

# **The Covid19 Crisis: What's at Stake?**

## **Alternative Scenarios and Implications for the U.S. 2020-2023**

by

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*“A plausible future requires a factual present.”*

*Timothy Snyder, The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America, 2018*

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#### **Where we are now**

This is a world in which, perhaps for the first time ever, almost everyone has the same priority: solving the Covid19 crisis. A convergence of events has upended the global economy and international relations in ways no one anticipated: these included the outbreak of a deadly pandemic together with a total collapse of oil prices. Suddenly this is a world of closed borders still faced with globe-spanning challenges, like the virus itself, climate change, and economies in free-fall, which no nation can manage on its own. As national economies shut down and travel is restricted, a glut of oil threatens to undermine the once oil-rich economies of Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Iran as well as the U.S. energy industry as a whole.

The virus has highlighted massive global and local inequality. Social distancing measures recommended by public health authorities reveal the gaps between those who can wall themselves off from others and those who live in such densely-populated communities that a “six-feet-of-separation” rule seems like a perverse joke. Those who cannot work at home face daily risks avoided by most white-collar workers. Children without Internet access at home cannot keep up with their schoolwork and the digital divide grows wider.

Essential workers in this new world are among the lowest-paid: grocery store workers, bus drivers, front-line healthcare workers, food processors and shippers, and first responders. All others, including teachers, office workers, technology experts, politicians, journalists, and security specialists, while performing needed services, are generally able to keep working from home, or they are in the ballooning ranks of the unemployed, facing food insecurity and long unemployment lines.

Another impact has been the reality of pervasive uncertainty; practically overnight a world of experts has been transformed into a world of amateurs. No one has a blueprint for planning ahead in a world thrown into chaos.

Sadly, by the end of May 2020 this is a world in which Covid-19 has killed over 353,000 people, nearly one-third of them Americans, and sent nearly 40 million Americans to the ranks of the unemployed.

With media coverage naturally focused on national news, the impacts of the virus on the developing world receive only sporadic attention. There is early evidence, however, that regions in some countries are already particularly hard hit, such as Guayaquil in Ecuador. In other areas, such as Central America, the virus seemed initially not to have penetrated as aggressively. Of late, however, the U.S.'s deportation policies amounted to an export of the virus into Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador as infected asylum seekers were returned to their home countries without recourse. Such policies were in contrast with those of other countries, like Portugal,

which granted all immigrants and asylum seekers the rights of citizens as a way to reduce pressure on immigration offices during a declared nationwide emergency.

Potential Covid19-related instability abroad and lack of preparedness at home for a pandemic that had been widely predicted for many years have made the crisis immeasurably worse, particularly in the United States. As the virus rapidly spread from China into Europe, and from Europe and China into the United States, the U.S. government has shocked the world with its ineptitude and corruption that appeared to represent failing-by-design. As epidemiologists around the world raced to understand how to treat or prevent the virus, the death toll steadily climbed to shocking levels, especially in Italy, Spain, the UK, Russia, and the United States. Healthcare professionals on the frontlines have been the most exposed and lacked sufficient personnel protective equipment from the start. In the U.S., a lack of an effective testing regime and the virus's transmissibility from asymptomatic carriers have ensured that the U.S., with about 5% of the global population, would soon have the highest numbers of known COVID19 infections and deaths in the world.

As the obituary section of local newspapers grew, readers have confronted the stories of countless families suffering immense losses, sometimes with more than one Covid19 fatality in the same household. A disproportionate number of those who succumbed have been from African-American households, Native American communities, recent immigrants, or residents or staff in long-term care facilities. The victims also have included well-known musicians, scientists, inventors, and other scions of their respective communities. By late May, the number of known U.S. Covid19 fatalities has exceeded the total numbers of Americans killed in the years of the Vietnam and Korean Wars.

A widening gap has emerged between the crisis management capabilities of the U.S. federal government and that of state-level governors and public health officials. Many observers, shocked at evidence of U.S. government incompetence, have said they doubt that the U.S. can regain a position of respect and leadership on the world stage.

Such an outcome would suit America's adversaries, including Russia's Putin who intervened in the U.S. 2016 election in favor of a Trump victory. Although Covid19 had grabbed the world's attention, in the background was a well-documented strategy of blackmail and cooptation of the U.S. administration by autocratic states hostile to democratic principles and the rights of free press, including Russia, Saudi Arabia, and North Korea. In late 2019, the U.S. President was impeached for withholding congressionally appropriated funds from Ukraine in an effort to compel the newly elected Ukrainian president to wage a campaign to discredit a political rival of the U.S. President.

This geopolitical reality imbues this scenario work with imperatives for decision-makers at all levels to adopt a "bigger picture" when adapting to a COVID19-altered world and planning for what might be to come. Specifically, a fragmented media environment, a polarized American public, daily distractions by a U.S. administration intent on covering up COVID19 statistics, and corporate lobbyists working to exempt businesses from liability for workers falling ill on the job all combine to create futures hostile to democratic values, including the importance of education.

An invisible and novel virus has accelerated and magnified a global contest between oligarchic authoritarianism and democracy and made the U.S. a battleground in that conflict. It has exposed the effects of poorly regulated capitalism on humanity and the planet as a whole. The Covid19 virus had the effect of a massive earthquake shaking the world of man so violently that many of its institutions and structures have been reduced to rubble. The viral earthquake has exposed fault-lines that had been neglected for decades.

The present is a moment of enormous opportunity as much as it is a moment of unthinkable disaster. By mid-2020, the future of the global order is yet to be drawn, and prospects for human dignity and liberty—freedoms defined and hard-won over centuries of sacrifice—hang in the balance. The liberal democratic order and a people’s right to have a reasonable expectation of a better future are on the chopping block.

### **Where can we go from here?**

We are faced with a myriad of uncertainties: medical, economic, social, and political, to name a few. Given the stakes, there is need for anticipatory thinking and strategic insights that consider different ways in which critical uncertainties — and combinations of those uncertainties — may play out over a specified time period. In this paper, we explore alternative scenarios of the United States from 2022-2023.

To identify the key uncertainties, we interviewed a variety of people including economists, scientists, science writers, political scientists, former senior government officials, and journalists. We asked each to identify which uncertainties would have the most impact on shaping the near future.<sup>1</sup>

The ones we chose as the basis for the scenarios in this paper were:

- Society’s ability to deal with fear and uncertainty
- The degree to which society trades off maximizing business profits against maximizing human welfare
- The degree to which tribalism divides and weakens social cohesion

