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Margaret Chase Smith Library 2022 Essay Contest

Each year the Margaret Chase Smith Library sponsors an essay contest for high school seniors. The essay prompt for 2022 asked students to consider what the proper role of government should be in responding to the current coronavirus pandemic. Essays have been edited for length.

SECOND-PLACE ESSAY

Everything in Moderation

by Erin Larson

Anyone who's ever tried to improve their eating habits is very familiar with the phrase "everything in moderation." Sure, you can have some cake, but maybe just a sliver. And yes, vegetables are good for you, but so is protein. You might even have to adjust your diet based on changes to your mood, environment, and lifestyle. However, these principles don't just apply to dieting. They apply to every aspect of our lives, including the government. Over the past few years, the COVID-19 pandemic has incited a tidal wave of discontent towards the government, causing many Americans to question its limitations, especially during a national emergency. Some say the government has overextended its power, while others argue that it hasn't done enough. I wish I could simply state that the perfect government is a fusion of both strong policies and individual freedoms, but it's more complicated than that.

Similarly to making adjustments to a diet, the government needs to adjust its policies when the circumstances of the country change. Therefore, after an analysis of historical examples and different responses to public health crises, I have determined that the best way to govern during a state of national emergency is in

moderation. While I can explain why that is, I cannot say what such a response should entail. However, I believe that to achieve this idea, our country has to do a serious reassessment of our core American values.

We can learn much from examining the 1918 flu pandemic. While technology, population, and culture have drastically changed since then, human beings have stayed the same. Therefore, our responses to such events have been consistent. It is no secret that the public's response to COVID-19 has been divided. And while not to today's extent, there were also factions of resistance that arose during the 1918 epidemic. One of these was the Anti-Mask League of San Francisco, which claimed that wearing a mask was an infringement of civil liberties (Dolan 2020). This analysis proves that there will always be resistance to government policy, even when it's designed to keep people safe. Some people simply don't like being told what to do.

Additionally, the ways in which the viruses of the two pandemics spread is similar. While people in 1918 did not have access to advanced medical technology available today, practices such as

social distancing, masking, and lockdowns were effective during both events. In fact, a study by Bootsma and Ferguson (2007) looking at the 1918 influenza pandemic found that banning mass gatherings and requiring the wearing of face masks cut the death rate up to 50 percent if implemented at the correct time and not lifted prematurely. These findings match data collected from the COVID-19 response. For example, an investigation of an outbreak in the closely confined quarters of the USS Theodore Roosevelt revealed that the use of face coverings onboard was associated with a 70% reduced risk of infection (Payne et al. 2020). Unfortunately, misinformation seems to come in tandem with pandemics. The reason the 1918 pandemic is often referred to as the "Spanish flu" is because Spain was the only country that reported the illness's toll. In France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and even the United States, public health officials refrained from reporting on the effect of the pandemic in an attempt to keep up morale during World War I (Brown 2020). Similarly, tactics have been used during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo concealed around 4,100 COVID-related nursing home deaths from the public (Ferré-Sadurní 2022). President Donald Trump downplayed the virus to the extent that Americans living in counties where 60% or more of the population voted for Trump have had 2.73 times the death rates of counties where the majority voted for Biden (Wood and Brumfiel 2021).

So what can we learn from this? For starters, honesty is the best policy. Second, everyone makes mistakes. Being critical of the government is good; it's

how reforms are made. However, citizens must also hold a degree of trust in their government. But trust goes both ways. For the government to maintain public approval, it must be candid. At the end of the day, a president is a person, and scientists can be wrong. It doesn't mean they don't know what they're doing or that they are purposely deceiving us. As long as an acknowledgment and a correction follow the mistake, that's all we can really ask anyone to do.

After explaining why a moderate government is the best way to manage a pandemic, I can now explain how we could possibly achieve a more productive response for the next one. First of all, liberty is undeniably the cornerstone of American values. With cherished monuments such as the Statue of Liberty and the Liberty Bell, it's safe to say Americans love liberty. However, there is another American principle that is often overlooked: sacrifice. Liberty is a product of sacrifice. And while we claim to appreciate the sacrifices made by the troops, how much do we really sacrifice ourselves? Unfortunately, we won't always agree with each other. But we don't always have to agree with our actions if we agree on the same goal. Everyone wants the pandemic to be over. To get to that place, though, we have to care a little less for ourselves, and a little more for others. We have to do things that we may not entirely support, like wearing masks. But since that is the only way to snuff out coronavirus, it must be done. Those who sacrifice their lives don't do it because they want to die. They do it because they realize the desired outcome can only be reached by taking the necessary actions. So instead of defending our personal liberties, we need to make sacrifices for our collective liberty. If everyone, even those in power, were willing to give up a piece of their freedom for the prosperity

of someone else, we could be one step closer to not only resolving the pandemic, but closer to becoming a more united nation.

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Erin Larson graduated from Bangor High School in Bangor, Maine. She now attends Mount Holyoke College where she is studying

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