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From the Black Death to Covid-19: what history can teach us about managing crises and coming out stronger

Whether the plague, the world wars or now coronavirus, serious crises reorder societies. With effort and imagination, can we shake off a nightmare and wake ourselves into a brighter tomorrow?

by [Margaret MacMillan](#) / May 7, 2020 / [Leave a comment](#)



Illustration: Pete Reynolds

In the autumn of 1954, when I was 10, we had a hurricane in Toronto. We were surprised; tropical storms were not meant to come that far inland or north. [Hurricane Hazel](#) hit hard: the winds howled and sheets of rain hammered down; tree branches snapped; our street became a stream, and the power went out. Creeks and rivers throughout southern Ontario turned into raging torrents that carried away roads, bridges and, horribly, barns and houses, sometimes with their unfortunate inhabitants inside.

In the next weeks, the city and province picked up the pieces with the help of the armed forces, which were still large and well equipped thanks to both the Second World War and the Korean War. Citizens chipped in with furniture, clothes and money for those who had lost everything. And the public and government decided that we needed to be prepared for next time. A powerful conservation authority was set up to monitor and channel waterways and laws passed to prevent houses being built on flood plains. An

unforeseen benefit was that Toronto's network of wooded ravines was saved from further development, and preserved to provide much-needed green space for the city.

Catastrophic events such as Hurricane Hazel, and of course Covid-19, are hard to predict. They bring out weaknesses and expose previous bad decisions in societies. Yet they also demonstrate that mutual support makes a difference, and that coping and recovery happen best when societies possess effective leaders, strong institutions, a willingness to deploy sufficient resources as well as the capacity to redeploy them rapidly.

It is never too early in a crisis to search the past for insight about what we might be doing right or wrong. If we use history wisely, drawing on insights from the many and varied catastrophes of the past from wars and plagues to financial meltdowns, we can put our present crisis in perspective, and perhaps also give ourselves hope. After all, societies can and do recover from disasters, and those willing to learn from them can mitigate or even avoid reruns.

Even more importantly, knowledge of history gives us the capacity to ask questions and to imagine alternative courses of action. This matters a great deal because in a crisis things are prone to move fast, and so it is critical to be nimble enough to change our minds and direction rapidly.

“Far from resisting sudden government intrusion, publics seem to be longing for nanny to tell them everything will be all right by teatime”

Just as usefully, too, the past can provide us with salutary warnings about how bad situations can be made worse. The fate of New Orleans after it was devastated by [Hurricane Katrina](#) in 2005 makes for a stark and dismaying contrast with the way that Toronto dealt with Hurricane Hazel half a century earlier. While there were individual acts of heroism and strong community support, the public authorities had been starved of cash, undermined by the anti-government and anti-tax sentiment that had framed American politics for a generation. Compounding the problem was a lack of clear leadership, as the three levels of government responsible for New Orleans failed to swing into action in a co-ordinated way. The people and city suffered far more than was necessary. Relief funds were late and inadequate, and for the many families left homeless there was nowhere to stay other than squalid camps improvised in sports halls. Many fled altogether and have never returned.

Scrambling for survival

Most natural disasters are limited by geography: the Covid-19 crisis by contrast has the whole planet in its grip. Yet the choices before our leaders are like those that faced Toronto or New Orleans in the face of a terrible storm. The immediate focus has to be on saving lives and then protecting those still living. But in time, we will start to think about what was learned, what went right and what went wrong, and what can be done better for the future. Even while the pandemic rages, deeper questions about our times and our society are already presenting themselves.

We must ask why some countries such as [South Korea are managing well](#), and others are floundering. Class divisions are widening. The Indian government abruptly shut down the country without making any provision for the millions

who barely eke out a living from one day to the next. The United States, the richest and most powerful nation in the world, cannot decide on consistent policies or provide its medics with the most basic equipment such as face masks. What will such failures mean for the social fabric?

International society is suffering too. States and regions are blaming each other and hoarding vital medical supplies. The rich world is looking out for itself with, so far, little thought for the global south. The [World Health Organisation \(WHO\) is being attacked by the same countries that denied it the resources](#) required to prepare for the pandemic, with President Trump vowing to stop US contributions to the only healthcare insurance policy the planet has got. Well-equipped Germany took too long to send help to Italy and Spain. The unity of the European Union has taken a beating from which it might not recover. The crisis has exposed frailties in international supply chains that once seemed so efficient, and other [significant flaws in our model of globalisation](#), which most of us were not aware of as we enjoyed the benefits of cheap electronics and ate tropical fruits in winter.