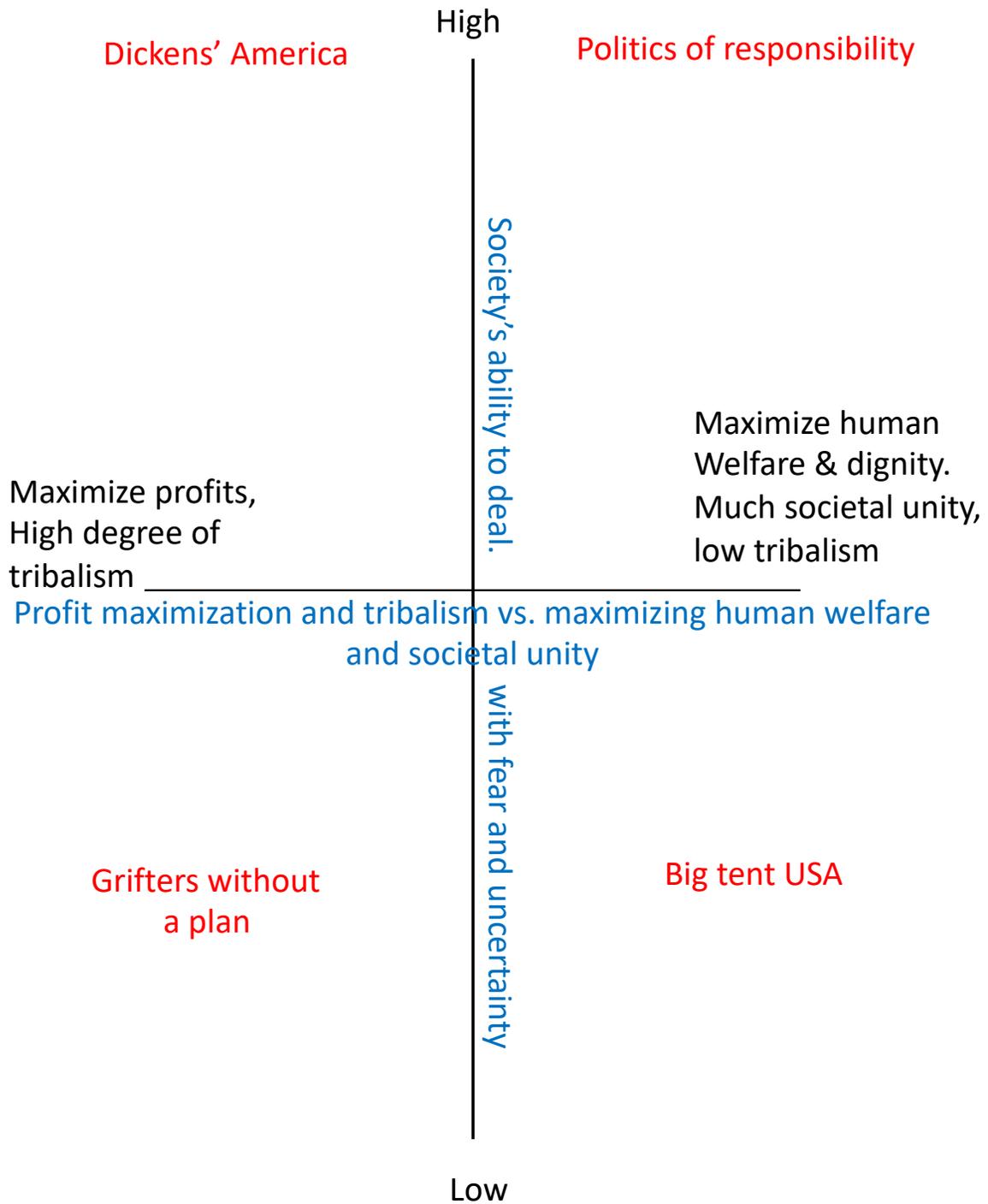
These uncertainties provided the foundation for our scenarios. To build the scenarios we created a matrix with two axes. Each axis represents an uncertainty. Its ends represent the extremes to

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<sup>1</sup> This process of interviewing experts itself is a departure from traditional scenario practice which generally involve convening people to work together in a shared space to co-create scenario narratives. Due to the pandemic, the authors selected to interview individuals one at a time through videoconference technology. The pool of interviewees is not meant to represent a statistically significant ‘sample’ of attitudes, but to solicit ideas that could be helpful in creating the scenarios.

which an uncertainty might develop over the chosen time period. In this case the timeframe is three years. In constructing the scenarios, the second and third uncertainties, represented by the socio-economic axis and the tribalism axis respectively, are combined, as they seemed to be complementary. Each quadrant of the matrix defines the chief characteristics of one scenario.

In the diagram below the axes representing the uncertainties are in blue, their extreme outcomes are in black, and the names of the scenarios that represent combinations of the extreme outcomes are in red.



Scenarios are meant to be suggestions, or “rehearsals” of potential futures, and not predictions. Any individual scenario, therefore, is unlikely to come to pass, but elements of multiple ones may be present in the future. Scenarios are best used as guides for interpreting signals of change in the present and creating adaptive strategies that enhance readiness for both expected and unexpected developments. The scenarios are:

- **Dickens’ America** — In this world, U.S. powers-that-be exhibit a high degree of adaptability to fear and pervasive uncertainty by denying and ignoring the reality of the virus. People throughout society remain fearful but distracted and misinformed in a Balkanized information environment. False advertisements by corporations of their health and safety precautions add to the confusion. Corporations pursue business-as-usual by compelling workers to work in infected factories, thereby risking their health and their lives—and those of their families. The middle class has all but disappeared, and industry has consolidated leaving no market for small businesses. Worker and consumer protections are non-existent. Workers are treated as disposable and their communities face collapse under the strain of overburdened health and local government systems.
- **Politics of Responsibility** — In this scenario, America has changed course and acted to correct the economic inequalities that so recently nearly destroyed its democratic political system and rule of law. Government, community leaders, and the public exhibit a high degree of adaptability to fear and pervasive uncertainty. They incorporate a realistic appreciation of risks, including climate change impacts, into all economic valuation, and into all business practices and protections extended to all members of society. A new administration has prioritized economic and civil rights of all who reside in the U.S. America is redefining its values and its place in the world by engaging in new forms of burden-sharing cooperative networks internationally and domestically. A widely shared vision and robustly supported independent media help to coalesce public support.
- **Grifters without a Plan** — In this world, the United States has become an oligarchic fascist state. There is no middle class. Tribalism, xenophobia, and a daily media diet of “alternative truths” keep society fractured and fearful. The public has given up on expecting truth from its government or the media and has lost faith in the possibility of a better world. Food insecurity is widespread and citizens are afraid to speak freely. There is no prospect of mobility as work itself has become scarce. Democratic countries shun the U.S. This is a regime without a plan for the future. It is an unsustainable course, even for the oligarchs, as opportunities for profiteering shrink over time.
- **Big Tent USA** — In this world, the Covid19 ordeal has proved to be a unifying experience for all Americans. Other countries still consider the U.S. as equivalent in some ways to a third world country and feared it for its high rate of infection and the chauvinism of its policies. The U.S. has become more isolationist and worked to become economically self-reliant. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government leaders inspire a fearful populace to a new optimism. A new patriotism

focuses on bringing out the potential of each person. Government at all levels brings competent people into the civil service. The country addresses its vulnerabilities, especially the vulnerabilities of the Internet and rebuilds its run-down infrastructure.

Such scenarios are meant to provoke strategic conversation and not to influence decision-makers to adopt a specific course of action. This paper is, therefore, not prescriptive but instead offers an opportunity to reflect on how decisions and actions today can influence how the future unfolds. In this spirit, the following **Selected Insights** provide a digest of highlights from this Covid19 scenario-based project.

