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PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Coronavirus Crisis Update

"Suzanne Brennan Firstenberg on Her Memorial to America's Pandemic Loss: 'In America: Remember'"

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FEATURING

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Andrew Schwartz: You're listening to the Covid-19 Update, a podcast from the CSIS Global Health Policy Center, focused on the science and policy implications of the outbreak. I'm Andrew Schwartz of the Center for Strategic and International Studies. And I'm joined by my colleague, Steve Morrison to discuss the latest on Covid-19.

Steve Morrison: Andrew and I are thrilled to be joined again, for the second time, by Suzanne Brennan Firstenberg. Suzanne, welcome, and thank you so much for joining us again.

Suzanne Firstenberg: Thank you for having me.

Dr. Morrison: Suzanne's an artist, she's a businessperson. She has an MBA. She was in the pharmaceutical industry. She's a person of enormous compassion. She has a deep background in providing hospice care and bringing her art to the whole subject of drug addiction. She first came to attention of America and to us in the fall of 2020, this is before we had vaccines, it was before Delta had hit, when she put together an installation up at the D.C. Armory Parade Ground: "In America: How Could this Happen…" At that time, she put in place 267,000 white flags. It was very powerful. It really made visible the human toll at that point and raised a bunch of profound questions.

And you came, kindly, and spent time with us doing a podcast reflecting on that. Then you came forward, starting September 7 through October 3, with the largest public participatory art installation on the National Mall since the quilt, since the AIDS quilt of 1996. So, the single largest public participatory art installation on the National Mall in 25 years, entitled "In America, Remember," and in the course of that, that's September 17 through October 3, a total of 701,133 flags were planted. I want to note that Ruppert Landscape donated enormous amount of labor and expertise in putting that installation together, over 150 personnel, they deserve enormous credit for their role in this. In that time over 11,000 people came, and, with the Sharpies you provided, personalized those flags. People connected to those who were lost. It was a beautiful and profound installation in the shadows of the Washington Monument, right on the most sacred ground of our country.

Congratulations on that and thank you for coming in to talk to us. I want to first ask you a personal question. How did you personally experience this second large-scale installation? Delta had come upon us. We had vaccinations come into force. The numbers were continuing to climb. We'd moved out of the Trump era into the Biden era. You had moved from a side stage up near the D.C. Armory to the biggest national stage, on the Mall. And you attracted, as we mentioned, 11,000 mourners grieving over the loss, and you did something that was, I thought, quite remarkable. As I would cycle past every day and visit this, and I would visit it in the morning and in the evening

coming to and from work, I would see you there. I would see the people there with their Sharpies, but I would see you engaging personally with these people. You made part of your engagement in this art installation direct and deep personal engagement with people. So tell us a bit about that experience. That must have been rather profound.

Ms. Firstenberg: You know, Steve, profound is the perfect word for it. It was a profoundly moving experience for me; speaking with so many people and having them share their grief was truly overwhelming. People were so open about the pain that they had suffered. And when one talks with a stranger, it's usually about the weather or about something like sports, but to be able to have such meaningful conversations with people, strangers, about something that matters so deeply to them, was really an honor. I was overwhelmed, day after day, with the sharing and the pain and the number of visitors. I think now we are counting about 16,000 dedicated flags that I have at my studio. And there were literally hundreds of thousands of people who came to the flag installation in September and early October. People came from all over the country. I met so many people from so many states.

There was a doctor who I met, a pulmonologist from Denver. He had tears in his eyes and, and he came up to me and thanked me profusely for doing this art. He said, "My mother died in May and my wife died in June of Covid. And I had to go as a pulmonologist being on the front lines of caring for people with this disease. I had to put my doctor face on and go straight back into the hospital." He said, "Suzanne, being able to be amongst these flags has allowed me to finally experience that grief that I've had to bottle up inside."

Mr. Schwartz: That must have been really hard for you too, when you interacted with people like that, who experienced such again profound loss, knowing that you were doing something to raise awareness to their loss. That must have been really hard for you emotionally. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Ms. Firstenberg: Luckily, with the hospice background, I understand certain things about how to speak with someone who suffering grief and loss. And, of course, personal boundaries. What I tried most of all was to listen because that's what we don't have enough of here in America today, the willingness to listen. And when someone's in grief, that's what they want to do. They want to have their story heard. And this was all about recognizing those who they had lost. So being witness to that pain and the stories was all that I needed to do.

