

This Should Have Been a Problem, Not a Pandemic by Daniel M. Kammen

AS OF THIS WRITING (EARLY APRIL 2020), more than 1 million people worldwide are sick with COVID-19, 20 percent of them in the United States. After claiming that COVID-19 was nothing more than the flu, the U.S. president has been forced to retreat and admit that 200,000 deaths would be a sort of victory relative to forecasts of 2 million dead. His presidency has turned away from science in search of profits for the already wealthy and he cares so little about its citizens that basic health care is a luxury good. We have seen the worst economic quarter in the history of the U.S. stock market, while unemployment is approaching 15% nationwide, with projections of 50% in some of the hardest hit, and most fossil-fuel dependent, states. Everything COVID is of excessive, historic, proportions.



And yet, COVID-19 is a simple, natural virus. True, it is potent and challenging, but it is not unique, and there will be other crises on a crowded, over-consuming planet where we have put every ecosystem and species in peril, including our own.

There is, however, nothing natural about the crisis we now face. It has been engineered by humans. The tragedy we face is, in fact, one of greed and indifference.

To turn a virus into a social and economic upheaval takes work. We needed to actively ignore and discount most of the best lessons of the past century. We have elected a government that devalued, ignored, and disrespected science, despite a century of medical advances that have enabled healthy, long, lives. We have under-invested in research and education, despite awarding the 1987 Nobel Prize in Economics for work that indicates that 80 percent of economic growth, or more, derives from scientific and technological innovation. We have uplifted opinions on social media based on how caustic and cruel they are, not how much they are based in fact. We installed a government that has looked to divide, not to unite, has fought against healthy air and water, and encourages wages to be as low and demeaning as possible to enrich the already affluent.

COVID-19 would not have spread as fast and as virulently if the lessons of SARS, MERS, and Ebola were acted upon in the United States. It would be a problem, not a pandemic, if healthcare were available to the people who cook, clean, shop, and care for the more affluent. And more importantly, destruction of biodiversity and natural areas means that coronavirus-type episodes are likely to become more common.

So, while COVID-19 is rightly dominating the headlines, the true crime is of sidelining science, abusing the planet by valuing profits over basic health and educational services, living wages, and social opportunity for the most vulnerable.

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