

## FINAL WORD ➞ BY A. BARTON HINKLE

## COVID and Leviathan

In his seminal *Crisis and Leviathan*, Robert Higgs described the ratchet effect: Government expands during a period of upheaval. Afterward, government scales back some, but not all the way to the status quo ante. And when the next crisis comes, the process repeats itself.

Anyone who has a passing knowledge of history will recognize this pattern. The U.S. Naval Station at Guantanamo Bay—still very much operational, and occasionally controversial—was established during the Spanish–American War. Long after the Great Depression, a host of New Deal agencies and statutes that were created to combat it remain in place. Nearly two decades after 9/11, presidents continue to use the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force as a fig leaf to cover whatever military operation they wish to conduct. And so on.

More insidious than the institutions and policies born of these crises is the public acculturation to them. Chicago politician Rahm Emanuel famously observed: “You never want a serious crisis to go to waste. And what I mean by that [is] it’s an opportunity to do things that you think you could not before.” During a crisis, leaders will employ—and people will accept—government expansion that previously would have been out of the question. Soon everyone gets used to it. Eventually, it seems perfectly natural.

In 2001, a terrorist named Richard Reid tried to bomb a Paris-to-Miami flight using an explosive concealed in his shoe. Today, despite the absence of similar plots and the lottery-like odds against being killed in *any* terrorist attack, let alone an aviation-related one, Americans placidly remove their shoes and submit to full-body scans before boarding a flight. There is no great pub-

lic outcry that the nation revisit the policy, let alone repeal it. The notion of reversing even older policies—perhaps shutting down a New Deal-era agency such as the Federal Housing Administration—borders on the unthinkable.

All this suggests post-coronavirus America will be less free and more comfortable about being less free. President Trump and state governors have sparred over who has the authority to issue and repeal shelter-in-place orders, social-distancing rules, and similar measures. But only a small minority of citizens have questioned what limits there are or should be on such authority. So far, given the sweeping infringement on basic liberties—suspending the constitutional right to peaceful assembly, forbidding retailers to sell items a government official deems nonessential—the limits appear to be nonexistent.

Those who have questioned the most draconian restrictions on individual behavior in a century have been lampooned as ignorant, heartless yahoos or vilified as avaricious, heartless fat cats. And while others have questioned *the way* Trump has used the Defense Production Act, there

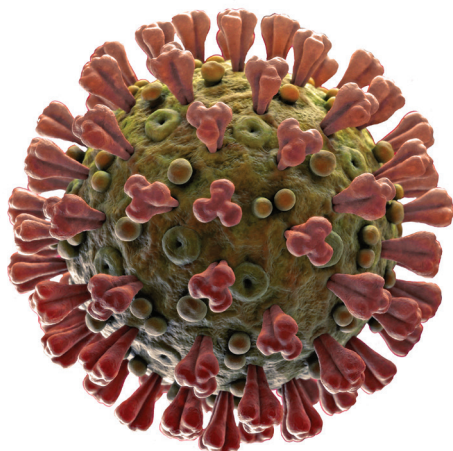
has been precious little head-scratching over *why* he can still use a statute passed at the start of the Korean War to address a non-war emergency seven decades later.

It’s not unreasonable to conclude that recent restrictions have been necessary and wise. But they set a precedent that a future administration can use to impose similar command-and-control decrees in response to a situation far less dire.

Meanwhile, there has been much Emanuelian *carpe crinem*. Even though the pandemic was made worse by the mendacity of a police state abroad and the bumbling of government agencies at home, we are told the pandemic proves the need for even bigger government. Supposedly, the crisis shows that the internet should be a public utility (*Quartz*), that we need universal health insurance (*Los Angeles Times*), that “sealing borders saves lives” (*New York Post*), that we need to tackle “the obesity crisis” (*Daily Beast*), that “Trump is right to send back illegals” (*American Thinker*), that we must consider basic-income and wealth-tax policies (*Financial Times*), that “we need a Green New Deal” (Democratic Socialists of America), that we should “have a vitally important conversation with American industry” about relying on Chinese suppliers (*The Bulwark*), that “now more than ever, we must join together to take on the pornography industry” (*The Federalist*), that Jeremy Corbyn was “absolutely right” about the need for more public spending (Jeremy Corbyn), that it was foolish to move “many of the means of production to other countries” (Sen. Marco Rubio), and so on.

Nobody making these arguments thought any differently *before* the pandemic, of course. The contagion has simply provided a convenient stone on which to grind the same old axes. Most of those axes concern the manner in which someone somewhere is Doing It Wrong and must be forced to Do It The Right Way, whatever “It” is.

Whatever the crisis, no matter how greatly it might differ from previous ones, the solution is the same: more state control. R



A. BARTON HINKLE is the former editor of the editorial pages of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*.

