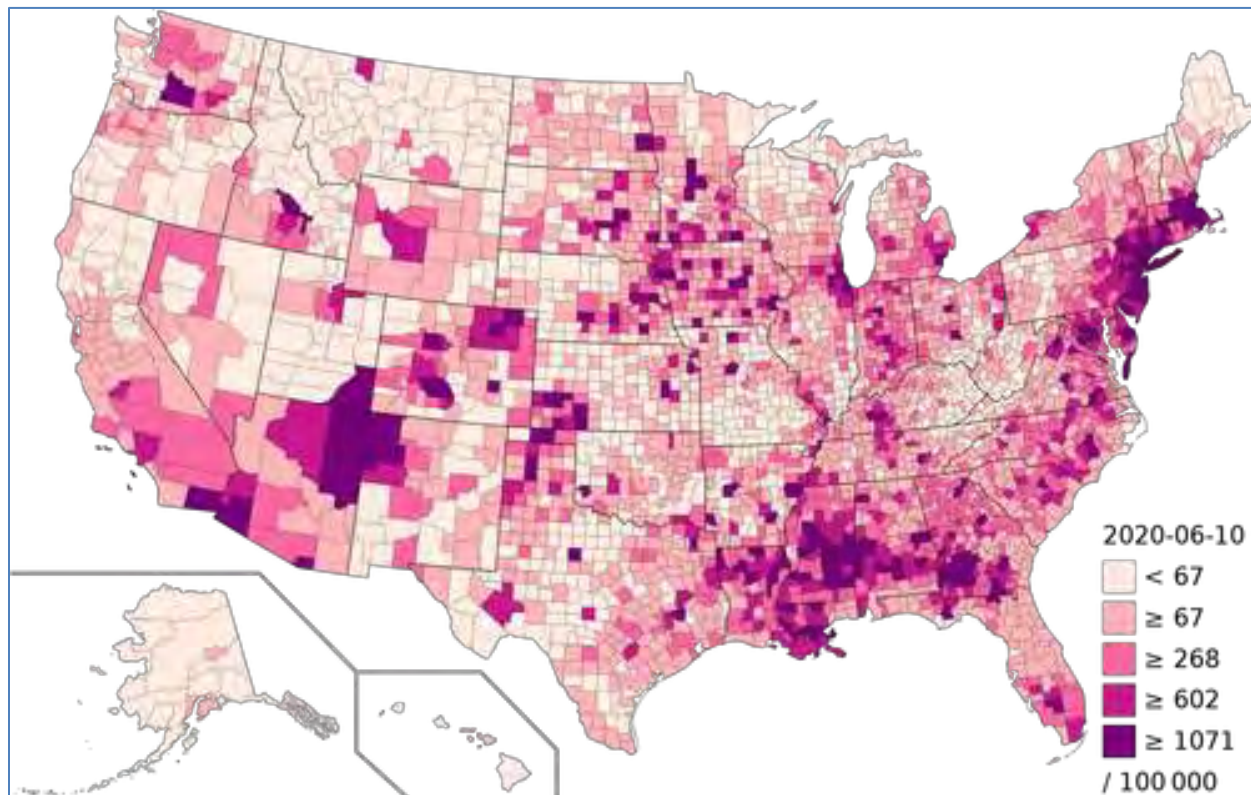


The COVID-19 Pandemic and America

Ronald Brown
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COVID-19 cases per 100,000 residents in the U.S. by county, June 10, 2020.

In April, as I sat in lockdown in my Queens apartment, blocks from Elmhurst Hospital, ground zero for New York City’s pandemic treatment, I tuned to radio news hourly, religiously followed the BBC, PBS Newshour, network news, virus specials on television, awaited the morning clap of *The New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* on my doorstep, and consumed articles in magazines.

As of mid-June, the daily death toll in the City is now around 20 (down from a peak of as much as 1,200 per day in April), over 120,000 have died nationwide (6,500 in the borough of Queens alone), shutdowns and lockdowns in the City are just beginning to ease, and many fear a coming second wave of infections, likely a result of lifting stay-at-home restrictions too soon.

I am not the ordinary citizen lamenting home imprisonment, teaching on Zoom, not finding the right foods in the supermarket, and receiving news of friends in the hospital, quarantine or morgue. I am a news junkie, but also a professor with a BA and MA in history from Gannon University and the Hebrew University, an MTS in theology from Harvard, and a Ph.D. in international relations from the University of Geneva.



