Written by **Patrick J. Buchanan** on March 24, 2020

Must We Kill the Economy to Kill the Virus?

"We cannot let the cure be worse than the problem itself," tweeted the president on Sunday night, adding that, after the current 15-day shutdown, "we will make a decision as to which way we want to go."

President Trump is said to be privately expressing a deepening concern at the damage the coronavirus shutdown is doing to the U.S. economy and debating whether it can be safely reopened.

Though castigated for his remark, Trump has a point.

The U.S. is rightly using extreme measures to meet the threat and control the virus that threatens the lives of millions of Americans, with the elderly sick foremost among them. And we need to do so without killing the economy upon which scores of millions of other Americans depend.

Clearly, America was unprepared for this pandemic.

And there will be time enough to assess responsibility for the lack of surgical masks, medical gowns, rubber gloves, respirators, ventilators and hospital beds.

The immediate imperative is to produce those beds and that equipment and get it delivered to doctors, nurses and hospital staff, the front-line troops in the battle to control the virus.

However, during this shutdown, all "nonessential businesses" are being closed and their workers sent home to shelter in place and to keep "social distance" from friends and neighbors to minimize the risk of spreading this easily transmissible virus.

Unfortunately, what is "nonessential" to some — bars, restaurants, hotels, stores, cruise ships, tourist sites, shops, malls — are places of employment and indispensable sources of income for millions of other Americans.

Close the businesses where these Americans work and you terminate the paychecks on which they depend to pay the rent and buy the food and medicines they and their families need to shelter and live. And if the salaries and wages on which workers depend are cut off, how are these millions of newly unemployed supposed to live?

How do those who follow the instructions of the president and governors to remain in their homes get their prescriptions filled and buy the food to feed their families?

How long can the shutdown be sustained if the necessities of life for the unemployed and unpaid begin to run out? Is it necessary to create an economic and social crisis to solve the medical crisis?

"We had to destroy the village in order to save it," was a remark attributed to a U.S. Army officer in the Vietnam War. Must we cripple or destroy the economy to rescue the American nation from the coronavirus crisis of 2020?

Then there is the matter of time. Many Americans can survive on what they have on hand for two or four weeks. Far fewer can survive without income for two or four months.

If we shut down the economy, what will we have when the medical crisis passes, be that in May, June, July, August or September?

Will all those nonessential businesses we put to sleep come back to life?

The free market system that is the legacy of Hamilton and the Founding Fathers is the world's best design for the distribution of goods and services and ensuring prosperity. And in a population where life expectancy is decades beyond what it was in the early 20th century, there are government programs to provide the necessities of life for those who can no longer access or afford them.

But businesses are needed to deliver the goods.

And if, by government command, America's free economy is partly shut down as unessential in this medical crisis, the government could be responsible for imposing the conditions that lead to social disorder.

At some point, the country is going to have to open up the supply chains and take the risks to let the market work to provide food — or people will engage in panic buying, hoarding and using any means to get what they need for themselves and their families.

Reports of folks in this heavily armed nation stocking up on guns and ammunition suggest a widespread apprehension of what may be coming.

If the medical crisis is allowed to induce an economic crisis that leads to a social crisis, the American political system, our democratic system, may itself be severely tested.

Lest we forget: In the greatest crisis in this nation's history, in which the issue was whether the American Union would be severed into two nations, Abraham Lincoln suspended the right of habeas corpus, shut down state legislatures, closed newspapers, jailed journalists and was prepared to arrest the chief justice. And for the dictatorial measures he took, and for waging the bloodiest war in U.S. history, against fellow Americans, Lincoln is now regarded by many as our greatest president.

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Patrick J. Buchanan is the author of Nixon's White House Wars: The Battles That Made and Broke a President and Divided America Forever. *To find out more about Patrick Buchanan and read features by other Creators writers and cartoonists, visit the Creators website at www.creators.com.*

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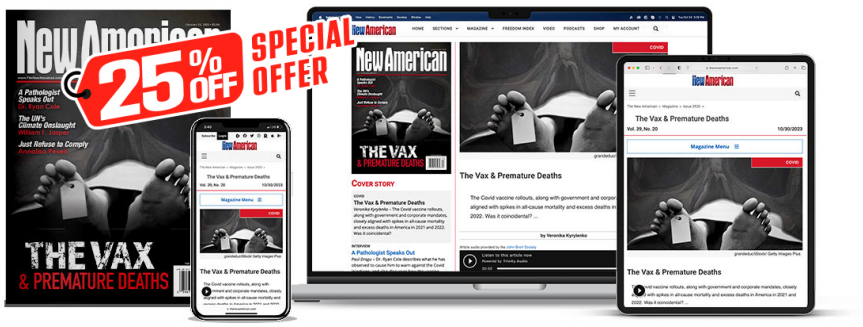

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