Coronavirus and the Fallacy of the False Dilemma

By Alex Berezow, PhD — April 22, 2020

Should we open up the economy immediately or remain on lockdown indefinitely until a vaccine is made? Believe it or not, there are other options. It's too bad that society isn't smart enough to understand that.

I'm continually struck by what our species is capable of.

On the one hand, we build skyscrapers, cure disease, and put men on the moon. On the other hand, we knock off liquor stores, ignite our own farts, and engage in battles of sheer stupidity on social media. I'm convinced that the members of our species that constitute the latter far outnumber the former, which is why I'm shocked that our species has come as far as we have.

The COVID-19 pandemic seems to have brought out the best and worst of humanity. There are thousands of stories of true heroes -- mostly doctors, nurses, and medical staff -- putting their lives on the line to save complete strangers from a scary infectious disease. But then there are also thousands of stories about racism, domestic violence, hoarding, price gouging, and other wicked behavior.

Social media, of course, remains the sewer pipe it always has been. Not only has disinformation flourished, but everybody seems to fancy himself or herself an epidemiologist, public health expert, and economist. The debate about the lockdown has been absurdly over-simplified to the following false dilemma: "Open the economy now!" vs. "Stay on lockdown until a vaccine comes out!"
Believe it or not, there are other options.

What makes the debate even more infuriating is that those who favor an indefinite lockdown claim to have "science" on their side. No. As a scientist myself, I can say without a doubt that smart public policy is not simply doing what scientists say. Why? Because there are many other considerations -- legal, ethical, and financial -- that scientists routinely do not take. Scientists deserve a seat at the table, but so do economists, businesspeople, and, dare I say, lawyers.

Those who favor an indefinite lockdown also claim that we shouldn't sacrifice lives for the economy. This is a statement made out of pure ignorance for two reasons: (1) A society with a severely damaged economy inevitably will harm public health; and (2) We already sacrifice lives for the sake of the economy every single day. Influenza kills thousands of Americans every year. HIV killed hundreds of thousands since it emerged in the 1980s. Car crashes kill about 40,000 Americans each year.

Imagine all the lives that could have been saved if we simply shut down daily life in 1980. If you believe that conclusion is absurd (and it is), then it's equally absurd to argue that the COVID-19 lockdown must go on indefinitely until a vaccine comes out. (Spoiler alert: A vaccine may never come, and if it does, it may not work very well.)

Those who want to fully open up the economy right now are also spouting nonsense. There is simply no way that Americans have achieved herd immunity for COVID-19, so disease hotspots (which are usually in big cities) must reopen their economies cautiously over the coming weeks and months. Restrictions in other, less dense places can probably be lifted relatively soon. We need a nuanced approach that considers local and regional factors, rather than a top-down either/or policy dictated from the state capital. What makes sense for an urban area usually does not make sense for a rural area. Thus, this isn't a choice between A and B. It's a choice between A, B, and about a dozen other variations.

**Most People Can't Be Properly Educated**

Yesterday, I was having a conversation with two of my best friends. We came to the conclusion that most people can't be educated. There are two reasons for this.

First, many don't want to be educated. They want to be lied to. That's why cable news and partisan websites are popular. Most people don't really want their beliefs challenged; they want them reaffirmed. This is a problem inherent to human psychology and is largely insurmountable. It's part of the "fall of man."

Second, for the few of us who are open-minded enough to have our beliefs challenged, even fewer are capable of understanding highly complex arguments. No matter how long I sit in a lecture hall, I'm never going to walk away with a decent grasp of quantum mechanics. My brain isn't built for it. The math is too hard for my neurons, which is why I had to settle for microbiology.

But for some reason, too many Americans seem to think that they're smarter than everybody else, including experts. I think this is a cultural problem that stems from the fact that we teach kids from a young age that they can be whatever they want to be, if only they wish and work hard enough for it. But, as many Millennials discovered, this is a bald-faced lie. External factors over which we
have no control -- recessions, pandemics, Baby Boomers -- have an outsized impact on what options are actually available to us. Besides, Little Johnny will never be an astronaut if he can't pay attention in pre-algebra.

We would do a lot better as a society if we taught people from a young age that some people really are smarter than you and should be listened to. Until then, we will continue to have a culture dominated by people who spend five minutes on Google and then believe themselves to be among the world's leading experts in constitutional law and infectious disease epidemiology.