“Wildcards” are events that may occur during the time frame envisioned but which are not taken into account in the scenarios. No list of wildcards can be comprehensive, just as no list of uncertainties is complete. Given the anticipated duration of the COVID19 crisis from 18 months to several years, however, the probability of one or more of such wildcards occurring is close to 100%. This means that decision-makers today need to factor into their planning the highly likely risks and impacts of multiple, concurrent stressors amplifying the effects of Covid19. Some of the wildcards that could affect the scenarios in this paper, however, include:

**Severe drought and/or wildfires**  
**Major disruptions or collapse of the Internet**  
**Major hurricane(s), floods, and/or earthquakes**  
**Changes in valuations of U.S. coastal and urban real estate**  
**Collapse of Russia or China or Iran or NATO/EU**  
**Second epidemiological outbreak – New Flu Variant**  
**Collapse of U.S. agriculture or multiple global breadbasket failures**  
**Confirmed slowing of the Gulf Stream which would make the UK and Western Europe cooler**  
**The dollar is abandoned as an international reserve currency**

## Selected Insights

The COVID19 global pandemic has unleashed unprecedented uncertainty and fear and highlighted gaping inequalities that now confront governments with difficult policy choices. Human society hovers between two worlds: a pre-Covid19 world and one that is now taking shape. The dangers and responsibilities in this ill-defined transitional space between two worlds cannot be exaggerated; just as the 1920s proved to be a prelude to World War II and the Holocaust, current times could prove to be an opening for human catastrophe on a global scale. Such periods of transformation alternatively can feature abundant creativity and innovation that advances human welfare.

The U.S. and the world are at a crossroads. While this paper's scenarios focus on alternative U.S. futures, the interconnections between the U.S. and the global context receive attention. Whatever lens one takes to Covid19 futures — whether the lens of a local politician, entrepreneur, or a university administrator — what happens inside the U.S. affects the future course of events in the world at large, and vice versa.

Through a geopolitical lens, our Covid19 present can be seen as potentially strengthening radically different systems of government: on the one hand, democratic capitalism bound to the public through a social contract and, alternatively, oligarchic authoritarianism that survives by dividing publics, stoking fear, and rewarding loyalists. A crisis provides opportunities to de-regulate or strengthen worker and consumer protections that affect workers' upward mobility, prospects for a middle class and the resilience of communities. These dynamics are reflected in the scenarios that follow.

The scenarios strongly suggest that there is no possibility of a “return to normal.” In addition, a prolonged pandemic makes it nearly inevitable that concurrent future disasters, such as hurricanes or droughts, will amplify the dangers and hardships facing society and governments. All sectors now must reimagine their operations in view of unfamiliar and still unimaginable new realities. In academia, the effects will likely be profound and involve necessary changes in curricula, business models, major shifts in foreign student enrollment, and impacts on tuition fees.

The availability of accurate information will remain critical to maintain people's confidence in government and to making sound policy. The lack of viability of the news-as-a-business model undermines social cohesion and trust in the media. A continued “balkanization” of news media, particularly in the U.S., fragments the public's understanding of current events in a way that promotes tribalism and strengthens the ability of the current U.S. government to divide public opinion and weaken the country's response to Covid-19. In addition, the public needs valid scientific and timely information in order to deal with mitigating the outbreak.

The pandemic has exposed a world beleaguered by outdated mindsets, assumptions, and orthodoxies. There is a need for new conceptual frameworks and warning capabilities, as well as new institutions to advance them. The crisis is yet another

example of the immense price of unheeded warnings about **expected disasters**. In this case, years of warnings about an inevitable pandemic have been ignored. While still in its early phases, the virus outbreak already has provided powerful evidence of the steep costs both in human lives and economic devastation of a reactive, rather than anticipatory, stance towards expected disasters. This remains an area of critical national and global insecurity in an age of increasing risks of **unexpected disasters**, moreover. Globally, there is growing vulnerability to systemic risks, such as the effects of invasive species on a nation's food supply or cyber attacks disrupting Internet traffic.

Institutionalized myopia sharpens the dangers for democratic principles, erodes standards of living, and catalyzes shifts in economic realities without public debate or policy formulation. Disasters such as Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Maria provided openings for ruthless actors to exploit the needs of suddenly vulnerable communities. Sometimes called "disaster capitalism," this predatory phenomenon strips populations of workplace protections and civil liberties and creates conditions that are difficult to reverse. By 2023, as a result, most Americans could be living in poverty within a society more divided than ever between haves and have-nots, such as is described in the scenarios, "Dickens' America" and "Grifters Without a Plan." Such outcomes may trigger a brain-drain as highly-educated academics and researchers move to posts in countries perceived to have managed the virus and their economies well.

A critical uncertainty today is the degree to which policymakers will understand and address the root causes of the Covid19 crisis. Covid19, a novel virus that leapt from an animal species to humans, is yet another "wake-up call" regarding the interconnectedness of natural and man-made systems. As such, the virus has highlighted the systemic interdependency of humanity with the health of the natural world. Such a systems-aware approach would entail extensive global cooperation. A key implication of this future, which is sketched out in "Politics of Responsibility," is a requirement to rethink most disciplines including economics, international security studies, and political science.

As the crisis has upended societies around the world, it has created the conditions for still greater inequality. In the U.S., for instance, one outcome could be that more mega-monopolies will dominate the business landscape. As a result, there would be less innovation, entrepreneurialism and consumer choice, and fewer consumers due to sharp economic contraction. In addition, protectionist economic policies may dominate as over-simplified narratives about globalization provide cover for national-level consolidation of industries. Such outcomes are most likely in scenarios featuring high degrees of tribalism and short-term profit maximization, such as "Dickens' America" and "Grifters Without a Plan."

In addition, the crisis has provided powerful reminder of the critical role that the Internet has come to play in the lives of billions of people and of the vulnerability of this resource to disruption and even collapse. Reliable and affordable access to the Internet has become a necessary public good but without, so far, the regulatory infrastructure to ensure its protection and continuity during a prolonged crisis. Digital access during the

Covid19 pandemic has enabled people with Internet access, cut off from their usual in-person routines, to continue critically necessary economic, educational, medical, banking, commerce, media and news analysis, religious and other activities. Those without digital access, including children in the U.S, are at risk of falling further behind. Ensuring universal access to a functioning and secure Internet will require globally coordinated policies.

The scenarios suggest several other implications of the COVID19 crisis that decision-makers need to take account in their planning today for an uncertain future. These include:

