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Prevailing over the pandemic: Human progress won't stand idle for long

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Some years, on the whole, are worse than others. Really bad ones meet the definition of a coarse colloquialism that is synonymous with the word for what babies do with a bottle and which rhymes with “duck.” Thus far, 2020 is one of those years. Death and despair have spread from continent to continent — not the consequences of world war — but disease. Still, shafts of hope are beginning to pierce the dark shroud of COVID-19. As painful as the pandemic has been, it’s valuable to remember that the world has been through far worse. And if past is prologue, progress achieved prior to the virus will be dusted off and relaunched to power the human race toward a brighter future.

The coronavirus from China infiltrated invisibly, possibly for months, before it was discovered. From a standing start, defensive medicine has struggled to catch up. Pestilence’s head start has enabled the disease to run down the elderly, sickly and unhealthy, infecting 17 million across the globe and killing nearly 700,000, including more than 150,000 Americans.

In a dead sprint for months, a medical A-team now has a visual on the crown-capped culprit off in the distance and is loading up to take the shot. “Operation Warp Speed,” a public-private initiative unleashed by the Trump administration, is engaged in all-hands-on-deck research and development of effective virus vaccines. Among dozens of pharmaceutical companies receiving federal funds, AstraZeneca, Moderna and Pfizer have entered their third and final phase of testing.

Barring poor results, initial shipments of an eventual sum of 300 million vaccine doses could be available for Americans by January. That would mean the complex process of vaccine development, which normally requires 10 to 15 years, will have been compressed into one. The can-do spirit of Americans, with help from like-minded Brits, could end up pulling off the most rapid, lifesaving medical breakthrough in history. Widespread distribution of a remedy would earn the United States a debt of gratitude from the world — excluding an aberrant strain of Democrats who refuse to lend credit to any enterprise associated with President Trump.

Even critics who cringe at the president’s name can’t deny their fortune in living during a time when Trump-era enterprise makes medical miracles possible. A century ago, Americans were not so lucky. The Spanish flu, carried by masses of unsuspecting soldiers returning from the battlefields of World War I, spread sickness worldwide. Before burning itself out in 1919, the

virus infected 500 million worldwide and killed at least 50 million, including 675,000 Americans. A commensurate death rate for the current coronavirus would add up to more than 2 million victims.

It is easy to imagine the dread of living trapped in an age in which suffering is everywhere. It should be just as natural to admire the grinding human effort expended by earlier generations to brush past the horrors of disease and march onward during a lifetime of labor, achievement and, for many, happiness. Owing to their resolve, there is a lot to like about life in the 21st century, despite the prevalence of disease.

HumanProgress.org, a project of the libertarian Cato Institute, marks the advance of betterment by quantifying the falling costs of 50 basic commodities tracked by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. As the human population grew from 4.5 billion to 7.6 billion between 1980 and 2018, the price of uranium fell by 87%, coffee by 86%, rice by 80%, aluminum by 76%, U.S. natural gas by 61%, beef by 70% and copper by 41%.

The average decline in cost for all 50 basic commodities was measured at 72%. Since price is determined by the balance between supply and demand, falling costs mean basic goods are increasing in abundance even faster than the rise in global population. If this seems counterintuitive, it's only due to the tendency to overlook the ultimate resource: human ingenuity, the same force that has been brought to bear against COVID-19.

Media doomsayers murmur that rich folks fleeing urban centers where the virus has spread spell the coming end of the American dream. Those cities were built, it must be remembered, by the strong arms of past pandemic conquerors. The smart money says it will be no different this time because human progress won't stand idle for long.