

A Nation's True Test Comes After the Crisis

Perhaps it's natural and understandable for most people to think that things like "leadership" and "character" are forged and evidenced in response to crisis. It's quite apparent in the present moment that judgments about public figures are being shaped by how they're handling the virus pandemic.

Around the world, people are generally, if grudgingly, embracing the "strong man" model. The "leader" who takes charge, issues orders, shuts things down, threatens punishment and demands conformity earns applause; anything less runs the risk of criticism as "hesitant" or "weak."

A deadly invasion, whether it be of visible armies or microscopic pathogens, requires extraordinary measures. Which ones make sense and which don't is certainly debatable and are not my focus here. I rise to urge my fellow citizens to judge leadership and character by more than crisis behavior; it's what comes *afterwards* that often is the more critically important.

George Washington's finest hour was not on the battlefield of the Revolutionary War. He lost more battles than he won. His presidency was of average capability, notable for but a handful of accomplishments. No, his greatness for the ages sprung from the pivotal moments when he could have chosen power [but declined](#). He was the King we fortunately never had, the man who set an example for free people in eschewing permanent, concentrated power.

Writing in the March 30 edition of *The Telegraph* in London, Tim Stanley makes a powerful, related point. His column is headlined "[Don't Panic And Don't Surrender Your Freedoms](#)." Stanley pleads with us all to "stay rational" and

“maintain perspective”:

It is not fair to jump down the throat of every employer who tries to keep a business open; it is not right that the police are asking us to spy on rule breakers. If a journalist raises doubts about the strategy, it does not mean they don't care – they are expressing their right to dissent, often with courage. Fear is not conducive to rational debate. It is at times like these, when forced to watch the utter hysteria of television news, that you understand how a society talks itself into a war or a witch hunt.

And that is my second plea: let's not abandon our freedom. According to a Telegraph poll, 86 per cent of us are willing to give up our civil liberties to help beat the coronavirus – and I think they mean (I hope they mean) temporarily and voluntarily, in which case I entirely agree. Self-sacrifice is good: the proper spirit should be “I am happy to stay at home if it helps save lives”. But it should not be “I will do as I'm told because I'm terrified and the state knows best”. If that's the way a majority of us now think then, in the long run, we really are doomed. A society that does not instinctively cherish freedom will eventually lose it.

*I say this not out of self-indulgence: on the contrary, I am practically a hermit and can live cooped up like this for as long as it takes. No, I am alarmed that powers of arrest and detention have been dramatically strengthened; that new jury trials have been suspended; that prisoners are now forced to spend up to 23 hours a day in their cells and are banned from seeing friends and family; that parole board hearings have been cancelled. Maybe all this is necessary and justifiable, but we have got to question it and we must stay on guard against Big Brother. **How far we are willing to go to protect human rights is just as important a test of a nation's character as what we will do to protect human life [emphasis mine].***

In other words, our “leaders” aren’t the only ones who should be under the microscope. How the rest of us react to the power they exercise says a great deal about *us*.

The Washington example brings another to mind, that of the ancient orator and statesman [Marcus Tullius Cicero](#). At the height of his power as Consul, having snuffed out a mortal threat to Roman liberty, Cicero was quick to return power to the people. When his one-year term was up, he honored the term limit requirement and retired. Like Cincinnatus of an earlier day, Cicero did the job and went home.

Cicero yearned for both liberty and normalcy. Nations are great to the extent they do as well. Some say America’s greatness during World War II showed itself in our awesome abilities to bomb the enemy to smithereens. I think, instead, we proved our greatness when we walked away when the task was finished. We didn’t annex Japan or Western Europe as, say, the Soviets effectively did to Eastern Europe.

When the pandemic is at last over, hindsight will help us fully understand and assess the measures employed. Surely, some of what frightened people readily embraced in the emergency will be deemed to have been proper. Other measures will be seen as ill-informed, hasty, or counterproductive. And perhaps the most telling benchmarks of leadership and character will come in that aftermath.

This much I know for sure: Liberty is so important to me that life without it is simply unthinkable. I will not sanction its permanent limitation for the sake of temporary expediency. I will judge the leadership and character of those in power by how quickly they get off our backs, out of our pockets, and out of our way when the crisis has passed. I will judge most harshly those who use the situation to enshrine the state as our master. Toward that end, I invite readers to think about these words of wisdom and warning:

- “The true danger is when liberty is nibbled away, for expedients, and by parts.” – [Edmund Burke](#), 1777
- “There is danger from all men. The only maxim of a free government ought to be to trust no man living with power to endanger the public liberty.” – [John Adams](#), 1772
- “If ye love wealth better than liberty, the tranquility of servitude better than the animating contest of freedom, go home from us in peace. We ask not your counsels or arms. Crouch down and lick the hands which feed you. May your chains set lightly upon you, and may posterity forget that ye were our countrymen.” – [Samuel Adams](#), 1776
- “Necessity is the plea for every infringement of human freedom. It is the argument of tyrants; it is the creed of slaves.” – William Pitt, 1783.
- “It is the common fate of the indolent to see their rights become a prey to the active. The condition upon which God hath given liberty to man is eternal vigilance; which condition if he break, servitude is at once the consequence of his crime and the punishment of his guilt.” – John Philpot Curran, 1790
- “Those who would give up essential liberty, to purchase a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety.” – Benjamin Franklin, 1755

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