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The inevitable pandemic

By Steve Bakke  December 1, 2020



We are deep into this disgusting pandemic, having spent most of several months feeling confused and misguided. A lot of us, experts and amateurs alike, have started to get philosophical about our experience. We do this, not as some sort of rationalization, but as a search for partial understanding of what's been happening. Let's make sure we learn something from this tragic waste of time, resources, and lives.

A virus came to visit, and it's been somewhat chaotic ever since. In my opinion this chaos isn't because of a lack of leadership on either side of the political chasm, and not because of a cataclysmic error on anyone's part. I think we've simply been experiencing what can happen when an unknown virus stumbles onto the planet, whether by design, mistake, or perhaps merely by chance.

Hidden in some early words of advice was perhaps the most accurate information we've received to date. Unfortunately, these simple messages have been lost in the confusion:

- COVID will be with us until a vaccine is developed, and that could take a couple years.
- We're advising you to do things that will "flatten the infection curve." This won't eliminate the pandemic, but by spreading out the infections, we'll keep hospital beds available so we can effectively deal with infections by not outstripping hospital capacity.
- Mitigating measures will help us do this but won't eliminate the virus. Distancing and mask usage are essential for flattening the curve but are not the solutions.

Nobody really knew what to do, and for good reason. But we, the public, didn't want that early advice. We insisted on something definitive, but we got soothing words, conflicting advice, counter-productive attempts at answers, some ham-handed comments by our president, and equally unhelpful and misguided criticism from democrats and "never...Trumpers." Permeating all of this was the fool-hardy impeachment process and a hate-filled presidential election.

Those early comments about what we were facing was unacceptable to us, but probably was close to the best prediction we could have expected, i.e. we can "flatten the curve," but that

only delays the inevitable. Unfortunately, human nature sometimes insists on creating feelings of action and success, even when that's not quite accurate.

We've been too inclined to force "one-size-fits-all" policies on our citizens. We eventually learned that resorting to economic lockdowns probably brought with it significant collateral damage, even body counts. We didn't adequately focus protection on the most vulnerable, often imposing harmful rules on those least vulnerable. For example, we piled too much of the burden on our student population by closing the schools needlessly. Students didn't have much say about it – they definitely drew the short straw. And minority students were the ones most affected.

Early in the process we began looking at therapeutic treatments, some of which were already determined to be safe, and already on pharmacy shelves. But that got tangled up in politics. I hope we can acknowledge that being skeptical of existing safe therapeutics, delaying or blocking their use, was foolish and cost lives.

We have become too dependent on the government, and our political leaders couldn't effectively respond to our demands for immediate solutions. Those claiming to know the answers were fooling themselves and everyone else. Lots of unhelpful fingers were wagging. Public demands for quick fixes were futile, so we got angry and impatient. But thankfully, the government came through in the best way possible. It made sure vaccines were safely developed, produced in large volume, and in record time. We set aside "peacetime" drug development protocol in favor of something much more productive, and it worked.

We're learning that the response by the U.S. is shaping up to be as effective, or better, than most industrialized countries when all measurements are considered, including direct and indirect loss of life, as well as economic damage.

This virus was new, dangerous, and we knew nothing about how to react. Let's admit that most of our mistakes came from lack of information. And many things labeled as mistakes are best explained by economist Thomas Sowell's advice that "there are no perfect solutions, only tradeoffs."

Bottom line, the virus was going to have its way with us, no matter what we did.