

► **DirecTalk** MUSINGS FROM THE 10TH FLOOR

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The Raven

Savagery, pure and simple. The raven seemed unfazed by the cloud of the victim's angry and agitated family members as it inserted its beak into a nesting cavity of much smaller birds and brusquely removed a tiny, wriggling pink mass. The winged beast causally flew off to dismember and digest its meal. I endured the spectacle of the raven returning again and again over a 2-hour period to eat multiple baby birds. Edgar Allan Poe is smirking somewhere in the ether.

Darwinism can be painfully disquieting. Contemporary developments in environmental health and more broadly in public health, however, are by contrast not natural selection at work. Hostile residents, political ineptness, and mixed messages from elected leadership are not inevitable manifestations of evolution. Prevailing societal attitudes that have given rise to >150,000 COVID-19 deaths in the U.S. (as of press) are the spawn of our European forefathers.

American immigrants in the 18th and 19th centuries were by all accounts a tough bunch—independent, resourceful, rugged, and determined. Those are darn fine qualities for humans with a penchant for clearing and living off the land. Those same attributes in 21st century America, while laudable in certain circumstances and in measured doses, are literally killing us, devastating the economy, and dismantling the fabric of society.

Just before Memorial Day weekend I drove virtually nonstop for 13 hours from Maryland to Florida to deposit my wife Angela at our daughters' home where she quarantined while waiting for the birth of our first grandchild.

The moment has arrived for us to embrace a new national identity.

Route 95 on the eastern seaboard is a boring and monotonous excuse for a road, punctuated by intermittent scenes of feral swine foraging in the leaf litter. Wild pigs are modestly amusing when observed at a distance but the further we traveled south, the more disturbed I became. I intermittently stopped for fuel and stretch breaks and noticed an increasingly more perplexing sight—people not wearing face coverings, ignoring physical distancing recommendations, and gathering in large groups. Whiskey. Tango. Foxtrot.

The contrast to Maryland was palpable where face coverings are required to enter public buildings and public health authorities are generally respected. By the time we arrived in Orlando, it seemed like I landed on a foreign planet. I estimated that approximately 40–50% of the shoppers in a well-recognized Orlando grocery store were oblivious to basic COVID-19 public health recommendations. I mentioned to my family that I had a bad feeling about the lackadaisical impression Floridians were sending me.

Since Memorial Day, Alabama, Arizona, Florida, Louisiana, and Texas have suffered a COVID-19 resurgence with discussions of

returning to lockdown resurfacing. The same independent, rugged, and determined sensibilities that characterized the birth of this nation are now eroding away our foundations. There are numerous reports of local and state health officials being harassed and threatened by gun carrying, rowdy, independent residents who feel their rights and financial well-being are being compromised by underpaid public servants. According to my friends at the National Association of County and City Health Officials, over 20 of their members have recently quit or retired in large measure due to threats to them or their families.

In entrepreneurial circles it is generally understood that people who are gifted at starting companies are not so great once the enterprise begins to mature from infancy to middle age. The adrenaline surge of new ideas and rush to the market must increasingly be substituted with professionals who create value chains, analyze performance reports, and endure investor scrutiny. Our country is no longer reliant on a “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality. To be successful over the long haul we should increasingly embrace altruism in its purest form. The good of the nation and the individuals who resides in it must take precedent over a “don't tell me what to do” sentiment.

I have spoken to many of our association members over the last several weeks and what I am hearing is appalling. Some have not had a down day since the beginning of the outbreak. Others have accrued hundreds of comp time hours that they will never be able to enjoy. Some are resigning because of

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threats and many are being thrown into circumstances for which they are not trained and educated. Training and travel budgets are being slashed or outright suspended.

Alternately, there are many opportunities created by COVID-19 that merit serious consideration. New emphasis on telework, remote inspections, and reduced corporate travel costs are among the issues worth a second glance. While we are at it, I humbly believe our educational institutions could do us a solid by revitalizing conversations around the obligations of modern civil society. Let's start with why real men should wear masks and practice physical distancing during a pandemic. Let's look at the economic and personal benefits of a healthcare enterprise that provides preventive services at low or no cost. Let's explore why local environmental health programs are foundational to life as we know it and why what happens in China matters to those of us who live in Maryland, or Nebraska, or Saipan. Climate change is largely man-made and not inevitable.



Robin's nest pre-raven (left) and post-raven (right). Photos courtesy of David Dyjack.

The people who forged our new nation in the 18th and 19th centuries were bold, courageous, and independent. Americans admire those qualities. Regretfully, the moment has arrived for us to embrace a new national identity that is fashioned from a contemporary fabric. One that recognizes and values diversity, equity, and inclusion. One that increases investments in prevention from 2% of healthcare costs to 4–5%. One where we recognize in an increasingly crowded biosphere that we are indeed our

brother's keeper in that a disease anywhere is a disease everywhere.

When the raven flies nearby, avian scouts cry out an alarm to alert their community to the presence of the menace. Tiny birds act as a collective to ward off the leviathan. Our raven is old thinking. This scout is sounding the alarm. 🐼

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