Put Out More Flags

As part of "Operation America Strong," the Blue Angels and Thunderbirds announced they will fly joint operations over Washington, Baltimore, New York, Newark, Trenton, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Dallas, Houston and Austin, sources told USA TODAY.

It was inevitable that vocabulary and concepts around COVID19 would come to lean heavily on militarized bafflegab. We are "at war" with an "Invisible Enemy" that threatens to "destroy the economy and the lives of millions of Americans." We "deploy strike forces" to conduct tests in elder living facilities.Perhaps the term 'care team' was deemed too twee and weak for the National Guard carrying out the "mission." Screw it; let's scare Granny to death. We are exhorted to "activate the arsenal of democracy" to defeat this threat.

Not as easy to predict was the invocation of one of our most overused symbols of military prowess, the roaring squall and vapor trails of the U.S. Navy's Blue Angels and the Thunderbirds of the U.S. Air Force air demonstration squadrons.

It is customary to have the victory parades after the victory is won, but if the COVID episode has proved anything it is that our government's sense of sequence and priority is somewhat addled. And hey, who can resist a tight marketing pitch? Operation America Strong. Fuck yeah.

As with most things military, the actual cost of these mighty

flexes are damnably difficult to pin down. The most common figure is $35M-ish per annum per squadron, but estimates range as high as $200M when costs of maintenance and aircraft replacement are figured in. Each plane burns approximately 1300 gallons of jet fuel per hour, an extravagance that is expensive fiscally and environmentally. That is a lot of overhead up there for something that will be done with in a few seconds.

But hey, what's a little dosh when it comes to putting on a circus, no matter how quick? Sure, we could pay the rent or buy Momma's insulin, but fuck it, let's drive up to Dothan instead and buy us a bunch of fireworks.

Maybe to some degree our lazy reversion to illness-as-military-metaphor makes sense. It is likely that as I write this post the total number of deaths in the U.S. from COVID19 will surpass the number of U.S. troops killed during the entire Vietnam War. (We surpassed the Korean War tally over the weekend.) This makes COVID19 the fourth most deadly war in our history.CW, WWII, and WWI for those keeping score.

This assumes that we have been counting more or less accurately. "Some experts" believe we are missing a huge batch of COVID casualties, while "other sources" disagree, asserting that the COVID numbers being deliberately inflated by nefarious forces who are trying to use the pandemic to subjugate the "sheeple" who refuse to see that our essential Liberty is under attack by a tyrannical one-world-government cabal.

Perhaps you would like to try our two for one special?

Both sides. You say potato…

Somewhat less paranoically, we are exhorted to “activate the

great arsenal of democracy” in order to “protect our precious freedoms” and “kick start our economy” so that we might enjoy the “liberty” that fuels the “American Dream”. We are in an “arms race” to develop a vaccine, a race in which victory is “critical” so that we are not left at the mercy of *pick-your-villainous-other*. You know, Those People, the ones who started this virus in the first place. You know who I mean, amirite? Nudge wink…

> *“When the general atmosphere is bad, language must suffer.” – George Orwell Politics and the English Language (1946)*

Never mind that. We are “winning the war” with our “Invisible Enemy”.

Today, the White House proudly announced that the U.S. has conducted 5.4M COVID tests, “more than any other country in the world”. This boast gently elides the fact that 5.4M represents about 1.5% of our total population.

Here in Florida, Gov. DeSantis touts that Florida has conducted the third highest number of tests in the nation. Again, the elision: Florida also has the third highest population in the nation, putting our percentage a little below the national figure. Yesterday, our Governor Mini Trump declared that he sees a “light at the end of the tunnel”. Victory! Open the beaches.

It is astonishing how successful our man Ron has been, given the impossible obstacles. Just yesterday he blamed “the media” for ignoring the dangers of CV for too long. But our Speaker of the House today asserted that “journalists continue to sustain the pandemic narrative” and that “the measures we have taken in the last few weeks have been both harmful – with freedoms lost, money spent, livelihoods destroyed – and pointless.”

It’s a dessert topping! It’s a floor wax! Both sides!