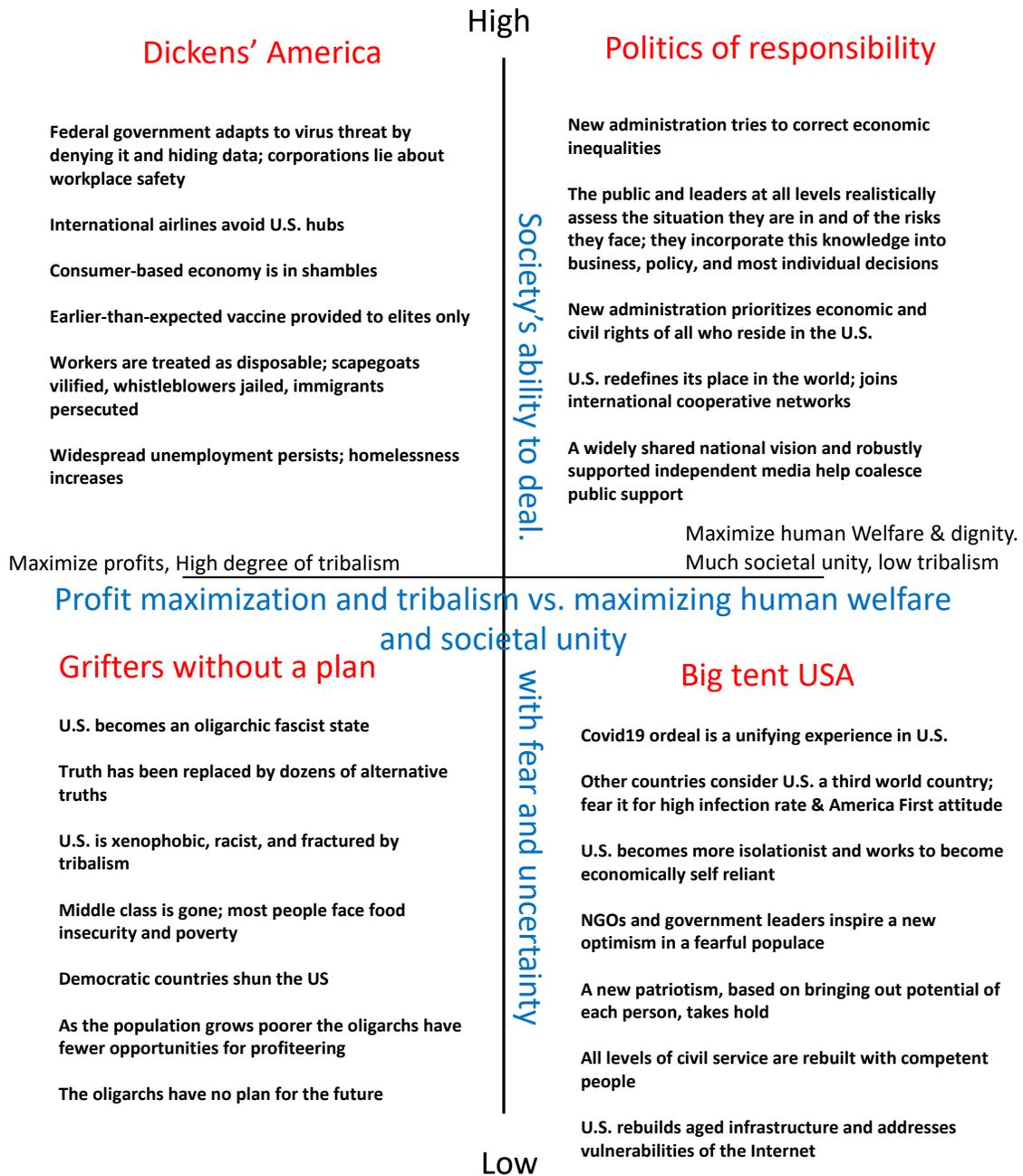
- **Failure of the world’s scientific community to develop a safe and effective vaccine to counter the novel coronavirus.** Unusual features of the virus appear to be a formidable challenge to vaccine developers.
- **Possible inequalities in access to a safe and effective vaccine.** In some scenarios, nationalists adopt the competitive language and behaviors of a zero-sum strategic arms race with regard to making a successful vaccine available to the global population. Such an approach will cause more preventable deaths and delay economic recovery.
- **Societal responses to “tribalism” or scapegoating of people perceived to be different.** How issues of tribalism play out in the Covid19 crisis is a critical uncertainty. The virus and accompanying global economic contraction could further polarize societies including in the U.S. In the scenarios “Politics of Responsibility” and “Big Tent USA”, immigrants are highly valued as part of the economic and social fabric of the country.
- **Differences in the quality and politics of leaders** already have proved to be correlated to variations in nations’ and states’ ability to deal with the effects of the virus. The different futures ahead depend on the quality of leadership at all levels: national, state, religious, economic, media, social media, and entertainment. Populist-nationalistic leaders responded to the virus outbreak by denying its dangers and lying about their countries’ readiness to deal with it. Democracies with science-literate leaders, who have prioritized providing clear and accurate data to the public, have demonstrated more success in dealing with the pandemic.
- **A new geopolitical dynamic** has become pronounced in the early phases of the Covid19 pandemic in which the U.S. government, which once could be relied upon to take the lead in a global crisis, is instead acting in ways that stoke chaos and prevent a cohesive societal and global response. The new U.S. role was in evidence when the U.S. government refused in May 2020 to participate in a globally collaborative effort to develop and safely field an effective vaccine against the Covid19 virus. This dynamic is present in two of the scenarios. In addition, there are risks of a potential Cold War with China; whether a Cold War breaks out, however, depends as much on China as on the U.S. There also are

uncertainties about how the U.S. will approach global re-engagement in the future.

- **Decisions to lift current travel bans** may be manipulated by different countries for political as well as public health reasons. With data widely available on which countries have handled the virus more effectively than others, some countries, including the U.S., may be discriminated against once international travel restrictions begin to be lifted. Such disparities would have sweeping implications for American businesses seeking to re-open, including commercial airlines, hotels, and universities. The scenarios refer to “clean corridors” of international air travel that avoid countries perceived as contaminated.

Successful management by the United States of the coronavirus is essential to the continuation and strengthening of U.S. democracy and rule of law. Without this, there will be no viable future for universities, law schools, or a credible diplomatic service. Pathways to a healthier, more democratic U.S. society will involve restoring science-based decision-making to government and valuing, perhaps for the first time, the rights of all people to live with dignity. In “Politics of Responsibility,” a new U.S. administration has taken on this enormous task as the only way to restore democracy and America’s standing in the world.

# Four Scenarios of the United States in 2022-2023



## Scenario 1: Dickens' America

The first few months of the pandemic in the U.S highlighted the health and economic uncertainty with which hundreds of millions of Americans lived. By January 2021 it was clear that the social safety net in many states was in shreds. Unemployment benefits were not enough to help most people pay for rent, food, utilities, and medical care. During the very cold winter of 2020-21, almost as many people died from cold and hunger as did from the first flare up of the coronavirus. Poverty took its toll in rural areas as much as in cities.

Workers in essential industries such as meat processing were ordered to work despite the great risks of getting Covid19 or face losing their jobs. As a result, hundreds of workers were falling ill every day, and many of them died. With inside channels to powerful congressional leaders, the corporate headquarters of several meat processors adopted a slick strategy of widely advertising the new health precautions they were taking inside their plants. These ads were part of a corporate media strategy to convince Americans that meat shortages were imminent. In fact, however, little had changed to make the working conditions less dangerous for the workers and, by extension, their families. Companies did not take obviously needed steps to insure greater separation among the workers along the meat-processing lines. It was more cost-effective for them to treat individual workers as disposable. Congressional interventions to ensure that the companies would face no legal liability in the event workers and their families got sick, with some dying, made it easier for corporations to adopt this hypocritical strategy. It was business-as-usual for them.

Urgent demands for reform slammed the new administration from all sides. Corporate leaders were still on a sugar-high from the generous tax breaks and loosened regulatory policies extended by the previous administration. The new president had run on an ambitious program to provide food and shelter to the millions of people now living on the street, to enable the working poor and unemployed to stay in their homes and put food on the table, to keep struggling small businesses afloat, to provide jobs through public works, and to provide health care to all who needed it. He and his cabinet tried to focus on where they could make the greatest impact in the shortest time. Unfortunately, the corporate sector — unshackled from any liability for unsafe working conditions — had managed to keep their factories humming by going through an endless supply of workers even as the rates of infected workers caused state health systems to buckle.

Congressional leaders wrote a bill that gave lip-service to the president's plan but quickly bogged it down with a long series of hearings. What emerged from Congress in June 2021 was a bill that provided subsidies to individuals to buy private health insurance, subsidies for hospitals, tax breaks for businesses, special tax breaks for pharmaceutical companies, and inadequate block grants to states to use for welfare and unemployment benefits. The Senate Majority Leader announced that it was the job of the states to take care of their people and to deal with the virus. It was every state for itself. The Senate Majority Leader was not from the president's party and made it clear that the president would accomplish very little.

