

# Coronavirus, Discord in America, and Emerging Trans-Atlantic Challenges

Robert Bruce Adolph

**We are several months into the global pandemic. One major impact: more Americans have died because of the virus than all US soldiers have died in the Korean, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan Wars. Worse, the obscene figure of more than 100,000 dead continues to climb as the US president insists on re-opening the country. It did not have to be this way. Those nations that have dealt most effectively with the novel Coronavirus acted in a unified manner soon after recognizing the threat. They followed the recommendations of the World Health Organization and their own public health officials, instituting stay-at-home protocols for all but the most essential public servants – police, fire, and medical services. The US was not among them.**

It may still be too early to speculate about lessons learned from the crisis. However, some of the major geopolitical impacts have begun to show in the US, Europe, and China. It has become clear that national governments as well as the United Nations organization need to wrestle with how humanity will deal effectively with the next pandemic. For if we do not face the next threat together globally, we will no doubt again fail while acting separately as individual nations, and more will perish.

## A LEADERSHIP FAILURE

America is regarded by many as second-to-none in terms of medical expertise, infrastructure, and resources. Tragically, none of that mattered. Alarm bells were ringing, but the Oval Office was by all accounts not listening. Both the Central Intelligence Agency and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention fully briefed the US President regarding the looming peril as early as January 2020. Per the *Washington Post*, "...it took 70 days from the initial notification for Trump to treat the coronavirus...as a lethal force that had outflanked America's defenses and was

poised to kill thousands of citizens. That more-than-two-month stretch now stands as critical time that was squandered." The lack of a national coordinated response compelled the 50 state governors to come up with their own individual and often ideologically driven strategies – sometimes competing among themselves for resources. A few governors did well while some others did poorly. However, their performance was never the key factor in the attempt to control the spread of the virus countrywide. COVID-19 does not now - nor did it ever - respect state borders. This is precisely why a national response was required.

Despite the President's numerous and unrelenting attacks on the US Civil Service as part of his belief in the baseless yet popular right-wing "Deep State" conspiracy theory, it has become abundantly clear that sometimes the federal government is the solution. The nation that at one time was considered the "leader of the Free World," no longer appears capable of leading itself out of danger - a long hard fall from one-time great heights. Along with its allies, the nation that won the greatest war in recorded history,



More Americans have died because of the virus than all US soldiers have died in the Korean, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan Wars. Especially New York was hard hit. People in Astoria, Queens, New York thank Essential Workers (photo: James Andrews1/Shutterstock.com)

WWII, and arguably brought the Soviet Union to its knees, utterly failed to address the threat of the Coronavirus in a unified manner. Tragically, the US commander-in-chief's failure was replicated internationally by others, including Great Britain and Brazil. Both also chose initially to ignore the threat. Reactionary populism does not seem to deal well with crisis. Logic and common sense seem to have been replaced by irrational tribalist ideology. The former US President, Barack Obama, dubbed the current presidential administration a "leadership failure" in dealing with the virus, and so it is. Those leadership failures have also been highlighted during recent US race riots in multiple cities across the country after the death of George Floyd, who died after being arrested by the police.

#### RIGHT-WING MEDIA FED TRIBALISM

Even some of the president's most devoted acolytes are compelled to admit that their political messiah has more faults than can be easily counted. However, they continue to support their chief executive because the right-wing propaganda machine represented by the likes

of Fox, OAN, Breitbart, and PJ Media has so completely demonized the whole of the Democratic Party. Because of this sometimes targeted and often broad-brush character assassination, Democrats are now considered either irredeemably corrupt or even evil by a significant number of Republicans. Therefore, and for them, the devil we know (this president) is somehow better than the devil we do not (almost any unnamed member of the opposition party). Doves of thoroughly propagandized conservative Americans now believe that the Democrats are coming for their guns, intend to restrict their liberties, and somehow threaten their churches.

Right-wing-media-driven fear mongering has been enormously successful at maintaining the agitation of this Oval Office occupant's political base, while simultaneously enhancing their financial bottom line. Of course, and in the process, the alliance of right-wing media and the White House have gone a long way toward delegitimizing the main-stream media that is attempting to hold this administration to account.

