

2023

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What Resolution?

January 5, 2023

The new year has just started, and many people have begun 2023 with good intentions for living a better, healthier life. However, you may remember the old saw, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” This saying provides a hint that intentions are not by themselves effective, and it also provides a mental image of the road to damnation being covered with cast-off intentions of fellow travelers along that way. If you are having trouble maintaining your resolve, or if you want to make a change but were put off by the prospect of failure, read on!

Most often, death in this country is due to a life-style disease, caused by the choices people make to use substances (including food) in unnatural or unhealthy ways. For that reason, I believe the medical profession should do all that we can to help people identify life-style changes that they would like to make, and then help them to succeed in making these changes. When people desire to make a change, they are often advised to ‘make a clean break’ and ‘start fresh’. The fresh start effect does add power to our good intentions, and that is one reason why people choose to make New Year’s Resolutions. I should also admit that I have a personal bias toward making and keeping resolutions, which predates my study of medicine, as I believe that life should be lived intentionally. As the great Yankee philosopher, Yogi Berra said, “If you don’t know where you are going, you’ll end up someplace else...”

In an article in the science journal PLOS One it was noted that for several years a fairly stable proportion of 4 in 10 Americans made New Years resolutions, and a majority of those people said that they kept them for at least a portion of the year. The article went on to give some insight into ways to improve the success rate to about 60% for the entire year. That’s a pretty good success rate, and for those who succeed, it’s excellent! The article also provides guidance to make sure you are among the successful ones.

In achieving a goal, there is nothing more important than excellence in goal setting. Intentions are powerful in proportion to how much we both desire what is intended, and believe we can achieve it. Therefore, we must be clear about what we intend, and also careful to choose something that is both desirable and attainable. SMART is an acronym used in goal-setting, and there is are various ways of defining that, but one is: Specific, Measurable, Acceptable, Reasonable and Time-bound. In the study cited above, participants were enrolled during November and December and researchers found, “Participants with approach-oriented goals were significantly more successful than those with avoidance-oriented goals (58.9% vs. 47.1%).” In other words, people who resolved to *start* doing something were much more successful than people who tried to *stop* doing something. Also, the study found that the most successful people used these strategies: They chose a particular person who would hold them accountable and who would support them throughout the year, and they revisited their resolution at the first of every month, January through December.

Since we are focusing on New Year’s Resolutions which bring about a change in life-style, it is important to realize that the goal is not simply to see how long a person can maintain an uncomfortable pose. Our goal is to develop a comfortable and sustainable habit that replaces a less healthy one. So, for instance, instead of resolving to never smoke another cigarette for the rest of your life, a SMART goal would be to develop the habit of being a non-smoker. Perhaps use these time-bound milestones: achieve at least 7 days in a row of no-smoking by March 1; have at least 30 days in a row of no-smoking by November 2023, and demonstrate the non-smoker habit throughout December of 2023. Also, use a calendar and

write your goal on the first day of each month of 2023, and use the calendar on your phone to make it a recurring event on the first day of every month. Look at one or more of these calendars on the first of each month. You could even set calendar alarms for these events to remind you. Consider making notes on these calendars or elsewhere, commenting on your progress and difficulties. Finally, carefully choose someone you respect to help you and hold you accountable, throughout the year. Touch base regularly with them, at least monthly.

You don't have to wait for a new year to make a change. These strategies will work all year round. The main reason people don't undertake to make the changes they know they should, is that they fear failure. It is true that they anticipate the change will involve discomfort, but what they are most afraid of is not the discomfort itself, but rather that they will experience some discomfort and then still fail to make the change. I learned a long time ago how to deal with fear of failure in a class on Basic Life Support. At the start of the class we were told, "Failure is not an option in this class...There are only two options, Success and Quitting, because we will stay with you as long as it takes for you to be successful." That struck me profoundly, because I saw I could apply that to most things in life. As an inventor, Edison made 1,000 unsuccessful attempts at inventing the light bulb. When a reporter asked, "How did it feel to fail 1,000 times?" Edison replied, "I didn't fail 1,000 times. The light bulb was an invention with 1000 steps." No one ever needs to live in fear of failure, as long as you are alive and have not given up. Of course, it is true that you may die before you succeed, but then you are not living with failure or fear *or quitting!* In the words of Yogi Berra, "It ain't over till it's over."

Sources and Methods

January 12, 2023

Economists (practitioners of the dismal science) tell us that the United States will experience an economic recession within the coming months, because the branch of our federal government most directly responsible creating or avoiding recession (the Federal Reserve or simply The Fed) is actively doing all it can to create a recession. They are raising interest rates in order to slow economic growth and increase the unemployment rate. They believe that is the only way they can fight inflation. Therefore, good economic news such as a strong labor market, is seen as bad news because the Fed will take it as a reason to raise interest rates even more. There has never been a time when the Fed raised rates in this way without it causing a significant recession. Unfortunately, the two elected branches of our federal government which have a direct influence on employment seem to be doing all that they can to strengthen the labor market. When asked about the danger of inflation, or the recession which will be brought on by fighting inflation, they respond that the economy is in great shape! The data they use to support that claim is the strong labor market. As it turns out, however, there are two types of data which the federal government uses to assess the labor market. The Labor Department surveys large businesses, and based on the Department's assessment of the overall economy they then 'impute' some additional positive or negative number of jobs. This 'fudge factor' is an estimate of the number of jobs created or lost in small businesses, which are not included in the survey. The Census Bureau, on the other hand, uses a household survey which obtains information directly from individuals regarding their employment status. These two sets of data usually provide similar numbers, but they tend to diverge when the economy is growing or shrinking rapidly. In such cases, the household survey is always the first one to detect the change. During the last year these two sets of data have diverged more than ever before, amounting to 2.7 million more jobs in the economy according to the Labor Department's accounting, compared with that of the Census Bureau. That's an interesting number in isolation, but what is even more fascinating is that the Labor Department should impute a small or negative number, if the economy were stagnant or shrinking (as is suggested by the household survey). However, because they believe the economy is growing, they continue to add a positive fudge factor with each report. What is their reason for believing that the economy is growing? The strong labor market, of course. "Wait a minute!" you say, "Is it possible that the labor market only looks strong because you have added millions of jobs that aren't real?"