The bill made lobbyists smile. This is why they were paid the big bucks. Because the recession of 2020 hurt so many middle-class people, small donations to congressional campaigns were greatly reduced. The industries with money had an extra advantage during the campaign. And they used it to “make friends” among the candidates of both parties. The friends made sure that federal spending and taxes on corporations and the very wealthy were kept low.

The series of viral outbreaks, lockdowns, and re-openings became routine. Life developed a new rhythm. By fall 2021, gig workers, workers in factories, and in food processing who survived the virus and recession were confident that they could do what it would take to survive until a vaccine or treatment were available. There was a new cohort of small business entrepreneurs who were optimistic and energized. They were producing new apps for tracking contacts, new technologies for PPE, and designer face masks.

Beyond this world, however, there was even a larger number of people who were depressed, anxious, and angry about their declining standard of living. More homeless people appeared on the streets. They squatted in foreclosed properties. Drug use, alcoholism, suicide, and crime increased.

Although it was not true, Internet trolls and alt-right media spread rumors about how African-Americans, Latinos, Muslims, Jews, and immigrants were receiving generous welfare benefits while white people were starving. Some governors countered these claims with assertions that all people were getting the same benefits. In the confusing jumble of contradictory media sources, there were no good sources of information that could bolster the arguments of either side. To save money, states had eliminated jobs of people who collected labor and welfare statistics. States had names and addresses of recipients, but no information on their race or religion. And most local newspapers that might have investigated had closed their doors due to a lack of advertising revenue. Hate crimes increased. Jim Crow returned, and in some states was extended to Latinos, Asians, and non-Christians.

Many foreigners—especially those who came of age in the 20<sup>th</sup> century—were aghast at what was going on in the US. A once competent country had brought neither the coronavirus nor the economic health of its people under control. European and Asian presses portrayed the U.S. as a place where both the virus and crime were rampant. They advised their citizens not to visit the US. Foreign students abandoned American universities. Wealthy Chinese who had bought properties in New York, Washington, Houston, LA and San Francisco sold them off. Real estate values, already depressed by the recession, drifted lower. In addition, foreign airlines greatly cut back flights to the U.S. in favor of “clean corridors” through Canada. Hotels that once catered to foreign tourists or conventions went bankrupt or scraped by as “isolation hostels”.

In early 2022, New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey, accepting that Congress was not going help them out, issued hundreds of billions of dollars worth of bonds for

public works projects. At least they could renew their infrastructure and put lots of people to work. California issued general revenue bonds to mend its social safety net.

Throughout 2021 the stock market went through a series of ups and downs. The ups were fueled by speculation that some company was on the verge of releasing a vaccine or treatment for Covid-19. The downs came when the vaccine proved ineffective. By April 2022 there were persistent reports that a vaccine had been developed but no one reported having received it. On Mothers Day, a Fox News commentator gloated that she and her family had received the vaccine. The president announced that he, the vice president, cabinet, and members of congress had also been inoculated but only 100,000 doses could be produced per month. Those would first go to medical workers, first responders, the military, and state officials. Nevertheless, there were reports on social media about Wall Street tycoons, members of Congress, sports celebrities and the very wealthy getting the vaccine, albeit at a hefty price.

Foreign governments complained that the US-led pharmaceutical consortium that patented the vaccine would not license it to other manufacturers. They threatened to stop trade with the U.S. until the vaccine was shared. Everyone who was not on the list for vaccinations was angry. People who had been discriminated against for welfare or unemployment assistance were particularly angry. Many of them knew people who were dying at a much higher rate than upper-middle class white people. Riots broke out in southern states. Martial law was declared as another shutdown was ordered in riot-torn areas.

As 2023 drew to a close, most of the American people were seething with discontent. The vast majority had slipped into poverty, many people had lost loved ones to the virus, and public services — including health care services — were woefully inadequate. Many had lost their savings, their homes, or their businesses. Washington was a joke. Help from most state governments was minimal to non-existent. Millions of small businesses were gone. Big businesses had trimmed operations and employment to remain profitable. No one trusted the media. And other countries shunned America.

## **Scenario 2: Politics of Responsibility**

The Covid19 pandemic unmasked the myth of “American exceptionalism”. Sharp disparities in who lived and who died had created a different map of the United States. Many abroad now saw it as a failed state. Yet few world leaders gloated over this. They were traumatized. Their experience with a bullying anti-science U.S. administration left lasting impressions. Most recognized that the erosion of the rule of law and democracy in the U.S. threatened their nations more than a virus ever could.

By late 2021, the new U.S. administration was working closely with state, local and many world leaders to address gaping inequities and democracy deficits that the pandemic had highlighted. Violent uprisings in parts of the U.S. reminded many of video

footage from conflict-ridden areas of the developing world. Some hard-hit areas were states that had prioritized business-as-usual. Predictably local healthcare systems in these regions had collapsed under the weight of Covid19 cases.

Across America, the hardest-hit demographics included African-Americans, the elderly, Native Americans, incarcerated people, those with underlying health conditions, hourly workers, front-line healthcare workers, low-wage immigrant communities, and willfully misinformed people. Those deemed too essential to stay home included grocery store workers, meat-packing processors, medical personnel, nursing home staff, and first responders. Others with jobs that could be carried out online had the option of never leaving home. In America, being poor, black, sick, elderly, in jail, a new immigrant or refugee, or a nurse or a doctor, or deceived by propaganda could be a death sentence.

One of the few upsides of the ongoing crisis was that strong leaders with the necessary communication skills had emerged all over the globe. It was impossible to miss the fact that many of them were women with strong science or technical backgrounds. It was furthermore impossible to ignore the better performance of their countries in confronting the coronavirus. These leaders made data-driven decisions. They each benefited from strong pre-crisis networks of cooperation with colleagues in other fields, relationships that could never be created on demand but which were cultivated over many years. Of these leaders, some were heads of state, some were governors, and others the heads of regional public health sectors or economic and security blocs. All were authentic and empathetic and delivered fact-based briefings to frightened publics hungry for them.

Such inclusive leaders attracted different types of thinkers and activists comfortable with tackling cross-boundary problems. Before the new U.S. administration took office, a global network of problem-solvers was applying knowledge of complex systems analysis to the many so-far intractable problems of the world, such as climate change. The recognition that previous policymakers had tended to tackle the symptoms and not the roots of problems energized this broad-based coalition of problem-solvers-without-borders. They emphasized how old mindsets and unexamined assumptions undermined peoples' ability to deal with a broad range of problems.

The new administration thus had natural allies for creating new political realities before it was too late. This was no time for complacency: an authoritarian future still waited in the wings. A balance between pragmatism and entirely new thinking had to be found, without racing too far ahead of a suffering public in need of basics like food and shelter.

A new form of politics was emerging: a politics of responsibility. It emphasized an environmentally sustainable economy and a livable income, decoupled from employment, for every adult. Already a collective sense of responsibility for tackling global challenges was manifest in an emergent global political reality. Covid19 was, after all, a common threat to all. It respected no borders. Confronting it and other looming global disasters, such as climate change, with disunity was a recipe for prolonging the public health crisis and economic disaster. The world's experience with the virus since

2020 proved this. A painful lesson had been learned and mobilized a new global consciousness, a new Zeitgeist, into which the younger generations were pouring their talents, ideas, and boundless energy. There was an unprecedented readiness among nations to pool national resources in pursuit of strengthening collective security: it was the responsible thing to do and addressed the wishes of most nations' newly eligible voters. The world was interconnected and always had been, at least biologically.