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From my balcony in Queens, I witnessed the racing ambulances on Queens Boulevard, scalpers selling overpriced face masks, my downstairs neighbor coming home late at night from nurse duty, and two elderly neighbors peering through covered windows. Meanwhile, Democrats and Republicans fought in Washington. With major corporations declaring bankruptcy, unemployment rising close to 16%, pastors and rabbis insisting on their religious freedom to gather their followers, and armed militias unwilling to sacrifice their American freedoms for the common good, I couldn’t help but ponder, “whither America?”

What causes great empires like Babylon, Egypt, China, India, Greece and Rome, Spain, Great Britain and France, and more recently Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, the Soviet Union, and the USA to rise, flower and fall?

Barbarian invasions humbled great Rome, national revolutions shattered the Spanish and British empires, the atomic bomb humbled Japan, military defeat destroyed Nazi Germany, and economic collapse ended the Soviet empire.

Will a tiny virus bring down the American Empire and end the “American Century”?

The biblical quest for dominion over all that liveth

According to Genesis 1:28, Jehovah commanded humanity to subdue the earth and gave him dominion

over all living things. The earth was to be subdued and all living things were to be dominated. This statement clearly pitted humans and nature in an adversarial relationship. This theme was further developed in the Bible when as punishment for the original sin of Eve and Adam, they were condemned to a life of sweaty labor and painful childbirth. The English philosopher Thomas Hobbes gave an eloquent description of the human condition when he wrote that human life is “nasty, brutish and short” in his 1651 book, *Leviathan*.

Ancient writers from Babylon and Egypt to China and India have portrayed gods employing thunderbolts, floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, locusts, volcanos, and plagues to warn and punish wayward humans. The end of the world so vividly described in the Book of Revelation is filled with natural calamities that God will use as final warnings to a sinful humanity.

However much writers such as Henry David Thoreau and modern ecologists attempt to dilute the brutal words “subdue” and “domination,” humans, especially of the American variety, have historically viewed nature and the forces of nature as an enemy to be subdued and dominated.

The American quest

Even before our Pilgrim ancestors set foot on Plymouth Rock, they were convinced they were finally cutting ties with the theological heresies, religious persecution, political domination, and economic corruption of old Europe. Their Puritan kingdom in the virgin lands of America would be a new birth for humanity, a land of righteousness, purity of living, and material prosperity — a beacon to humanity, a city on a hilltop to inspire the world, a realization of the biblical grant of dominion over all of creation.

But, the forces of nature viciously resisted their quest. During its voyage, Atlantic Ocean storms nearly sank the *Mayflower* and drove it off course. But for the generosity of the Native Americans, they would have starved to death during that first brutal winter. They labored to transform deep dark forests into farmland, construct rustic shelters, ward off wild animals, and protect their European cattle, sheep, chickens, wheat, and rye from native insects and viruses. The devil himself entered into the souls of many and only a series of witch trials, burnings, and hangings drove him out of the community. Through this all they remained true to their vision of America as a new beginning, a new Garden of Eden, a new Land of Israel, a New Jerusalem, and a major step toward the return of Jesus as the Messiah.