"I'm sorry, but we've run out of time for questions. We'll have to circle back to you on that."

This brings me to a much more important point, as regards our society. Very likely you have been curious about some event or aspect of governmental behavior which you have been prevented from learning more about, and the explanation was some version of that wonderfully flexible phrase, "Disclosure of this information would compromise our sources and methods." Since this is still the rationale given for not disclosing all of the Warren Report on the assassination of President Kennedy, almost 60 years after the conclusion of the investigation, a person should be forgiven for honestly asking this question: What sources and methods could possibly be compromised at this point? Evidently at least some of the methods are old ones, and the sources seem almost inexhaustible. Perhaps when the United States Government needs information that it cannot find, it simply invents some. If so, an honest answer as to the Government's source of information may often be, "We made it up."

Sleep Is Important.

January 26, 2023

I'll sleep when I'm dead...

What is important? Common sense says that the most important things are those upon which other things depend, beginnings and foundations come to mind. However, we typically live our lives as if the ends and the pinnacles are the most important things. This is a fundamental error, and our lives are shot through by it. It is obvious that breathing, eating and drinking are important because by inhaling and swallowing our body takes in the basic elements we need to survive. However, exhaling is just as important as inhaling. As the mathematicians say, it is "by definition" or "identically" as important. A moment of reflection will confirm that if each exhalation were only slightly less than was needed, we soon would be unable to get any oxygen in, and we would die. In the same way, although eating and drinking are often occasions for socializing, and getting rid of our solid and liquid wastes not so much, excreting those wastes is identically as important. The situation with sleep is similar. Working, learning, engaging with other people and attending to our electronic devices is what seems important, and these activities fill our days. As we do these things our brains are constantly working, and that work creates waste products that are excreted from the neurons into the surrounding brain tissue (glia). Removing these waste products from the brain is *identically as important* as the activities one does while producing them. How do we remove them? We sleep. That is the purpose of sleep. It isn't the only purpose of sleep, but it is the most important purpose.

One of the neuronal waste products is the molecule adenosine. This is one of the most basic of all the molecules of life. It is the backbone of the most important molecule for producing and storing energy in biological systems, ATP (adenosine triphosphate), and it is also a neurotransmitter. There are adenosine receptors in the brain which are blocked by drugs such as caffeine, accounting for the fact that coffee or colas can have a refreshing effect when a person has been up for a long time. During sleep, especially the phase of sleep we call 'deep sleep', adenosine and other waste products are literally flushed out of the brain tissue through what is known as the 'glymphatic system'. The refreshing effect of sleep is directly related to the flushing of adenosine from your brain. There are other waste products that need to be removed nightly. If these are not removed by regular and adequate sleep, the result is an accumulation of abnormal proteins in the brain, which can then lead to neurodegenerative disease such as Alzheimer's disease or another one of the dementias. It is sometimes said that nobody ever died from lack of sleep, but that is simply not true. There is a very rare condition known as fatal familial insomnia, in which abnormal proteins known as prions accumulate. The affected individuals almost always have a family history. Often in their 30's these people experience an onset of near total insomnia, rapidly progress to dementia, and then die within a few months.

I said that the waste products need to be removed nightly, and technically they need to be removed during a person's regular major sleep period, because some people sleep during the day. However, research shows that sleeping at night is more beneficial than equally long daytime sleep. There is so much more that I could say about sleep, but I will end with this. In one two-week study (<http://www.nap.edu/catalog/11617.html>), where subjects were randomized to 4, 6 or 8 hours in bed per night, "Performance deficits in individuals who slept 6 hours or less per night were similar to those observed in individuals after two nights of total sleep deprivation. Most striking was that study subjects remained largely unaware of their performance deficits, as measured by subjective sleepiness ratings."

The portion of our thinking that is most impaired by insufficient sleep seems to be our judgement, and what that means is that our ability to correctly assess our abilities is impaired. As a doctor who specializes in sleep medicine, I can say without a doubt that the most important sleep problem I see is this: Insufficient Opportunity for Sleep. Sleep is identically as important as work or school or anything else you do. Just as you can't expect to breathe in easily if you don't exhale adequately, you can't expect to continue to think well if you don't sleep adequately.

Culture of Excellence and Caring

February 2, 2023

Rural Texas and the small towns with long histories which dot Central and West Texas are in danger of being swamped. Many such places have seen an influx of people, and we will see a lot more. While that can be positive or negative, it is taking place at this moment, when unexpected events are occurring more frequently, attitudes are changing rapidly, and the effects are unsettling. The country I grew up in did not have 'supply chain disruptions' which caused basic necessities to be unavailable. Baby formula, amoxicillin (the most commonly prescribed antibiotic in my practice), Tylenol and ibuprofen for children as well as a score of other common items are now or have recently been truly scarce. We used to joke about the Soviet Union having such issues, and we thought it was emblematic of the inefficiencies of socialism/communism. Russians said that when they saw a line forming in a store they would immediately go stand in it, and then they would determine what it was for. The expectation was that the que was for a staple they would need at some time, or it was for a luxury item they would be able to use for barter. Can we be overwhelmed by shortages? It seems like we are or we soon will be, and one clue that we have been overwhelmed, as the Soviets were, is a populace accepting such shortages as normal.