The bafflegab comes strong and fast, one degraded word and metaphor after another. ‘Freedom’ and ‘Liberty’ have taken a solid thrashing over the past 40 years, denuded of any real meaning by relentless *deployment* in service of selling cars and trucks and sundry other shiny objects, not to mention their use as cudgel to differentiate “patriots” from “libtards” &c. The sight of literally tens and twenties of outraged protesters demanding their Constitutionally protected right to get a haircut – in the name of Freedom! and Liberty! – could only attain greater comic amplitude if they painted their faces blue like Mel Gibson.

Freedom isn’t free! It’s a bumper sticker.

But the word that has taken the worst body blows of late is ‘essential’. Who has to show up to work? The essential workers. What businesses have to stay open? Essential ones.

That the people who do the work deemed ‘essential’ are overwhelmingly the lowest paid among us is more than a tad discomfiting, as is the free slinging application of the word ‘hero’ as a token of appreciation in lieu of actual support and compensation. This is a word that has long served as a lever to encourage people to sacrifice themselves for the greater good, which all too cleanly equates to what is good for their betters. *Dulcē et decōrum est prō patriā mōrī*, yo. You’re a hero, maybe even an essential one.

The word takes on water fast when we start to see enterprises like WWE pro wrestling declared an “essential business” in Florida. That this happened within 24 hours of the ownership of WWE donating $18.5M to the Florida GOP is either a happy coincidence or a disturbing demonstration of the power of a specific kind of *essence* that lies behind the unsubtle drive to Reopen America. Nail salons. Barbers. Tattoo artists. Waiters. Not many people leaving the gated communities for those essential tasks.

On the brighter side, the present viral moment affords an opportunity for us to closely examine what ‘essential’ truly means as we adapt to a life style that is, to put it mildly, constrained. While there may be a long list of things we might really, really, really want to do or buy – beyond the life-sustaining basics of food, shelter, and medical care – much of what we took for granted as necessary is just…not.

Being cooped up at home for weeks (months? experts differ) on end sucks. Shit gets old under the best circumstances. I can rarely tell you what day of the week it is without checking first. Sleep is hard to achieve and riddled with the most cinematically disturbing dreams. There is nothing grand about it.

But shelter in place (itself a term more closely related to mass shootings that are often carried out in a militarist fantasy) is quite evidently the most effective means of curbing the spread of the virus until a vaccine comes along. Contrary to the assault rifle toting mini-mobs demanding their right to a mani-pedi, self-isolating does not equate to cowering in fear. It is an act of love and affirmation.

The pandemic catastrophes of history share two salient features that suggest our near future: First, there will be a premature declaration of all-clear, with an attendant resurgence of the disease that matches or exceeds the first wave. Second, there will be a reflexive move to blame *anybody else* for the catastrophe, especially among those whose job it was to manage the crisis.

“It was on fire when I got here.”

In a twist that would be ironic if it were not so poignantly tragic, the U.S. State Department until recently was actively recruiting immigrants in the health care field. Somewhere between a sixth and a quarter of the health care work force is currently comprised of immigrants. If history is any guide, these good people are as likely to face rage as they are appreciation. Thank you for your service, hero. Now kindly leave before we show you out the hard way.

Wielding the same kind of demented alchemy that saw a pig virus from a Kansas farm end up with the name Spanish Flu, we already see a small but visible contingent of yahoos determined to hang this virus around the neck of China, which is handy since these same deep thinkers can’t quite tell the difference between Chinese and Japanese and the rest of Asia’s children.

So let’s gear up for some traditional scapegoating to let the

steam off. And if you count your blessings that somebody else is the target, remember it wouldn’t take much to set the hounds off on a different hunt. It’s as much a part of the American Way as the damn air shows.

American as apple pie.

The worst of it is that we have not seen the worst of it. Even if the virus miraculously mutated itself out of existence tomorrow, there would be massive upheaval to sort out. Jobs have disappeared. The gap between haves and have nots has been

quite explicitly demonstrated. This pandemic is not and never will be the ‘great equalizer’. (The phrase “we’re all in this together” is yet another trope tossed around in hopes that we won’t notice the differences.)

