

Resolving the Argument Between Lockdown and Liberty

We must protect the vulnerable, restore the lives and livelihoods of those whose vulnerability is economic and not medical, and assert the human spirit of survival and progress over a demeaning and unfeasible culture of intimidation lest we live like furtive, fearful, moles.

by Conrad Black



As the debate between those who want an unlimited lockdown and those who want to reopen America as quickly as possible becomes more clangorous every day, months of intensive study and sad experience with the coronavirus enable us to determine the best course and resolve the argument.

The shutdown must end in all but severely afflicted areas. Its original purpose was to “flatten the curve.” In the early stages, the number of coronavirus reported cases and deaths in the United States was doubling every few days. Horrifying projections based on the scanty evidence available and hyped by the anti-Trump media to put as much pressure and blame on the president as possible for his initially somewhat casual treatment of the subject, stirred fears of millions of deaths

and of a universal vulnerability to an almost untreatable fatal illness.

As viruses do not die and only become dormant, there was no possibility of stamping the coronavirus out completely in any country that it had entered. Flattening the curve was always a method for slowing the progress of the coronavirus, but never had any possibility of eliminating it. Everyone knew that the economic cost would be completely unsustainable beyond a couple of months. It was correctly estimated that unemployment would swiftly rise to 25 percent or more, a number not seen since the depth of the Great Depression in 1933.

The shutdown achieved its initial purpose; the incidence of coronavirus has declined from its height of several thousand to approximately 1,400 fatalities per day last week. We now know that approximately 80 percent of fatalities occur among the approximately 20 percent of people above the age of 60, especially those with supplementary problems that reduce their immunity.

The terrible economic burden of the shutdown rests most heavily upon Americans of working age, so 90 percent of the economic cost of the shutdown is endured by the physically strongest 80 percent of the population, in order chiefly to protect the 20 percent of the population that is most at risk. Obviously no responsible or civilized person wants to turn these facts into an equation that directly translates the value of any human life into a precise amount of money.

The United States, however, is now facing either an obligatory return to work of the able-bodied, with redoubled effort to protect and assist those most vulnerable to the pandemic, or a continuation of the shutdown which will either hobble the nation with unsustainable amounts of inflationary debt or impose a grinding poverty on tens of millions of people who are not only blameless but are not condemned to that state by the normal forces of a free market.

The national Democrats involved in the presidential campaign, and the great majority of the national political media who are as fervently committed to the defeat of President Trump as the official Democrats themselves, have been the authors of an unannounced mission creep by which flattening the curve has been informally redefined to the elimination of the coronavirus, in an effort to lumber the administration with an unattainable goal.

On the heels of the Russian and impeachment fiascos and reduced to carrying the thoroughly defeated Joe Biden to the edge of the nomination in order to avoid the Marxist nightmare of a Bernie Sanders presidential candidacy, the Democrats and their media accomplices are trying to create a moral imperative for the president to maintain a shut-down that has no chance of medical success in order to create an economic depression that could give them a chance of replacing Trump in the White House with the palsied candidate haltingly campaigning for the presidency from his basement in Delaware.

Since neither party is prepared to forgo massive assistance to the economic victims of the shutdown, this Democratic strategy includes, as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) revealed last week, continuing to deluge the country (and particularly traditional Democratic constituencies) with trillions of dollars of borrowed money. The taxpayers saddle themselves with back-breaking additional debt and Trump obligingly becomes the Herbert Hoover of the 21st century by subscribing to an impossible plan to eliminate an indestructible virus.

We now know from a rich variety of statistics from many advanced countries that the number of people apt to die from the coronavirus is almost none beneath the age of 20, approximately 1 in 25,000 in their 20s, 1 in 14,000 in their 30s, 1 in 7,000 in their 40s, 1 in 1,000 in their 50s, and 1 in 200 in their 60s. Sweden, which never had a shut-down and has only approximately one-third more deaths per capita than the United States from the coronavirus, demonstrates that the

continued shutdown only trades self-induced penury for a modest reduction in the incidence of the illness.

There is only one possible solution: wait for a vaccine, and whether a vaccine eventually is developed or not, achieve what is rather crudely described as "herd immunity." All the data indicate that the number of people infected by the coronavirus who have mild or no symptoms is over 90 percent (even with people in their 70s), and there is ample evidence that individuals who have recovered from the coronavirus may (rarely) be attacked again by it, though such attacks are considerably less effective and much more strenuously resisted. It is this development of antibodies among the great majority of coronavirus sufferers who recovered from the illness that provides the only certain route to defeating the illness, barring a vaccine.

The Democrats' argument is that Trump failed to develop an adequate testing capacity early and that accordingly the entire population must be tested and all those who are revealed as being infected by the coronavirus must identify everyone with whom they have been in close contact in the last 14 days so that those people may be traced and quarantined.

Of course this is complete nonsense and would require a medical constabulary dragnet over practically the whole population. It is of a piece with the Obama theory that the current administration's management of the coronavirus crisis has been a shambles. This administration inherited an antediluvian anti-pandemic capability from Obama that included testing only by appointment in hospitals with all tests sent to Atlanta, Georgia for eventual evaluation. The speed with which the Trump Administration sponsored the development of instant testing and the vast increase in production of supplies and necessary equipment and hospital capacity was by any standard impressive, and more than adequate to meet the problem.

The importance of tests has been absurdly exaggerated; their use is in developing data and satisfying the curiosity of the individual tested about whether that person has at that time the coronavirus or not. It is no silver bullet to deal with the pandemic; people have it or they don't and they can test negative today and positive tomorrow.

For all of these reasons the conclusion is clear: without getting into the constitutionality of continued restriction of the right of people to move about freely and without imputing motives to the advocates of impractical options, additional measures should be taken to warn and assist the vulnerable and especially those in homes for the elderly, and the country as a whole should be returned to full normal activity on a fast timetable.

Those who are most vulnerable ultimately will have to be relied upon to act prudently. The stadiums, theatres, and immense restaurant, hospitality, travel, and pleasure cruise industries of America cannot be closed all summer and reduced to mendicancy from fear that a few vulnerable people will be incautious about their own condition.

Above all, the United States, as the world's most important country, should lead our entire species out of an attitude of fear verging on cowardice and tainted with political opportunism, to a posture of prudent strength and determination. We must protect the vulnerable, restore the lives and livelihoods of those whose vulnerability is economic and not medical, and assert the human spirit of survival and progress over a demeaning and unfeasible culture of intimidation lest we live like furtive, fearful, moles.

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