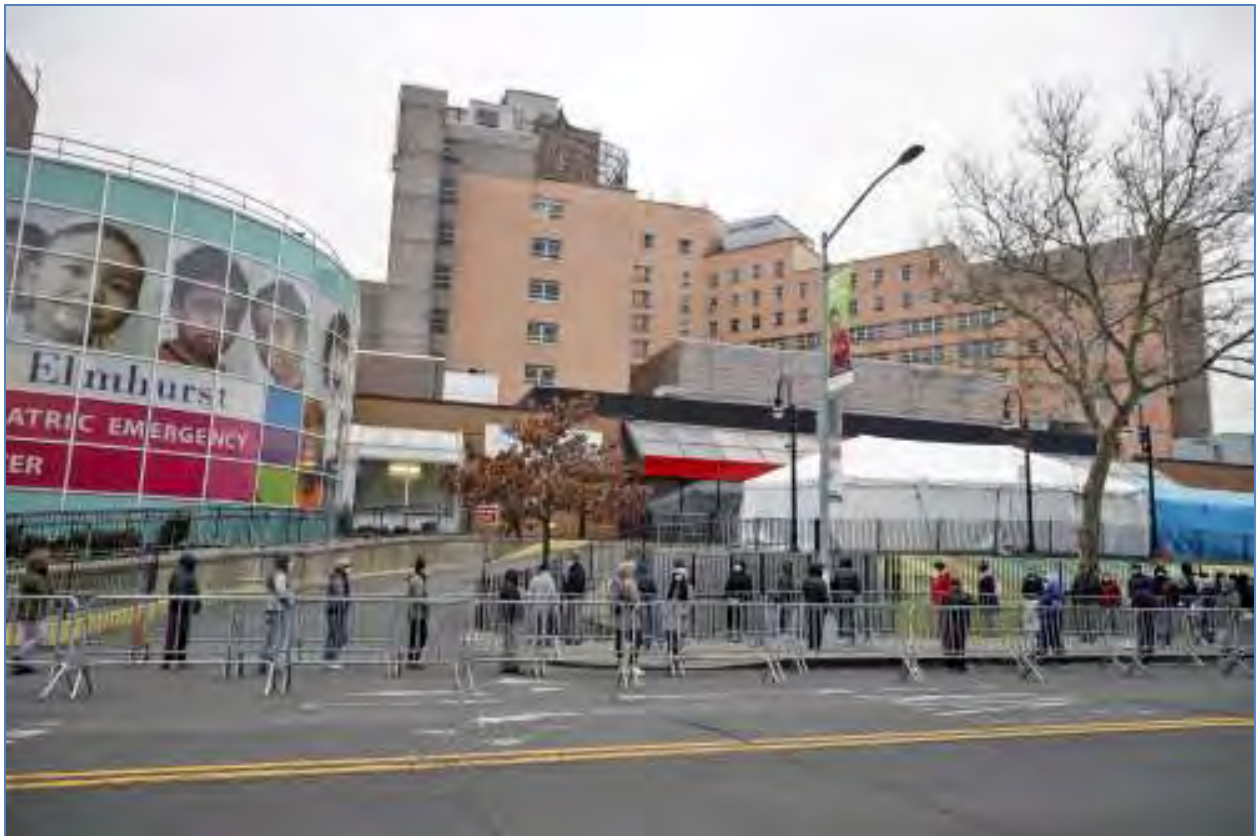
This founding experience spread deep into the consciousness of the young nation. The journalist John O’Sullivan coined the term “Manifest Destiny” to describe America’s divine mission to conquer the continent in the early 1800s. The German-American painter, John Gast, portrayed “American Progress” in 1872 as lady “Progress” striding across the continent followed by railroads, telegraph lines, caravans of settlers, ox-pulled plows, and ax-wielding lumbermen.

However, little noticed are the herds of bison and tribes of indigenous peoples fleeing in front of American progress. Pioneers felled virgin forests, raped mountains with tunnels, tamed rivers with bridges, dikes and dams, desecrated the land with deep earth and open pit mines, ruined the scenery with highways, billboards and motels, polluted the air, water and earth with every kind of poison, and may now do the same for the “new frontier” — outer space.

We were a nation of can do, of bring it on, of let’s get it done, if anybody can do it, we can. Our Puritan ancestors in Plymouth would have starved to death if it had not been for the generosity of the native Americans, but once spring arrived, the slaughter, expulsion and genocide began. The colonies enslaved millions of Africans, won the War of Independence, conquered the wilds of the continent, seized Texas and California from Mexico, bought Alaska, annexed Hawaii and conquered Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and other Pacific Islands. We achieved dominion over our empire with railroads, canals, bridges, tunnels, interstate highways, telegraph, telephone, electrical lines, and air links. As well, we achieved global dominion by defeating England (twice), Mexico, Spain, Germany (twice), Japan, the USSR, and ISIS.

This ruthless campaign to achieve dominion over nature reached its culmination following the Second World War when the editor of *Life* magazine, Henry Luce, announced in February 1941 the beginning of “The American Century.” Central to this new century, we covered the nation with utopian Levittowns and housing complexes, provided every kitchen, living room, and yard with every electrical and mechanical gadget imaginable, subdued the continent with Tennessee River Valley dams, Mississippi River dikes and bridges, tunnels under the Hudson River, airports at every city, a telephone in every home, and the network of the Interstate Highway System for millions of automobiles and trucks. The USA even added the words “In God We Trust” to our currency and “One Nation Under God” to our Pledge of Allegiance to celebrate our realization of the commands of Genesis 1:28.

The “Greatest Generation” created an American empire of 77 million Baby Boomers, sent millions to college, liberated women, gays, and blacks from centuries of oppression and set out to achieve dominion over the world. The American Century was becoming a reality.