Attitudes toward work and higher education are two things that seem to have changed, especially among young men. Regarding work, this nation has 7 million working age men 18-45 years old, who are not enrolled in school and are not working or looking for work. As to education, I grew up in a college town (Portales, NM), and ENMU always had more enrolled males than females. That has now reversed, and considering that fact brings to my mind the whole question of pronouns. Who had ever thought about pronouns ten years ago?!? He and she have now been replaced – at least in the polite and sensitive crowd – by 'they'. I am sorry, but using the word 'they' to refer to a single individual is, well... confusing. I could go on with the changes, but I will leave it to the reader to judge whether we risk being overwhelmed by the pace of change. One thing that is indisputable is that depression and use of dangerous substances are both problems that have always been with us, but are now truly epidemic. Death due to drug overdose is now the leading killer of people 18-45 in this country. Use of methamphetamine is so common in our community that frequently 10% to 25% of the people who come to our Emergency Department in a day, are regular users.

So, what kind of a place do you want to live in, and what kind of people do you want to attract to the place in which you live? If you want to live in a place that is safe and welcoming, there must be rule of law, good schools, and good healthcare. Also, the people around you must be trustworthy. For the most part, I believe, that describes this area of Texas. However, we can do better, and things will get worse if we don't work to make them better. It also helps if the economic environment is improving. To a certain extent, the fact that things are improving is more important than the absolute level of circumstances such as economic wealth. What are the conditions that foster an increasingly safe, welcoming and prosperous place? I submit that it comes down to a culture of excellence and caring. Protection from death or loss due to fire is essential and excellence in law-enforcement, healthcare, mental health, education for our young people and education for our adults likewise are all essential elements of any vibrant community. Nothing, however, is more important than is the spiritual health of our people. In recognition of these facts, the Health and Wellness Coalition for Runnels County is going to begin recognizing individuals who have done the most to promote the health and wellbeing of the people of our area recently and also over a life-time or a career. We are soliciting nominations for individuals who exemplify excellence and caring. We intend to recognize two people each year. We'd like to recognize one person for having improved the health and wellbeing of Runnels county residents over some period

of time, be it during a disaster, a year, a career or a lifetime of service. This can be any person who made a difference in our county or a portion of our county, either as a professional, or volunteer or both. We would also like to recognize one person from among those designated as 'First Responders Plus', for their recent service to the public. In the future, the period will be the year preceding the recognition, but nominations for the 2023 award may be the time of COVID or the year 2022. The First Responders Plus designation applies to people who work (volunteer or for pay) in fire departments, EMS, law-enforcement (including incarceration or probation roles), healthcare (including mental health), education (including the County Extension office) and ministerial work. These are people who see our emergencies, or – perhaps even more importantly – they see the situations that precede emergencies. Often it is their work that results in averting calamity and avoiding emergencies. The best news may be the things that don't happen, even if you rarely know about them.

We will be recognizing these individuals (HAWC Heroes) at an event on the weekend of April 29, 2023. We will have more information later, but if you would like to nominate someone, we have a short, one-page form. You can pick these up in Winters at the office for West Texas MHMR, 126 State St. or in Ballinger at Ballinger Home Health office, 818 Hutchins Ave. The completed forms can be turned in at the same locations. We will publish more information in the Runnels County Register, or you can go to our Facebook page or website, www.HAWC4RC.org.

Are we about done with COVID

February 9, 2023

I began writing this on Groundhog Day, and that occasion seems a fitting metaphor for what we are experiencing. Groundhog Day is observed each year on February 2nd, and it has long been about one question, “Are we about done with winter?” There is now another meaning which is taken from the 1993 movie, “Groundhog Day”. In the movie, Bill Murray awakens over and over again to the same February 2nd morning, and everything is the same, except him. He remembers and learns and tries different things, but when he awakens to the same scene each morning we can read in his expression the question, “Are we about done with this!?”

So, to the question, “Are we about done with winter?” Punxsutawney Phil is said to have predicted 6 more weeks of winter this year. Who am I to argue, but I do recommend that you get busy now, if you want to trim trees before they turn green in this part of Texas. Are we about done with COVID? Jay Powell, chairman of the Federal Reserve, said on February 1 that they no longer believe COVID will have any further serious impact on our economy. President Biden has established May 11 as the complete and final end of the COVID emergency. What about the ‘triple-demic’ of RSV, flu and COVID about which much was written (including here) late last year. Is that about over? That is the principal question I wanted to answer, and I believe it turns out to be a rather interesting answer, especially when seen graphically. I hope that you agree.

First, COVID turns out to have a cyclical pattern, as can be seen from any graphic depiction of activity of the disease. The graph I have chosen (Figure 1) shows the number of daily deaths due to COVID in Texas. After COVID became established here there has been a peak in activity twice each year – one in January and the other between mid-July and mid-September. The first such peak occurred on July 23, 2020, when 279 Texans succumbed to COVID. The next peak was the highest, at 386 deaths on January 13, 2021. The next two peaks were lower: 354 on 9/10/21 and 257 on 1/28/22. Then, there was a sharp drop in mortality. The latest peak, was 31 COVID deaths on January 3rd of this year. While every death is a tremendous loss (someone with whom I was close was among those COVID deaths of January 3rd), the point is that this peak is less than a tenth the size of either peak in 2021. Also, the trend is still downward. I expect to see a peak later this year that will be lower than last month’s, and I expect a peak in January 2024 that will also be lower than the one we just experienced.

