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ANALYSIS

After COVID: Twelve Challenges for a Shattered World



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Commentary

Three years ago, in the depths of lockdowns, it became obvious that we desperately needed a new citizen movement with a different focus. Prevailing ideological forms were simply not adapted to the enormous exogenous shock to the system that lockdowns implied. It was unexpected, especially under the guise of public health.

Every essential freedom was under attack. Authoritarian/totalitarian government sweep over the country and world, and nearly the entire intellectual class said: this is fine. And so I suggested a response:

“This movement, whether it is called anti-lockdown or just plain liberalism, must reject the wickedness and compulsion of this current moment in American life. It needs to counter the brutalism of lockdowns. It needs to speak and act with humane understanding and high regard for social functioning under freedom, and the hope for the future that comes with it. The enemies of freedom and human rights have revealed themselves for the world to see. Let there be justice. The well-being of us all is at stake.”

And such a movement did in fact form. It has been broad. It has transcended the ideological and class entrenchments of the past. It grew in sophistication and strategy over time. The resistance became international. It fought its way out of censorship and shaming. The fields of battle have been varied and comprehensive, from the scientific journals to journalism to hard-core revolts on the street such as the truckers' protest.

The results have been impressive. Vaccine mandates and passports have been beaten back. The right of international travel has been restored. Emergency declarations have been allowed to expire (even if the powers are still in place). We are back to pretending that the people and not the Faucis of the world are in charge.

There has been no justice, however. No question that the officials who did this to us are on the ropes. Many have resigned. Others are hiding. Rare is the public figure today who is willing to own what happened. And these days, hardly anyone defends the claim that the despotic response achieved anything in terms of public health.

Congress holds hearings on the pandemic response and that's great. But the mass media does not cover them. A brutalized population does not want to revisit the trauma. There has been and will likely not be any real accountability much less a Nuremberg 2.0.

We are left with a vast number of remaining issues from the past and new ones we never expected. These all necessitate continued ideological adaptation and citizen mobilization. It's a sad truth because people are tired and demoralized and more than ready for normal life again. But we cannot simply wish away the ugly truths all around us.

No question that the administrative bureaucracies would lock down again under the same or new pretext. Yes, they will face more opposition the next time and trust in their wisdom has fallen off a cliff. But the pandemic response also granted them new powers of surveillance, enforcement, and hegemony. The scientism that drove the response informs everything they do. So the next time, it will be harder to restrain them.

Below are some remaining and new issues we must confront in the coming years.

1. Tech Surveillance and Censorship

Big Tech surveilled before the pandemic response but the quasi-martial law of the period consolidated the power of the government over private data. The Twitter Files have proven the huge role that the police state played in censorship of science and any opinion that contradicted regime priorities.

Facebook groups were blasted away. LinkedIn and Twitter accounts were banned. Even Google search results were gamed. This was why those of us in the resistance had such a very difficult time finding each other in the first place.

When they demanded social distancing, they wanted more than human separation of six feet. They wanted to stop the formation of any serious resistance. They wanted us all isolated, disoriented, and thus easy to control. As a result, the tools that we once believed were designed for more human connection were deployed to keep us apart.

Yes, there are many lawsuits ongoing that challenge this practice as a violation of First-Amendment rights. Court discovery has produced many thousands of pages, and the decisions seem likely to land in the correct position.

But here's what is spooky. If these court challenges really posed much of a threat to the practice, wouldn't mainstream social platforms be eschewing censorship right now? They are not. YouTube is the king of takedowns. Instagram, LinkedIn, and Facebook do the same.

Only Twitter was relatively freed up once Elon Musk took over. But his new CEO is a champion of content moderation at the behest of the advertisers she hopes to lure back to the platform. It appears that the platform is going back to the way it was, perhaps with not the same intensity but with the same potential. In any case, the trajectory is not headed the right way. Censorship and surveillance are being institutionalized.

The mass media performed abysmally during the entire fiasco, threatening dissidents, amplifying lies, and cheering the compulsion. There have been no admissions of wrongdoing. We need all new sources of news.

