Well it is entirely obvious by now that life in the USA has changed due to the corona virus’s clutch on the world as a whole. In these seemingly desperate times, as in similar crises, there is always a bit good mixed in with the bad and some other things worth commenting on as well. Let’s start with some aspect of the good.

The scene is 5:30 am on a Tuesday morning. I usually get up this early but ordinarily I stumble into my home office and look for research ideas or inspiration for a new blog. This day I did nothing of the kind. Shuffling off to the bathroom, I ran a comb through my hair, freshened my face, and changed from pajamas to street clothes. Slipping out of the bathroom I went downstairs, fetched my fob, and at 5:45 am left my house. My destination, the local supermarket, lay some ten minutes away. When I arrived I queued up behind the dozen or so people there before me, each keeping a 6-foot buffer between himself and his neighbors to the front and rear. A little after 6 am, the store opened and we all somberly entered in single file. Most, if not all, of us went straight down the paper products aisle looking for that one commodity that is to our modern situation what gasoline was to Mad Max - toilet paper. It was eerie and surreal to walk through an area of the store that until 2 months ago held an abundance of products to find just under a hundred packs of rolls that were mostly scooped up by myself and my fellow early-morning shoppers.

There are many good aspects of this sorry situation but I’ll only comment on three.

The first is that, despite the stay-at-home orders and the general shuttering of the economy, the American can do spirit has not entirely withered. There are still manufacturing activities going on in the country. The supply chains may be clogged but are not stopped and we still enjoy such a high standard of living that was entirely inconceivable a century ago.

The second is contextual and may not come home to everyone, even though it should. What we are experiencing with these various shortages is a small foretaste of what socialism would be like if we embraced it. Long lines, empty shelves, and desperation are always the earmarks of socialism and communism. No country on Earth, even the so-called socialist scandanavian nations, can have a vibrant economy under socialism. Denmark and Sweden (and probably the others in the fever dreams of politicians who believe in a Nordic utopia) have clearly rejected the label of socialism and pointed to their free-market practices. And well they should, because free-market practices are what fill shelves with toilet paper, sugar, napkins, ground beef and so on. And, touching on my first point above, we can see experientially just what happens when the market is not free and, hopefully, this will be the worst we’ll ever see.

The third is far more prosaic dealing with substitution as a by-product rule. Economists like to point out that when supply is low and demand is high and prices rise, consumers will substitute similar alternatives for the good they usually purchased. For example, people might switch to ground turkey if beef prices sharply increase. I think economists should have a field day with papers galore based on what I have observed. Everywhere I went in the supermarket, there were shelves totally missing contents next to shelves brimming with products very few wanted. I know that I have tried new items that I ordinarily wouldn’t have purchased but it seemed that even in crisis, choosy mothers were finicky about what foods they were allowing in. It would be fascinating to see a breakdown of what threatened people still wouldn’t touch and if the buyers of the various chains change how they purchase based on these observations.

On the bad front, I’ll focus only on one thing but a really bad one. The nation’s governors, mayors, and elites seem to have let, in far too many instances, power go to their heads. The textbook example is probably found in Michigan where the following table compares the do’s and dont’s, courtesy of governor Megan Whitmer,

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Do** | **Don’t** |
| Purchase liquor, lottery tickets, and marijuana | Purchase seed, paint, and rugs |
| Go boating with a canoe, rowboat, or kayak | Go boating with a power boat or jet ski |
| Get an abortion | Get a biopsy or joint replacement |

Louisville, KY Mayor Greg Fischer comes in a close second when [he ordered churches to cease ‘drive-in’ services](https://abcnews.go.com/US/kentucky-governor-warns-worshipers-congregate-easter-weekend/story?id=70101091) where each car was at least 6 feet from neighboring ones but wouldn’t ban drive-through food pickup, where the distances between strangers was much closer and number of direct-interactions much higher. I challenge anyone to find the logical rhyme-and-reason of these allowances and prohibitions. The table listings smack of lobbyist influence and crony-capitalism. Milton Friedman certainly seems vindicated in his belief that big government exists to grant favors. In addition, all sense of cost-benefit analysis and awareness of hidden costs seems to have gone out the window in shuttering the national economy.

Sure COVID-19 seemed like the super-flu ‘prophesied’ in [Stephen King’s The Stand](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Stand) back at the beginning of March but now the emerging evidence seems to indicate that the communicability of the disease is much higher and the lethality a lot lower. Still cries persist that even one life lost is too many. What utter nonsense. Below is a table adapted and supplemented from [CDC data](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/leading-causes-of-death.htm) indicating how people died in 2017.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Cause of Death** | **Number of Deaths** |
| Heart Disease | 647,457 |
| Cancer | 599,108 |
| Accidents | 169,936 (including [37,133 traffic deaths](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Motor_vehicle_fatality_rate_in_U.S._by_year)) |
| Chronic Lower Respiratory Diseases | 160,201 |
| Stroke | 146,383 |
| Diabetes | 83,564 |
| Influenza and pneumonia | 55,672 |
| Nephritis, Nephrotic Syndrome, and Neprhosis | 50,633 |
| Suicide | 47,173 |
| COVID-19 (as of 4/24/20) | [44,973](https://search.yahoo.com/search?fr=mcafee&type=E211US0G10&p=covid-19+deaths+usa) |

I get that social distance impeded the immediate spread (although the Chinese Communists could have nipped it in the bud if they hadn’t lied) but let’s get people back to work. We don’t shutter the economy because over 600,000 people die of heart disease, no doubt aggravated by working in close proximity to other people. The unseen cost of keeping the economy moribund will cause more addictions and more suicides for years to come.

I’m not the only one advocating for a measured approach to the risk imposed by COVID-19. Heather Mac Donald, in her article [*The Deadly Costs of Extended Shutdown Orders*](https://amgreatness.com/2020/04/22/the-deadly-costs-of-extended-shutdown-orders/), argues quire convincingly that focusing on saving “just one life” effectively does more harm than good and that our governing elite are using anything but the science of risk analysis to make policy.

I’ll end on an ugly note, since the blog title suggests a more than passing similarity with a famous western. The behavior of my fellow man can be very ugly, despite certain philosophers claiming that tragedy and crisis bring out the best in people as it shakes them from their complacency. The scarcity of toilet paper could be understandable as a supply-side problem if I didn’t see a neighbor 3 streets away try to scurry into her home in the early hours last week. With two 20-packs of toilet paper under each arm and another 20 pack in the trunk one has to wonder if she eats it or has she simply given into panic and fear and is hoarding. Let’s just say that my answer to that question doesn’t favor toilet paper as any part of the food pyramid.