

SHAPING OUR OWN DESTINY

Dr. Michael Osterholm is an infectious disease epidemiologist and founder of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota. He serves on the editorial boards of nine scientific journals and is a frequent consultant to the World Health Organization, National Institute of Health and the U.S. Department of Defense. He is highly respected in the public health area.

Dr. Osterholm is also a ubiquitous presence on television. News programs have flocked to him during the COVID-19 crisis, and he does not mince words. Back in April Dr. Osterholm said in an interview “the epidemiology tells me that this first wave of illness, is, in fact, just the beginning of what could be 16 to 18 months of substantial activity coming and going, wave after wave. 800,000 Americans may die. We are just at the beginning of this pandemic, the second inning of a nine-inning situation”.

The media find Dr. Osterholm’s unambiguous certainty quite compelling, as the market for rock solid opinions is larger than that of weighted probabilities. Talk shows want someone willing to state thoughts and judgements unequivocally. The less resolute are not heeded. This appeal is true for predicting pandemics, politics, sporting events and the stock market. Confidence is easier to grasp than nuanced odds, and many analysts and pundits are happy to oblige. Forecasting average outcomes or hedging responses is not a propitious way to land an appearance on television.

Human beings, unfortunately, have never been able to accept the fact that predicting the future is an exercise in futility. People facing immediate danger want to hear an authoritative voice they can draw assurance from; they want to be told what will occur and how they should prepare. We are not programmed for inconclusiveness.

During the Vietnam War, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara tracked every combat statistic he could, creating a mountain of analytics and predictions to guide the war’s strategy. Edward Lansdale, head of special operations at the Pentagon, looked at McNamara’s information and told him something was missing. “What?” McNamara asked. “The feelings of the Vietnamese people”, replied Lansdale.

Prognostications based solely on statistical data demean the emotions and attitudes that exist inside people’s hearts and minds. Models calling for the deaths of hundreds of thousands do not properly account for the smart choices and sacrifices Americans are willing to make. We know there is a dangerous virus spreading and contest it by staying inside. When we do go out we wear masks and practice social distancing. The spread of the virus always depended on the myriad decisions people make every day, and for the most part, we have acted prudently and selflessly. We have taken our destiny and shaped it with our own hands.

How many people die depends on how we behave, how we test, how we treat the infected and how fortunate we are in developing a vaccine. Let us stop asking health specialists and public officials for absolute projections they should not be making, or be disappointed when they admit they do not know. A dose of humility will do us all much good in the present moment, and help reconcile us to the uncertainty in which we are living.

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