

The Republic of COVID-19

by George Friedman - December 13, 2021

The emergence of the omicron variant drives home an essential point: There is no evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic will end. It might, but the possibility of the virus mutating means continual adjustments to or reinventions of vaccines, the potential resurrection of social distancing, including closed borders, and the transformation of culture. In many places in the United States, wearing masks in public used to be potentially criminal and always suspect. The virtuous now cloak their identity, and those who refuse to do so are seen as suspect by the law. The degree to which the battle against COVID-19 has changed our lives, the economy and social norms has been staggering. We lived in a world where travel between countries was seen as essential to global society. Now, those entering a foreign country are held suspect or banned.

As I have argued in the past, these measures save lives. But as I have also argued, there is a price to be paid for safety. Social distancing and a global economy are not completely incompatible, but over time they create sufficient friction in the system as to slow down or disrupt the movement of goods from one nation to another. The withdrawal of workers from the workforce has created a global shortage of labor and therefore of products. The absence of products such as fertilizers and medicines can be fatal. COVID-19 kills, but so potentially do the measures needed to limit it.

The social consequences are real as well. An essential part of human communication is the silent identification of another human, and a sense of their intent. Masking increases the difficulty and significantly limits human intercourse. It forces a sometimes painful redefinition of all that is social. Similarly, we have learned that tele-education is not a substitute for the community of children that schools provide. The most important thing a young child learns in school is how to deal with other young children. There are now years during which children have not learned these skills. The results are being noted in all age groups. Isolating children disrupts their life pattern and challenges maturation.

These are points I have made in the past, and I ask forgiveness for repeating myself. But the omicron variant shows us that these problems may not be the side effects of a solution to a temporary problem; rather, the problems may indefinitely redefine themselves, forcing some protective steps to be revived and rendering other steps less effective. We do not know what the next mutation will look like. It may not be as amenable to known steps as omicron may be. There are

scientists I have read who argue that the mutations will become milder over time. That may be the case, but COVID-19 has been an ongoing surprise party.

So far, the primary emphasis in the battle against COVID-19 has been medical. In some ways, the medical establishment became the government of the United States and other countries. The doctors of this community are not stupid or corrupt. They have done extraordinary work. However, their work cannot bring the disease under sufficient long-term control, so it cannot bring the economic and social consequences under control. It is not their jobs to take into account these costs; it's their job to submit medical solutions regardless of social and economic cost. But this is why they cannot be permitted to pose solutions that are adopted by the state. The cure may carry a massive price if it leads to shortages of staple goods.

I have written on the problem with experts and the manner in which expertise has driven the United States since World War II. An expert knows his field, frequently narrow, superbly. But he is trained ethically not to involve himself in areas in which he is not an expert. Those who are experts in, say, supply chains or education, accept the findings of the experts on the front line of a problem. But over time, the unintended consequences of the expert solution become known. The primary expert retains the totem – that is, “this is the problem, and we will do as the expert says.” Expertise is the ethical foundation of contemporary America and the world.

Opposition rises, but it is disorderly and poorly thought out. A generalist can anticipate otherwise unforeseen problems, only to be dismissed as ill-informed or outright demonized as undermining the truly heroic efforts of the expert. But as is frequently the case, the expert cannot anticipate his own rate of success. In the past couple of years of the pandemic, the medical problem turned into a variety of non-medical problems.

COVID-19 is a medical problem that needs a medical solution, but as the virus mutates, the medical establishment reimposes the same solution. The delta variant led to omicron, and it is reasonable to assume that omicron will lead to the next letter, which in turn will lead to an institutionalized medical response of vaccines, masks and social distancing, while the social and economic disruptions exact their own price.

Demonizing everyone can be a disease in its own right. Fear of and frustration with the experts can be one too. COVID-19 kills, but so do shortages of medicine and famine, which I pray is not a real threat but my own private weakness of taking things to a conclusion they never actually reach.

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