Queens residents wait in line to be tested for COVID-19 outside Elmhurst Hospital Center on March 25, 2020. In the last week of March, Elmhurst Hospital became the “center of the center” of the COVID-19 pandemic in New York as the state itself became an epicenter of the global pandemic.

American dominion over all that liveth

However, the American Century quickly came under attack. In May 1945, the armies of Stalin occupied Eastern Europe and, in 1949, Mao Zedong proclaimed the People’s Republic of China. America fought to a stalemate in the Korean War but defeat in Vietnam severely threatened the American Century. School shootings became commonplace, race riots, business bubbles bursting, stock market gyrations, financial scandals, dotcom and real estate bubbles, Wall Street corruption, political paralysis, 9/11, catastrophic foreign military adventures in Afghanistan. Even the political system seemed to be falling apart in the 2000 presidential election when the Supreme Court had to intervene in the Florida hanging chad mess.

President Trump swept a significant segment of the nation with his vision of an America restored to greatness. As with George W. Bush’s 2000 election, Trump lost the popular vote but mastered the murky mechanics of the Electoral College. He preached that he could halt the decline of the American Century.

Proclaiming “Make America Great Again,” Trump harnessed the party of Abraham Lincoln to his chariot, and convinced the Evangelical Christian Right that he was “a savior.” Unwilling to allow another nation to claim the new century as its own, he set out to keep China at bay. In 2017, he announced that the slogan for his 2020 campaign would no longer be “Make American Great Again,” but “Keep America Great.”

Then, suddenly out of the bowels of China, emerged an enemy that would threaten his restored American Empire. It was not a country, a race of people, a religion, a band of terrorists, or an army. It was an enemy that neither Trump nor the nation would be able to achieve dominion over, at least for the present, a tiny thing that liveth named COVID-19.

Enter COVID-19

The government struggled to provide sufficient PPE — masks, gloves and gowns — to protect health workers. Ventilators to enable breathing for the worst affected were rationed. States battled other states and the federal government for access to protective gear and resources. The American economy plunged, unemployment skyrocketed to levels reminiscent of the Great Depression, and bodies were buried in mass graves on New York City’s Hart Island. Supermarkets lacked essentials, corner hucksters were price gouging on masks, restaurants and corner markets closed, factories ground to a halt, and homeless filled the streets and subway stations. The press highlighted the chaos, panic, confusion, and denial of reality.

After its initial beachhead in the State of Washington, the virus continued to spread like a medieval plague across the country, eventually occupying the Empire City, with ground zero being Queens, where President Trump was born and grew up. Elmhurst Hospital, blocks from this author’s home, saw a major part of the peak of up to 1,200 persons per day that died in the City. Walking past the hospital, it was

obvious that even in New York City — the Empire City — COVID-19 was one thing that liveth that America could not achieve dominion over.

Washington feuded with governors; governors were at odds with mayors. Some evangelical pastors and ultra-orthodox rabbis chose to rely on divine protection rather than the advice of the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Dr. Anthony Fauci of the NIAID (National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases) called for social distancing and wearing of masks in public, while the President and most of his staff held press briefings without taking these precautions. Some people confronted police in support of an individual's freedom to gather in groups without masks or social distancing. The bulk of e-mails I received from friends abroad asked the same question: "What the hell happened to the USA?"

Why was (and is) the American response so rudderless and ineffective? Why did the USA become by far the world's worst victim of the virus?

The rise and fall of empires

Lockdowns, business closings, flight cancellations, faces hidden behind masks, social distancing, cancellation of church services, deserted springtime beaches, still factories, empty grocery shelves, silent highways, and shuttered schools did not jibe with the cherished twin beliefs in American Exceptionalism — the USA as a city on a hilltop and Manifest Destiny — and our fate to lead humanity to greatness. These twin convictions fueled the founding, rise and glory of the USA. Few Americans or residents of the planet believed that this great nation, which had achieved dominion over a continent and subdued the world, would be brought down by a tiny virus.

Have the ravages of COVID-19 proven that these American beliefs were American myths?

The American Century has come to a screeching halt. As the planet stumbles into the Third Millennium, will the United States be able to reconcile itself as just another, among many, nations? Will Americans be able to accept being part of a multi-polar world with China, the European Union, India, Russia, Brazil, and likely other global actors? Will COVID-19 be the force that brings the American Century to an end? Is our claim to exceptionalism an outdated myth? Has our quest for Manifest Destiny not only hit a stone wall but led the nation toward destruction? Will the country follow the path of all great empires to rise, flower and fall?

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