

# **The World Without The Usual Stuff**

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Elective surgery in hospitals has been eliminated. Pollution is way down in Los Angeles and other places in the world because people are not using their cars. Lawyers are not filing as many lawsuits. Subways and old, dilapidated roads are not as crowded. Airports are manageable, when they are usable at all.

The closing down of the world as we know it is teaching us a lot about what the world could be like if we eliminated a lot of stuff that we really do not need anyway. Perhaps lessening pollution, using mass transportation instead of vehicles, and having a rebuilt infrastructure would be good for America? Perhaps reduction in pollution should not be a partisan political issue but rather a national health issue?

For years health care professionals have indicated that there are far too many back and knee surgeries. The public is always screaming about lawsuits. Maybe we could use less of everything that we take for granted.

A world with less of everything might be more. That is a hard concept for people to get their arms around. Much of our society and economy depend upon people working at trades and professions that provide services. We live in a service-oriented civilization, which then depends upon a manufacturing base.

People are not going to stop flying on airplanes, but we could have better, more modern airports. We can encourage the production of jet airliners, as we have done in the last few years, that are less polluting, quieter and safer.

In the field of medicine, we can start making sure that our insurance carriers and government agencies only pay for services that are really necessary. Lawyers can utilize mediation, arbitration and other alternative dispute resolution when it is feasible and fair.

The casual reader can think of many unnecessaries that can be eliminated and would probably provide for a much happier life. We do not need to go back to the Stone Age in order to have a safer and sane environment and body politic.

One thing we do not need are politicians attempting to exploit every bad thing that happens in order to beat up their opponents. Both anti-Trump and anti-Biden ads are running like crazy. The "pro" ads are also ramping up. However, every political wonk knows that negative ads receive better reception than positive ones. This is a sad commentary.

It would be nice if, once we are out of this COVID-19 pandemic crisis, we could as a society look at our consumptive nature. John Kenneth Galbraith, a well-known economist in the 1960s, wrote a book taking the position that demand is created by

advertising. We do not necessarily need lots of the things that we have, but advertising, which is an off-shoot of the commercial enterprise, helps to convince people that they need all kinds of products. Some of those products do make our lives easier, such as robotic vacuum cleaners. Somehow, I have managed to live without a robotic vacuum cleaner, but apparently some people cannot.

It is unlikely that any national leader is going to look at priorities for consumption. Every politician now knows that it is “the economy stupid” as Bill Clinton was allegedly told during one of his election bids. If the economy is doing well, people are making money and stocks are up, election of the incumbent is almost certain to occur.

How then do we parlay the current shutdown into a more permanent examination and reexamination of our lifestyles? How do we keep people from forgetting? No doubt the Great Depression of the 1930s and World War II had a very long-lasting effect. Vietnam scared the daylights out of America in terms of future international involvement. All of these events, and the COVID-19 crisis, did and will affect future conduct. However, institutionalizing that behavior so as to create a better society is the key.

Educational institutions as well as government have a role in helping citizens learn from the events that in most parts of the country as still ongoing. Colleges and universities that train people in all kinds of bogus degrees need to look at what they are doing and why. How much of their work can be reduced to less expensive online teaching? I taught a class to a medical school online, using PowerPoint. I was shocked how easy it was. The question is whether the students learned more about law and medicine watching me online than they would have in class? Maybe they were ironing their shirts while listening to me, or playing a computer game; but the reviews were fantastic.

One of the most difficult lessons for Americans will be to appreciate how our layers of government interface badly. The fights and lack of coordination between the federal government, the states, county government and different agencies not only was very costly but also slowed the American response to the disease.

We need to look at our government structure. We have a Constitution that is an antique; 231 years old. What are we going to do to modernize government? Regionalization is all the rage in many places, but has not advanced much beyond the talking stage. We still run government and support overlapping expensive political structure as though we were living in 17<sup>th</sup> Century England. The time has come to look at how we govern ourselves to see whether we can protect democracy and our republican form of government while having a much more responsive and efficient political system.

*Clifford A. Rieders, Esquire  
Rieders, Travis, Humphrey,  
Waters & Dohrmann  
161 West Third Street  
Williamsport, PA 17701  
(570) 323-8711 (telephone)  
(570) 323-4192 (facsimile)*

*Cliff Rieders is a Board-Certified Trial Advocate in Williamsport, is Past President of the Pennsylvania Trial Lawyers Association and a past member of the Pennsylvania Patient Safety Authority. None of the opinions expressed necessarily represent the views of these organizations.*