

OPINION // OUTLOOK

Opinion: We have a responsibility to guide our leaders during pandemic response

By Edward P. Djerejian | May 3, 2020

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Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo is welcomed by medical staff of the Lyndon B. Johnson Hospital during a visit on Thursday, April 30, 2020, in Houston.

Photo: Marie D. De Jesús, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

Today as we individually, as a nation and as part of the global community face the vital threat of the COVID-19 pandemic, our civilization approaches a turning point. It is our collective responsibility as Americans to take on the momentous challenge of COVID-19 by actively guiding and influencing our leaders toward wisdom and resilience. We cannot leave the task up to them alone, especially given the growing lack of trust and partisan divides. Then only will we turn this crisis into an opportunity and emerge stronger among our family of nations.

The interests of the people are paramount and, in this case, public health and safety, social justice, economic security and equal opportunity must be key goals as we define the post-pandemic era. Let us not forget President Abraham Lincoln's iconic statement in the Gettysburg Address that we are a "government of the people, by the people, for the people." We cannot return to "business as usual." To do so would be at our peril.

We have a duty as citizens to hold our leaders in the public and private sectors to accountability. We must learn the lessons of what went wrong — namely, an almost religious belief in a liberal world order and “globalization” that left too many people behind; a cost-driven race to the bottom in global supply chains that left us without critical infrastructure redundancy to meet domestic demands in times of crisis; a deficient public health system that has been underfunded and neglected as a policy priority; defining national security in overwhelmingly military defense terms without going beyond lip service to the national security threats of pandemics and climate change; neglecting for too long the socio-economic inequalities in our society that leave many Americans behind and most vulnerable to economic, educational and health hardships.

There is evident need for change. This crisis presents both danger and opportunity. Change that is bottom-up led by an informed and active citizenry alongside responsive political leadership at every level would be the most successful and enduring paradigm. Already we have seen how responsible the vast majority of Americans have been in following the safe distancing, containment, mitigation and other guidelines. We have seen the dedication and brave call to duty by our health care providers, emergency personnel and service sector workers. Local community efforts are building up. Our federal system of government at the national, state and local levels is more complex than in centralized societies and countries. Valuable time has been lost in confronting and coordinating the response to the crisis, but the system is coming together more effectively as the weeks pass.

What is particularly important is to depart from the politicization of the crisis. The blame game is deplorable when so many lives are at stake. Politicians should reach out across the aisle and collaborate as effectively as possible, yes, even in an election year. Who would want a legacy of short-term political gain at the expense of the greater public good? Perhaps some would but the call to public service must transcend that.

And here the media have a major responsibility to inform the public of the unbiased facts of the crisis. Too often the press and media, left and right, are practicing shallow advocacy. There is little distinction between presenting the news and editorializing with a partisan

point of view. News and editorial opinion have been lumped together in one media package. This plays to divisions in our society. The press and media should segregate their reporting into clearly distinct news reporting and editorializing and labeling the latter as such. The way this article comes under the “Opinion” label is a good example.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a game-changer that has consequences for how we Americans govern our society, our economy and ourselves. In its aftermath, we will need to reexamine basic assumptions about the way we live our lives and create new policies. Our economic security, trust in government and way of life are being questioned. The specter of rising populism, nationalism, dictatorship and antiestablishment forces is reappearing. Basic issues are rising in the United States-China relationship. Multilateralism and the efficacy of existing international organizations are being questioned. As a director of a nonpartisan public policy think tank, I recognize that we also have a special responsibility at this critical moment to provide data-driven, nonpartisan analysis and solutions to both domestic and foreign policy challenges. If we Americans address these issues with open-mindedness and mutual respect, we can help build a more just and resilient society. This has become the major test of our time.

To view this commentary on the Houston Chronicle website, visit this link: <https://bit.ly/3ccv0qu>

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