The truth has become malleable in the US. Essentially, the right-wing media has monetized divisions between the two major political parties by telling their conservative viewing base what they wish to hear. An outrageously mendacious White House exacerbates this circumstance while exploiting political polarization for gain. The impact only increases the highly and often irrational ideological divide. As the battle between Republicans and Democrats intensifies, the best interests of the country are by appearances all but forgotten in the resulting tribalist melee.

Regrettably, too much power is now being amassed within the executive branch of the American Government. The checks and balances engineered by the Founding Fathers are being dismantled with the assistance of presidentially appointed self-serving enablers. Government watch dogs, inspectors general, are being fired. These unprecedented actions on the part of the chief executive are more than alarming – pushing the republic toward authoritarianism. Moreover, critically important life-saving decisions are being made by a White House that, on the evidence, does not trust in modern science.

Because the virus is new, and its properties not fully understood, because the mortality rate appeared to be initially low, because there are those that place individual rights over and above health concerns, there was and remains controversy. That controversy continues to simmer, while occasionally boiling over. There are those in America even now that conflate individual liberty with the absurd “right” to go where they please and do as they please, even if that means the virus spreads to kill others. But, there are no individual rights without commensurate individual responsibility. Those that insist on exercising their rights without taking responsibility will only sow more chaos, while adding to the lengthening list of the lifeless.

#### AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

Economies globally are in shambles. Uncertainty sparks fear. Fear feeds its sibling, panic. Panic is the enemy of all. There are those who wish to see a rapid return to the economy of the recent past. After all, it is what we know. Even if lacking in equity, at least it is familiar and for that oddly comforting. Current socio-economic factors favor those who are already wealthy. Some have ridden-out the pandemic on yachts or in isolated mansions on private islands, while enjoying concierge medical care. This much-favored group possesses significant influence with the political class in several countries, especially in the US. There will be strong self-interested currents driving toward a return to the status-quo-ante. If this scenario comes to pass, the wealthy and powerful are those that will benefit most.

Others favor an overhaul of the existing global economic system to make it more equitable. Moving ahead will prove perilous. Those who desire change threaten those that do not. In the US and elsewhere battle lines will soon be drawn. The reasons are multiple:

1. The US, for now, has abandoned its traditional role as leader of the free world and replaced it with the self-absorbed slogan, “America First.”
2. The role of China as the world’s manufacturing giant for the convenience of developed countries has been called into question, which places the whole current global economic system in question as well.
3. We are living in an ever-more multi-polar globe, possessing an ever-more confusing and potentially dangerous political-military landscape.
4. The EU has been placed under enormous financial strains created by the vexing maladies of BREXIT, massive debt load in its southern arc, and the pandemic that hugely compounded both.

The nature of the trans-Atlantic relationship was changing for the worse well before the pandemic. The US President has been outrageously successful in alienating most of Europe’s political leadership over the last three years. The former hard-won and long-standing marriage of mutual interests between Europe and America has been under continuous assault since he took office. At the same time, tensions between Washington and Beijing are fast rising, fueled by a second-term-seeking president, who appears desperate to distract the populace and then pin the blame for six-figure COVID-19 deaths somewhere other than at his own feet.

This unfortunate situation will only add to post-pandemic economic and political stresses within the EU. It will make for hard choices too. Should the EU seek to maintain its historical political-military relationship with the US by perhaps sacrificing its economic position with China, or take the reverse tack? Both paths suggest the potential for pain and instability. The better choice, given the complexities at work, might be to pursue greater independence from both East and West. Much will be decided during the next US presidential election. In the meantime, the remainder of the globe will largely have to manage their own recoveries. Funds once available to the Developing World in the form of World Bank and International Monetary Fund loans will tend to dry up in favor of US and EU spending on national populations in the post-pandemic period.

Interestingly, the US and UK seem to share an unusual bond in terms of not only their current politics but economics as well. Nesrine Malik in UK’s *The Guardian* compares them in this manner. “The two nations that prided them-





Both the Central Intelligence Agency and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention fully briefed the US President regarding the looming peril as early as January 2020. It took 70 days from the initial notification for Trump to treat the coronavirus as a lethal force (photo: Matt Smitg Photographer/Shutterstock.com)

selves on their extraordinary economic, historical and political status have been brought to their knees. Their fall from grace is the outcome of a damaged political culture and distinct form of Anglo-American Capitalism.” Essentially, Malik makes two critically important points: 1. That political slogans like: “Brexit Now” and “Make America Great Again” won out over reason and rationality in both nations. 2. That all matters within these two governments have been made subordinate to the maintenance of a strong and growing economy. In other words, and in the context of the pandemic, lives matter less than preserving this perhaps unique, unfettered and sometimes predatory form of Capitalism. There is no doubt that the slogans were appealing to a significant portion of the electorate – essentially the victory that resulted from creating and then reinforcing a positive self-image over the benefit of enlightened self-interest.

