

# The Columbus Dispatch

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Opinion

## Column: Time will reveal the legacy of COVID-19

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All national and global crises expose both the strengths and weaknesses of governments and citizens, and the aftermaths of crises often create opportunities for transformational improvements in societies.

The 1918 flu pandemic, which like COVID-19 was a respiratory disease and originated in China, claimed 50 million lives, or 2.5% of the global populations. Most deaths occurred during a 13-week period.

In the years that followed the “Spanish flu,” as it became known, many governments embraced the concept of socialized medicine. (America followed a different path, preferring employer-based health care coverage that then grew during the Great Depression.)

The coronavirus of 2020 could be a long-term game-changer, too.

When it passes, we’ll be closer to a presidential election and likely dealing with a major recession as well. The confluence of those developments could provide a powerful catalyst for transformation.

What changes may occur when the coronavirus passes?

- More rapid growth of telehealth and medical technology that can support online diagnoses in greater numbers and reduce the rate of diseases spread by in-person contact.
- Depending on who wins the presidency, a morphing of health care coverage to include more aspects of “health care for all,” especially for those who are dependent on “gig economy” work.
- Further institutionalization of the virtual workforce concept, especially for industry groups where AI-powered technology can enable more to work from home. Overall, expect fewer in-person and more virtual meetings.

- A rapid acceleration in the growth of online America as more citizens grow comfortable ordering food, supplies and other items over the internet. Online education services also could see a boost, and election voting could gradually migrate to online.
- A gradual shift in the U.S. economy favoring larger employers with the scale and financial stability to withstand the impact of major future disruptions. Small business will be a major victim of a prolonged shutdown during the pandemic, and many might never recover. Expect a surge in bankruptcies and a dramatic rise in the number of empty storefronts across America.
- A substantial increase of the already high national debt, fueled by the president's proposed massive economic stimulation package and the expected decline in tax revenue that will result from a recession. The federal government won't be able to afford all the fixes we need, especially if there is a major recession. Expect taxes to be raised. We also might see the rise of more public-private partnerships to address major problems governments can't handle on their own.

• An enhanced trust in science by more Americans. This could lead to a broader understanding of the impact global population growth will have on public health. As the global population inexorably moves toward 8 billion by about 2023 and ultimately to what scientists view as a maximum sustainable population of about 11 billion in the decades ahead, expect more communicable diseases to arise and spread rapidly.

On a personal level, we might witness, at least temporarily, the following developments:

- A deeper understanding of the impact of income inequality. Crowd diseases like the coronavirus magnify human inequities, and today, as in 1918, the poor and working classes tend to suffer more in a pandemic because they are more exposed.
- A rejuvenation of the art of conversation and in reading at home, especially while public sources of entertainment including sports are closed. The weeks ahead will offer a nation of nesters the chance to engage more in reflection and in enriching their relationships at home.
- The decline of the handshake and hugging in public. Handshakes date from medieval times and are a particularly American form of greeting, but they could decline in frequency as a new physical etiquette takes root in the wake of “social distancing.”

Hard times are upon us, and they likely will grow even harder.

How Americans respond will reflect the strength of our national character and set the tone and course for our society for many years to come.

Will we rally together around collective common-sense-driven goals or default to self-serving individualistic ways that weaken the power of a united country?

The power to “do the right thing” is within us. All we need is perspective and discipline.

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