2. Money and Banking

The Federal Reserve was essential to making the pandemic response possible. It stood ready to monetize every dollar Congress spent to subsidize the lockdowns and boost spending of the entire public-health hegemon. It was so essential that on March 15, 2020—two days after the declaration of emergency and one day before the Trump administration's lockdown edicts—it actually eliminated reserve requirements for banks completely. In other words, it abolished a core regulatory practice that had restrained money creation for more than 100 years. The result was a \$6.5 trillion printing spree.

The bank crisis caused by dramatically increased interest rates—a policy designed to arrest the inflationary consequences of the Fed's accommodation of the COVID regime—has destabilized regional banks and centralized banking operations. In the background is the stated intention of the Biden administration to reform the whole system using a Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC) that creates a path for a China-style social credit system of universal control.

The only solution is sound money but we are getting further from that by the day. The competent advocates of pro-freedom reforms are few and far between. The economists largely failed during the lockdowns to speak out for their discipline and knowledge. Now they are as captured as any other profession.

3. Business Enterprise

The pandemic response was a massive boon to big business, particularly tech and media companies, and a disaster for small business. My immediate concern in the earliest days of lockdowns concerned investment in such enterprises: why would anyone start one if it can be shut down by government edict? There has been no compensation for the losses and no attempt at reparations. A recession will introduce even more challenges.

A major boost to small and medium-sized businesses would be regulatory and litigation reform but today's political environment admits almost no discussion of these crucial topics. All the energies of Washington's lockdown shock troops are now spent on concocting ways for more regulation, less economic growth, higher business costs, and more interventions. Big business loves this but it is devastating for the middle class.

Champions of free enterprise need to understand that their cause has massively diverged from the interest of big business, which has never been more united with big government in a campaign to monopolize and cartelize industry. Collusion of this sort is now the norm. The system bears a lot in common with the corporatism of the interwar period that was later called fascism.

4. Regulatory Capture

Many of us got a thorough education in just how influential bad actors in the private sector are over government agencies. The revolving door is the main way they do business. The FDA started rubber-stamping vaccines even over the public objections of its top experts. The CDC was giving out recommendations that were effectively industry-based press releases.

The same is true for the whole of the regulatory state. It is no longer possible to discern which is the hand and which is the glove: government or big business. This is true for every department in government, including the war machine which operates at the behest of the munitions manufacturers.

The SEC is run by the securities industry. The Department of Labor is captured by the labor unions. HUD is captive of the housing developers. The Department of Agriculture rules at the behest of large agriculture interests while blocking access to markets for local farmers and ranchers. And so on.

Have we yet come to terms with this on the left or right? Have libertarians grappled with this? I suspect not. This reality has massively reshuffled the political layout. We have completely left the clarity of the 1980s and entered into a new world of grave complexity and corruption at all levels.

5. Public Health

The public-health bureaucracies took over in 2020 and what did they most neglect? Public health. They made us stay indoors when we needed sun. They closed the gyms when we needed exercise. They shut down the rehab centers and groups at a time of mass substance abuse. They blocked the distribution of repurposed drugs that doctors even at the time knew to be effective for respiratory infections. Even basic antibiotics lost their luster in the mandate to wait for the vaccine. And together all these actions reinforced a problem far more vast than infectious disease: chronic disease, including obesity.

What about health? It's in crisis. The American diet has to change. That in turn connects to the way we live our lives. We all need to learn that not every health problem can be solved by a pharmaceutical. Indeed, the opposite is true: a society awash in government-approved snake oil is fundamentally poisoned. The poisoning of the body needs to stop. The only way out is the old-fashioned way: fresh air, sunshine, healthy diet, and daily exercise. It sounds like a cliché but it is a matter of life and death.

Also essential are real and not captive markets. Our systems of delivery of medical services need to become more competitive with doctors granted the freedom to practice again. The system of insurance serves mostly industry and not customers. All of this cries out for radical reform. As for the FDA and CDC, reform is simply not enough. They must be razed to the ground with new systems taking their place.

In addition, over the pandemic period we observe how public health became a trojan horse for martial law. So far as I can tell, that remains true today. The problem here is deep and frightening, especially since virtually any social, cultural, and economic problem can be rendered as a health issue.