Mr. Schwartz: Yeah. I can't imagine you were experiencing people talking about our polarized politics or how much we as a society don't agree on things as fundamental as public health. I can imagine that you were really just dealing with this at a very human level, because this is, really, at the end of the day, about a lot of people in America losing their lives

Ms. Firstenberg: So many, it was simply overwhelming. One of the things that I tried to impress on all of our volunteers who manned tables where people personalized flags, was that to truly listen to someone who is talking about their grief, it's important not to just say to them, “Oh, I'm sorry for your loss.” That ends a conversation, it doesn't begin one. And it's an “I” statement. I really wanted to encourage people to have visitors tell their stories of loss. That's what it was all about for them. And so I would encourage them. If someone said, “Oh, you know, my mother died of Covid,” I would encourage them, say, “Your mother, how painful, tell me about her.”

Dr. Morrison: 16,000 people made the journey to come there. They had to make a deliberate decision to come to this installation and become part of it, to participate in it.

Mr. Schwartz: Well, 16,000 who signed the flags. There were hundreds of thousands who came to the installation. Let's just be clear about that.

Ms. Firstenberg: Right. And one of the most important things that people who've seen pictures of this installation don't realize is that we made this available to people across the country. We knew early on that so many people would not have the time or money to be able to travel to Washington DC to experience the art firsthand. In honor of creating equitable access, we provided a website where people could go and make requests to have flags dedicated for their loved one. And that website also includes a digital map of the art so that people can go and see just where their dedicated flag flew in the actual art installation.

Dr. Morrison: What do you think people took away? What was it that they acquired by choosing to participate too, in the various ways that you offered? In person, remote, simply walking the grounds of this memorial, or taking the step of personalizing a flag to memorialize one of their someone that they loved that’s passed.

Ms. Firstenberg: Many of these deaths happened in isolation, and they happened without large formal funerals to mark the passing. What we want in life for our loved ones is recognition because that validates our own grief. And so, to have a person's passing publicly acknowledged, it is comforting, it’s important to family members. Life goes on, but for them, it doesn't go on in the same way.

Dr. Morrison: The AIDS quilt from 1996 lives on. There are people who are responsible for stewarding it. And it is it's registered in the consciousness of many, many Americans. It's become a mythic part of the storytelling of what happened in this country on HIV. It changed people's thinking about HIV. It brought across the magnitude of this, and so it can change American thinking, this kind of major art installation. Do you think what you've done is changing Americans thinking?

Ms. Firstenberg: This is a tougher one because the country was poised to accept homosexuality as we learned more about how that population was affected so grievously by AIDS and HIV. And the quilt was the perfect iconography for that because our response initially to homosexuality tore families apart, and the quilt is the quintessential icon of home. And so to use a quilt, to bring families back together and tie them back together, that was a brilliant, brilliant idea. And the AIDS quilt helped us to come together. My art is coming at a different point. We are tearing ourselves apart as a society. We are doubling down on all that divides us, and so my art is more a reflection of society and where we are today. It is my attempt to put a mirror up to us and to say, "Is this really who we want to be?" So, there's more work to be done, yes, at this point in time regarding this virus and what it has shown about us.

Mr. Schwartz: Yeah. I don't want to read into your art too much because the art ultimately is how it's interpreted by other people, especially in a large-scale installation like this. I'm sure most of our listeners have seen it because it would be hard to be an American and not see what this installation looked like. But there's places you can find pictures of it all over the web. In some senses, when you picked the white flags to be symbolic, to me, it sort of gave this very neutral feeling when it comes to politics, you know. Something like, "We surrender to the politics of this. We don't want to deal with the politics of this. This is a very neutral situation. This is about humanity, not about politics." Did you feel like it was political or was the response of some of the people who visited the site or reached out to you political?

Ms. Firstenberg: I purposefully avoided using American flags because I wanted to not suggest that this had anything to do with politics. This was the one thing that we could join together over. And that's the grief that we are all suffering. I did not, as I told visitors, have one section for Democrats and one section for Republicans, we were all in it together and we all had the same kind of flags marking our loved ones' losses. A lot of people brought political messages to the flags. So many people, in particular because of the timing, came to me and said they could not believe that their loved one who died would not get vaccinated. There was a lot of anger that came out in this installation, and that anger was really rooted in pain.

Last fall, when I did the first installation, first iteration of this art, many people had died at first because we didn't know about the disease. Then it was people dying who were made vulnerable because of job and health inequities, but to now have lost so many people just in the time when I did the installation, we lost 35,000 more people from the day it began to the day and ended. Most of those lives were because people did not take the appropriate health precautions. They did not get vaccinated. They did not socially distance. They fought against masks. Not all of those lives, but a good portion of those lives were lost because they got their information from the

wrong place. Imagine dying because you're watching the wrong channel. That's heartbreaking.