How about the other two elements of the triple-demic, influenza and RSV? They are also in sharp decline. Figure 2 depicts influenza activity in Texas this flu season, through the 3rd week of January, 2023. Figure 3 is from a CDC website. It shows RSV activity in Texas from February 6, 2021 through January 21, 2023. It shows three peaks in activity: mid-July 2021, early July 2022 and mid to late November 2022.

To me it is clear that we are coming to a rapid close on this season’s respiratory illnesses, and better times are ahead. There is, however, one more question that I would really like answered, “Is the winter of our intellectual dishonesty and discontent also ending?” Are we about done with that? I hope so, and I was heartened to read something from Newsweek entitled, “It’s Time for the Scientific Community to Admit We Were Wrong About COVID and It Cost Lives.” This was written by Kevin Bass who is identified as an MD/PhD student at a medical school in Texas. He speaks for many of us in saying, “My motivation for writing this is simple: It’s clear to me that for public trust to be restored in science, scientists should

publicly discuss what went right and what went wrong during the pandemic, and where we could have done better.”

As a duly appointed Public Health Authority, I encourage all of you to read what he has to say (<https://www.newsweek.com/its-time-scientific-community-admit-we-were-wrong-about-coivd-it-cost-lives-opinion-1776630>).

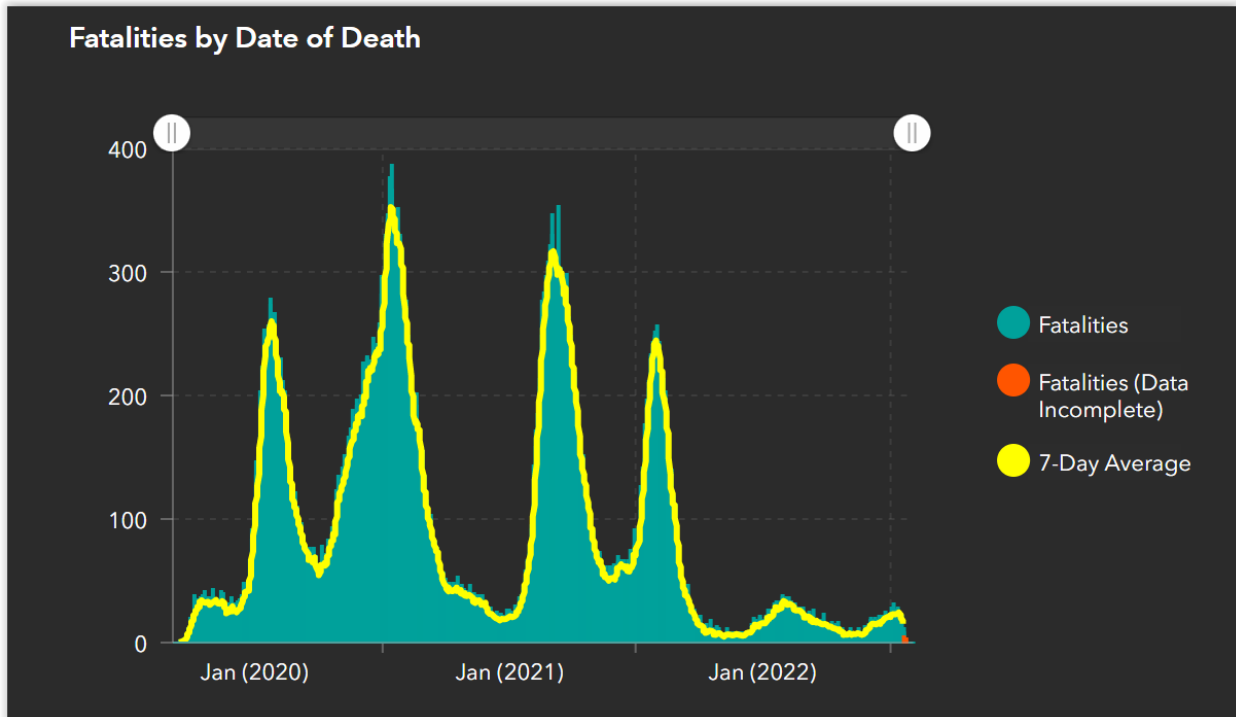


Figure 1

<https://txdshsea.maps.arcgis.com/apps/dashboards/4ae43eefd0f641d59d35c3df82ee59cc>.

(From Texas DSHS COVID Dashboard website, click Trends, then see chart upper right)