6. Educational Institutions

The public schools closed in some places for up to two years. Government forced closures on many private schools. Homeschooling became mandatory as daycare centers also closed. This massively disrupted the work and education habits of families but now millions are seeking alternatives. This applies to universities and colleges who betrayed students first with lockdowns and then with mask and vaccine mandates.

There has to be a better way. And the market for educational services needs to open up to allow a better way. The old way failed and is now being drained of trust, energy, and resources, even as student debt has ballooned to incredible levels and public institutions are no longer attractive places to work. The dream of universal education was killed by its most passionate champions.

And yet, new institutions are taking their place. They have to. In the process of recreation has come a new and much-welcome emphasis on Classics, basics, and genuine educational fundamentals. Sadly the transition will leave many people. Students are already two years behind in learning, thanks to the cruel closures.

7. The Deep State

Americans had become vaguely aware of this thing called the deep state before the pandemic response but the experience itself proved it. Democracy did not exist. We were at the mercy of bureaucrats and their decisions. Courts did not step up. When they finally did, the bureaucrats pushed back and said that no one has the right to control them.

There are hundreds of agencies and millions of deep-state employees who are accountable to no one and yet exercise massive power over our lives. There is nothing about these institutions in the Constitution. The bureaucratic state is a fourth branch of government when there are supposed to be only three. The tentacles from Washington extend not only to every state and city but all over the world.

This whole problem began in 1880 but massively worsened in the postwar world, and then rallied to hegemony in the 21st century. It absolutely must be dismantled or, at the very least, held accountable by elected representatives of the people. This point is obviously very important to the establishment. The repeal of the executive order that would reclassify many administrative employees as at-will (Schedule F) was one of the first acts repealed by the Biden administration.

8. Crime and War

During lockdowns, traffic accidents massively worsened and stayed that way. The data are not in yet but they are certain to reflect record crashes and deaths. Why might this be so? I spoke to an Uber driver who explained that driving became and remained a venue for the expression of human volition when our avenues for exercising free will were closed off. Add anger and substance abuse to that and you have disaster on your hands.

The lockdowns coarsened life and blunted the moral conscience. If government can do all this to us, why can we not do it to each other? After this experience, people are no longer mustering the empathy sufficient to care about the well-being of others. People stopped making eye contact with each other, and then the masks made even basic nonverbal cues impossible. Communication itself was reduced to its most base elements.

The results started to become obvious with the entirely just protests that turned to violent riots in some spots in the summer of 2020. The crime wave has not abated ever since. Cities now tolerate a level of petty thievery that would have been unthinkable just ten years ago. The cops no longer care and the citizenry in general shows far less respect for property and person than in the past.

When government becomes immoral with the blessing of all the commanding heights in society, it sends a message to everyone else. In this way, the pandemic response unleashed a form of ethical nihilism and detached communities from a human connection to each other. The forced human separation was bad for the soul, and this dabbling in wrongdoing spread around the world.

Even the Ukraine-Russia conflict is a symptom of this loss of rationality and morality. Recall that Putin himself spent at least a year in lockdown, isolated from reality and physical contact, enough to drive an already power-drunk oligarch into a delusional state of mind. The same could be said of Biden with the mindless funding of the Ukrainian regime. The clash of these leaders has become an apocalyptic pursuit devoid of diplomatic wisdom, imbued with almost messianic fanaticism. So too for the peanut galleries recruited to cheer one side or the other. Common sense has been trampled as the funding blows up, more property is destroyed, and lives are lost.

9. Immigration

Never forget that the travel restrictions that began in 2020 kept most of the human population locked in their nation-state residences for years, even those living on islands that used to be sanctuaries. The right to visit the United States for the “unvaccinated” only resumed on May 11, 2023.

The captivity of the people has also driven a desperate desire to flee and find a new home. The massive demographic shifts in the U.S. population, out of lockdown states to open states, is reflected internationally too. With huge populations on the move, states have been forced to come to terms with migration policies on which there is no political consensus.

