

WORLD

# The ‘Slow Pearl Harbors’ of the Coronavirus Crisis

By MATTHEW CONTINETTI | March 23, 2020 3:23 PM

A woman wearing a protective mask walks past a portrait of Chinese President Xi Jinping on a street as the country is hit by an outbreak of the coronavirus in Shanghai, China, March 12, 2020. (Aly Song/Reuters)

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China delayed and dissembled, the federal bureaucracy prevented decisive action when it was still possible, and a pandemic caught the U.S. unprepared.

As I write, the richest and most powerful country on Earth is shutting down cities, states, and large portions of its economy to stop the spread of a deadly contagion. The potential economic, political, social, and security costs are incalculable. The problem is made worse because hindsight bias allows us to see that current conditions might have been avoided. Instead, as happens so often in history, wishful thinking and self-deception led to dire consequences.

“Quite a few years ago,” wrote Roberta Wohlstetter in the autumn 1979 issue of *The Washington Quarterly*, “I looked into why we were surprised at Pearl Harbor.” Part of the difficulty of anticipating such events, she said in “The Pleasures of Self-Deception,” is in separating meaningful signals from background noise. Another part is self-deception. “What has interested me from the beginning but more so in recent times,” Wohlstetter continued, “is the role the victim often plays in deceiving himself. This seems especially important in cases that occur between wars, where the critical time to recognize what an adversary is up to may take years, and where perceptions may be shaped by extended negotiations, past, present, and future, on the assumed common interests of the opposing sides. These are the slow Pearl Harbors, so to speak.”

Wohlstetter offered three examples: The British resisted the conclusion that Hitler meant to rearm Germany; the United States avoided the recognition that the Soviets intended to outpace the American nuclear deterrent; and the Western powers refused to acknowledge India’s nuclear ambitions. “In all of these errors persisting over a long period of time in the face of increasing and sometimes rather bald contrary evidence, cherished beliefs, and comforting assumptions about the good faith and common interest of a potential adversary play a very large role. The victims in such cases may be the principal deceivers.”

Viruses lack the presumed rationality and intentionality of human adversaries. But Wohlstetter’s framework still helps clarify the chain of events that has placed the United States in such an unprecedented strategic situation.

In this case, there is not one slow Pearl Harbor. There are two.

The first blunder was China’s. Not until December 31 did the Communist power tell the World Health Organization that a novel coronavirus had been found to induce a deadly lung disease in Wuhan. “The disease is preventable and controllable,” read part of Beijing’s statement to WHO.

Doctors found the first overseas cases in Thailand and Japan in mid-January. The United States reported its first case on **January 20**. “By the time Chinese officials acknowledged the risk of human-to-human transmission on January 21,” reports the *New York Times* in a remarkable piece of visual journalism headlined, “**How the Virus Got Out**,” “local outbreaks were already seeded in Beijing, Shanghai, and other major cities.” The Wuhan lockdown began on January 23. By then, **five million people** had already left the city.

Then came the second failure. It was in Washington State that the first U.S. case of the coronavirus appeared. A Seattle-area doctor wanted to re-purpose flu tests to detect the infection. She asked state and federal authorities for permission. They said no. FDA regulations prevented approval of innovative tools. Initial CDC testing criteria were too strict. The CDC’s original test kits did not work, and took weeks to fix.

Red tape and bureaucratic failures inhibited efforts to detect and trace the extent of the disease. Testing is now finally ramping up, but not to the level necessary to shift from mitigation to suppression. As one doctor told the *Times* for a **March 10 story**, “This virus is faster than the F.D.A.”

The FDA and CDC say they did everything they could to expedite the testing regime. That may be true. The problem wasn’t so much with their actions but with the regime itself, which was not constructed for a pandemic of this sort. At every level, our government was captive to the widespread belief that nothing like Ebola or SARS or MERS could happen on a large scale in the United States, and it cost us.

“Not to be deceived was uncomfortable,” wrote Wohlstetter. “Self-deception, if not actually pleasurable, at least can avoid such discomforts.” She referenced the sociological concept of the “self-annihilating proposition” or “suicidal prophecy” described by Robert Merton. “A basic underlying characteristic of these prophecies which are perverse or have perverse effects,” she wrote, “is that there are genuine ambiguities in the evidence supporting them. The unanticipated consequences upset the initial assumption. But policy predispositions, desires, and prejudices may lengthen the time it takes to recognize that the prophecies are false or have perverse effects.”

When Dr. Nancy Messonnier of the CDC warned of widespread social disruption on a February 25 conference call, her words were shocking. Her prediction seemed alarmist, unimaginable. Now, less than a month later, it is reality.

China delayed and dissembled. The American kludgeocracy jammed up. And the slow Pearl Harbors caught us unprepared.

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