

Opinion

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MY VIEW

Newsom takes still another course on COVID-19

At some point in the future, if we have one, historians will ponder when and why COVID-19 morphed from a public health crisis into an ideological confrontation, with vaccinations and masks as symbols of political leaning and with school children as innocent pawns.

However it happened, the politicization of the pandemic continues to flavor its response. Officials insist that they are “following the science” when they impose or lift personal behavior decrees, but it’s obvious that they also are sensitive to the political effects.

After all, orders about vaccinations, masks, public gatherings and other pandemic-fighting tools only work if the public is willing to obey them, or at least enough to have a dampening effect on contagion. If the howls of protest are loud and widespread enough, officialdom has no choice but to back off.

This fact of life was demonstrated in 2020 when Gov. Gavin Newsom repeatedly issued restrictive orders, only to lift them.

When his initial shutdown orders appeared to slow infections, he boasted how California was succeeding while other states, such as New York, were being devastated. Newsom dubbed it “bending the curve” and reopened vast sections of the economy that he had shuttered only weeks before.

“We have to recognize you can’t be in a permanent state where people are



DAN WALTERS
CALMATTERS

locked away —for months and months and months and months on end — to see lives and livelihoods completely destroyed, without considering the health impact of those decisions as well,” Newsom rationalized.

However, when infection rates and deaths increased again in mid-year, Newsom reimposed restrictions, closing bars, making masks mandatory and banning indoor activities in counties with particularly high infection rates. He also formed “multi-agency strike teams” to crack down on “people who are thumbing their noses” at restrictions.

Later in the year, Newsom once again eased up, only to crack down again during a strong surge of infections during the winter of 2020-21.

The dizzying on and off sequence confused and eventually angered Californians — enough that a recall campaign aimed at ousting Newsom qualified for the ballot and looked, for a time, to have a chance of success.

Newsom is once again easing up on restrictions that had been ordered in response to the omicron strain of the disease last year. He’s adopted what he calls “SMARTER,” an acronym for policies aimed, he says, at weakening

or dropping unneeded restrictions while guarding against future outbreaks.

“California’s early and decisive measures to combat COVID-19 have saved countless lives throughout the pandemic, and as the recent omicron surge made clear, we must remain prepared to quickly and effectively respond to changing conditions in real time,” Newsom said. “As we move the state’s recovery forward, we’ll continue to focus on scaling back provisions while maintaining essential testing, vaccination and health care system supports that ensure California has the needed tools and flexibility to strategically adapt our response for what lies ahead.”

The state has lifted mandatory wearing of masks inside businesses and other public venues and will soon drop the mask requirement for school children — a move that has drawn protests from teachers and may not sit well with parents.

A recent poll by UC Berkeley’s Institute of Governmental Studies found that about two-thirds of voters, and of parents, support COVID-19 vaccinations of school kids and being masked during classes.

Newsom’s performance as manager of the pandemic has been, to say the least, erratic, even as he claims to have been decisive and effective. COVID-19 is still with us and still killing people, so the final verdict on his management has yet to emerge.

MY VIEW

Don’t throw away your mask



PETER FUNT
VIEWPOINT

Five years ago a sports injury forced me to wear a light brace on my knee. Within a few months the joint was fine, yet to this day I continue to wear a brace on both knees when on the field. I feel there is prophylactic value, but also a sense of comfort and security.

Perhaps that helps explain why, as mask mandates are being relaxed, I find myself in a minority that welcomes being masked — at least in certain situations.

In other countries, principally in Asia, masks were worn routinely in public before COVID came along. Often it was to avoid the effects of severe air pollution, but also to be respectful about transmitting disease. There’s no reason why Americans, having become comfortable with masking during the pandemic, couldn’t be more conscientious going forward.

A survey last fall by USC Annenberg found that 46 percent of respondents favored wearing masks in stores and other indoor locations outside the home, even after the pandemic passes. Personally, I might stick with masking in crowded subways, concerts — any indoor space where strangers are packed together.

One benefit of voluntary masking would be to reduce the impact of seasonal flu. Before the pandemic, in the 2017-2018 flu season, there were an estimated 41 million cases in the United States, resulting in 710,000 hospitalizations and 52,000 deaths.

Where else might the lessons of COVID improve our health awareness going forward?

Consider the protocol for food preparation at, say, a Subway shop. It wasn’t long ago that wearing disposable gloves became the norm — a simple way to keep employees from accidentally transmitting germs. Doesn’t it also make sense for food-handlers to wear masks, as they have been during the pandemic?