A global race to conquer the virus ensued with most of the nations of the world cooperating to a degree that had not been seen since the end of World War II. And, in mid-2022, a successful vaccine was deployed with mostly global agreement (there were some outliers) to prioritize this limited resource for use with the most vulnerable populations representing demographics that had suffered the most.

In many countries, such as Brazil, Mexico, and the United States, however, it was difficult to get the necessary logistics in place for a widespread vaccination program. Global air transportation remained non-existent except in so-called "clean corridors" connecting countries that had handled the virus with skill and science from the beginning. The United States was not among them. By 2021, when accurate Covid19 case counting began to include long-term care facilities and prisons, the United States, about 5% of the world's population, was exposed as having the 27% of both Covid19 cases and deaths in the world. It was still too dangerous to fly there and, in any case, many U.S. international airports would face exorbitant costs in re-opening before travel bans were lifted.

The U.S. had begun accepting foreign financial assistance by 2021, however, and also was open to advice on how to ensure fair elections at state levels. The new administration recognized that several foreign governments had firsthand experience with adversarial digital hacking of their nations' electoral systems and had tried to warn the U.S. of this danger well before the 2016 presidential election.

To an unprecedented degree, the United States was receptive to learning from other nations' achievements in various sectors, including public education. The crisis forced the new U.S. administration to invest scarce resources in building a strong, adequately funded public education system accessible to all in the U.S. Extraordinary inventiveness was necessary to create and extend worthwhile on-line learning opportunities to different age groups and children with different learning styles. America's famed pioneering spirit and grit came to the rescue.

America's near-death experience with oligarchic authoritarianism under the previous administration exposed the failure of American education to emphasize the study of history and reasoning from data. With anti-corruption commissions and crimes against humanity trials still underway, the public was daily learning how America's unexamined assumptions, following the sudden collapse of the Berlin Wall, had contributed to a misguided sense of national exceptionalism. This hubris and lack of strategic reflection led directly to the existential national security crisis that still had a death grip on the nation's future. Succeeding U.S. administrations had turned a blind eye to widening inequalities and accelerating democratic decay in America. Misled initially

by a sense of the “End of History,” America’s historical vacuum since the end of the Cold War left generations of Americans without sufficient education to think critically. It also made its most critical infrastructure—America’s electoral system—a target for foreign manipulation.

U.S. universities were already enduring unimaginable budgetary pressures and, by 2021, it was clear that that business-as-usual was dead. There was no aspect of any university curriculum that did not need end-to-end restructuring in light of new realities. Entire fields of study had to be rethought and new programs of study designed. Even as online learning dominated the education landscape, the pandemic had shown a bright light on the drawbacks of overemphasis on digital technology at the expense of the humanities and environmental literacy.

Even before the 2020 election members of the new administration had realized that America was on a path to authoritarianism. Unconventional ideas had been generally unwelcome so long as the myth of America’s exceptionalism endured. For 30 years after the Cold War, America had insufficient interest in foresight or even in hindsight. Entire generations of students were thus ill-equipped for what was ahead. Covid19 would change this under this administration. A respected historian joined the new administration to oversee a nationwide effort to boost appreciation of the study of history.

The new administration realized that it could not solve the problems America faced with the same level of thinking, let alone some of the same thinkers that created them. The civil service needed rebuilding and it was a high priority to recall into public service some of those who had been labeled different thinkers during their government careers. It was to these people that young aspiring career public servants would now look to for guidance.

The pandemic itself was a reminder than many warnings had gone unheeded for too long. During the prolonged “stay-at-home” period, the potential winners of the next election cycle used their time to familiarize themselves with up-and-coming thinkers about ways to create an environmentally sustainable economy. The administration’s advisors embraced a systems-level, forward-thinking interdisciplinary approach that ultimately integrated the entire incoming Cabinet in a strategic conversation focused on shared goals and new ways to incorporate and act upon strategic warning.

But the path ahead was cluttered with the apocalyptic results of the outgoing administration. Incoming administration officials inherited an almost completely destroyed economy. With unprecedented levels of unemployment, hunger, disease, and homelessness across the country, there were insufficient resources to tackle everything that needed attention. It was now a national security priority to think differently and quickly about what could be done with the resources that were available. This was possible but never before implemented to the extent now necessary.

The new administration naturally emphasized national and global public health, reinstated scientists in government, and prioritized staffs and methods for anticipatory

warning. A new international diplomatic service was established. In addition, a new health care service made possible universal healthcare in America. Covid19 demonstrated that the health of the population depended on the health of each individual so universal healthcare included all people residing in the U.S. Detention centers of asylum seekers were closed and the new administration led a global effort to rethink refugee and asylum policies in the face of mounting migration flows worldwide. Farm and factory workers were welcomed back with social distancing and other personal protection protocols in place, as well as guaranteed paid time off and health coverage in the event of any illness. Public transportation including subways, buses, and trains were revamped with added public health protections for customers and employees alike.

Corporations were compelled by law to pay taxes again in the face of the inevitable implosion of the U.S. economy. By 2022, it was clear that no corporation, no matter how wealthy or artificially propped up on Wall Street, could survive the economic downturn without a different approach to U.S. tax policy: a consumer-driven economy needed consumers with purchasing power. A larger tax base helped to rebuild infrastructure and the civil service, to enforce environmental and labor regulations, and to expand voting rights.

Last but not least, the U.S. news media environment began to undergo a dramatic transformation, one that excited journalism students. A partnership, formed of a new government agency (a reinvented U.S. Information Service) and non-profit foundations, supported a new model of independent media reporting, including greatly strengthened investigative and local reporting. A long pandemic of lies was coming to an end and America could look forward to rejoining a community of responsible nations.

### **Scenario 3: Grifters without a Plan, People without a Future**

By late 2022, many Americans no longer wondered whether their own “Dear Leader” was dead or alive. It was simply too much these days to expect the truth from anyone. They did know that the president was the same person who had advised bleach injections as a possible means of curing Covid19 two years ago. In the time that had elapsed, even the hopeful music of Christian evangelist singers had gone silent. To them, God seemed to go missing. Many in their congregations had not survived Covid19 despite the president’s assertions that it was fine to go shopping and back to church services and school. Millions of prayers offered for the recovery of the Covid-19 infected church members had gone mostly unheeded. Belief in miracles seemed to depart this Earth along with the souls of too many of their singing preacher heroes. For the rest of society, belief in the possibility of a better future was buried under a pandemic of lies.

The absence of God was fine with those in power. It made it easier to focus the public’s attention on the Earth-bound savior who was the only one who could protect his flock against the marauding hordes the internal security services claimed to be monitoring closely. The leader’s big-belt-buckle, bare-chested doctored photo was

everywhere, defying anyone to question his authority even though, when last seen, he only mumbled unintelligibly. His loyalists were regularly interviewed on the only channels still allowed to broadcast. They mainly issued reports that contradicted previous ones. Daily reports of violence, kidnapping and looting contained video coverage that could have been photo-shopped. The reports were hard to discount, however, in the current culture of distrust and economic hardship. The subways were too still too dangerous, according to these reports: if the virus didn't kill you, a homemade explosive might. As in previous eras, the vulnerable or different were singled out for blame. It was permissible to scapegoat many different communities of people. By 2022, the melting pot of America was dumped out into the streets, apparently in the hopes that it would drain into the gutters and ultimately into oblivion. Wealthy backers of the administration saw their dream coming true: a pseudo-Christian, White Supremacist, transnational kleptocracy.

