

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Crisis: A preview of the Big One

Recently, *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof asked the nation's leading epidemiologists about their best- and worst-case scenarios as the coronavirus spreads across America and the globe.

Under the best-case scenario, life returns to normal by the end of this summer. Thousands, mostly the elderly, have died before new infections are brought under control. The economy rebounds quickly. A vaccination is developed in early 2021.

The worst-case scenario: More than two million Americans die within the next year from the coronavirus, and tens of thousands of others die prematurely because our medical system is too overwhelmed to adequately treat other diseases.

The economy has plunged into a depression, as people fear to leave home. Businesses close and tens of millions are unemployed.

This is a truly horrific scenario. But the coronavirus doesn't present the existential threat to humanity that climate change does.

The worst pandemic of the modern era, the 1918-1919 Spanish Flu, killed about 675,000 people in the United States, less than 1 percent of the nation's population at the time.

Even today's worst case scenario, 2 million fatalities, is less than 1 percent of our current population.

There will be tremendous pain and suffering, but the nation — and the world — will survive.

In Tuesday's column, we pointed out that in 2015 Microsoft visionary Bill Gates predicted exactly the kind pandemic we have today and recommended common sense steps to prepare for it. We did not take them.

Even as the coronavirus broke out in China in January, President Trump scoffed that it was no worse than the common flu.

He didn't change his opinion until the stock market crashed three weeks ago.

The president has shown that same contempt for climate science, claiming that global warming is a hoax. Last November, he formally notified the United Nations the U.S. would withdraw from the Paris Agree-

ment on climate change, under which nearly 200 countries have pledged to cut greenhouse gas emissions.

That same month, a United Nations panel conceded that it's already too late to avert the worst effects of climate change.

"Every year of delay beyond 2020 brings a need for faster cuts, which become increasingly expensive, unlikely, and impractical," the U.N. report states.

The concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is now higher than any time in the last 800,000 years. The last time concentrations were this high, the oceans were 30 to 60 feet higher than they are today. That would put cities from New York to London to Shanghai completely underwater.

The reason that warming doesn't seem so bad, as we live everyday life, is climate lag. The oceans, which cover 71 percent of the earth's surface, warm much more slowly than land, just as a pan of water on a hot stove takes several minutes to boil.

Even if emissions stopped increasing tomorrow, the earth would continue to warm because of the greenhouse gases already in the atmosphere. Things will get much hotter.

Until now, Americans have resisted dealing with climate change because it would disrupt our lifestyles and our economy.

But the pandemic has done just that in a matter of weeks.

To prevent catastrophic warming, we must wean ourselves off fossil fuels and develop new forms of energy. We've made astonishing progress in recent years in creating usable energy from the sun and the wind, and developing battery technology that allows us to store that energy to use as needed. Technological advances also make it possible to build a new generation of nuclear power plants that are much safer than ones like Limerick.

Such dramatic changes will require intelligent, fact-based national leadership and ramped-up investment on a scale we haven't seen since World War 2.

We need a president who's up to the job. The voters will make that decision in November.



Commentary by
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