This problem is blowing up right now on the U.S. Southern border, leading to tremendous anger that has turned into a major populist backlash under the impression that the country is being invaded. This is not going to end well for anyone. The answer has to be a rational and humane immigration policy that can somehow separate worker rights from voting rights, but the United States is not prepared to tackle that issue as most nations in the world already have. As a result, we toggle between legal restrictionism and border chaos.

10. Shattered Lives

The trauma of the last three years has shattered the stability of millions of families and communities. Couples were torn by travel restrictions but also internal arguments about vaccines. Children could not attend the funerals of their parents and couples held weddings on Zoom. Many families are dealing with grim deaths not from COVID but from ventilators, despair, suicide, and vaccines.

Digital addictions of various sorts tore apart familial loyalties. Strange new forms of gender dysphoria have been unleashed in this period too, and that cannot be a coincidence. Many parents live wracked with guilt about their vaccine-injured children.

The arts experienced wreckage, ruining careers that took a lifetime to build. How can we have a true civilization without the arts? Without them, we are reduced to the status of brutes.

Many small communities had their routines disrupted as civic associations dissolved. Every person experienced this in different ways: the local band broke up over mask wearing, the bridge club stopped meeting up over vaccines, the religious community drained of energy in arguments about social distancing, and so on. There is plenty of anger everywhere in plain sight.

These are conditions that can lead to disaster, especially when it is coupled with an economic crisis. It's a powder keg.

11. The History

Vast efforts on the part of Brownstone writers are spent getting the history of this correct. Precisely when was COVID spreading? When did U.S. officials know? When was the response mapped out and who was involved? Who decided to transfer authority over to the security state? What tools did the federal government use to coerce the states? Why the neglect of natural immunity? How did repurposed drugs get deprecated and why?

There are thousands of questions, many of which are mapped out in the independent Norfolk Group document that Brownstone supported. There are commissions needed in every nation, state, city, and county. We need answers. We've discovered many features of the response and the truth about the truths and strategies but we have a very long way to go.

The establishment line is that while mistakes were made, science is hard and officials had to improvise in real time. That is utter rot. There was very little about the entire regime that made any sense, and anyone with an ounce of knowledge knew that and also knew the devastation that it would cause. Why precisely did the people in charge decide to blind themselves? Who were the powers behind the throne?

We have to get this right, and the challenge is intensified by the mandatory secrecy of all the main players. Still, if we don't get the history discovered and told, we will be stuck with the propaganda version of events, and that serves only ruling-class interests. Nor can we depend on regime historians to reveal unflattering truths.

Generations hence will ask the great question: how could they have so stupidly dismantled civilization so quickly and under such thin pretense? We must have the answers.

12. Force as a Policy Tool

To muscle the whole population into a particular pattern of action and belief was the core principle of the COVID response. It was worse than being treated like lab rats: at least scientists don't try to control what the rats think. It was the ultimate and global experiment in social management under the guise of science.

This is why Brownstone was founded with one ideal that came out of the pandemic policy experience: "a society that places the highest value on the voluntary interaction of individuals and groups while minimizing the use of violence and force including that which is exercised by public or private authorities."

Achieving that is our task but the barriers are massive. The Iron Law of Liberalism formulated by British sociologist Ralph Miliband says that all reform efforts by liberal democracies ultimately serve the interest of the economic and political elite, rather than the general population. That's certainly been the experience in our lifetimes.

That is why we need more than a political movement. We need a massive cultural and intellectual movement that upholds a new ideal. In some ways, however, it's not really a new ideal. It is the trajectory of the idea of human progress for many hundreds of years dating back even to the Magna Carta. That push has been for enforceable limits on power and fundamental rights to the people. The whole point of representative government was to guarantee that as a living reality.

All of this was taken away to the cheers of all elite opinion, ending in shattered lives and a global loss of trust. Before this happened, many people never realized just how important freedom truly is to a well-lived life and the building of a humane society. Nor did we know just how fragile civilization truly is.

Now we know. If we want to restore it, there is work to do. The urgency cannot be exaggerated. There is too much at stake to ignore any of the above. Rebuilding requires all our efforts.

From the Brownstone Institute

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