



National Coronavirus Meltdown Means No More Smug Jabs at California

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Until recently, we could all laugh at California's mind-boggling array of bans. Years ago, they prohibited single-use plastic bags. Gig work was banned this year, but firms like Uber fought back in court and firms like Vox Media blacklisted Californians. They talk about outlawing the internal combustion engine in ten years. It's even illegal to own a hamster there! Bottled water -- but not bottled Coke -- is verboten at the San Francisco airport.

But recent events have made me feel much less smug. Many of the products and services that California despises might save those of us hunkering down in our homes to avoid infection.

Since reusable bags harbor pathogens, chains like Target asked shoppers who won't avail themselves of single-use bags to bag their own purchases. (Last week, many municipalities wisely reversed or suspended these bans.) And then gig workers for companies like Uber Eats are essential to make life bearable for many people stuck in quarantine.

It should go without saying that we should be grateful for the rapid and reliable transportation provided by the internal combustion engine. At least we needn't feel "range anxiety" when dealing with shortages at the stores -- or a trip to the hospital. And with cars and trucks we can avoid crowded public transit altogether.

Until a few weeks ago, whenever I heard about California's many restrictions, I thought I'm so glad I live in Florida! (In fact, a 2016 Cato Institute survey ranked Florida and California the first and forty-eighth freest states, respectively.) But as I sit at home, with my kids in the house and most businesses closed, I don't feel so smug about California anymore.

Like many other places, local officials here are clamping down on the normal operation of our economy -- indefinitely, without an exit plan, and with no rhyme or reason beyond a single slogan: flatten the curve.

Set aside for a moment the propriety and practicality of barring a large number of people from productive activity and trade. Let's just consider what has brought us to the point that an illness -- about as dangerous as a very bad flu --- has brought our highly regulated medical sector to its knees.

Here are just a few that have come to light, and been waived: A initial CDC ban on effective, existing coronavirus tests other than its own (ineffective) test; laws preventing physicians from practicing across state lines; FDA regulations that keep patients from choosing treatment with drugs it does not approve; so-called "certificate of need" laws that prevent the expansion of hospital facilities.

I am no public health expert, but I haven't exactly had to dig hard for these examples. They're just regulations that have come up in the daily news stream as this crisis has unfolded, and that have clearly impeded our efforts to fight the pandemic. We are fighting blind due to an entirely needless months-long lag in deploying a test.

And, as if giving the virus a head start wasn't enough, we're playing catch-up while hobbled by manpower and capacity shortages. Patients who want to try existing drugs have to rely on a compassionate use loophole because the FDA would otherwise stop them from making that decision even with their own lives at stake.

No one disputes that flattening the curve will also flatten our economy, and many commentators worry that our government's reaction to this pandemic could be worse than the virus. But that's not the half of it: Government bans have stymied Americans for decades, leaving us in the situation we are in now, where millions are holing up in fear of a virus that is harmless to the vast majority.

But, hey! Since California and Senate Democrats (including three former presidential candidates) hadn't quite killed off Uber before the pandemic hit, at least we can still order dinner and booze while under house arrest.

This crisis has ripped away any semblance that we were free. California may have the most obviously ridiculous regulations, but our lives, our wealth and our liberty are all in peril. Blame decades of complacency in the face of regulations we failed to examine closely, even as they slowly sapped the strength of the very industry that we need to face down this pandemic.

We are all Californians now. Indeed, we've been Californians for some time.