' MASKS WILL BE TAKEN MONDAY

ATTORNEYS OF STATE BOARDS HELD USELESS

Big Drought May Result in Bohlympics

THE AERIAL CRUSADER

Capt. Guy L. Smith

SCOUTING THE SUEZ CANAL

'Red' Parley Asks Recall Of Stephens

HEALTH BOARD SAYS ACTION NOW INIMICAL

Figure 13: Pressure mounting for the mayor and Board of Supervisors to remove masks. From *San Francisco Examiner*, January 31, 1919.

Commerce, Merchants' Association"—all seeking to get released from under the ordinance.[49]

On January 29, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that Pasadena was set to repeal their "flu mask ordinance" for the reason that it is simply "an experimental measure, detrimental to the morale of the people, injurious to the wearer and without any beneficial effect in remedying the influenza situation."[50] While preferring to say that it was because "the influenza situation has improved to such an extent" instead of appearing to cave to the protests or question its efficacy, on February 1, 1919, Dr. Hassler recommended the mask measure be repealed, and on that day Mayor Rolph signed a proclamation—penned by Supervisor Schmitz—nullifying Ordinance 4758.[51]

49. *Sacramento Bee*, 23 January 1919, p. 1.

50. *Los Angeles Times,* January 29, 1919.

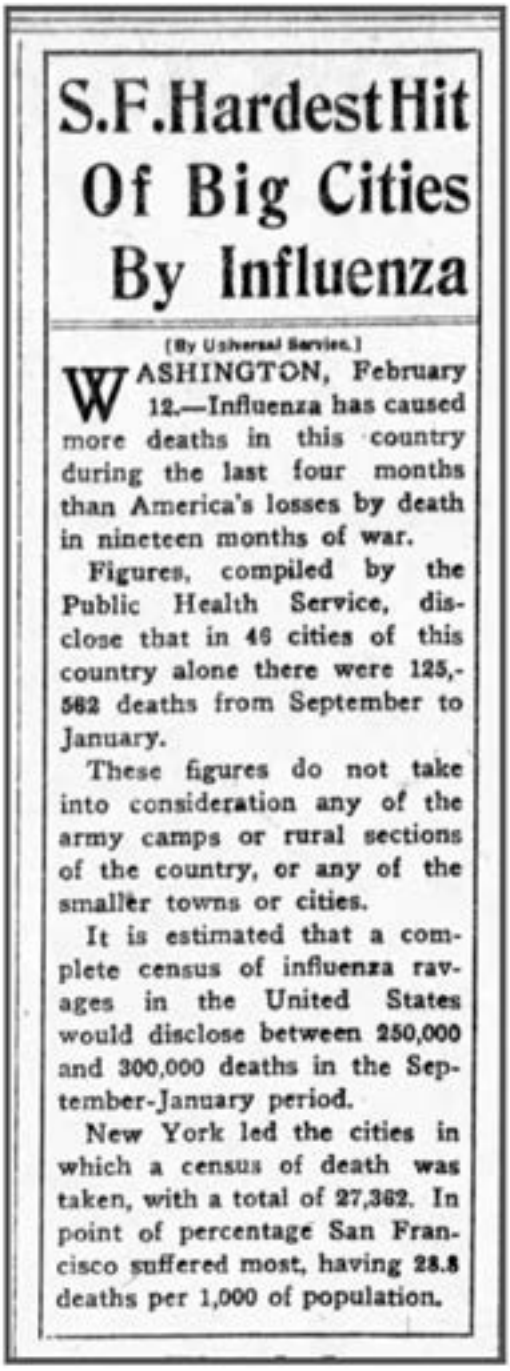
51. *The Recorder*, 11 February 1919, p. 6.

Conclusion

The end of the mask debacle was the end of the Anti-Mask League. It also coincided with the gradual decline of new influenza cases and deaths, until a third (smaller) wave appeared later that fall. Some recent epidemiological analyses suggest that the virus may have run its course inflicting mass immunity (considering the possibility of an influenza outbreak earlier in 1918 that affected a certain portion of the population) with the possibility that the virus lost its virulence with each wave.[52] Despite the social efforts made to control the impact of influenza, the final tally of deaths in San Francisco were 30 per 1000 people, one of the worst hit cities in America. (Figure 14)

It took another 101 years for a mayor of San Francisco to mandate the wearing of masks for protection against a respiratory disease in the middle of

52. Martin Bootsma and Neil Ferguson, 2007. "The effect of public health measures on the 1918 influenza pandemic in U.S. cities," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 104:18, 7588-7593.



S.F. Hardest Hit Of Big Cities By Influenza

[By Universal Service.]

WASHINGTON, February 12.—Influenza has caused more deaths in this country during the last four months than America's losses by death in nineteen months of war.

