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Comment by John Grayzel

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Prof. John Grayzel, an anthropologist, attorney, and veteran official at the Agency for International Development, who also serves on the current ISCS Board of Directors, examines civilizations and this epidemic as he views the broad sweep of human history from the perspective of the “Great Man Theory of History”:

There is no question that pandemics can shake up a seemingly stable set of circumstances and, in that way, affect history.

However, I think we would be hard pressed to actually attribute to pandemics significant causality in terms of making a difference in the direction of the evolution of specific civilizations.

As serious as they might be, I would say the evidence is that pandemics (or more specifically the resulting "die-off" they have caused) only exacerbate the influence of the most prevailing factors. This is because their actual effect is mediated by extant social, political, economic, demographic, and religious/psychological parameters.

The exception may be Polynesian civilization.

For thousands of years smallpox was a repetitive scourge for much of humanity, but Polynesian civilization constituted probably the only civilization that a pandemic actually ended. In the case of Polynesia, the relatively small population, and its relatively thin distribution across a large area of bounded islands, made the die-off unusually swift, repetitive (each time a new European ship visited), and catastrophic—and without ample opportunity for rapid regeneration.

In the Americas, disease also decimated the indigenous populations, but what it did to the independent civilizations located in North, Central, and South America was the result of purposeful political and economic policies of the new European rulers.

What is different today with the Covid-19 pandemic is that its most pathological effect is not being visited upon any particular group or society but on the process of globalization itself. The struggle of individual nations to protect themselves from outside carriers, as well as competition among them to access limited available medical resources, has generated a retreat from what has otherwise been an evolving global civilization.

Ironically, this is most attributable to a single person, the current President of the United States, Donald Trump.

Had the current situation occurred under any of President Trump's predecessors, they would have used the circumstances to reinforce American leadership within the institutions of international organizations and thereby actually advanced the world's acceleration towards global governance.

In this sense, President Trump has proven that the "Great Man Theory of History" has validity and that he may well turn out to be a figure of truly causative historic importance. The Covid-19 virus pandemic has exacerbated the deleterious effect of Trump's behavior from merely being highly disruptive to the normal operations of the institutions of American democracy to being disastrous regarding the entire world's movement towards global governance of common concerns.

Because of the challenges his authoritarian behavior posed to American Presidential authority, General Douglas MacArthur was called the "American Caesar." For the damage President Trump has visited upon the behavioral integrity of the Western World in the face of the clear and common threat of Covid-19, he may well become known as the "American Commodus the Monster."²

² The Roman emperor Lucius Aurelius Commodus (161-192 CE) came to power in 180 CE when his father, the philosopher emperor Marcus Aurelius, died during what is known as the Antonine Plague (probably smallpox) that decimated the Mediterranean world from 165-180 CE. Gibbons writes that *"every sentiment of virtue and humanity was extinct in (his) mind."**

His licentiousness, cowardice and disdain for Roman institutions was described by the Roman historian Cassius Dio. He wrote: *"Moreover, a pestilence occurred, the greatest of any of which I have knowledge;... not alone in the city, but throughout almost the entire empire. ... Now the death of these victims passed unheeded, for Commodus was a greater curse to the Romans than any pestilence or any crime."***

*Gibbons, Edward. *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, abridged edition. Greenwich, Connecticut: Brompton Books Corporation, 1979. See page 38.

**Dio, Cassius. *Roman History*. Vol. IX. *Epitome of Book LXXIII*. Loeb Classical Library Edition, 1927. See page 103. You have to scroll to the page bottom to see the footnote.