

# Forget the Trump Administration. America Will Save America.

The federal government bungled its response to the coronavirus. But leaders around the country give us reason to hope.

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South Korea mobilized health care companies to make coronavirus tests in late January, when the country had only four cases. Soon, 10,000 Koreans a day were being tested, and now new infections are dropping.

The first cases in the United States were identified in January, too, and yet we don't even know how many people have been tested — estimates range from just 54,000 to 139,000 total. While Angela Merkel of Germany was soberly telling her compatriots that up to 70 percent of them could expect to get the virus, setting expectations and summoning solidarity, it took Fox News weeks to realize that the coronavirus was not a Democratic hoax to make people mad at President Trump.

It's not surprising that people are comparing the United States' botched response with other countries' handling of the outbreak and concluding, as a headline in Slate put it, that "America is a sham" — that our economy is fragile, our society shallow and our democracy rotten to the core. This crisis has exposed the deep fissures and failures in our culture and the incompetence of so many of our federal leaders. And a reckoning must be had; we are already seeing calls for an inquiry akin to the 9/11 commission into why we were so unprepared.

But if this crisis is highlighting our weaknesses as a nation, it is also bringing out some of our greatest strengths. In the absence of competent national leadership, others are stepping up. Governors and mayors, business owners, university presidents, philanthropists, pa

City officials are also on the front lines. In addition to imposing curfews and shutting down bars and restaurants, they are finding new ways to help those most affected. Mayor Jenny Durkan of Seattle announced a proposal to issue \$800 vouchers to more than 6,000 families to help them buy food and cleaning supplies and ordered a halt to most evictions, including for small businesses and nonprofits. The Columbus, Ohio, City Council created a \$1 million emergency fund to help virus-affected residents with food and housing.

In Indianapolis, food pantries have transformed operations in a matter of days, allowing the people they serve to drive through and pick up food. Jeb Banner, the chief executive of a software company created the Indy Service Workers Venmo List, which lets waiters, cooks and bartenders enter their name, employer and Venmo ID so that locals can send them tips during the downturn.

The National Domestic Workers Alliance has done something similar, starting a fund whereby people can donate to house cleaners, home health aides and others who are unable to do their jobs right now. Chicago has a plethora of responses, from a coronavirus fund coordinated by the city government and philanthropic groups to a community newsletter sent out by Block Club Chicago, a nonprofit news site that tells its readers to just hit reply to get help with signing up for unemployment or food stamps.

Meanwhile, around the country, business leaders were some of the first to act. Facebook, Google, Twitter, Cisco and Amazon all established remote work policies by March 12. Most also announced that their companies would continue to cover the wages of employees who couldn't do their jobs while out of the office, like contract workers. Universities recognized the danger of allowing their students to return from spring break and infect one another and the surrounding communities, and moved classes online. They also marshaled their experts to help inform the public about the risks of the coronavirus; many of us are finding the Johns Hopkins University's Coronavirus Resource Center more reliable and on top of the information curve than the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

These are the hallmarks of a horizontal, open society, one that is often inefficient but ultimately more innovative and resilient than closed, top-down systems. That is not to excuse the absence of national leadership; many Americans are likely to die who could have been protected had the nation been better prepared and better led. When people are suffering and dying and a virus is propagating, high-quality, centralized, top-down direction is critical.

Over the longer term, however, we are better off with as much experimentation and as many leaders as possible, not only to spur the kinds of innovations that will protect us from the virus (vaccines, treatments, cheaper and better medical equipment) but also to guide our transition to a very different world.

The coronavirus, and its economic and social fallout, is a time machine to the future. Changes that many of us predicted would happen over decades are instead taking place in the span of weeks.

For example: Many of the universities that managed to move all classes online in little under a week had been resisting online education for years, notwithstanding its obvious benefits in terms of lower costs and greater inclusion. They will now be surprised to discover that online teaching can actually be better than physical classrooms. Why then return to the tyranny of the semester system, in which my professor husband is teaching the same course exactly the same way (two lectures, one discussion section, over 13 weeks) as when I took it in 1978? Universities will instead compete to offer the best blend of residential and virtual education.