Mr. Schwartz: It takes your breath away.

Ms. Firstenberg: It does. And so, most of the people who came up to me and talked about the sadness of the loss of their loved one, because the loved one didn't get vaccinated. That was really the most heartbreaking because they were angry and yet so sad. And that combination is just devastating.

Dr. Morrison: When you think about it, the first installation was pre-vaccinations, and it was at the conclusion of the Trump administration. Now you come, months later, the mortality numbers have risen 400,000, but they've risen by 400,000 in a period in which vaccines are available, right? And those deaths have accumulated in a period in which there was disappointment. We thought we were turning the corner, the summer, Delta, and premature reopening sort of threw that back. So people are struggling, right? We're more fatigued, we're more disappointed, we're struggling with this. One thing that struck me about the atmosphere of the installation, surrounding the installation, was that it was really a very solemn and quiet and respectful and calm atmosphere in the shadow of the Washington Monument and on sacred ground. Maybe I'm wrong here, but it seems to me that you were very successful at escaping for a moment the rancor and recriminations and bitter divisions that separate our country around all aspects of this pandemic. Maybe you could say a few words about that, because that, to me, seemed to be one of the great achievements of this. The installation had a beauty, a magnitude, a solemnity, a power to it. It had this participatory element that was so dramatic and personalized, but it also, for some period of time, escaped the worst behavior that we've descended into.

Ms. Firstenberg: You know, when that was going on, you're right. We did transform this part of the National Mall into a place where it was safe to bring one's grief and where we rose above politics. The amazing thing of it is that from different vantage points, these flags could be seen with the capital in the background, with the White House in the background, with the Jefferson Memorial in the background, reminding us of how important this space is and how it is owned by all. And yet, somehow in this time of great polarization, we saw so many strangers comforting each other, and they didn't check first to say, "Hey, I see you're hurting. Can I give you a hug? But are you a Democrat or a Republican?" You know, they just saw each other in pain.

One woman wrote a flag out for her mother who died just a few months prior. She planted it and got down on the ground to take a picture of it. She was so overwhelmed. She just lay on the ground for a couple of minutes crying. And when she got up, she saw a man standing beside his bicycle that he had laid down. He had just planted a flag for a friend of his, and he took a

couple of steps over to her. And he said, “You look like you need a hug.” And she said, “Yeah.” And he, this complete stranger, gave her a huge hug. And we saw that time and again, politics didn't matter. Skin color did not matter. What mattered was that people saw others in pain and they provided, if not comfort, they provided respectful quiet. A place where, months prior, as I was walking to scope out the ground, I saw bicycles all over the place and dogs were running through. And people, people just passing through this space in transit from one location to another, here we transformed that. It became the location. It became the message for those 17 days.

Mr. Schwartz: That must've been really comforting to you, and it sounds like to the people who visited there. One of the things that really has surprised me, Suzanne, about the pandemic, is the lack of art surrounding the pandemic, whether it's music or art installations like yours or paintings or film. After 9/11, we had concerts. We had, all kinds of artists writing music about 9/11. The scale of this, in terms of death, is so much more and it's affected so many more people because it's affected everybody. But somehow there hasn't been a response from the artist community. Why do you think that is?

Ms. Firstenberg: I think that we are having art, it's just more on a localized basis. There are some local concerts that are happening and there are different uses of art, like the yellow heart campaign and such. So, art is being used, but I think that 20 years ago, we weren't so firmly encased in our echo chambers. And now it takes a lot more to break down those doors. Words are not making it happen. But I do encourage people to use art and to support art, because art can filter in slowly through the air vents and art can glide in under the doors of our fairly locked echo chambers. Art can unlock those doors from the inside. So I believe profoundly in the power of art and we do need to use it more. I feel very honored as an artist to have been able to use the space on the National Mall for this art exhibition.

