

Together apart

We've always known the risks associated with congregating in crowds, but we've pushed them to the back of our minds. Handshakes, kissing, drinking from the same glass, and sneezing and coughing indiscriminately have led to the spread of germs ever since God was in short pants. We've endured plagues like the Black Death in the 14th century. That one killed around 50 million people. The Bubonic Plague of the 17th century hit Italy hard, killing over a quarter million people and nearly half the population of Verona. London, too, was hit hard in the same century. At the plague's peak, there, nearly 8,000 people/week were killed, ending up with a total of 100,000 victims.

In 1720, a merchant ship sailed into the harbor of Marseille in France carrying what was called, 'mortal distemper' from the Middle East. The ship was quarantined, but the owner persuaded the authorities to offload its cargo, unleashing plague-carrying rat fleas into the unsuspecting population. The result...one hundred thousand people dead in southern France.

Fast forward to the 19th century and the Chinese province of Yunnan, and what is known as the 'Third Pandemic' erupted there and spread viciously throughout the globe for the next several decades. Rats ended up carrying the plague to six continents. Most of the devastation took place in China and India, but places like San Francisco were also affected.

In the 20th century, more specifically from 1918-1920, the 'Spanish Flu' infected a half-billion people around the world which was 27% of the world's population at the time. The mortality rate from that flu was estimated to be from 17 million to as many as 50 million. Some estimates even put the death toll at 100 million! There have been many theories about where the flu originated, northern China being one of them, but wherever it came from, its killing effect was mind-blowing.

Here in America, we have experienced measles epidemics, tuberculosis and polio outbreaks, not to mention the devastating HIV scourge in the 20th century. In the last 30 years or so, we've seen the Swine Flu, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), the Ebola outbreak and now, the Coronavirus which is dramatically changing the way we are forced to live our lives. While great strides have been made in virology and in the downstream advances in vaccine discoveries, there are two things that we Americans haven't confronted, adequately. The first is our poor institutional memory. *(Institutional memory is the collective knowledge and learned experiences of a group like our entire non-scientific population. As the turnover of new generations occurs among our population these concepts must be transitioned...and they have not been.)*

The second is our ignorance of the fact that our bodies are not invulnerable. Just because we have managed to conquer some diseases or mitigate their effects on us through advances in medicine, we have convinced ourselves that we can somehow skirt the inevitability of large-scale epidemics and pandemics. Those two things have made us more vulnerable to disease as has our unwillingness to prepare for such diseases and properly plan for their arrival. Our healthcare system, especially our emergency healthcare preparedness system, has been inadequate throughout many Administrations and didn't start with Donald Trump nor his predecessors.

We've become so convinced of our own ability to 'tackle anything that comes our way' that we have simply failed to acknowledge our own mortal weaknesses. Having said that, it does no good to invoke old aphorisms like "Those who do not remember (or heed) the past are doomed to repeat it." We must deal with our failings now. The onset of the Coronavirus must be the catalyst for us to re-examine our approach to many things. Globalization is one of them.

The 'enlightened' politicians of the post-WWII era believed that the only sane way to avoid new wars was to reject the monopolistic and imperialistic tendencies that led to many of those wars. The way to do that was to shrink the space between cultures and make the world smaller and its economies more interdependent. They did this by pushing a one-world ethos based on globalization.

Enter NATO, the European Economic Community (now European Union), a strengthening of the U.N., a reduction in global trading barriers through the WTO and other organizations along with multi-lateral and bi-lateral trading pacts. Couple them with billions of dollars of international investments, the linking of world currencies, the opening up of new markets, vastly improved travel possibilities and improved digital communication along with the imposition of a one-world trading language (English) and globalization became the world's new religion.

Hundreds of millions of non-business travelers spent billions flying or sailing to new exotic destinations and bringing back with them not only impressions of new cultures but goods purchased in over one hundred countries. This led to increased demand for not only new products (which importers were only too happy to accommodate) but also prompted American companies to reduce their costs by investing in manufacturing or assembly of familiar U.S. products, overseas.

This contract manufacturing included a wide range of products that were now bearing the 'Made in China' label. Pharmaceuticals were one of them. While this offshore manufacturing decreased costs for some medicines it also created a dependency for many antibiotics, some of which are now going to be in short supply due to the shutdown of some Chinese factories. The result is that globalization has shown itself to be the ultimate double-edged sword.

Americans - indeed the whole world's people - are now discovering the unpleasant edge of that sword and are now being forced to accept the downside associated with that dependency. Our current state of national emergency is a graphic reminder of the inescapable cause and effect our decisions have and of the real consequences of 'togetherness.' As we sequester ourselves away with 'social distancing,' avoiding congregating in large numbers and concentrating on those closest to us, we actually have a golden opportunity to re-examine our ways and our choices both as individuals and as a country. There is not a better time than now to do so.

Stephan Helgesen is a retired career U.S. diplomat who lived and worked in 30 countries for 25 years during the Reagan, G.H.W. Bush, Clinton, and G.W. Bush Administrations. He is the author of ten books, four of which are on American politics and has written over 1,000 articles on politics, economics and social trends. He can be reached at: stephan@stephanhelgesen.com