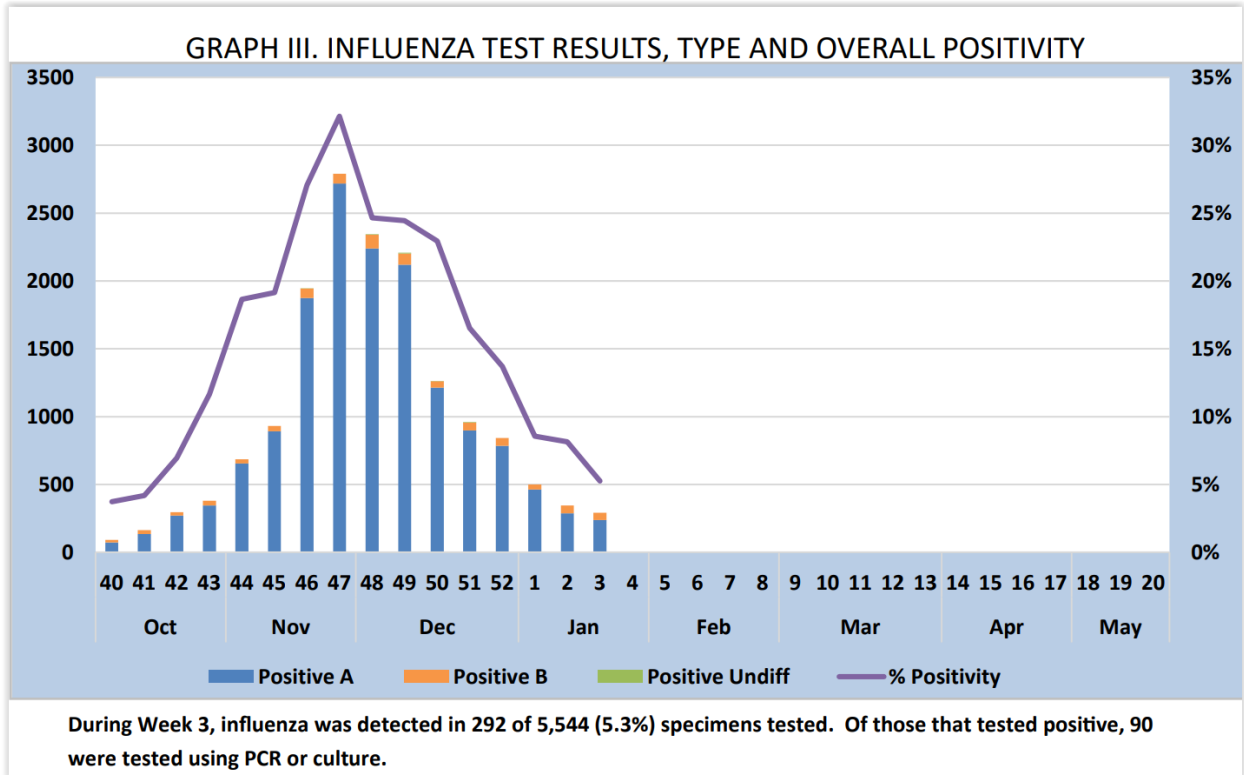


Figure 2, from Texas DSHS Region 2/3 influenza activity report for Week 3, 2023

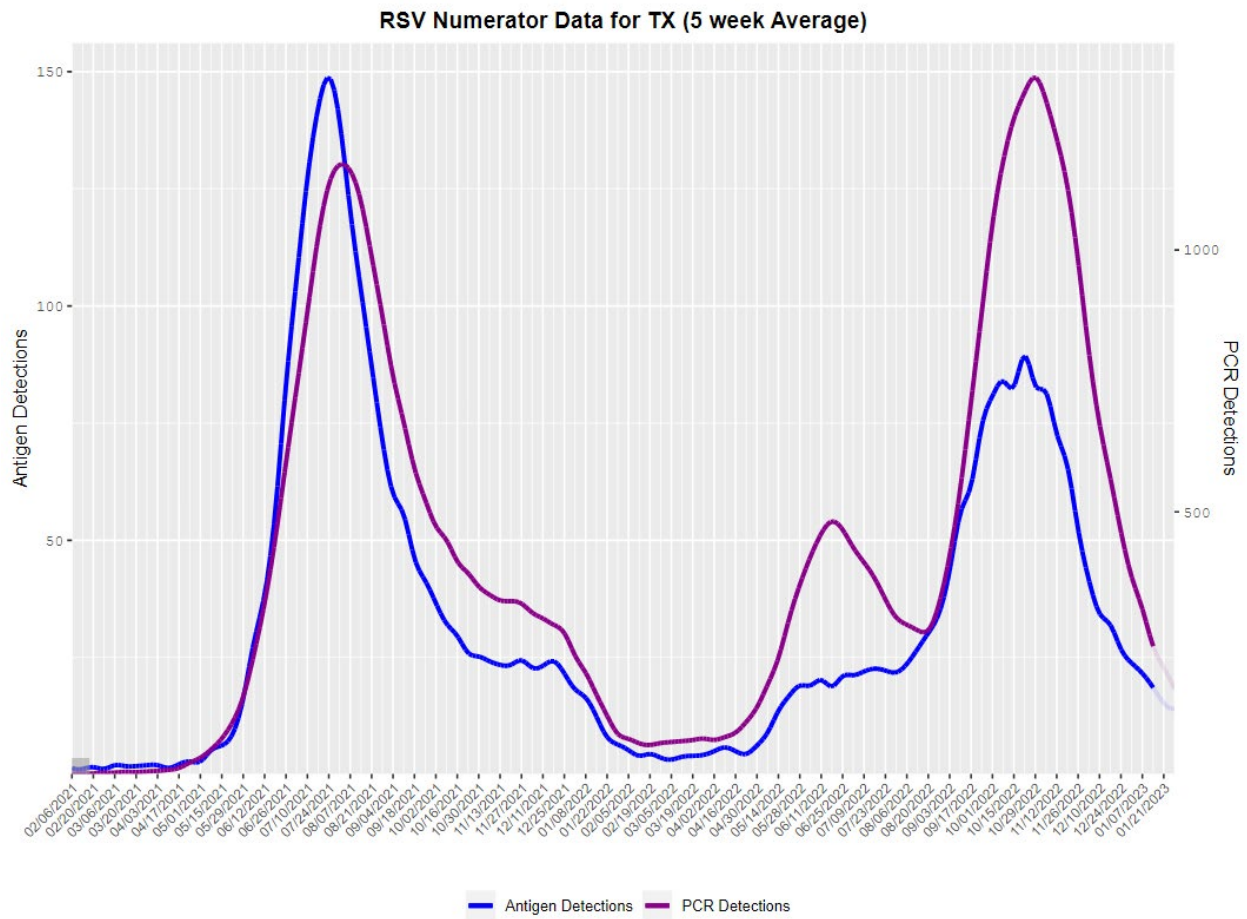


Figure 3

<https://www.cdc.gov/surveillance/nrvss/rsv/state.html#TX>

The Opioid Wars

February 16, 2023

War is a terrible thing. The Vietnam War fractured this country. The political strife which accompanied it defined a generation, and the war shaped the course of this nation ever since that time. According to the National Archives, 58,220 service members lost their lives; another 185,000 had significant injuries during the 10-year duration. That war was a potent political factor because television news brought scenes of violence and death into American living rooms on a nightly basis. Between 1964 and 1973 there were a quarter of a million American military casualties (those who were killed or injured), for an average of about 66 per day. We are currently involved in another war which is not being televised and last year resulted in more than 150 deaths each day from fentanyl overdose (<https://www.cdc.gov/stopoverdose/fentanyl/index.html>). This is what I call The Third Opioid War.

All of the Opioid Wars have involved China, and they are all related to one another. According to the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA, <https://www.dea.gov/resources/facts-about-fentanyl>), "Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid typically used to treat patients with chronic severe pain or severe pain following surgery. Fentanyl is a Schedule II controlled substance that is similar to morphine but about 100 times more potent.... Illicit fentanyl, primarily manufactured in foreign clandestine labs and smuggled into the United States through Mexico, is being distributed across the country and sold on the illegal drug market. Fentanyl is being mixed in with other illicit drugs to increase the potency of the drug, sold as powders and nasal sprays, and increasingly pressed into pills made to look like legitimate prescription opioids.... 42% of pills tested for fentanyl contained at least 2 mg of fentanyl, considered a potentially lethal dose." The DEA Intelligence Report, Fentanyl Flow into the United States, makes it clear that the principal source of this opioid is China.

Why would China do this? The answer is to be found in history. In this space not long ago I referred to, "... the small towns with long histories which dot Central and West Texas." I point this out to illustrate how natural it is for Americans to think that anything earlier than about 1860 happened so long ago as to be barely relevant today. However, for the Chinese such is by no means the case. In Beijing's Tiananmen Square stands a 10 story tall stone obelisk which was created at the order of Chairman Mao. It depicts what he saw as the recent century of humiliation his country had suffered at the hands of western powers, beginning with the First Opium War in 1839. Prior to that time, China had been almost entirely closed to trade with the west and the Emperor was able to dictate the terms on which trade would be conducted. For instance, foreign merchants were limited to a 5-month trading season each year and could use only two trading stations, at Macau and Canton (present day Guangzhou). Also, few imports were allowed, and all payment for