The Black Death, left, killed as many as a third of all Europeans; but the lessons of history don't stop these Americans, right, taking libertarianism to extremes. Photo: Alamy/Shutterstock/Prospect composite

Years of austerity have left many western states with little resilience to sudden challenges. Suspicion of “big government” and the bugaboo of the “deep state” is an article of faith for the right, particularly in the US. Even as his own administration frames heavy restrictions to retard the spread of the virus, Trump plays populist politics and risks lives as he targets Democratic governors when he urges the end of lockdowns and tweets “LIBERATE MICHIGAN!,” “LIBERATE VIRGINIA!” His shadowy political supporters whip up deluded protesters—pressing together in defiance of social distancing—out onto the streets of state capitals.

It is not only the zealots who have been influenced by the broader libertarian worldview: since the 1980s, well-funded think tanks and parts of the media have successfully promoted the creed that regulation whether of mining, guns, or social programmes is tyranny—as is, of course, taxes. Suddenly, however, that worldview is everywhere on the defensive, if not in outright retreat. So we see Boris Johnson's Tories, whose aim was to free society from over-regulation, introducing extraordinary restrictions. And after decades of demanding a slimmed-down welfare state, right-wing administrations around the world are underwriting almost everyone's livelihood. Far from resisting this intrusion of government, their publics have shown themselves longing for nanny to tell them what to do and that things will be all right by teatime.

Unfortunately the governments of our era don't always have the tools and personnel they now need. The sidelining

of career civil servants in favour of political advisers has led to a dearth of the skills and experience that the hour requires. Hands up those who believe that Trump's son-in-law and chosen Mr Fixit, Jared Kushner, can bring peace to the Middle East, make American borders secure, reform the criminal justice system and now run a Covid-19 task force which will, supposedly, co-ordinate the federal government's response to the needs of individual states?

The crisis has shown the costly side of another recent trend: the assumed primacy of emotion over facts. Well-educated parents can conclude, based on hearsay, internet conspiracy theories, or simply their own feelings, that vaccinations will harm their children. Trump doesn't bother with evidence of any sort; his gut speaks truth to him. It is not only in Brexit Britain that officials are disdained as out-of-touch and preoccupied with making pettifogging regulations. The blanket suspicion of experts and technocrats has created a world in which a demagogue such as President Bolsonaro of Brazil dismisses Covid-19 as mere sniffles.

Wisdom from experience

History can aid our thinking about many of the worries and searching questions that are raised by the current emergency—as well as about where we might aim to go next. It is cold comfort, but the more acute the crisis or threat, and the starker the choice between survival or not, the more we have historically been ready to modify flawed beliefs, and make lasting social changes.

After the Black Death, the shortage of labour forced landowners to pay their peasants better, and allow them more freedom. The US had not planned the Marshall Plan to reconstruct post-war Europe: it was fear of the spread of Communism that changed minds in Washington. The crisis of 2008 threatened the immediate survival not of lives, but of the global financial system. Still, it was enough to jolt governments into working together to stabilise the markets, bail out corporates and banks, casting overboard in a few days their own reverence for the invisible hand. And in wartime, governments have often found that they can squeeze unprecedented resources out of society, and that their publics will accept the burden. In the First World War, the British government's share of GDP jumped up from 8 to 35 per cent, a far steeper rise than even coronavirus will create.

Looking back at great upheavals of the past does not arm us with 10 easy lessons to avoid similar ones. Contexts differ, from the available technologies to social structures, assumptions and values. But one repeated and sensible lesson is that, as much as is practical, it is worth putting in the time and resources to understand what you're up against. The Black Death spread such devastation through 14th-century Europe—maybe as much as one-third of Europeans died—because no one knew then how it spread from rats via fleas to humans. So the measures taken to counteract it were useless—carrying nosegays—or worked by accident, as when the rich fled to their country estates. And before we get too smug about being better equipped to understand our own myriad vulnerabilities, we should remember that our more recent record isn't good. It took far too long to recognise that HIV was causing Aids. The failure of Long-Term Capital Management in the 1990s was an early warning which the world didn't heed: if we had paid attention, we might have avoided 2008.

