

With the Grain

Don't count on 'COVID War' numbers

COMMENTARY

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Each morning, since the beginning of the coronavirus crisis, I am greeted in my email by a series of three numbers. The numbers are provided by the Indiana Department of Health (IDOH) in their Daily Digest Bulletin, and are freely disseminated by local media, reporting on the pandemic.

In the statistics, the IDOH chronicles the latest number of patients testing positive for COVID-19, the total number of positive cases, and — sadly — the latest number of victims succumbing to the disease.

Frankly, I wish the State would stop using them.

Ultimately, these are “body count” numbers. Body count numbers come from the military, who use them to measure progress in a war.

The first time I saw body count numbers used was during the Vietnam War. Each day in their public briefing on the progress of the war, the Pentagon released the latest casualty figures. The figures were broadcast that evening on national news, often the key talking point of newsmen of that era.

Success in the Vietnam War, unlike the Gulf War or WWII, could not be measured on a map. Vietnam was a war of attrition, not conquest. All the contested territory in Vietnam was already held, and no one planned to capture any. The only way to measure success, then, was to count bodies.

Each night during the Vietnam War, we all sat in front of our TV's, and checked out the latest numbers. “The North Vietnamese lost 15,345 fighters,” the Generals would say, “the Viet Cong 8,002, while the U. S. lost only 2,348.”

Body count numbers gave us at home a sense that we were winning. “The enemy possibly can't hold up to those losses,” we'd say.

As the war drug on, the ratio of deaths maintained a similar imbalance — night after night; year after year — until the significance of the numbers was lost. We discovered that the enemy was willing to die to the last man, and we were not.

The COVID campaign has a similar endlessness to it.

We can't conquer the enemy, but we hope to render it impotent, so that little harm will come in the future. Enter again, body count numbers.

They are a useful tools to those orchestrating the campaign. However, body count numbers have a dark side. Leaders learned that body count numbers may also be a means to mislead the public when things are not going well.

The duplicity of Vietnam era body count numbers was eventually unmistakable. By the end, reality sank in that each number was a person — a person who was loved.

I recently saw a report that COVID-19 deaths in the Midwest are lower than other parts of the nation. We perhaps are better at mitigation, and at protecting our citizens. The commentator implied that we are somehow winning against COVID-19 when compared to our neighbors.

Winning? What does *that* trophy look like?

Remember, please, numbers only calculate. Significance is reserved solely for those on our frontlines, and by the loved ones at the back of each figure.

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