

Something to Think About



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COMMON CENTS

The Ebola virus or ISIS? You have to choose one. Which is it? Which of these two keeps you up at night? After all, if the Doomsday scenarios for both are accurate, they will both bring, well, Doomsday to our planet or at least our way of life.

Sort of lost in the headlines this week was what I would consider a somewhat disturbing story. On October 12, The Wall Street Journal reported a consortium of 50 donor countries met in Cairo, and pledged over \$5 billion to the Palestinians in order to largely rebuild Gaza. For our part, the US promised \$212 million, with various earmarks.

Now, \$212 million from the US is but a drop in the bucket when it comes to the size and breadth of the US economy, or even the Federal budget. \$5 billion in a huge global economy is basically peanuts. However, and this is what bothered me, when UN General Secretary Ban Ki-moon pleaded with member countries for a 'fast-track fund' to help pay for doctors and supplies to combat Ebola in West Africa, the world yawned.

According to an article on CNN Money this morning, countries have pledged, get this, only \$20 million for Ban's fast-track program. The UN has only collected \$100,000, from Colombia. All told, the organization, and all its various agencies, have been able to squeeze around \$375 million in commitments to help combat the virus.

Obviously, this is less than a tenth what the Palestinians were able to secure from the group in Cairo to help rebuild Gaza, among other things. This got me to thinking, which can be a dangerous thing.

If the Ebola virus is such a potential problem, as the media is increasingly having us believe, why then the paltry response? Why and how can the Palestinian Authority, and indirectly, Hamas get 10 times the amount of money the UN has gotten to fight the purported scourge of man? Further, if this plague, if you want to call it that, is so severe, why hasn't the remainder of the world demanded a quarantine of the 'ground zero' West African countries?

Why can I get on my computer in Birmingham, AL, go to tripadvisor.com, and easily secure travel from Newark to Monrovia, Liberia. For about \$4,000, I can be in Liberia in about 24 hours, no kidding. Really? On the flipside of that, I can also get back home.

But, hey, to help combat the spread of Ebola in the United States: "Customs and health officials at Newark Liberty Airport are taking the temperatures of passengers from three West African countries as part of a stepped up Ebola screening program." *Source CBS News*. So, what constitutes enough of a fever to cause a concern? Further, according to the WHO (World Health Organization): "The incubation period, that is, the time interval from infection with the virus to onset of symptoms is 2 to 21 days."

Basically, the infected have up to 3 weeks before they start showing symptoms of the disease/virus. I am not a pathologist, but it seems there is a likelihood someone infected with the Ebola virus might be able to get through the robust temperature taking procedures at the Newark airport. You think?

All of this tells me something: either the threat of Ebola is greatly overstated in the media or something is seriously wrong with our response and preparedness against it. It really is one or the other.

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Constantly choosing the lesser of two evils is still choosing evil.

Jerry Garcia

Something to Think About Cont.

And if this is the case with Ebola, could the same be said of ISIS? That is a great question. So, which is it? This is relevant, because these potential global catastrophes have been helping to roil the global markets for some time. Hey, this is costing us money here.

This reminds me of a passage from a book entitled World War Z, which is about a zombie outbreak. In it, the narrator interviews a once prominent government official as to why the initial response to the crisis was so muted and ineffectual. Why didn't the government do more to 'solve the problem?' This is his response:

“Oh C'mon. Can you ever "solve" poverty? Can you ever "solve" crime? Can you ever "solve" disease, unemployment, war or any other societal herpes? Hell no. All you can hope for is to make them manageable enough to allow people to get on with their lives. That's not cynicism, that's maturity. You can't stop the rain. All you can do is just build a roof that you hope won't leak, or at least leak on the people who are gonna vote for you.”

Don't get me wrong; I am not some sort of conspiracy theorist. However, the growing discomfort over the potential problems in the world doesn't seem to go hand in hand with our official responses to them. In fact, we seem to be diverting time and money elsewhere. Of course, I am not privy to inside, classified information; perhaps the people who are supposed to be “in the know” are actually so, this time around.

So, should we take the President at his word with his official comments, from the White House website:

“And so this is not a situation in which, like a flu, the risks of a rapid spread of the disease are imminent. If we do these protocols properly, if we follow the steps, if we get the information out, then the likelihood of widespread Ebola outbreaks in this country are very, very low.