Looking at past disasters can sometimes give us heart, to the extent that even the worst of them will, eventually, pass. Civilisation did survive the great influenza epidemic at the end of the First World War. Economies finally came out of the Great Depression. The world goes on—but that isn't necessarily true for individual regimes that fail to rise to the hour. Russia was developing fast before the First World War. However, its failure to manage the war effort opened the way to revolution and the Bolshevik coup.

“What seemed fantastical in peace—penicillin, splitting the atom, jet engines—became reality”

One of the most dangerous things leaders in crises can do is to lock themselves into a rigid course of action, guided by blind adherence to old dogmas, even as the emergency consigns them to irrelevance. The Irish famine of the 1840s was so cruelly devastating not just because the potato crop failed, but because London had a visceral disinclination to interfere with the free market or feed the starving itself. Governments in the 1930s committed themselves to deal with the Depression by cutting

expenditure and trying to balance the books when, as John Maynard Keynes taught us, the economy needed stimulus and the unemployed needed jobs.

Remaining adaptable to circumstances is essential, and it's also wise to look about you—beyond your borders. Countries that turn inwards in a troubled world can sometimes achieve short-run safety, but leave themselves vulnerable later. Appeasement in the 1930s may have bought time for the democracies—which they did not always use—but it also allowed the dictators to grow stronger as the world order crumbled. Another lesson from those years, this time in respect of economics, is that erecting tariff barriers in the name of protecting domestic production will hurt world trade. In a truly global crisis, there are no island nations.

While Covid-19 looks to be settling in for some time to come, as well as taking stock of the warnings from the many mismanaged crises of history, we can also draw inspiration from remembering those cataclysms that did, ultimately, provoke lasting and productive change. For example, the world's leaders did, eventually, learn from the Depression. The trio of Bretton Woods institutions—the IMF, the World Bank and what eventually became the WTO—were meant to ensure that the world managed its interlocked economies better in future. And for a time after 1945, it did.

And while we remain in the immediate heat of the Covid-19 crisis, let us remember, too, just how effectively some societies have mobilised during emergencies, especially in wartime—directing resources and factories to producing what is essential, training up labour, including women, and using the skills and brains of their brightest people to solve problems. In the Second World War academics migrated to government offices, war rooms or specialist intelligence centres such as Bletchley Park. In Washington and Ottawa, “dollar-a-year men” who had led great enterprises, organised supply and production. In the US—in the service of Roosevelt's “arsenal of democracy”—and across the Soviet Union, new towns and factories sprang up overnight. To anyone who recalls the technical wonders of the D-Day landings, the NHS's ability to convert London's (already standing) ExCel Centre into a “Nightingale hospital” for the

current crisis should not seem such an extraordinary feat—as it does to many contemporary Britons.

But after too many years in which governments have seemed more interested in emphasising what they can't and shouldn't do than intervening to strengthen society, the agility and application we are again beginning to witness is refreshing. We might forgive our leaders' frequent and self-serving language of war and their invocation of Churchill in 1940 if only it is accompanied by some of that wartime spirit that reset and expanded the boundaries of the possible. What had seemed fantastical or too expensive in peace—mass producing penicillin, splitting the atom, making jet engines—swiftly became reality. And, yes, such innovation can also happen in peace. The eradication of smallpox or polio shows what sustained and focused research, adequate resources and a shift in public attitudes can achieve. The response to Sars in 2002-3 or the Ebola outbreak of 2014-16 provide other—and more recent—encouraging examples of successful international co-operation.

Winning the peace

We are more fortunate than our ancestors because we have a greater capacity for rapid research, more adequate resources and, usually, wider sharing of information. But when Covid-19 is finally brought under control, society will need healing too. Its future health and capacity to deal with new crises will demand mobilising and maintaining a spirit of magnanimity towards those who have endured an especially difficult time: those who have lost family members, suffered themselves and remain particularly vulnerable to disease, as well as the millions of [younger people who have paid the highest price for the lockdown](#). The deep divisions of the crisis could settle into enduring social scars. We must not go back to neglecting the future of our young and the misery of our poor.

