

The Washington Times

Freedom's fall has preceded rising COVID-19 coercion

December 21, 2020

As the last days of 2020 dissipate, coronavirus lockdowns, quarantines and isolation are escalating. The year will surely be remembered as one when freedom faltered. As natural as the morning light is the yearning for freedom, but fear of disease is erecting sturdy barriers that thwart the inborn desire for autonomy. Trends that predate the pandemic signal that the new year will likely bring additional challenges in the struggle against forces that oppose the irrepressible impulse to be free.

The Human Freedom Index (HFI), published last week by the Washington, D.C.-based Cato Institute and Vancouver, Canada's Fraser Institute, portrays a world losing ground in the contest between liberty and oppression. Measuring personal and economic freedom in areas that include rule of law, security and safety, religion, and expression and information, the index manifests an unhealthy decline of personal freedom among 162 nations during the decade ending with 2018, the most recent year for which data is available.

"The findings in the HFI suggest that freedom plays an important role in human well-being," writes Cato author Ian Vasquez, "and they offer opportunities for further research into the complex ways in which freedom influences, and can be influenced by, political regimes, economic development, and the whole range of indicators of human well-being."

Disturbingly, the index indicates America is not quite "the land of the free" it is customarily thought, coming in 17th among nations, two places lower than the previous year. The U.S. was not alone in slipping, though. Among the nations for which researchers have a full, 10-year record of indicators, overall freedom lost ground.

At the top of the liberty ladder, well ahead of the U.S., are New Zealand, Switzerland and Hong Kong, although China's heavy hand on its territorial appendage in 2020 is likely to soon drag the city from its lofty perch. Even Denmark, Canada and Sweden — often scorned as exemplars of socialism's regulatory excesses — have managed to outscore the U.S. on the freedom scale.

Fear of the coronavirus, which is attributed for the deaths of some 320,000 Americans and 1.6 million worldwide, has triggered in 2020 an unprecedented expansion of the regulatory state at the expense of freedom. Heavier restrictions on Christmas commerce and travel that have left U.S. citizens feeling unwelcome in their own nation can only further dim the cherished flame of freedom.

Unsurprisingly, inhumane public health orders, like New York City's short-lived ban on outdoor diners entering restaurants to use the bathroom, have triggered angry push-back. Americans wish no illness on their fellow citizens, but millions are choosing to ignore rules that consign them to destitution and isolation.

Liberty is a natural aspiration, but sadly, it is easily overwhelmed by fear. When the pandemic is but a memory, the task ahead will be to clear away the coercive coronavirus rules so Americans and their global brethren can once again breathe the air of freedom.