Figures, compiled by the Public Health Service, disclose that in 46 cities of this country alone there were 125,562 deaths from September to January.

These figures do not take into consideration any of the army camps or rural sections of the country, or any of the smaller towns or cities.

It is estimated that a complete census of influenza ravages in the United States would disclose between 250,000 and 300,000 deaths in the September-January period.

New York led the cities in which a census of death was taken, with a total of 27,362. In point of percentage San Francisco suffered most, having 28.8 deaths per 1,000 of population.

Figure 14: Reporting on Public Health Service's estimate of death toll caused by influenza in San Francisco. From *San Francisco Examiner*, February 13, 1919, p. 9.

a pandemic. (Figure 15) On April 17, 2020, Mayor Breed tweeted the requirement, and soon the city's COVID-19 information page posted information about when and where to don a mask, how to make one and how to wear one. "Face coverings can be made of a variety of cloth materials, such as bandanas, scarves, t-shirts, sweatshirts, or towels," the site advises. All you need besides this might be a few rubber bands.

Figure 15: Mayor London Breed tweeting an order to wear masks in San Francisco.

As soon as the measure was announced, questions were posed asking what history has taught us about this sort of public health measure. Given that during the flu pandemic of 1918-1919 San Francisco was a leader in promoting this initiative, it seemed especially compelling to compare then with now, when again many municipalities were looking at the city's decisions as a guide for their own next moves.

What this story about the Anti-Mask League begins to show is that universal consensus or compliance for such measures is never possible. Then, like now, we see conflicting information—from the health profession, the politicians, the business community, and civil rights proponents—about the utility and feasibility of using masks to protect oneself from disease. Dr. Kellogg's position after assessing their use or non-use in different cities was later further supported by the United States

Navy who wrote in 1919:

> No evidence was presented which would justify compelling persons at large to wear masks during an epidemic. The mask is designed only to afford protection against a direct spray from the mouth of a carrier of pathogenic microorganisms; and assuming that it affords such protection, the probability that the microorganisms will eventually be carried into the mouth or nose by the fingers is very great if the mask is worn for more than a brief period of time. Masks of improper design, made of wide-mesh gauze, which rest against the mouth and nose, become wet with saliva, soiled with the fingers, and are changed infrequently, may lead to infection rather than prevent it, especially when worn by persons who have not even a rudimentary knowledge of the modes of transmission of the causative agents of communicable diseases.[53]

53. Quoted by Howard Markel, et al., *A Historical Assessment of Nonpharmaceutical Disease Containment Strategies Employed by Selected U.S. Communities During the Second Wave of the 1918-1920 Influenza Pandemic* (Department of Defense, 2006), p. 119.

While the public health consensus today stresses the benefits of the mask as helping to reduce the amount of spray from the mouth of a germ carrier (while noting that cotton fabric does not filter the air we breathe in), similar concerns exist today about fitting them properly, keeping them clean, and not fidgeting with them.[54] We also see that then, like now, mask debates tend to create social conflict. The Anti-Mask League protests also suggest that these conflicts might be cloaking deeper ideological or political divides.

54. Jeremy Howard, et al., "Face Masks Against COVID-19: An Evidence Review," *Medicine and Pharmacology*, Preprint, April 12, 2020.

No measure, whether quarantine or masking, was ever touted as a panacea for pandemic threats. If there is a clear lesson to be learned from the past it is that we are just as limited in the number of possible ways to slow the spread of disease. The illustrations of actions now look very much like they did a century ago: isolating the ill and those suspected of having direct contact with them, preventing social gatherings, reducing an individual's risk for infection with masks and hand washing, and launching public health information campaigns. But when we look to history, we cannot hope to find a surefire answer to current problems. Despite the benefit of hindsight, most communities who took actions similar to ours still sustained significant illness and death; whether measures such as wearing masks lessened what might have been even higher rates had such ordinances not been in place is impossible to say on the basis of available historical data.

Finally, however much attention "anti-mask" protestors get in the media—today or a century ago—it is worth observing that the majority of people

living under such public health ordinances did not agitate. As with this historical example, we see that enforcing complete compliance of a measure which radically alters social behavior overnight is near impossible. However, the attempts to persuade the majority to comply today appear to yield better results than in the past in controlling the spread of disease. That is where we may take comfort in not looking like the past.

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank the faculty and students involved with the UC Medical Humanities Consortium for their comments.

Errata

This article was revised to correct a statement previously written on page 8 that stated the Board of Supervisors voted 12-2 to reinstate the mask ordinance on December 17, 1918. The corrected paragraph now states that the Board of Supervisors postponed that vote, which (as indicated on p. 11) was taken one month later, and on January 17, 1919, the mask ordinance was reinstated for the second time.