Dr. Morrison: I'd like to turn a bit to the question of the lasting impact of this type of project and whether it ties to an issue that's being debated right now, which is whether we should have a national commission that is done on a credible scientific basis, a non-biased examination of what has happened here. What were the deep root causes? How are we going to avoid a repetition into the future? It seems to me that what you've done connects to this question, what I mean by that is a couple of things. One is in 1918 when we lost 670,000 people when we had a population a third the size of the U.S. population today, Americans turned away very, very rapidly to live on and forget, and then move past the loss from that pandemic. It was the end of World War I, people were eager to get back to their lives. They were traumatized. In this instance, we will have the same impulse run through our America. The number, 754,000 dead today, November 8, it's an indigestible number. It's a magnitude of loss that is incomprehensible at some level, but somehow we need to have a memory. We need to memorialize the loss and we need to

translate the loss into some kind of constructive action. And you've laid the groundwork for that. And we need a constituency in America. This has touched every household in America.

Mr. Schwartz: And as you said, Steve, we're still losing about 1,200 people a day.

Dr. Morrison: So, we need a constituency. It's touched every household. We need a constituency that's calling for not forgetting and not turning away, for understanding the deep roots and causes and not repeating it. And I think what you've done is helped us move towards the building of that constituency. And have you thought about this question of should we have a national commission? If so, why and what would the value be?

Ms. Firstenberg: It's such a good question, Steve. So many people have asked me, first of all, should we have a memorial? What should the memorial look like? And my first response has been, "the plane is still crashing, here." And the difference between this and some other events like 9/11 is that this pandemic is not going to end on a day. This is going to be endemic, and we are going to have to learn how to live with Covid-19. It's just a fact because we had inequities around the world in getting vaccines out and we have not had incredible uptake of vaccines here in the U.S., so we are going to just have to live with it. It makes it a little harder to memorialize, if you will, something that will become a part of life. So that makes the whole conversation different.
But when people have asked me about creating a memorial, I've said to them, "We shouldn't do it if we want it to allow us to turn away from this." Any memorialization has to include an in-depth examination of how we got to this point. So I absolutely agree with you. You know, we don't "do" pandemics. People don't realize that it did not have to be like this. That's why at this art installation in front of the main sign, I had an array of at the time 27 white flags that marked the complete death toll in New Zealand and an array of 1,809 flags beside it, which would have been the number of flags I would have had to have planted if we had had the same immediate, good response that New Zealand did. And if we'd had the social cohesion that they enjoy. And if we had had the really strong protocols for, for testing and for quarantining. I would only have had to plant 1,800 flags, and instead I was planting 700,000. That's remarkable. I hope that any memorialization will take into account the fact that this did not have to happen. So that's first. We have just passed 5 million worldwide deaths, and we are at three quarters of a million. We account for 15 percent of worldwide deaths, but we only account for 4 and a quarter percent of world population. That's failure to adequately control this virus in the greatest nation on earth. And we have to account for that. We have to look at those figures and say, "What went wrong and how can we never let this happen again?"

Dr. Morrison: You believe that over time we will see a community form of the survivors of those who'd passed? And what I have in mind is, for the 9/11 commission,

those who died on that single day of 9/11, those 3,000 Americans, their survivors became a powerful force in demanding action and demanding to understand what happened and demanding all sorts of things. This is a different phenomenon, obviously, and it's occurring in the midst of deep division in the life, but do you have a sense that this is going to, over time, create a lasting community of interest among survivors? Or where people simply want to mourn in private and move on?

Ms. Firstenberg: I think we'll see an array of reactions to this. There will be some who will fervently demand that we find answers. There will be others who will need to walk away just because the grief is overwhelming and it's very difficult to continue to carry that. There's an organization called Covid Survivors for Change, and they are really pushing for a commission. People can join that organization and in that regard push for answers. But this has hit such a broad array of people, and it would be difficult to organize a commission that people feel is truly representative. The one adjective I hope is attached to a commission is nonpartisan, not bipartisan, but nonpartisan because we have to move well beyond politics so that we can truly assess the role of politics in this virus.

Mr. Schwartz: We're talking about 754,000 American deaths. To put that in perspective, that is the population of Washington D.C. itself, forgetting about the metropolitan areas, just the Washington D.C. population. So you're talking about wiping out an entire American city. If we can't put aside our partisan differences for that, I'm not sure what we can put aside partisan differences for.

Ms. Firstenberg: No, and Andrew that's one of the reasons why I did this art, as a wake-up call, because this has happened slowly. This is a slow motion mass casualty event. And so it's easier to just try to move on and go to the next day. And I wanted these flags to blanket the National Mall to really say to America, “Stop, even if it's for just a minute, just stop and think about how we could possibly have let our fellow Americans succumb to this virus and how much effort are we really going to put into never letting this happen again?”

Dr. Morrison: Suzanne, what's your next act?