But the disruption represents an opportunity to reconfigure at least some aspects of our social contract into something more equitable, more in keeping with the vaunted American ideals of fair play and justice for all that have never quite managed to manifest in our destiny.

Unfortunately, this opportunity cuts both ways. There are powerful actors already at work taking advantage of the crisis to consolidate wealth and power. The hasty reopening in Georgia of the businesses deemed *essential* are as much about coercing people back to work and off of unemployment as it is anything to do with liberty or rights of assembly. When government makes these kinds of inexplicable decisions, the best explanation comes with following the money. Cui bono? I guarantee it ain’t the waiter working for tips at Applebee’s.

Along the same lines, it is instructive to witness the panic expressed by Our Betters (people like Jamie Dimon and Jeff Bezos and Rick Scott) as they clutch their pearls at the idea that people hardest hit by the virus might actually receive some kind of support that makes their lives better, even if just for a minute. “They’ll never want to work again,” cry our pampered overlords. Perhaps if the jobs and compensation were not such pitiful crumbs in the first place, they might find their labor widgets more amenable to return.

The dignity of work is another one of those denatured bits of language that exists solely to make it easier for the top to extract labor from the bottom. Nobody who is earning a low wage cleaning bedpans or fast food grease traps needs to hear anything about the dignity of work from these soft-handed swells. People like to work, to have a purpose, a task. But they like to be appreciated for that work and compensated

fairly. It’s an *essential* part of the dignity touted but that is never remitted. Moral hazard, my ass.

Essential. Non-essential. Unskilled. Entry level. We have been sold a pig in a poke. The work that is keeping us propped up right now is largely ‘unskilled’ and ‘entry level’ work. The work that so many of us have done for years is part of a deck chair shuffling choreography that serves to keep us, and each other, busy. Think of all the oh-so-essential office jobs that are going undone right now.fwiw, I have done every job I am about to mention at one time or another. My apologies to anyone who does this work and finds it ennobling. The world keeps turning even without a flood of instruction manuals and press releases and such. Advertising has devolved into a computer-generatable stream of “We are all in this together and we value you, our customer, as one of our family, and by the way, we are not in the car/pharma/travel/entertainment business: We are in the people business.”

Do you miss compiling network usage statistics, analyzing cash flow deviations, or dissecting work flow charts to find someone who can be fired? Do you miss developing power point presentations and proofing spreadsheets over a holiday weekend to help your company extract a one-tenth of one percent increase in efficiency? Do you miss hustling insurance titans into buying software that will “enhance their enterprise productivity while allowing them to right size their work force”? Do you really miss coming up with catchy phrases like Operation America Strong?

Do we miss measuring out our days by the thimbleful? I don’t think so.

I think we miss each other.

Please refer to the top of this page for the ever-applicable closing line. oxoxox

Message From the Bubble

Love in the Time of COVID19

A fine pal suggested I offer some strategies for Boredom Immunity as we endure our varying degrees of lock down and isolation. I doubt I have anything useful to suggest, but why let that stop me, right?

It hardly seems real. Unless you are one of the people on the front lines of our current predicament, the whole thing has a fuzzy cast to it. Like a piano slightly out of tune, just off enough that is not quite cringe-inducing, but far enough from harmonious to make it a little hard to take. Occasional moments of wincing at wave forms that do not quite align, the urge to stop and play a passage or chord over again to try to determine what is wrong. And then over time, the off notes start to sound more or less okay, what was the problem anyway?

We have been locked up for how long now? A week or two, for most, maybe a month for the more anticipatory/paranoid among us. Time goes mushy: Is it Friday or Tuesday? Sunday, you say. What difference?

For us – me and my enfeebled immune system and Stanwyck and the dogs – life under CV19 is really just a sharpened continuation of the practices of the past year. We have been

practicing social distancing since before it was cool. Or cruel. A tad more intensely diligent, but really just more of the same. Keep your distance. Wear your mask if you have to go out. And really, do you need to go out after all?