But I think what we've all learned over the last several weeks is that folks here in this country, and a lot of non-specialized hospitals and clinics, don't have that much experience dealing with these issues. And so we're going to have to push out this information as aggressively as possible, and that's the instructions that I've provided to my team.

...So bottom line in terms of the public: I want people to understand that the dangers of you contracting Ebola, the dangers of a serious outbreak are extraordinarily low. But we are taking this very seriously at the highest levels of government. And we are going to be able to manage this particular situation, but we have to look towards the future. And if we are not responding internationally in an effective way, and if we do not set up the kind of preparedness and training in our public health infrastructure here in the United States, not just for this outbreak, but for future outbreaks, then we could have problems.”

In truth, I am old enough to remember the panic over the Swine flu in 1976, which truly was a panic, as more people actually died of the vaccination than the disease itself. Then, we had the uproar over SARS about a decade ago. Remember that? All of Asia was going to get sick and die. However, even in densely occupied Hong Kong and China, it didn't spread as fast as forecast, and had a very low mortality rate besides. Then, a couple of years ago, the Swine flu, or more appropriately H1N1, got folks all astir, and what happened there?

So, what if the hubbub, furor, and panic has more to do with the need to fill media space than anything else? After all, more people will die in auto accidents in the United States between now and the end of the year than have all the people in West Africa who have died from Ebola up to this point in the current crisis. Shoot, more people will likely die in auto accidents between now and the end of the year than from Ebola EVER. But we aren't going to outlaw cars are we? Even though they have been much more deadly than the Swine flu, SARS, and Ebola combined?

Therefore, we have to ask what it is we really want Washington to do about Ebola? Ban travel to Africa? Quarantine

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the continent? Ban the export of cocoa beans and whatever else West Africa exports to the world? Blockade Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and other countries? Get as freaked out as the rest of us? In order to prove they are “doing something”? Even if the cost of “doing something” far exceeds the economic reality of the situation? Then would we complain about the overreaction? Like we did to the Swine flu back in the day? And H1N1 and SARS more recently?

This isn't to minimize the seriousness of Ebola. It is bad stuff, but, for my money, the worst of the two evils currently facing the world would almost have to be ISIS. The reason is simple: these guys seem to be yet another iteration of a problem that won't seem to go away, and probably never will. What makes ISIS scary to me is they seem to be more organized, better financed, better armed, and more certain of their purpose than previous groups. They aren't hiding in the shadows, and operating on the margins. Nope; they are going on the offensive, and capturing territory. If that weren't enough, consider this from The New York Times, hardly a warmongering news outlet. Here is the link to the full article: <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/10/14/world/middleeast/us-casualties-of-iraq-chemical-weapons.html>

As Iraq has been shaken anew by violence, and past security gains have collapsed amid Sunni-Shiite blood-letting and the rise of the Islamic State, this long-hidden chronicle illuminates the persistent risks of the country's abandoned chemical weapons.

Many chemical weapons incidents clustered around the ruins of the Muthanna State Establishment, the center of Iraqi chemical agent production in the 1980s.

Since June, the compound has been held by the Islamic State, the world's most radical and violent jihadist group. In a letter sent to the United Nations this summer, the Iraqi government said that about 2,500 corroded chemical rockets remained on the grounds, and that Iraqi officials had witnessed intruders looting equipment before militants shut down the surveillance cameras.

Really? Not only did Iraq have any number of chemical weapons, with no small amount 'stored' at some site ISIS now controls? Again, really? Why is Iraq's cache of chemical weapons only now coming to light, a decade after we invaded that country? Why were they not destroyed or at least carted off to the US? When the area was in danger of collapse, why did we or someone else not go in and get the rest of the things?

Corroded? Perhaps. Still usable? According to pictures from various news organizations, yes. Could they be refitted, repurposed and reused? It would appear that is a definite maybe, if ISIS has any scientific types who would be willing to do such a thing.. Then, this from Reuters:

(Reuters) - Iraqi pilots who have joined Islamic State in Syria are training members of the group to fly in three captured fighter jets, a group monitoring the war said on Friday, saying it was the first time the militant group had taken to the air.

Of course, the Pentagon couldn't verify this claim, nor did it verify Iraq had chemical weapons, let alone ISIS was probably in possession of some of them.

That is what makes ISIS so scary to me: they know what they are doing, but we don't. Have a great weekend.

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