How about hospital visitors? It seems logical that everyone entering a hospital should don a mask, not just because of COVID but because hospitals are filled with sick people who could infect others, or who are at risk of serious consequences if they become infected by germs brought in from outside.

Should pharmacists wear masks? I think so. Masking should also be urged for customers picking up prescriptions.

The pandemic has provided other lessons about behavior modification. Logically, we should pretty much eliminate all hand shakes. It really makes no sense to walk into a meeting room, for example, and immediately shake the hands of a dozen strangers. Or, when my friends and I play amateur baseball, the notion that after the game 15 or more players from each team shake hands now seems crazy. An elbow bump would be fine.

Politicians learned long ago to discreetly use sanitizer during and after hand-shaking sessions. Indeed the State Department’s Protocol Reference document recommends that hot towels or hand sanitizer be available on receiving lines.

How about sneezing into your elbow? Shouldn’t that become the norm? Sneezing into your hand — the one you’ll use later to shake — is ridiculous.

But the focus going forward should be on voluntary masking when it makes sense. High-traffic locations such airports, supermarkets and movie theaters ought to have permanent signs advising: “If you’re feeling sick today or have active cold or flu symptoms, please wear a mask.”

Once freed of social and political stigmas, it would be nice if common sense took over.

Peter Funt’s new memoir, “Self-Amused,” is now available at Candid-Camera.com.

ANOTHER VIEW



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MY VIEW

Putin’s costly miscalculation and desperate misadventure

President Vladimir Putin of Russia has drastically miscalculated in launching a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine. In effect, he has returned combat and killing to a region largely free of those burdens since the Balkan wars of the 1990s.

The Russian military can occupy Ukraine, but the cost will be heavy in dimensions that go beyond the tragic loss of life. The likelihood of actually establishing permanent control over this independent nation is nil.

Ukraine’s military is fighting hard against the invaders. This reflects generally strong anti-Russian sentiments, and commitment to independence, in the western part of the nation.

Putin uses public posturing and threats against largely imaginary enemies to increase his international visibility. However, his significant accomplishments remain essentially domestic in nature.

Restoring order and stability in Russia at the turn of the century is notable, indeed remarkable. This following true anarchy in Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union. His tenure in power in Moscow has now surpassed two decades.

In 2014, Russia seized Crimea and the eastern portion of Ukraine. Crimea had been part of Russia until Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev transferred the peninsula to the authority of Ukraine in 1954.

Ukraine became independent from Moscow following the Russian Revolution that began in 1917. Af-

ter World War II, the Soviet Union absorbed the nation. Independence was regained following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The invasion of eastern Ukraine by Russia’s army, after months of substantial aid to rebel forces drastically undercut stability in Eastern Europe. The United States, Europe and the international community must resist this, while trying to avoid wider war with Russia.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, followed by the disintegration of the Soviet bloc and then the Soviet Union, represent historic strategic victory for the West. The end of the Cold War confirmed the policy of deterrence termed “containment.”

Instant editorial commentaries on Russia’s war against Ukraine often emphasize the end of the post-Cold War order. That may be true in the most literal sense, but not strategically. Containment in fact was the application of traditional realism regarding power realities, especially the military significance of the nation-state.

Putin, undeniably a remarkable leader, generally plays his strategic cards well. However, his hand remains weak. The Russian economy is vulnerable, dependent on petroleum, plagued with corruption.

Opinion polls in Russia show Putin’s popularity declining. External power plays clearly are in part a response. The very existence of serious opinion polls provides empirical evidence of just how profoundly Russia has changed since the era of Soviet totalitarianism.



ARTHUR CYR
VIEWPOINT

Before today’s pervasive electronic media, totalitarian dictators in Nazi Germany, the Communist Soviet Union and other nations could effectively isolate their populations. Power holders substituted propaganda for facts and reality.

Such control is no longer possible. Russia’s aggression has energized NATO, dramatically. The war has transformed the new German government. Caution is gone, replaced by aid to Ukraine and military modernization. Russia’s fear of Germany makes this move especially significant.

Poland, in NATO since 1999, now leads in the collective effort to provide arms to bordering Ukraine. U.S. officials are confident and clear in condemning Putin’s violation of both international law and practical norms of behavior.

The global economy permits effective penalties and sanctions against Russia, including the rich elite. The ruling clique is becoming isolated.

Communism once seemed on the offensive. Russia today is structurally defensive. The world has changed.

Arthur I. Cyr is author of “After the Cold War” (NYU Press and Palgrave/Macmillan). Contact acyr@carthage.edu