Chinese products (tea, for example) had to be made in hard currency. However, the British found that there was a demand for opium, and this could easily be produced in India and present-day Afghanistan, which were under British control. When the government of China banned that trade, Queen Victoria's Royal Navy intervened to force the issue and the war began. It ended in 1842 with the Treaty of Nanjing which required China to pay the costs of the war and permanently cede the island of Hong Kong to the British. However, the Emperor still did not legalize the import of opium until the Second Opium War of the 1850s. This war ended with the treaty of 1858 which allowed opium to be imported legally, and it also for the first time legalized travel by large numbers of westerners into the interior of China.

We need to understand that the current government of China is engaged in fulfilling a dream that they call by various names. China's President Xi alluded to it in a phrase he used when he first took office in 2013, roughly translated as, "The road to renewal." Another way they refer to it is translated, "The

hundred-year marathon.” By this they intend that within 100 years after Chairman Mao came to power (in 1949), China will be once again restored to its rightful place of unquestioned preeminence in the world. The Third Opioid War is but one of the ways they are advancing toward that end. As Confucius said, “There cannot be two suns in the sky, nor two emperors on the earth.” They say they desire a multipolar world, but they desire that only as long as they are not capable of world domination.

All websites were accessed February 12, 2023.

The Middle Kingdom

February 23, 2023

The way to write, “China,” in Mandarin is by using the two characters that mean ‘middle’ and ‘kingdom’ or ‘country’. Thus, China has long been known as “The Middle Kingdom.” However, like all things Chinese, that phrase can have several meanings. When I checked Google today, using, “What is the Chinese definition of the middle kingdom?” one top result was, “Middle Kingdom or Middle Country, Mandarin *Zhongguo*, Chinese name for China. It dates from c.1000 BC, when it designated the Chou empire situated on the North China Plain. The Chou people, unaware of high civilizations in the West, believed their empire occupied the middle of the earth, surrounded by barbarians. Since 1949, when the Communists took power, the official name for China has been *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo* [middle glorious people's republican country] or, in English, the People's Republic of China [PRC].” The top search result was, “The notion of China as the “Middle Kingdom” (*Zhongguo* 中國) comes from the fact that Chinese universality is inseparable from a certain idea of civilization, with a centre shining upon surrounding regions.” Most of the other entries indicated that China middle country geographically, or between other kingdoms/countries. I think that the historian John King Fairbank captured the proper (Chinese) meaning in saying that China is not just a country, but a civilization at the center of the universe, ruled by heavenly authority (not just between other earthly realms, but the one realm between heaven and earth). That is, unique and superior to all other peoples or nations, and not subject to the same rules.

