Coronavirus: Thoughts on End Times

Graham E. Fuller
Former Vice Chair, CIA National Intelligence Council; Former CIA Kabul Station Chief

These are not, of course, strictly speaking, end times. But for the first time in a long time, there is a whiff of the apocalyptic in the air. The Black Swan has come out of the blue. Events utterly unanticipated in any practical near-term sense now suddenly overwhelm the daily news. Certainly, some scientists and a few visionaries warned in the past of the distinct likelihood of such a pandemic, but it was always theoretical. Now it isn't.

Statesmen and politicians now face some harsh decisions in managing this crisis. But there is one issue that stands out as particularly sensitive and emotional, and hence little addressed. In bluntest terms, how do we balance between the costs of the possible loss of several million lives to the coronavirus, and the costs of a response that is destroying the political, social and economic structures of the world?

As in most issues, it is our particular *perceptions* of reality that dominate our actions. The coronavirus is charged with emotive power. It is new, has no known defenses or cure at present, has its own signature of attack, comes (for westerners) from distant Asia, is disturbingly linked to the image of bats as a likely origin — all this enhances our fear of the unknown. Modern media provides just the kind of 24/7 echo box to amplify and even wallow in the fear and uncertainty. And on top of that we see a broad range of special domestic and foreign agendas joining in to try to shape our perceptions and responses.

Perhaps the hardest part of all is to try to speak "objectively" about death. The statistics show the deaths worldwide from the virus, at least so far, fall well short of the near millions of deaths unleashed by two U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that still find no end. Or the savage and tragic Saudi-conducted war (supported by the U.S.) against impoverished Yemen with 10,000 dead. And the ongoing deaths in the civil war in the Congo — probably exceeding five million — don't even register on anyone's screen. But those deaths are mostly "over there" and not here.

But of course, statistical comparisons like this quite miss the mark. We all know vehicle deaths vastly exceed deaths by terrorism — but highways are a routinely accepted, known risk of modern life. Terrorism is not a known risk and, hence, occupies vastly more attention than actual numbers involved. In short, the impact of deaths tends not to be proportionate to the numbers but to the particular psychological impact.

The dawning reality during this pandemic portrays how perhaps the most truly devastating impacts of the coronavirus stem from the variety of state actions taken in response to it — actions that our politicians and leaders hope will help stop the virus. Among the actions and guidelines that have been taken and presented are the closing of borders, the shuttering of shops and closing of private businesses, the cancellation or postponement of most forms of public entertainment, and social distancing and "shelter in home" self-quarantine — each with consequential impacts ranging from job loss to overall economic depression.

It may be some time before it becomes clear just how much the sweeping measures to halt the spread of the virus may, in the end, be worse than the disease. But how much worse? In an age when pandemics are likely to emerge again, how much and

how often can leaders really shatter public life to meet the disease? And how will shattered economic and social orders ever restore themselves?

In demographic terms — and we must think in those terms when the welfare of huge societies is at stake — we need ask: What are the trade-offs between higher death rates, especially among elderly and infirm populations on the one hand — and the paralysis and near destruction of the entire social and economic order we live in? (I write this as a member myself of the statistically most highly threatened social cohort at risk of acquiring — and dying from — the disease.) But it is irresponsible to shy away from acknowledging the fact that some kinds of trade-offs do exist. In wartime and massive natural disasters it is called triage — saving those who can be most practically saved. How much should we move heaven and earth to save everybody at the cost of greater social and economic destruction? There is no concrete answer to such a delicate and painful question. But it must be asked.

And then come some of the hard, political questions of system of governance. The coronavirus experience, like nothing previous, dramatizes the extremely delicate and complex character of our world. What kind of governance will the world adopt to manage future such nonmilitary global crises? China's apparent quick recovery — after an initial failure to deal with the crisis at its outbreak — strongly suggests that its centralized authoritarian order may be one of the most effective ways to manage large and complex societies.

China was, of course, initially slow off the mark in recognizing the threat — a failure we have seen widely across many western nations. Some observers optimistically point to democratic South Korea's (or Taiwan's or Japan's) fairly successful response at handling the virus spread as demonstration that a democratic response to such crisis can succeed. But it is important to remember that all these Asian nations also operate within an internalized and quite self-disciplined framework of Confucian origin, producing a kind of tractable and deferential social order not remotely comparable to the impassioned individualism of the U.S., which responds in part by denial — or by buying more guns. Debate over the relative merits of political systems will grow, rather than recede, with time. And China and America are not the only potential models.

It is already growing clearer that when — and if — life eventually returns to "normal," it cannot truly ever get back to what it was. Consider the deep failings of our American social order — the impoverished "gig" worker, the huge rich-poor gap, the lack of fundamental social safety nets, the morbid fear of "government" doing anything versus privatization of everything, the reckless continuation of mining and consuming of fossil fuels; does the coronavirus hopefully suggest we cannot now go back to that? Will Bernie Sanders' years of drumbeat about the need for a national health care plan now ring truer, even to those who will not vote for him? The coronavirus has served to further rip off the veil to reveal the deep fissures in American society and governance. Mere acknowledgment of that reality at long last could be a big plus for the country, a valuable point of transition to painful new thinking about how the country should, and should not, be run.

Will the trillions of dollars that the combined damage this new virus will inflict on the nation perhaps pry open the door to a national examination of whether in this kind of world the U.S. needs a military budget exceeding the combined budgets of the next seven biggest nations of the world? Where should this money be most wisely spent? Are pandemics and climate crises not the true threat to our nation and the shared future world?

Will our conviction in America as "the exceptional nation" — exempt from the rules of international law and conduct — and our pervasive sense of superiority in all things perhaps be just a bit humbled as the country sinks ever deeper by so many measurements against most industrialized nations of the world? Will our extreme capitalism and worshipful laissez-faire economic policies perhaps now take a hit of realism from the rest of the world? Is the Gross National Product (GNP) triumphalism the best gauge of how well off our individual citizens' lives are — or do many European states have a better sense of what represents a healthy society?

Will this new American brush with common global cause perhaps enable us to ease off from our obsessive search for geopolitical adversaries abroad? Science fiction has long loved the trope that only an invasion of Martians would be able to unite all the people of our Earth to common cause. Perhaps the coronavirus may help shift our attention now to what is truly a global human crisis — in which we are all equally winners or losers. When things "go back to normal" will any new and wiser insights have percolated into our national mindset about better ways to run the world?

It might be useful to think of the coronavirus as something akin to a "shakedown" exercise. A gauge of our fitness for what is coming. A kind of rehearsal for another global crisis — another virus attack or more "apocalyptic" climate change disasters.

I have long believed — and here many readers will vehemently depart company from me — that the collective diseases of our society and political order mentioned above may require just such a major crisis in the country, a kind of "hitting the wall" that will finally register upon the national psyche how much deep changes are required. Is perhaps the coronavirus the beginning of that painful process of "hitting the wall" that can spark major introspection into our national priorities?

No, these are not end times. But a glimpse behind the veil? A small foretaste? A premonition of the need to start changing things? It would be too bad if all we aspire to is only to return to business as usual once this particular virus has been beaten back. If ever it is.

About the Author

Graham E. Fuller is a former senior CIA official and former vice chairman of the National Intelligence Council at the CIA, in charge of long-range strategic forecasting. He is currently adjunct professor of history at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, British Columbia, and is the author of numerous books on the Muslim world. His first novel was "Breaking Faith: A Novel of Espionage and an American's Crisis of Conscience in Pakistan," and his second is "BEAR — A Novel of Eco-Violence in the Canadian Northwest." This article is republished with permission from Graham E. Fuller.