Many had speculated that the president's own party would find a way to remove him as its candidate before the 2020 election, but this proved wrong.

His political survival defied the odds in a still rational society but, it turned out, the president's repeated insistence that the virus would disappear had its desired effect. People wanted to believe that getting "back to normal" was still possible. Anyway it was impossible to imagine a future without retail shopping, travel, movie theaters, and children going to school. It was quite understandable, therefore, that they heard what they wanted to believe. Governors in several states were praised for having clear plans for a return to business-as-usual. This was before anyone realized it was gone for good.

In any case, the president's absence from the public eye could easily be understood as due to the stay-at-home restrictions all states were compelled to resume in the summer of 2020 after a wave of "re-openings" of the economy proved fatally premature. No one knew the true numbers of fatalities but the only trucks on the roads were rumored to be carrying corpses to mass gravesites. White men wearing khakis and T-shirts along with riot gear but no insignia patrolled the streets, watching for violators of the stay-at-home decrees. Many families had relatives who had disappeared simply on minor errands supposedly allowed: so far as anyone knew, the disappeared were never heard from again. Of course, no one knew how many were missing.

In such an environment, it was risky even for children to be allowed to broadcast their puppet shows over YouTube. Parents had to censor the dialogue in case it revealed, or mistakenly suggested, things that children thought they had heard discussed at home. For adults, meeting up with old friends outside was to flirt with disaster; bored neighbors staring out from their windows could earn a few bucks or a couple of sirloin steaks from the authorities for reporting deviant behavior.

The only reprieve from the silence and isolation were the Saturday flea markets where residents of surrounding areas would lay out blankets and set up tables for displaying used home goods and clothing for sale to each other. Everyone kept at least six feet apart; with all the death and disappeared people, this seemed to be the one thing they could do for themselves. Old friends waved at each other across the sea of blankets

and battered lampshades. They refrained from real conversation out of concern for each other.

Most shops remained boarded up with plywood sheets from the first months of the pandemic. Gas stations had almost completely disappeared along with all of the middle class. There was no place to go and, in any case, travel between states was prohibited without a special permit. Most small businesses had collapsed too as many predicted they would two years ago. The “Moms” and “Pops” that had run the restaurants, cleaning services, skating rinks, and retail shops were now holed up in too-small apartments with their unemployed children. Once the funds Congress approved as relief for small businesses were diverted to large corporations and major league sports associations run by the president’s cronies, entrepreneurialism in America was dead. Predatory capitalists swooped in and got richer off of the spoils scattered across the once diverse commercial landscape.

Enemies of the state were everywhere and multiplying by the day, or so it seemed as America plunged further into isolation and, for the 99%, extreme economic distress. The few channels available broadcast coverage of military parades and news of America’s military victories against all types of adversaries abroad. They never addressed the fate of thousands of American men and women in uniform who succumbed to the uncontrolled virus right in their midst, whether on ships at sea or in hospitals. Military leaders never spoke out with their concerns; independent thought could get one killed. Intrepid journalism was dead too; it had suffered a death by a thousand cuts to newsroom budgets and a few accidents involving people falling from windows. Rumors of small batches of an effective vaccine being given only to the president’s most loyal supporters circulated widely.

Food shortages appeared as soon as the president’s second term began but it seemed not to concern him or his loyalists. Food processing plants continued to operate and were constantly pressing unemployed workers into service along the production lines. Plant managers crowed about their ability instantly replace a worker felled by the virus with an able-bodied man or woman. Malnutrition was widespread but never discussed on the nightly news.

Of course, the virus continued to spread like wildfire; people were no longer able to speak of “waves” of outbreaks. Large agricultural monopolies had joined forces with the immigration enforcement para-police to force both legal and illegal immigrants to work on farms and in fisheries to keep production lines going. Plant managers removed sick and dead workers from the production lines every day without ceremony or apparent regret. Bonuses and badges honoring “homeland food security patriots” continued to be offered to those who worked “bravely” without regard for the virus. Centralization of once extremely decentralized supply chains led to frequent distribution bottlenecks. Prices rose as supplies fell. By 2022, moreover, healthy workers were also in short supply, and companies were clamoring for special visas for healthy immigrant workers.

Though without any future, the United States was still a powerful country from a military perspective and acted as a rogue-state spoiler on the global stage. Countries along the “clean corridors” struggled to distance the U.S. from their own efforts to grapple with global challenges, including the ever-more devastating effects of climate change as well as digital security threats.

In mid-2020, the prescient and calming call for new forms of global cooperation, made by Jordan’s King Abdullah, catalyzed statesmen and women of countries along the “clean corridors” to band together. They used collaborative digital technologies, well-earned popular support, and refined public speaking skills to mobilize their publics into armies of hope and change. Prominent environmentalists and specialists on habitat loss and species migration persuaded millions of activists to work toward a “Half-Earth” post-Covid19 future. This vision called for setting aside half of the Earth’s seas and land surfaces for biodiversity. This environmentally sustainable future was now within reach, as the world’s wildlife had begun to reoccupy lands that were now left idle by so many homebound and unemployed people around the world. One idea under active consideration was habitat-corridors that would set aside land to re-connect areas of endangered habitats. These corridors would enable reunited members of species, previously cut off by concrete structures, to repopulate the new wilds.

The battle to save the Earth for future generations was joined. The world was bifurcated. One half called upon science- and humanities-based planning to rethink mankind’s natural interdependence with all living systems on Earth. The other half defended business as usual. Despite continued threats, animal species on the brink of extinction slowly rejuvenated and roamed freely in much cleaner environments than existed before the Covid19 crisis. Plant life also gained a new chance at survival as reforestation of the Earth accelerated.

Back in the U.S., however, authoritarian rule had all but supplanted democracy. Large corporations depended on an endless supply of disposable workers without any rights. Union rights and consumer protections were nearly extinct. Retirees were reduced to living in abandoned buildings or with relatives who could afford to support them. Many Americans sought to leave the country but encountered still closed international borders. Around the world, Americans were shunned.

Nonetheless, there were signs by late 2022 that the kleptocracy in charge of the U.S. was crumbling under the weight of its own greed and short-sightedness. There were too few outlets for consumer products in America and trading partnerships and channels were in disarray. No one in America who could still afford a car needed one. Restaurants seemed likely to never reopen. An entire generation had missed out on critical years of education. The nation’s universities could never adjust to an environment so hostile to most of the subjects taught before the virus outbreak. Even with infusions of coronavirus relief money meant for small businesses, Wall Street was collapsing. Offshore investment and typical money laundering havens fell victim to the virus’s effects as well with the implosion of the real estate, travel, human trafficking, and diamond industries. Short-term greed had run its course and corporations’ profits were shrinking. There was no

tomorrow, only today. Grifters continued grifting without a plan. For the rest, there was only pain and no future.

#### **Scenario 4: Big Tent USA**

Americans started 2021 unhappy with government responses to the coronavirus and the economy. Most parts of the country reopened in May 2020, only to close down six weeks later when the virus reasserted itself. Many states reopened again in August, only to close again in late September. People did not adapt well to oscillating between lockdowns and re-openings. A majority continued to self-isolate even when the data said it was safe to be with other people.

In retrospect this was a unifying experience for all Americans. It was easier for the rich, more difficult for the poor, and wrenching for those with just enough to lose when they were laid off or their businesses closed down. Nobody liked it. Some rebelled against it. Most shared the anger. All shared the fear—fear of illness or of poverty or of death.