What would it look like if one nation were unique and superior to all other peoples and nations? That nation would establish the rules by which all other nations had to abide; that nation's language would be the standard language of diplomacy, science and scholarship and that nation's currency would be the common medium of exchange. That nation would be us, the U.S. One of the rules is that our dollar is the world's ‘reserve currency’. You may not have thought about the impact which would result if the dollar ceased to be the world's reserve currency. I know that it would be much worse and more complex than I can imagine. It would be very bad and very destabilizing... and it could happen. Besides the Bretton Woods agreements, and even more important, the unique power of the dollar is vouchsafed by the Middle Eastern oil producing countries insisting that the cost of their oil must be paid in American dollars. That is the origin of the term ‘petrodollar’. These understandings form the bedrock of our modern economy. The PRC has successfully chipped away at the petrodollar requirement, and they intend to supplant the dollar as the reserve currency

It is crucial to understand that most Chinese people do not see the world as Westerners do. When we in the west talk about historical events, we tie them to dates: 1776, 1648 or – if we look way back – the Norman Invasion of Brittan in 1066. The written history of the Middle Kingdom nation goes back another 2000 years! When the Chinese speak of history, they refer to dynasties. There have been 14 imperial dynasties, and 10 lasted longer than the entire history of the United States. For all of that time, the Chinese way of thinking has been collectivist. Until westerners began to translate Mandarin in the 1860s, there was no word for ‘rights’, and so they had to make up one, *chuan li*, by combining “power” with “benefits.” To the Chinese way of thinking, each person exists within a family and a community that is governed by an autocratic regime. These regimes have come and gone for thousands of years, and they will continue to do so.

Much of China's history is one of war and intrigue. One of the Confucian classics, *Spring and Autumn Annals*, deals in some detail with a portion of that history which is known as 'The Warring States Period'. This period lasted hundreds of years, and ended before the second century BC. The lessons which Sun Tzu (*The Art of War*) and the Confucian scholars drew from that period form the basis of modern Chinese strategy. The simplest way to state this strategy is to say that a lesser power can certainly displace an older or much stronger rival (the 'hegemon') if they use cunning, deception and any other means available to grow strong. At the same time, they should only very slowly build military capability, while constantly reassuring the strong ruler that they wish to be a junior partner and have no intention of displacing the strong ruler. If possible, one should do all that is possible to weaken the stronger rival. That is what the PRC has been doing. The strategy emphasizes the need to delay any major military buildup, so as to not prematurely provoke the established power, until they have been so weakened or so lacking in military production capacity, that the hegemon no longer has means to resist. If done well, this strategy produces victory without ever doing battle. In the early 1700's China produced 1/3 of all global wealth. They appear to be on track to achieve the same by 2050. If they do so, they will unquestionably have the means to dominate America and the world.

The Last Thing

March 2, 2023

A few days ago, I saw on TV a quote from President Biden, “I think the last thing that Xi wants is to fundamentally rip the relationship with the United States and with me.” I fear that in this rare case, our President’s statement on foreign affairs may actually be true. One of the commonplace sayings about American strategy in the last century is that we were playing checkers, while the Soviets were playing chess. It turns out that while those adversaries were playing checkers or chess, the Chinese were playing *wei qi* (pronounced way chee) instead. This game, also known as baduk in Korea or Go in Japan, is a board game of strategy in which two players compete to see which one can surround the other player’s pieces. While checker players may try for some deception, and chess has the gambit, the essence of *wei qi* is deception, and the apparent momentum can change quickly. In the same way, the leadership of the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) has from the start intended to achieve world domination. They knew that they would have to have assistance, because the country in 1949 was so poor and weak. They allied closely with the Soviet Union which provided money and resident advisors for both military and civilian development throughout the 1950s and most of the 1960s. However, the Chinese leadership had some important lessons to learn. One lesson had to do with killing sparrows. Chairman Mao knew that sparrows ate grain, and thought that there would be much more grain available for feeding the people, if only the sparrow could be eliminated. The campaign was very successful, and sparrow populations were almost completely eliminated within two years. However, it turns out that sparrows have a lot of insects in their diets, and without sparrows the insect population exploded. This resulted in one of the most devastating famines the world has ever seen, as locusts and other insects wiped out crops over entire regions. China had to import not only food, but also a quarter of a million sparrows from the Soviet Union, before the famine subsided. Another costly lesson that the PRC leaders had to learn is that they had to keep quiet about their plans for world dominance. By 1962 there were Soviet military leaders who saw China as a military threat equal to or greater than NATO.

It was because a split between USSR and the PRC had already developed that China allowed Nixon to make his grand entry into their country, ‘opening China’. Of course, the entire reason for this trip by Nixon was to induce a split that had already occurred without our knowledge. Our China policy has thus always been naïve and misguided. On the other hand, the Chinese have always regarded the United States intentions as being malicious, directed intentionally to dominate China keeping it poor and powerless. The history taught in Chinese schools is that President Tyler is to be remembered as the first American President to pursue this policy, in 1840. (Most Americans remember our tenth President not at all, except perhaps in reference to the unforgettable slogan, “Tippecanoe and Tyler too”). To Chinese students, Abraham Lincoln (our 16th President) is to be remembered as the next terrible American oppressor of the Chinese people. For the hawks in the PRC – and rest assured that the hawks are the ones in control now – policies and acts that are obviously helpful are regarded as subterfuge by the oppressor nation.

