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Margaret Chase Smith Library 2022 Essay Contest

Each year the Margaret Chase Smith Library sponsors an essay contest for high school seniors. The essay prompt for 2022 asked students to consider what the proper role of government should be in responding to the current coronavirus pandemic. Essays have been edited for length.

FIRST-PLACE ESSAY

Finding the Balance

by Simon Hall

Over the past two years, the coronavirus pandemic has ravaged not just our country but much of the world. While it has been a cause of pain and despair for many, it also provides an opportunity to examine how the American government has responded to the pandemic. The pandemic has presented some difficult questions that have been answered in haste, but can now be dissected at leisure as this nation moves out of the critical phases of the pandemic. The past two years have shown that it is the job of the government, as the only body capable and coordinated enough, to orchestrate responses to the pandemic, and if these responses are to be effective, they must be decisive yet careful to protect the rights of individuals.

These points are easy to say but much harder to define in practice. What, for example, should the governmental response consist of? The first step in an effective response is to limit confusion and panic. The sickness itself was difficult to prevent at the beginning because it was new and nearly impossible to predict, but the government still did its best to help out where it could. One way the government can make life easier during a pandemic is to ensure that other aspects of life stay as normal as possible. Using grocery shopping as an

example, “the average of total stockouts of particular types of goods...rose from around 14% of goods in 2019 to over 35% in early May 2020” (Cavallo and Kryvtsov 2021). Some of these shortages resulted from supply line problems or worker shortages, but others were the product of panic buying on the part of consumers. A more unified governmental narrative as to what the risks of the pandemic might be could have helped people stay calm and retain some sense of normalcy.

The next important step for the government is to promote rapid research into the disease and into methods of mitigating both the spread and the deadliness of the disease. A short-term solution was to keep huge numbers of people home from work and school, but that quickly proved to be harmful in other ways. In the second quarter of 2020, the nation saw a 32.9% drop in GDP (Horsley 2020), while the unemployment rate rose from 3.6% to 13.0% from the fourth quarter of 2019 to the second quarter of 2020 (US BLS 2021). The government responded to these trends by increasing unemployment benefits and paying out stimulus checks to keep the economy running somewhat smoothly, and then turned to longer-term solutions by investing in projects such as Operation

Warp Speed, which brought the American populace hope. Even if this initiative had not managed to quickly help turn out highly effective vaccines, it was an important move in revitalizing the spirit of the people and the economy. The relative popular support for this program and for earlier governmental action, while far from complete, now stands in contrast to much deeper discord over the more difficult steps of ramping down pandemic precautions.

The proper governmental response began to get murkier as the nation moved from a state of emergency, where the government held great centralized authority, to a patchwork of different governmental modes, where some states were still in partial lockdown while others acted as though the pandemic was over. Further complications ensued when vaccines became yet many people refused to take the vaccine. It was, and is, a quandary: is it better to force people to receive treatment that will possibly save their lives and the lives of others or to allow them to retain their prized freedom? The short answer is that the government must strike a balance. This balance should push individuals to get vaccinated since vaccination is likely the easiest pathway to some kind of return to normalcy available to us. A great example of this is the Maine healthcare worker vaccine mandate, which took effect October 29, 2021 (Office of the Governor 2021). This mandate is high impact in terms of safety because it is crucial that employees in the healthcare sector can work as much as possible and do not pass illnesses to their patients. It also was fairly safe, because while there was some opposition to the mandate, the health sector is more open to mandated vaccines than many other sections of society, so the risk of widespread pushback was low.

Vaccine mandates, however, can be a dangerous path. America is, after all, as Thomas Jefferson said in his First Inaugural Address, a republic where “the will of the majority is in all cases to prevail” yet also must be a place where “the minority possess their equal rights” (Patrick n.d.). To protect the rights of the minority, the government must temper the extent of vaccine mandates so they are specifically targeted to keep citizens safe while avoiding becoming too intrusive. An example of a mandate that went too far, in my opinion, was the mandate enacted by OSHA that required nearly all employers with over 100 employees to mandate either vaccinations or tests. This directive, which was overturned by the Supreme Court (*National Federation of Independent Business v. OSHA*), was unworkable because it was both broad—it would have affected an estimated 84 million workers—and was intended to be nationwide. To be effective, mandates should be introduced at the state or local level. If a more far-reaching mandate is to be successful, it must be extremely targeted with a clear and widely supported vision.

These are the things that are important for the government to do to respond to a disease such as COVID-19. Our government has made some mistakes, but has overall managed to function through the pandemic. Much more work has to be done, however, in preparation for disasters such as this. The pandemic, while not entirely foreseeable, was predicted by experts before it happened. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEAM) warned in July 2019 that the nation was not ready for a major pandemic. The FEMA report predicted widespread social distancing and a shortage of medical supplies (FEMA 2019). This report leads an involved citizen to question: why was the government not at least somewhat prepared for the pandemic when it struck? While rapid and effective response is helpful, the

most important job of the American government in disasters such as the pandemic is to be prepared for reasonable eventualities before mass shortages and deaths occur.

Overall, the role of the government in responding to disasters such as the recent pandemic consists of a few different aspects. Immediately following the start of a crisis, the government must take an active role in mitigating panic. A crucial step in this response is understanding when to shift from a strong collective response promoting safety to a decentralized approach that once again emphasizes individual rights. By far the most important job of the government, however, is to be prepared for reasonable eventualities in the first place, so that this initial collective response can be as coordinated and effective as possible. Much death and economic disruption could have been avoided if the government had been more quickly able to ramp up the production of essential supplies and create a cohesive response plan. In short, the government needs to be more ready for disasters such as the pandemic because they will strike again and the nation will not easily survive another cataclysmic event unless our government takes that possibility seriously.

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