

I PROMISED myself I wouldn't do it, but I did: While flying from D.C. to Dallas last week, just after the news came out that an Ebola-infected nurse had been allowed to fly while running a fever, I went back and read the opening pages of Stephen King's "The Stand."

In King's epic, perhaps his finest, a superflu with a 99.4 percent fatality rate accidentally escapes from a desert laboratory and lays waste to civilization. King being King, supernatural developments ensue for the survivors. But the book is at its most terrifying in the unraveling with which it opens, when the only bogeyman that matters is a hacking cough that spreads and spreads and spreads.

To reread these pages now — in a time of national, well, not panic but least disquiet over the handling of Ebola inside our borders — is to be struck both by parallels and by crucial differences between the scenario King conjured and what we fear today.

The parallels lie, not surprisingly, in the realm of official incompetence. King's superflu escapes because various computerized safeguards fail; it spreads because of interagency chaos in chasing down patient zero; it compromises a C.D.C. facility whose safeguards turn out to be insufficient. The chaos swirling around the Dallas Ebola infections has followed this kind of pattern: the patient sent home undiagnosed; the unprepared hospital and the infected nurses; the C.D.C.'s weird slowness in taking over; the confident governmental assurances giving way to blame-shifting, double talk and the appointment of a political hack as Ebola princeps ... er ... sultan ... er, czar.

But the differences are interesting as well. King's novel, infused with 1970s-era paranoia, imagines a government that blunders constantly but is also malignantly competent — brilliant enough to design a superflu capable of killing 99 percent of humanity, tyrannical enough to suppress media reports with martial law and murder, ruthless enough to swiftly spread the superflu behind the Iron Curtain to make sure our enemies go down with us.

This part of the novel's vision is of a piece with all of modern conspiracy culture, which requires a certain level of omnicompetence to sustain its theories about covered-up alien landings or 9/11 inside jobs.

But conspiracy culture, while always resilient, has had a tough go of it of late. From the Iraq war to Hurricane Katrina and various Obama-era debacles, the public has been steadily conditioned to fear government incompetence much more than it fears secret conspiracies against the public good. Instead of the Bilderbergers and the Trilateralists and the cigarette-smoking man, it's Mike "heckuva job" Brown and George "slam dunk" Tenet and whoever was

allegedly in charge of the V.A. hospital system who haunt our collective unconscious these days. People still indulge the occasional “House of Cards”-style fantasy of all-powerful political puppetmasters, but what actually scares us is the idea of the Ebola epidemic being managed by the gang from “Veep.”

I suspect that’s part of why Obama-era scandals that may actually involve secret government machinations – from the N.S.A. revelations to the harassment of journalists and the politicized overreach of Lois Lerner’s I.R.S. division – haven’t fixed themselves in the public imagination, at least among people who don’t have an explicit ideological or political interest at stake. Wisely or not, Americans have trouble imagining the White House that gave us the HealthCare.gov rollout micromanaging partisan I.R.S. chicanery, or the national security bureaucracy that couldn’t see 9/11 or the Islamic State coming doing anything all that Machiavellian with a firehose’s worth of online data.

Likewise with Ebola: Of course you can find wild conspiracy theories, but the idea of a successful government cover-up – secret body bags, muzzled journalists – is basically laughable. Instead, the baseline anxiety is all about bureaucratic incompetence exacerbated by insouciance, with conservatives fearing that a liberal administration won’t be willing to go far enough – in terms of travel restrictions and quarantines – to effectively contain the disease’s spread.

Because plausible arguments have been offered for and against a travel ban, the administration’s actual response will be an interesting case study. As much as the authorities have fouled up so far, we’ve only had a few infections. If the White House continues to resist calls for more dramatic measures, and we manage to contain Ebola domestically, then the president and his appointees will look more competent and levelheaded than their critics – a result that’s all too rare these days.

Given the track record, however, it’s easy to imagine somewhat less fortunate results, and travel restrictions increasingly seem like an appropriate hedge against ongoing domestic incompetence.

But it would be welcome, and then some, to watch a competent strategy unfold that rendered that opinion obsolete.

And then, our faith in government’s effectiveness partially restored, we can all get back to worrying about what’s being secretly cooked up in the Nevada desert.