There is no way to win the trust of the hawks, because their distrust is so complete. It is not open to adjustment in light of critical assessment of information. (How else could President Lincoln be viewed as they view him?) Because they see America as the mortal enemy, the only morally right thing to do is to eliminate the threat. Crucially, Darwinism has become central to the popular thinking in China, but instead of seeing it as, “survival of the fittest” their way looking at evolution is, “elimination of the inferior.” Chinese society, at least according to Michael Pillsbury and others, is unapologetically racist. It is especially hard for modern Americans to understand this, but – from their moral standpoint – the

promotion of Chinese ethnicity is not only good, it is paramount, and it requires the subjugation, domination and eventual elimination of others.

There is, of course, much more to the story. There are people in China who do desire democracy, inclusion, tolerance and individual freedom or liberty. However, there are more than one-million people who are employed to scan the internet as censors for the PRC, and tens of thousands who put up fresh content bolstering the party line on every imaginable subject. There also are little known military capabilities and assets, including the full-scale mock-up of an American aircraft carrier in a Chinese desert that is used for target practice for hypersonic 'carrier killer' missiles. There is one more subject on which I must touch, and that is *shi* (pronounced shure, with a long u and silent e) The best way for us to begin to understand *shi* is to recall The Force, from Star Wars. (George Lucas drew this idea and much else from such Japanese films as "The Hidden Fortress.")

"Let your plans be dark and impenetrable as night, and when you move, fall like a thunderbolt." Sun Tzu—*The Art of War*. While total war seems unimaginable, at least to most people, China has a history of making what it calls 'warning strikes' that it believes can be conducted without provoking the full response of the adversary. It may carry out these attacks to increase *shi* and tilt the flow of events in China's favor. Remember Korea in 1950. Other examples include India in 1962, the Soviet Union in 1969 and Viet Nam in 1979. Rest assured that China seeks world dominance, and it would prefer to have it without fighting the US. However, the strategy they are following dictates that they must delay any obvious buildup of military strength, until the very last stage of their effort to displace the established power. Since China's military buildup is now obviously under way, I fear that President Xi may in fact want that last thing of which Biden spoke, "...to fundamentally rip the relationship with the United States..."

COVID Escaped from a Lab

March 9, 2023

We can say with high confidence that COVID-19 originated in a lab, and somehow got into the human population. Multiple lines of evidence support this conclusion. That's not news. The news is that we can say it without fear (or maybe only a little fear). Although the official position of the Office of the President is that there is no consensus on the origin of the virus, The Director of the FBI, Christopher Wray, stated in a February 28 interview with Fox News, "The FBI has for quite some time now assessed that the origins of the pandemic are most likely a potential lab incident in Wuhan. Here you are talking about a potential leak from a Chinese government-controlled lab." A few days prior to this the Energy Department had offered a similar opinion, couched in more tentative language. Since anyone interested can hear lots of opinions on the subject, I would like to offer a succinct version of the scientific evidence.

I first became convinced that the COVID virus was engineered when I read an article entitled, "Uncanny similarity of unique inserts in the 2019-nCoV spike protein to HIV-1...." This article, which has since been withdrawn for no clear reason, was posted to bioRxiv on January 31, 2020. In it the authors state that the 'spike protein' of COVID is similar to the original SARS spike protein, and differs in only 4 small areas, where additional genetic material has been inserted (naturally or not). It is these areas that account for COVID being contracted much more easily than the original SARS. In their conclusion the authors state, "First, we identified 4 unique inserts in the 2019-nCoV spike glycoprotein that are not present in any other coronavirus reported [to] date. To our surprise, all the 4 inserts in the 2019-nCoV mapped [only] to short segments of amino acids in the HIV-1 gp120 and Gag among all annotated virus proteins in the NCBI database. This uncanny similarity of novel inserts in the 2019-nCoV spike protein to HIV-1 gp120 and Gag is unlikely to be fortuitous." In other words, they thought it would be highly unlikely that over the space of a few years a coronavirus evolved to have these 4 insertions that just happened to look exactly like the portion of the HIV virus molecule which binds to a human cell, and not like anything else in the extensive database of viral genomes.

A few months later I learned something even more striking, from a Wall Street Journal article, "The Science Suggests a Wuhan Lab Leak." (June 6, 2021) What I learned is that not only was the original SARS virus changed so that it looked more like the HIV virus, the way that it was changed was... unique. The particular amino acid sequence, arginine-arginine, has been inserted in the COVID spike protein, and it is crucial to the enhancement in infectivity, relative to the original SARS. However, there are literally three dozen ways that a genome can specify this. One way is with the sequence genetic sequence CGG-CGG*, but, "...in the entire class of coronaviruses that includes CoV-2, the CGG-CGG combination has never been found naturally. That means the common method of viruses picking up new skills, called recombination, cannot operate here. A virus simply cannot pick up a sequence from another virus if that sequence isn't present in any other virus. Although the double CGG is suppressed naturally, the opposite is true in laboratory work. The insertion sequence of choice is the double CGG. That's because it is readily available and convenient, and scientists have a great deal of experience inserting it.... Proponents of zoonotic origin must explain why the novel coronavirus, when it mutated or recombined, happened to pick its least favorite combination... Why did it replicate the choice the lab's gain-of-function researchers would have made?"

One last point is this: Coronaviruses, including COVID-19, are positive sense RNA viruses. The protein structure has some similarities to the structure of HIV-1, but HIV is a retrovirus and it cannot directly share sequences with coronaviruses. Even though the structure of COVID has some similarity to HIV, catching COVID does not mean that you have been exposed to HIV.

*CGG stands for the ribonucleic acid (RNA) sequence cytosine-guanine-guanine.