Europeans lamented the decline of the America that had once been competent, principled, muscular, and commanding respect. Where was that America now? It acted like a third world country where legislators were bought under the guise of “campaign contributions”, with a corrupt corporate elite, a gross level of inequality, the majority of its people poor, and many of its citizens disenfranchised.

Europe once had a protector. Now Europe had to fend for itself not only against Russia, but also against the US. In April 2020 the *Guardian* reported that “Europeans were already outraged by America’s reported efforts to acquire monopoly rights to a coronavirus vaccine under development in Germany.” Germans also considered the alleged U.S. diversion of “200,000 protective masks destined for Berlin” from Thailand “an act of modern piracy.”<sup>2</sup> The world was repelled by the spectre of a supposedly developed country without a fair and affordable healthcare system, the desperate contest among states for life-saving personal protective equipment for their front-line workers, and the disparities in the death toll that struck the elderly, the incarcerated and the ethnic minorities with a vengeance. To this “watching world,” the “lack of centralized coordination are reminiscent of a poor, developing country, not the most powerful, influential nation on earth, wrote one foreign observer.”<sup>3</sup> As a result, not only did the U.S. lose the respect of Europe, but also most of the world came to fear the U.S. for its inept response to the coronavirus pandemic.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/apr/12/us-global-reputation-rock-bottom-donald-trump-coronavirus>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Even as some international travel resumed, travel to the U.S. remained a trickle of what it had been. Students from Asia and the Middle East chose to attend universities in “healthy countries” like Germany, France, Australia, and New Zealand. Many foreign-born and some native U.S. academic experts were lured to teaching and research positions abroad. Foreign tourists disappeared from U.S. cities and national parks. Americans who wanted to travel abroad had to get “health visas” and be virus tested before they could go through customs and immigration.

The darkness of the national mood became an increasing cause of concern on social media, among journalists and social commentators, mental health professionals, and the clergy. One of the first organizations to address the problem nationally was the World Epicenter Kitchen. They opened “chicken soup for the spirit” kiosks across the country, cheering people with tasty hot food, coffee and doughnuts, and milk and cookies that were available all day for free. The charismatic chef who led them rallied clergymen, medical workers, mental health professionals, celebrities, mayors — anyone who wanted to join — to address the problems of personal depression, anxiety, and increasing poverty.

National and local leaders acknowledged and shared people’s fears and urged those who were unafraid to assist their neighbors with shopping and to help maintain their neighborhoods and parks. The newly elected president called on people to lead simple, austere lives and to connect with friends and relatives. Local leaders, celebrities, and influencers took up the call. Many people shared photos on Instagram of their simple meals of rice, beans, and foraged greens or of potatoes and cabbage from their gardens. The media made heroes of “can-do” poor people. Those who helped their neighbors got 15 minutes of fame on Instagram and Facebook. People shared clever ways to adapt to intervals of opening and reclosing schools and businesses. The economy slowly expanded. By early 2022 the national mood was optimistic and altruistic. In most parts of the country it was also inclusive, a recognition that, despite being a nation that was divided in many ways, Team America had confronted a common enemy and come out stronger.

A new kind of patriotism flourished with the goal of strengthening America by developing each citizen’s potential. This involved providing a quality education to every child, higher education to those who wanted it, job training to those who needed it, creating employment opportunities where there were few, and helping the poor meet their basic needs.

One of the new Congress’s first acts was to expand the social safety net to help the neediest Americans with health care and a guaranteed monthly income but with spending levels tied to tax revenues and the ability of the government to borrow. As the economy recovered and tax revenues increased, these benefits would be extended to the working poor and then to people in higher income groups. Congress also enacted a temporary increase in taxes on corporations, financial transactions, and people with incomes in excess of \$1,000,000. To repair decaying infrastructure and provide jobs, Congress enacted a program to rebuild America’s bridges, dams, railroads, airports, and

highways. Rosie the Riveter T-shirts became popular. To repair America's tattered democracy, Congress enacted laws to protect the right of every citizen to vote and to make it easier to do so.

As part of its "Make America Competent Again" program, the new administration began strengthening the civil service by hiring people with expertise and loyalty to the constitution and rule of law. A renewed Justice Department made protection of voting rights and the reapportionment of gerrymandered congressional districts a top priority. Also, to ease unemployment, the Department of Education extended tuition and cost of living benefits to all students who gained admission to certified colleges, universities, and trade schools.

People realized that individual and national competence rested on knowledge, critical thinking, and science. By fall 2021 there was a noticeable uptick in enrollment in science courses among undergraduates. Just as important, people became much less tolerant of mis- and dis-information in social media and cable news.

By January 2022 U.S. industries were producing enough kits to test for the coronavirus and antibodies that everyone could be tested monthly. This was a great boon to schools, factories, meat processing plants, businesses, and the military. These organizations quickly adapted to testing for the virus, tracing contacts (with the help of new phone apps), quarantining new cases, and closing down as necessary. Dormitories, naval ships, prisons, and long-term care facilities were reconfigured to provide easy isolation.

The second way people rallied around the flag was on foreign policy. In November 2020 foreign leaders sent the president-elect congratulations but none came to Washington for the inauguration for fear of exposure to the virus. The president and his cabinet did not like having every country turn its back on the US. They decided that America would cooperate with foreign countries on issues that would matter most, such as controlling pandemics. But, as the coronavirus crisis abated, strengthening the U.S. industrial base and its defenses, especially the defense of the Internet, became higher priorities. Congress provided incentives to industry to produce as much in America as they could. Plans were made to build factories for producing pharmaceuticals, personal protective equipment such as masks and face shields, car parts, shoes, and clothing. The U.S. also realized it had to strengthen its digital security.

Since the first shelter-in-place recommendation for dealing with Covid19 was issued, people came to value face-to-face online meetings. Zoom, Facetime, and Skype became invaluable. Soon they would be taken for granted just as the rest of the internet was. With growing reliance came increased vulnerability: citizens' social lives, businesses, schools, and government could not function without the Internet. Hackers already had stolen hundreds of billions of dollars worth of private intellectual property online. Russia, Iran, and China, as well as terrorist groups and malicious hackers, were spreading disinformation and interfering with U.S. elections and media reporting. Many people feared that hackers could disable the Internet. Congress allocated money for a 21<sup>st</sup>

century Manhattan Project to build a vast firewall around America's internet, to protect each node within the country, to make sure that national digital security included redundant capabilities, and to create web crawlers to find malicious code on servers, on web sites, and in emails.

Thus, by fall 2023 Americans lives were based on a new normal — testing, tracing, and isolating; periods when it was safe to gather in crowds and when lockdowns were necessary; wearing masks and gloves; and getting together with others online. It wasn't the life that people remembered but they were optimistic. Life was good-enough.

### **Where Do We Go from Here?**

In summary, we are now in a world in which, for the first time ever, almost everyone shares the same priority: defeating the novel coronavirus. We are left wondering whether a global community coalesce in time to deal efficiently with this common enemy or whether individual nations and tribes will seek only to take care of themselves?

- How would such different futures affect you?
- What can you do in light of the uncertainties created by the COVID19 crisis?
- Are you curious to learn from others as a new world takes shape?
- What are the stakes if we don't think broadly or long-term or imaginatively enough now?
- How can we avert some of the darker outcomes suggested in these scenarios?

These are just some of the questions we hope this paper has stimulated for further strategic conversation and learning. We will host a discussion group on our new website in the coming weeks and invite all interested readers to join us there.