I know things are different now. Our friends in the medical world – including the heroes who helped keep me alive over the past year – are up against some serious trouble. A few scattered friends have been sick, or are very sick, or have even died. Our kids are scattered from mid-Florida to north Vermont, riding out the plague in their own fashion, afraid to come home because they are afraid they might kill me. (This alone cuts with so many sharp edges.) My elderly parents face isolation and uncertainty along with the litany of medical issues they brought with them to this era.

Aside from phone calls and Zooming (a new verb for our time), I am not much use to any of them. We talk, commiserate, hope for better times.

And yet…

A friend posted a lovely drawing on Facebook today with a comment that she had a wonderful day yesterday, and that fact made her feel a tad guilty. Piffle, says me, the world needs joy to survive, so have as many good days as you can. Good days had may serve as counterweight to the blazing shit show raging around us.

Or so I like to believe.

Because lo and behold…Most of my days over the past month have been good, some even very good. We are in the blush of Spring, the best weather of the year here America's most penis-shaped state. I have a nice home – free of mold, bless you all! – and a pantry full of food. I have books and music. And dogs. And most of all, Stanwyck.

Lou and Mimi

I spent the past year saying “Rob is the luckiest boy in the world”. And I meant it. Now, I feel even luckier. Most folks don’t have it so good.

People living alone or living with one or more people they do not really like. Having toddlers who need care, feeding, stimulation, and someone who can explain what is going on in a way that reassures, yet is honest and real. All while trying to not lose the proverbial shit in the face of what is probably the single biggest crisis most of us have ever seen.

Teens – and their parents – who are sick to death of the four walls and however many family members from which they cannot seem to escape. I cannot imagine how dire it must feel for everyone involved.

Worse: People stuck in toxic and abusive conditions. People who were at best day-to-day survivors, now out of work and money and wondering how to survive. People still at work and

risking exposure to a potentially-lethal virus doing the jobs we need them to do to keep the barest level of society functioning. People who were largely considered unskilled workers until all this happened, people who are now deemed “essential” to keeping the machine running.

I think about these folks every day, feel grief and despair for their plight.

And yet…

I still enjoy my days in semi-solitude. I revel in the absence of schedule and deadline and hurry up here and there. I am content to sit and stare at the sky for long stretches. After a year in which it was often all I could do, I have come to appreciate such a simple, basic activity.

But it is not for everyone. Stanwyck, bless her, has a dozen endeavors underway. The house is a maelstrom of sewing machines and laptop workstations and studio projects. She meets with friends via Zoom nearly every day, calls her Mom every day. I think she has mostly good days.

But the weight from ‘out there’ exerts force, creeps into dreams, disrupts easy slumber. We do not try to deny it. But given the measure of control we have in regard to the creeping beast, we try to not dwell and brood.

We do the best we can. It’s all any of us can strive for.

So, maybe a few ideas for how to build up some immunity to the tedium?

1. Avoid watching the wall to wall coverage of the crisis, especially if the criminal president is speaking. Read a few decent news sources every day and set it aside. Nothing is going to change in the course of an hour or a day or between a show’s A block and B block.
2. Try to establish a relationship with quiet and

stillness. If you can, cultivate Silence as a friend, whatever that might mean to you. Counter-intuitive tip: You can experience Silence even when your environment is howling like a tea kettle.
3. Read. Or write. Or draw/paint/play an instrument. A little goes a long way.
4. Move your body. Anything helps: sit to stand from a chair ten times and stretch your arms overhead. Or dance. Or jump up and down. Just move.
5. Eat well, drink moderately (or even not at all, if you wish). You do not have to be a fanatic. Just take it easy if you can.
6. If you can't, and you go on a spree, don't sweat it. Forgive yourself your transgressions.
7. Notice. The stuff that you like and the stuff you don't. Just pay attention. The blog contends that if you are bored, it means you are not paying attention. Find something worth paying attention to.
8. And most of all, and you know what's coming next doncha, you've been here before and it seems to still be the key for getting through whatever demented plot twist the cosmic scriptwriters throw our way…

Love Each Other, Motherfuckers!

It matters a difference.