Again we should look at history. Wars and revolutions can leave a lasting legacy of division and hate. If those who are most damaged by catastrophes are not helped or ignored, their resentment will play out in politics. Or societies and enlightened leaders can choose the path of reconciliation and rebuilding. When the victors in civil wars have shown generosity and both sides are prepared to forgive, we can move on. In 1660, as Charles II was restored to the throne, parliament wisely passed the 1660 Act of Pardon, Indemnity and Oblivion, for crimes committed in and just after the Civil War. The US, by contrast, has still not managed to assuage the bitterness created in the south by its Civil War.

There is also some heartening precedent for drawing a firm line under international enmity more bitter than that created by coronavirus. The Thirty Years' War caused horror and misery across Europe, but in the end the great powers made the peace of Westphalia in 1648, setting the groundwork for the modern order of independent sovereign states. The Congress of Vienna of 1814-5 brought together Europe's major countries including defeated France to wind up the two decades of wars set off by the French Revolution. The great powers of the Concert of Europe, as it was known, that emerged may have conspired to block all sorts of social reforms, but they also kept Europe stable and unusually peaceful for most of the 19th century.



Spanish paratroopers de-contaminate a retirement home of Covid-19. Photo: PANOS

The League of Nations that emerged from the First World War is unfairly seen as useless, and yet it gave concrete shape to the idea of an interdependent transnational community which still exists, much battered, today. Just as dealing with the Depression shaped the approach of Roosevelt and his colleagues to the post-war world economy, so they also learned from the damaging failure of their predecessors to support the League. He led the creation of the UN, and the US, this time, joined in. The aim of the battle-weary statesmen who laid the foundations of the much-abused European Union was to build a continent in which interstate war would be unthinkable.

Even now, before the inevitable inquiry begins, the current crisis has already given us a vivid demonstration of what happens when countries do not co-operate internationally and governments dither. Not sharing information fully or early enough, or looking at a diseases in other countries and lazily assuming "it couldn't happen here" led to unnecessary and costly delays of essential preparations. In time, we will need to look at and learn from the successes as well as failures, asking why New Zealand, Denmark and (possibly) Singapore, among others have apparently successfully kept their death rates down more than others including Iran, Italy, Britain or the US.

And, since great catastrophes provoke the big questions, individual societies will need to consider what was wrong with our world at the start of the crisis and where we might want to make it better. How, for instance, are the 27m Americans who don't have health insurance going to pay for treatment? Will they even be able to find hospitals to take them in? And what, if anything, will be done for the poor in countries such as India or Kenya?

For the longer-term health, in all senses of the word, of the world we must not miss the chance provided by this terrifying epidemic to understand better what is needed to cope with great challenges. Co-ordination and co-operation within and between are clearly key, but these things in turn depend on other factors.

A question of leadership

In particular, leadership, from the global to the local, matters. We have seen outstanding examples, from Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand and Governor Gavin Newsom in California to the medical staff and researchers in hospitals and laboratories. We have also seen the opposite, in India, Brazil and Iran. And what should concern us all is what happens to the international order at a time when the world was already feeling the results of the US withdrawing from its role of moral and material leadership of it.

We are relearning the lesson that good leaders are those who are willing to take the tough decisions and, as

important, tell us the truth. During the pandemic we have seen too much delay, and too many desperate attempts to avoid responsibility. The epidemic took root in Wuhan because local officials' first reaction was to cover it up, reflecting President Xi's initial refusal to take it seriously. In Russia, President Putin's government denied for weeks there were cases, although sharp-eyed observers soon noted rising deaths attributed to pneumonia. The aged mullahs in Iran allowed people to celebrate the Persian New Year in March. By contrast, Berlin has been open with the German people about the gravity of the crisis and its plans for dealing with it.

With good strong leadership, such as Britain had in both world wars, governments can marshal resources speedily and effectively. A good leader can inspire by words—as Churchill, Roosevelt and in a very different way latterly Angela Merkel have shown—and sometimes also by example. In the 18th-century it helped to change Russian opinion that the Empress Catherine the Great had herself, her son, and her court inoculated against smallpox. Compare that with Johnson and colleagues giving advice about social distancing on rostrums that were less than two metres apart, or Trump's boorish insistence that he can't see himself complying with his own administration's recommendations about wearing masks. These things matter. The task of a leader is often to be a messenger.

