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Silken Slippers or Wooden Shoes?

Hoyt Hilsman · Wednesday, April 22nd, 2020



In his timely book, *The End is Always Near*, author and podcaster Dan Carlin examines apocalyptic events throughout history, including wars, famines, environmental disasters and pandemics. He poses the interesting question of whether these catastrophes produce a generation of “tougher” people – meaning those who are better able to adapt to the uncertainty and tragedy of terrible times.

Carlin cites a quote attributed to Voltaire that “History is filled with the sound of silken slippers going downstairs and wooden shoes coming up.” The idea that nations or societies endure or fail based on the character of their people is an intriguing one, particularly as the world faces its own challenging pandemic. Noting the moral character and toughness of the Greatest Generation, Carlin suggests that their experience of the Great Depression and World War II were a key to their greatness.

In a similar vein, Andrew Mellon, a multi-millionaire and Hoover’s Secretary of the Treasury, apparently believed that the human suffering after the 1929 stock market crash would result in not only a tougher populous, but also a kind of Darwinian selection. “High costs of living will come down. People will work harder, live a more moral life. Values will be adjusted and enterprising people will pick up the wrecks from less competent people.” In a word, only the tough will survive.

It is this conflict between moral values and the economic spirit of capitalism that America seems to be wrestling with in the midst of a global pandemic. In fact, this is a question that developed societies have been wrestling with for decades – the only difference is that the wolf is now at the door. What will be the character of our nation? Will it be dedicated to saving the lives of a few at the expense of the many? Or should we sacrifice some members of the society in order to protect the economic well-being of vast numbers of unemployed and poor?

These are not easy decisions. Unfortunately, our president has abdicated all responsibility for making the hard choices and has instead left it to state and local officials, not to mention individual citizens, to make those decisions themselves. Nevertheless, we all will have to ultimately make those decisions ourselves. And whatever decision we make will determine the character of our society.

For too long, we have lived in a kind of comfortable cocoon, largely removed from many of the life and death decisions that people and nations around the world must regularly make, largely because of our privileged position as an advanced society and prosperous economy. However, pandemics can be great levelers – since no one is immune. In the final analysis, we all must face the tough decisions that may well decide the future of our society. Whether we can do so together may be the ultimate question.

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