

George Friedman's Thoughts: Thinking About This Moment

by George Friedman - April 2, 2020

My job is to write, and my goal in writing is to put things in perspective. The world has been to me an endlessly shifting kaleidoscope of nations, all moving in different directions that can be predicted by understanding the forces that shape their actions. I take pleasure in seeing the order behind the chaos. Sometimes I succeed, sometimes I fail, but I have lived in a world of many colors, shapes and tempos.

For the past month, a vast fog has made that world difficult to see. The coronavirus pandemic has rendered normal global events irrelevant. Something deadly is stalking the world, and it respects neither power nor money. Governments are obsessed with protecting us, or at least with appearing to protect us, but there is no protection except for what we provide ourselves. An infection cannot be destroyed yet. It will run whatever course it runs. Our bodies may or may not rally to overcome it. Our will has nothing to do with what happens.

Therefore, the only action we can take is to not allow the virus to enter our bodies, and the way it can enter our bodies is not through the air, or through food, or even through dirt. The disease invades our bodies from the bodies of other human beings. So we avoid contact with others. Governments have adopted a policy of building barriers between nations and sometimes barriers within their nations. The choice of families is to build barriers between themselves and their neighbors. Our politics and our lives are focused on this at the moment, and the distance we put between ourselves and the rest of the world.

The other consequences of doing social distancing are not at the moment of prime importance. There is something unseen out there that will sicken us and even kill us, and we cling to whatever safety there is by being alone. But we are social animals. We do not live alone. Love of one's own is not simply love of those in our household but of those with whom we share language, faith and history. If we see our neighbors, our countrymen and the world as being potentially infected with a hidden pestilence, if **the barriers of borders** and doors supplant all of these other things, then how do we remain human?

I have been at home for nearly a month, my wife making heroic forays to pick up pre-ordered food at

the supermarket, commanding me not to share her risks for I must not get ill so I can think and write and earn money. I am the man, and I am supposed to risk my life at the supermarket, yet she insists I must not get ill. The oddity of all of this is not only that this reduces my sense of manhood, but that a trip to the supermarket has become an act of quiet heroism.

What is most frightening in all of this madness is that it is not madness. It is all we can do, and we are for the most part doing it. We are not doing it because of threats from the government; we are doing it because it is all we can do. I used to think about [the Russia-Turkey confrontation in Libya](#), about [Brexit](#), and about [the development of hypersonic missiles](#). All that is still there, but for now none of it matters. There are slight glimpses of U.S.-China tensions or a Belarusian leader saying that the cure to all this is vodka. In some ways he makes more sense. Doctors tell us to wait. The president of Belarus tells us to get drunk. That won't save us, but at least we won't be afraid.

This is an extraordinary moment in human history. Our world has contracted. And this is true not in one country but in virtually all countries. In some countries, of course, life goes on unchanged along with all too common disease and death. In most countries, those violating the new laws and customs are seen as social deviants. But even in wartime, perhaps especially in wartime, I have not seen social responsibility being defined as refusing to enter into social life.

I am a fan of science fiction, and I love post-apocalypse novels. This is not playing out as it's supposed to. We have our disease, but it will not wipe out everyone but a lone woman, as happened in "Extinction Point." In novels like these, the virus would be delivered by aliens even now colonizing the planet, and the woman making contact with a crippled man in Alaska plans survival and resistance. Reality is even more stunning. We do not face the annihilation of the species – or so it seems – but we do, almost seamlessly, face the danger and transform our lives. We face combat not with aliens but at most with our own boredom.

What is perhaps most different in our apocalypse novel is that we have not seen a surge of banditry roving over the landscape. For me, one of the most remarkable things – and from what I can see, this is true globally – is that our retreat into our homes and ourselves has been remarkably orderly. But that I suppose is because heroes are still at work in our warehouses and trucks and stores, and food is still ample. That may continue indefinitely, but in a world we can't recognize, nothing is certain.

That this cannot become the new model of human existence is obviously true. It can be done only if we accept a level of poverty and loneliness until the day medicine finds a solution. And since the experts speak in terms of years, maintaining our current stance will be difficult. Our position now is

that preventing deaths from the virus takes precedence over all other things. Whether this posture can be maintained in the face of massive social and economic failure, where the trip to the supermarket is pointless, is unknown. But for the moment that is not the question. For the near future this will go on, and my world will contract, and my kaleidoscope will see grey, not the vivid colors I have lived with. And I do take walks, seeing occasionally other neighbors out walking, and we pass on opposite sides of the street each wondering whether the other is in the grip of the invisible plague.

We can do this. For a while longer.

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