“Good leaders are those who are willing to take tough decisions and, as important, tell us the truth”

Leadership only works in the long run if there is trust between the leaders and the led. Will the Thais still worship their king after he scuttled off to a luxury hotel in Germany with his retinue for the duration of the pandemic? Or can the American people have faith in Trump when he says one moment that the disease could vanish, and the next that thousands of Americans will die. At the other end of the spectrum, Germans pay attention to Merkel because they trust her—and equally importantly she trusts them to do

the right things to combat the epidemic. Swedes have, for now, largely accepted the distinctive and potentially controversial choice of their government to allow many normal activities to continue because they have confidence that it is informed by independent research bodies. If future governments want that sort of trust, they will likewise have to work for it, by being transparent and building independent institutions.

Being prepared for the next crisis means building a strong civil service, and being able to call on outside and relevant experts, whoever they may be. In many crises, it will be necessary to ensure that key supplies are not only secured—but monitored. Much of the US stockpile of critical medical supplies such as masks and gowns has had to be thrown out because no one was checking on it in the warehouses. The protocols and institutions are as important as the equipment.

Preparedness involves openly confronting, rather than wishing away, the tensions that crises expose. Take the tussle between freedom and privacy on the one hand, and safety and security on the other, which arises in relation to tracking people on their mobile phones to trace coronavirus infection paths. The debate is a thorny one, but it needs to be had. One way for countries to stay ahead of the next crisis and ensure their citizens are co-operative when it

comes, is to ensure that everyone is fully involved in all the difficult discussions—and at the earliest possible stage.

A particularly demanding task for leaders, especially in democracies, is to look further than the next election, and develop the capacity to imagine and prepare for unexpected crises of the future. There will be a cost, for example, in allowing ordinarily redundant resources to be built in. In the drive for “efficiency,” the NHS has been pushed by successive governments to keep 95 per cent of its hospital beds filled. That makes any unexpected spikes in illness a desperate scramble. In Canada by contrast only around 80 per cent of beds are filled under normal circumstances. The best leaders can make the case for sacrifices today in order to be better prepared for tomorrow precisely because they build on a foundation of trust.

Finally, we need to guard against complacency. If we dodge this bullet we may not dodge the next one. Let us, above all, use the brains God or evolution gave us—and not be like the pastor in Arkansas who refused to close down his church services with this promise to his parishioners: “Jesus died with Covid-19 so that you didn’t have to bear it.”

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John C.

May 8, 2020 at 09:08

A brilliant and encouraging essay. Statesmanship as always is the supreme quality required in our leaders. The willingness to face long-term issues and to prepare is the true difference between politicians and statesmen and women. National and international co-operation is essential. Canada and Britain have a long tradition of mutual support. My hero, the great Lord Haldane whose biography Hurst and McGill-Queens are publishing in July, gave his brilliant speech as Lord Chancellor on Higher Nationality in Montréal in 1913. This was statesmanship of the highest order. He went on to be the first Minister to place a paper on the concept of a postwar League of Nations before the Cabinet in 1915. Today, the palm of statesmanship is rarely awarded. The current crisis creates renewed opportunities. If we grasp them great things can be done and great things done endure. Thank you for reminding us of this.

REPLY

Paul D



May 8, 2020 at 10:45

We went into WW2 ill prepared , just as we went into the current pandemic.The difference was that then ,unlike now, we had a formidable manufacturing industry.Ventilators? Unlike now, I am sure that we would have been able to produce low tech PPE items in quantity. Unfortunately our present government, of little talent, has been far too complacent and guilty of doing too little, too late.

REPLY



S C.

May 13, 2020 at 08:17

Actually I think it's useful to have a crisis like this from time to time. Without crises, there is a tendency to drift to complacency. In the current crisis, it can be argued that a major problem is the sheer interconnectedness of countries, allied to 'just-in-time' supply chains, which eschew carrying stocks, so can mean that any serious disruption like Covid-19 leads to shortages. Some countries will have lost the capacity to make even simple stuff because it can (usually) be imported more cheaply from elsewhere. There is no resilience in this system to these rare worldwide crises. In the longer term this lack of preparedness may be seen as a price worth paying for the trading benefits in normal times, but in the current crisis it doesn't look as though anyone in charge had a clue until it was too late to do much about it. As the essay notes, ideological positions militate against practical policies, and at the moment ideologies appear to have the upper hand over pragmatism, even in 'the West.'

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