We are also suddenly living in a world that the United States government long insisted was impossible — one of drastically reduced plane and car emissions. Here we are at home, connecting to others around the world virtually rather than physically. That is terrible for the airlines but good for the planet. It may be good for us, too. A five-hour conference that I participated in last week matched a physical conference very closely, complete with breakout rooms and individual conversations. I just didn't have to waste hours traveling to get there.

And now that we're all at home, what to do with our empty office buildings? Given the housing crises in so many cities, the answer seems obvious. Much commercial real estate could be transformed into apartments. All the municipalities that are imposing moratoriums on evictions should be willing to experiment in the months ahead.

The future of work is here as well, for good and ill. Knowledge workers are logging in from home while restaurants and factories are laying people off, causing an enormous amplification in existing inequalities. This is incredibly painful, but it's also an opportunity to make the changes we knew we were going to have to make eventually.

First, we need to get more people into better-paying jobs that can be done anywhere via a computer. Employers complain that they can't find workers with the skills they need for knowledge jobs. Many organizations across the country are training people with nontraditional pedigrees to fill them.

Second, we need to invest in more locally based, customized goods and services and supply chains, which are less vulnerable to threats like cyberattacks, natural disasters and disease (not to mention automation).

Last year Gov. Gavin Newsom of California created a Future of Work Commission for his state. At one of its hearings, manufacturing experts predicted a future of "additive manufacturing," or local 3-D printing. Earlier this month, a group of more than 300 engineers, designers, doctors, nurses and others came together on Facebook to work on the Open Source Ventilator project. In seven days they came up with a prototype for a ventilator that can be assembled from bio-plastics and manufactured with 3-D printers. The Irish engineer Colin Keogh says that Ireland's Health Services will review the prototype next week with the goal of making it available to coronavirus patients. Maker spaces around the United States should start building these immediately. As communities figure out how to meet the basic needs of the newly un- and underemployed, and as weeks stretch into months, this kind of project could be a model for the creation of new businesses and new jobs.

Many of the jobs of the future should also be in caregiving, broadly defined to include not only the physical care of the very old and very young, but also education, coaching, mentoring and advising. This crisis is a reminder of just how indispensable these workers are. After arguing for the importance of the care economy for years, I was delighted to see, after only *one* day of kids' staying home, three different men tweet versions of the following: "First day of home schooling and I now firmly believe that teachers should be paid like C.E.O.s." Indeed they should, and after this crisis subsides, we may finally be able to build support for higher teacher pay and prestige.

All these transitions take money, of course, and above all the basic security that allows people to see opportunity rather than devastation, to feel hope rather than fear. We must mitigate the rising panic as we contemplate the possibility that millions of Americans will simply not have a paycheck as local economies shut down.

Here, too, we are seeing a fast forward, to a rudimentary Universal Basic Income. Congress is considering various versions of that, including one proposal that would provide initial direct cash payments of \$2,000 per person for every adult and child in families making up to \$180,000, beginning in April.

Once again, however, we don't have to wait for Washington. The nonprofit group Give Directly, which has been testing universal basic income in Kenya, is raising money to provide \$1,000 to families in need across the United States. The group is working with Propel, a company that made an app for managing food stamp benefits, to identify families in the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, typically single mothers. Payments will be made through debit cards that can be loaded remotely, or by setting recipients up with online wallets. Communities can adapt versions of this system, creating an informal tax that could become a formal one.

Finally, all of this innovation will require universal access to fast, affordable broadband. Our government has an obligation to provide public education; it must now provide the broadband to make that education possible. It can certainly be done, but the government will have to better regulate private internet service providers and move to more accountable municipally owned internet service utilities, like the one that offers the nation's fastest broadband, in Chattanooga, Tenn.

The future is here, whether we like it or not. Although a future dependent on the current federal government looks bleak, we can vote to change that in November. Right now, we can follow the lead of local and regional leaders and step up ourselves. Through the virus, we are rediscovering the dark side of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous "inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." But we can also rediscover what is possible and what we are capable of as a nation. We can use this crisis to create a better America.

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