

A Medical Pearl Harbor: Pandemic Uncovers Societal Fissures and Leadership Breaches

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Cataclysmic events occur infrequently in the life of a country. For the United States, our Civil War, the 1918–19 Spanish flu pandemic, the Great Depression, Pearl Harbor, and the attacks on 9/11 each shook the foundations of our country and are forever ingrained in our national memory. In recent months, two events, the surging of COVID-19 across our land and most recently the insurrection at our nation's Capitol, have had such devastating impacts. We have written extensively about COVID and the disinformation that has prevented an effective response. The attack on the nation's Capitol represents an even more serious threat to the nation. Ironically, these two cataclysmic events are related in that both were the product of reckless disinformation forthcoming from a politically motivated president and his followers. The virus was “a hoax”; the election was “a fraud”. To our great misfortune, many people continue to believe the lies and the conspiracy theories and act accordingly.

The COVID-19 pandemic has killed our loved ones in unimaginable numbers, and it has deeply disrupted the way we live and work, the way we communicate, our economy, and our system of medical care. Like Pearl Harbor, this pandemic has exposed severe weaknesses in our defenses, particularly within our national leadership. We needed unity, an adherence to science, and a respect for medical expertise. Instead, we have seen a disorganized national response, a growing political toxicity, and a disrespect for science and medical expertise at the highest levels of government. President Trump, for the entire first year of the pandemic, has refused to acknowledge its severity while he promoted useless or even dangerous strategies and undermined the advice of acknowledged public health experts. At the same time, he either ignored or subverted the advice and input of federal agencies, such as the CDC and FDA, which play a critical role in establishing an effective response to epidemics. Indeed, our future medical, economic, political, and geopolitical recovery now depends on whether the new national leadership will be able to convince the American public to accept masking, distancing, social restraint, and vaccination as scientifically valid and necessary.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had major impacts on cancer care. These impacts have been and will continue to be addressed in this Journal. They include delays in screening and diagnosis, changes in care plans, and diversion of medical personnel and

resources to the urgent care of COVID-19 patients. Clinical trials and laboratory research have been equally disrupted. Indeed, COVID-19 has replaced cancer as the focus of public attention. We expect that cancer mortality, which has been steadily improving for the past two decades, will plateau or worsen as a result. The loss of life due to the COVID-19 pandemic in America is likely to exceed half a million victims, approaching or exceeding the yearly toll due to cancer.

Will President Biden and his new Democratic administration be able to help us turn the tide? As optimists who chose cancer research for our life's work, we believe we will. This country and its people successfully dealt with previous perils. We have not just recovered from past Pearl Harbors, we have prevailed and grown stronger ... when we are united. There is a lot to be done, a lot to be repaired, and most importantly, a lot of thinking to be changed in our country and abroad. The task of convincing the disbelievers in vaccination, masking, and social distancing is monumental, and indeed, it is part of a larger challenge to reestablish a respect for truth, for science-driven facts, for the democratic values and norms that are enshrined in our country's Constitution.

We have no choice but to hope and to try. It is the New Year. Time for new thinking and new strategies to be sure that plain truths reach everyone.

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