

By Thinking Differently About Coronavirus, President Trump Can Be Great

John Tamny

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It was sometime in 2004 that Cato Institute senior fellow Tom Palmer returned from a visit to Iraq. He was speaking at a Cato donor retreat, and as readers can likely remember, the U.S.'s military involvement in Iraq was the contentious issue du jour.

Palmer's analysis of what he saw offered solace to no one in the audience that day. He told the attendees that no one knew what the final answer or answers would be. Iraq was way too complicated for armchair analysis, and similarly was too complicated for the brightest of bright academic and think tank minds. Palmer told rapt listeners to comfortably dismiss assured analysis of a country that defied it.

Palmer's words arguably rate consideration now. There's so much certain commentary about Coronavirus. Some say it's a non-story, some say it's a slightly magnified flu virus that is ultimately manageable, while some say dismissal of this virus is the stuff of knuckle-draggers and mouthbreathers who refuse to acknowledge that the world is dangerous, and virus-carrying people quite lethal. Maybe, per Palmer, it's none of the above?

But assuming the alarmed and pessimistic are ultimately correct, it's not unreasonable to contend that the mouthbreathers have the correct approach to the virus. Very specifically, they're not letting it alter how they live one iota. They want to be out and about when they're not working, and during work times, they want to be working. With good reason. No matter what happens, bills have to be paid, tuition paid, rent paid, which means all too many are terrified that the close the doors, shut down businesses, and cancel everything reaction to what remains an unknown will so paralyze the economy that once we do know something, we'll also be unemployed.

All of the above is worth thinking about in terms of the late Steve Jobs. One of his final projects at Apple was a design of the new Apple headquarters in Cupertino, CA. He felt an architecturally planned increase in the frequency of bright minds bumping into other bright minds was essential to Apple's present and future success. Jobs built Apple's HQ to maximize the interactions of the firm's top asset: its people.

Though it's unknown if he'd ever heard of or met Matt Ridley, it seems Ridley and Jobs to some degree thought alike. Ridley has long celebrated people of varying skills, interests and IQs meeting up. As he's put it, when ideas "have sex" with each other, better, more developed ideas are born.

Which brings us back to the present, and the great unknown that is the Coronavirus. President Trump, easily the least political individual to ever be elected president, is offering a very political response. Figure that he's surrounded by those who've spent their lives in politics. It shows. Trump has declared a national emergency, he's promised all manner of public/private combinations meant to fight the virus, lots of federal spending, proposed Keynesian-style tax cuts that will do little to boost the capital formation that enhances growth, plus he's endorsed the idea of people separating from others. This is a shame, and it's arguably delaying a solution to the virus assuming the worst predictions about it come true. It is for two reasons.

For one, the biggest foe of death and disease – and nothing else comes close – is economic growth. Stating what should be obvious, rich and growing societies produce voluminous resources for specialized individuals to utilize in pursuit of answers to society's most vexing problems.

Looking back to 1901, a grandchild of John D. Rockefeller, the world's richest man, died of scarlet fever despite a \$500,000 investment in a cure from the Standard Oil founder. Nowadays scarlet fever doesn't factor in the developed world as a disease, and it doesn't thanks to past wealth creation that made pursuit of cures economic. It's worth adding that the 20th century itself was chock full of infectious disease panics, and it was simply because the U.S. wasn't as rich of a country then. Wealth in the U.S. is exponentially greater today, and epidemics no longer kill like they once did. The two aren't unrelated. If we want solutions to that which some are indifferent to, and that terrifies others, we need economic growth.

For two, economic growth is a consequence of free people interacting with each other, and yes, making sure their ideas are "mating." Though Jobs had the appearance of a new-age thinker, let's never forget that he was a visionary entrepreneur worth billions. No doubt a headquarters designed to foster exchange between bright minds appealed to the northern California aesthetic that he cultivated, but it was also rooted in a desire to make a lot of money. In other words, Apple would rapidly revert to average, and its share price would plummet, if its greatest assets were walled off from one another, literally and figuratively.

Bringing it back to Trump, he prides himself on being different. Since he does, and since he'll be vilified by the media no matter how he responds, here's Trump's chance to communicate to the electorate that Americans don't quarantine themselves, they don't shut down offices and businesses for weeks and months, they don't cancel events, plus they defy market-unfriendly politicians so tone deaf as to tell them to do those things. Instead, Americans work relentlessly, innovate by their nature, and through feverish wealth creation they turn today's diseases into tomorrow's afterthoughts. Trump should again be different. He should make plain that the government he leads will do nothing other than protect freedom so that creative, free people matched with capital can fix what potentially threatens us.

The academic, media and Ruling Classes will attack him relentlessly, but the success that is always a consequence of freedom will give Trump the last laugh. Trump was elected to "drain the swamp" that's now informing a response that's nothing like Trump. Channeling this most non-political of presidents, the Swamp-authored policy response designed for an outsider president by insiders is the stuff of losers. Trump should seek the greatness that only free people can create.