

With the Grain

Democracy battered post-COVID

COMMENTARY

John O. Marlowe

Hang on everybody! Remember that Government class that you zoned out in high school while you were obsessing over your ex-girlfriend dating the star quarterback? Well, everything that was said that semester is about to play out right before your eyes.

Surviving two world wars, the Cold War, nearly countless theater wars, the pendulum of abundance and poverty, conservatism, liberalism, idealism, and narcissism, it took an invisible nemesis — the coronavirus — to drive democracy toward its greatest precipice since the American Civil War.

When democracy is threatened, the villain is always fear.

In an effort to protect its citizenry, governments at all levels are installing profound restrictions on civil liberties, in an attempt to slow the spread of a deadly virus. Watching this unfold, we all knew that freedoms would be trampled — hopefully for only a while. But as the likelihood for quick resolution to the crisis wanes, more of us are questioning what post-COVID democracy will look like.

Most notably curtailed was our right to freely assemble. Limits of fifty, then ten people in a single location were installed. Eventually, entire gatherings were forced closed, and when our government prohibited congregations from meeting in church, I'll bet more than one founding father whirled in his grave.

Nevertheless, not many of us bristled, because, well ... the restrictions made a lot of sense. Plus, thanks to technology, our need for being with one another seemed fulfilled.

Could any of us imagine that government intervention would extend to what we wear?

That's what is happening now as the U.S. reopens its doors to commerce. A hopscotch of inconsistent laws are leaping up around the nation concerning the use of protective masks.

Originally recommending that people not wear masks, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), in conjunction with the White House, now recommends wearing a cloth face covering.

Several state and local governments are taking the edict further to include mandated prohibitions on appearing in public without facial covering. Some include fines up to \$1,000, and imprisonment up to one year, although most have no penalties associated with them. Not yet, anyway.

But should government, in the name of public health, go beyond simply imploring its citizens to comply?

Currently, seven states and numerous municipalities require wearing face masks in public. Lawsuits are already threatened, questioning the constitutionality of such infringement upon personal liberties. Protests are emerging, and in some cases, what exhibits forms of anarchy has pressured authorities to back down from more confining measures.

By design or by destiny, nations most successful in extracting their citizens from the coronavirus crisis are among the most technocratic, adding pressure for strong central government.

There will be personal liberty concerns during contact tracing, and we should expect higher intrusion for technology and surveillance.

The powers and limits of government are being redefined in real time around us. What our kids are taught in the next Government class will depend on what we are willing to trade away now for a nation safe from COVID-19.

###