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Op-Ed: Yes, our coronavirus response has been a mess. But that's how the U.S. always responds to crises

By DANIEL AKST

If you're groping to understand the disorganization and ineptitude of America's response to coronavirus, you might find it helpful to know there's a single word that captures the situation perfectly. That word is: *normal*.

The sad truth is that we've faced many crises in our history, and we almost always make a hash of them. We start with inertia, bestir ourselves to hubris, move on to bungling, and spice everything with venality. Situated far from the world's troubles, we are invariably drugged by complacency and handicapped by federalism, the system that gives us so many levels of government to get in each other's way.

Unpreparedness is a signal feature of almost every American crisis, from the Revolutionary War right up to our recent stunning lack of ventilators and masks.

In 1812, for example, Secretary of War William Eustis predicted that we needed only to send some officers into Canada and residents of the British territory would "rally round our standard." In fact, American overconfidence, unreadiness and disorganization led to successive fiascoes culminating in the burning of the fledgling nation's capital.

In the Civil War, a crisis if there ever was one, the Union cause was imperiled by timid generals, bad equipment, scarce supplies and rampant fraud. When World War II broke out in Europe in 1939, the United States had the world's 18th largest army, behind even that of Portugal. In one notorious set of military training exercises, many U.S. soldiers were armed with broomsticks, yet 12 managed to get themselves killed and 200 injured despite the absence of any real enemy. The attack on Pearl Harbor, in 1941, came as a surprise.

The picture is just as bleak in civilian crises. John M. Barry, whose books include "The Great Influenza" about the 1918 pandemic, states flatly that, "In the United States, national and local government and public health authorities badly mishandled the epidemic." The federal government, embarked on the crusade of the Great War, suppressed news of the outbreak as part of a draconian crackdown on dissent. Local officials participated in the deception, contributing to the growth of suspicion and breakdown of mutual aid. "As the epidemic exploded," Barry tells us, "officials almost daily assured the public that the worst was over."

A decade later Uncle Sam met the Great Depression with bewilderment and battled it for years with earnest ineffectuality. A bungling Federal Reserve raised interest rates when it should have lowered them and failed to backstop banks against devastating runs. FDR tried lots of things but overall fiscal policy oscillated perversely and may have done little to shorten the nation's ordeal.

The Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, aside from a fleeting sense of unity, produced costly and inconclusive wars. Don't even mention Hurricane Katrina. And things have rarely turned out well when the government has declared "war" in some crisis that is not a military conflict, as in the war on drugs.

The good news is that, in our biggest crises, things usually come out right at the end, though not without a lot of unnecessary suffering and waste. With luck and leadership, we usually manage to mobilize our vast national resources and creativity to vanquish whatever has beset us.

Great crises, however mishandled initially, have also been the occasion for overdue changes. The Depression gave us Social Security, modern securities regulation and a wised-up Fed (itself the belated offspring of the Panic of 1907). The Second World War resulted in the Marshall Plan and helped propel us down the road to equality for black people, women and others. Our latest crisis may finally force us to universalize healthcare and find a way to rein in its costs. We might also agree that there are good reasons not to move so much manufacturing overseas. As Warren Buffett likes to say, it is never a good idea to bet against America.

Of course, in the direst crises of the past we were often blessed with great leaders including Washington, Lincoln and FDR. Donald Trump is something else again. But if we remain true to form, our fumbling will enable the virus to persist right up until election day — and eventually outlast his presidency.

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