Ms. Firstenberg: Steve, thank you for asking. I'm still needing to clean, document, photograph, and archive over 16,000 dedicated flags. I'm really happy to say that the In America art installation idea is popping up across America. Just yesterday, Congresswoman Jackie Spears from San Mateo County, Northern California, initiated a flag installation for her district. I'm in talks with some other cities to do the same. So in a few places, people will or already have experienced white flag installations of their own. And I take that as a compliment to the art and to the effort. So I'm encouraging communities across the country to do that as well. I think it's incumbent to find a way to make these flags travel.

I opened up one of the boxes from the 147 different sections we had of flags, and on the fifth one I was in tears. It really brought back all that individual pain and the stories. And it really just reminded me of so much we've lost as a country because we lost these people. And so I want people across America to be able to have access these flags. So I'm working to try to figure out the funding and the logistics.

Dr. Morrison: You're getting a lot of support from partner institutions, aren't you? From Smithsonian, National Geographic, others, who are the partner institutions who are working with you?

Ms. Firstenberg: The Smithsonian has been wonderful. They actually have now on exhibit on their second floor, some flags from last fall's installation.

Dr. Morrison: This is the American History Museum?

Ms. Firstenberg: Correct. I'll be working with them to create another exhibition of these flags, working on them accessioning some of the flags and materials that accompanied the making of this art installation. And I have to say, this could not have happened without incredible support from the National Park Service. I didn't even approach them last fall because art typically has about three days on the National Mall: a day to put it in, a day for people to experience it, and a day, to get it out of there. That would have made these flags a photo-op. If I could even have humanly installed all of them that quickly. Instead, the National Park service allowed me three weeks and that was incredible. They had seen the art last fall and they understood the value of putting this on the National Mall. They were incredibly supportive. And the Trust for the National Mall, they too were behind my request to place this art there on the Mall.

And so those kinds of partnerships were very important. National Geographic was great, too. They hired Stephen Wilkes to create one of his phenomenal day-to-night photos. It's already been released on social media, but rumor has it that it might be the centerfold for their January edition. They have been really wonderful. And then of course, family foundations, there've been a handful of family foundations, such as the Bernstein Family Foundation and the Carl M. Freeman Foundation, the Rappaport Foundation that supported the actual funding, some of the funding, for this project. They've been terrific as well. Craig Ruppert? He was the second call I made after I green-lighted this project with the National Park Service.

Dr. Morrison: Ruppert Landscape did the first installation.

Ms. Firstenberg: They did. And this time they did, they donated over 1,500 man-hours to put all these flags in. It was the third day of installation. It was Thursday, the 16th of September. And I forgot I had to plant section one in front of the large

signature sign. The next day was opening day, and I was like, “Oh my gosh.” So, I asked one of Craig's folks to give me a planting grid. and I’ll drag it over to section one, I’ll just plant the 1,800 myself. And the next thing I know, here's a guy bringing over the grid and right beside him is Craig Ruppert. The heavens opened. I don't know if you remember, but Alexandria, Virginia got four inches of rain that hour that I began planting that grid, that 1,800 flag section and Craig Ruppert himself stood beside me and planted flags in the pouring rain. That's the kind of guy he is and that's the kind of company. So I'm eternally grateful to him. And I think the country is too, for helping to bring this art.

Dr. Morrison: Suzanne, this is really such an inspiring story and it all started with you, and congratulations to you. And we're all in debt to you, really, for this magnificent achievement. So, we close all of these conversations with the same question, which is: what gives you the greatest hope and optimism, looking ahead?

Ms. Firstenberg: What gives me hope is the fact that I watched strangers consoling each other, because can we move beyond the concept of stranger danger? Right? That's good until you're about 10 years of age, but, but once you get to be a little older and understanding, it's time to talk with strangers. That's the only way to build community. Like if you don't talk with someone you don't know, how can community ever get built? And now more than ever, we need to bridge divides and create new ways to be communities. And I got to see that happen. It was because of grief, but I got to see people moving beyond what divides them and consoling and supporting one another. That, individual by individual, gives me hope.

Mr. Schwartz: Suzanne, thanks so much for joining us today. And I know that we're going to be checking in with you again really soon. This has been a great discussion and I hope our listeners take as much from it as Steve and I do. Thanks so much.

Ms. Firstenberg: Thank you both for having me, it's an honor.

Dr. Morrison: Coronavirus Crisis Update is produced by Liz Pulver. You can find our full catalog of podcasts, including Pandemic, Planet, and AIDS’ Existential Moment on our homepage at CSIS.org/podcasts.