For those most well off, the pandemic has lifted the veil to expose the ugliness underneath: that the political-economic reality of today is less about Tories and Labor or Republicans and Democrats than about those who have wealth and those who do not. Is this the new starker reality? If so, it would explain much.

One thing has been accomplished without any doubt, the inequity of the current socio-economic system has been laid bare. Those who are members of minority groups, those who are poor, those who live in close quarters and squalor, those who are disenfranchised, and those lacking access to quality health care are dying in far greater numbers than those possessing wealth. What does this mean for the US system of governing in future? It is a good question. The search for answers will be no doubt painful.

#### CONCLUSION

The EU recently elevated health care to a “security concern” for the coalition of nations. This is a smart move. For if the health of the body politic is at risk, so is its security. This is an important recognition of an essential truth. You cannot have the one without the other. This action solidifies the axiomatic wisdom that “health is always the first wealth.”

Given the discord created by the current White House occupant, the EU should consider working toward greater political-military independence from the US, while doing the same economically from China. One can reasonably

assume that Beijing will take advantage while the West recovers. For example, the rubber-stamp Chinese Parliament recently approved the controversial Hong Kong Security Law, which is designed to muzzle the city's pro-democracy movement. There will no doubt be more of the same, perhaps even in the military sphere. Pandemic-driven global disequilibrium will create opportunities for China that may become hazards for others.

At this writing, the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine reports that America has the highest rate of confirmed COVID-19 cases in the world. Unfortunately, and as a direct result of current policies as well as elected leadership inaction, the US was the least prepared for the pandemic among all the developed countries. Inevitably, and even as this article goes to press, too many people are still dying.

Tragically, it became abundantly clear in the midst of the pandemic that there is no actual healthcare system in the US: only several large and politically well-connected for-profit health care corporations more interested in the "bottom line" than the bottom of the barrel among the population. The millions of American families without health insurance are no doubt already dying at accelerated rates from COVID-19, but the statistics will take months to collect, collate, and analyze. Of course, those already encased in coffins will not care.

Many Europeans have been shocked by a long series of questionable policies emanating from this White House: most recently the monstrously bad decision of the US to terminate its relationship with the World Health Organization, while the pandemic continues to take victims. My ultimate concern as an American citizen is that the more-than-two-centuries-old experiment in democratic self-rule, the first of its kind in the world – a constitutional democracy – might find itself on the early path to self-destruction with a selfish and self-absorbed whimper made manifest by humanity's oldest means of social organization: tribalism. It is a sad commentary that may soon be corrected by the US electorate in November.

It is also important to point out that in the US, the poor and disenfranchised, blacks, native Americans, and Hispanics are suffering far greater losses to COVID-19 than their statistical proportion of the population would suggest. The reasons for these circumstances are multiple, but there is general agreement that the primary cause is a lack of health care for upwards of 27 million citizens. In addition, approximately 40 million Americans are now unemployed. Because the pandemic created an economic as well as medical disaster, more citizens will soon lose their health care coverage – unable to pay premiums.



America has the highest rate of confirmed COVID-19 cases in the world. The US was the least prepared for the pandemic among all the developed countries. Pictured is the USNS Comfort-mercy class hospital ship of the US Navy providing aid in New York City during the outbreak in March 2020 (photo: tetiana.photographer/Shutterstock.com)

Shortly thereafter, those who aspired to join the middle class may also lose their mortgaged homes and cars bought-on-time as well. There is a significant cross-section of America who live month to month on credit, while having little in the way of savings. There are even harder times ahead.

It is reasonably clear that COVID-19 will change the face of the world as we know it. That change will impact not only individual nations but groups of nations like the EU, the trans-Atlantic relationship, and the global geopolitical environment as well. The virus could serve some useful purpose if national governments examine themselves and their preparedness for more of the same. They should focus special attention on their societies' underlying pre-existing conditions that made the disease so very deadly and address the lack of a national health care system or make improvements on the ones that already exist. This is not the last pandemic!

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