

A MASK & A MUDDLE

*How I learned to stop worrying and love the mask.**

*(*I still hate the mask.)*

BY LAWRENCE BINDA



I have what you might call a mask problem.

It began with the start of the coronavirus pandemic itself, back in late February. Even before the full fury of COVID-19 hit, some people were already strolling by my office, all masked up.

“Why are they doing that?” I wondered, thinking it was more performance than practical.

At the time, health experts were minimizing the role of masks in preventing the spread of the disease. Some even claimed it was counterproductive.

Since then, the thinking has evolved, with the importance of mask usage rising as we learned more about the virus and how it spreads.

Still, I resisted, and, maybe sometime in May, I began to wonder why. After all, I regard myself as fairly non-ideological. When people ask me if I have a philosophy or ideology, I usually respond, “pragmatist.” In my book, the more facts, the better.

But there I was, not heeding the mounting evidence right before me, trying instead to justify being anti-mask.

Yes, masks are uncomfortable, but in the end, I realized that my greatest issue was this—I found masks to be dehumanizing. Interacting with someone wearing a mask seems incomplete, like a huge piece of his or her face is missing. The person doesn’t appear quite the same, made up of some kind of human/cloth hybrid.

I’ll probably never get over this. When I speak to a person wearing a mask, I find that I want to cut the conversation short, because it just feels off. Until now, I didn’t realize how much I valued the expressive, non-verbal part of human interaction.

However, I’ve also come to realize that I’m just going to have to get over it. Evidently, masks are the price we have to pay if we want life to return to some sense of normalcy until a vaccine (we hope) eliminates the threat.

If faced with a choice between hunkering down again in isolation and a mask, I’ll take the mask.

If faced with a choice between skyrocketing infection rates and a mask, I’ll take the mask.

If faced with a choice between widespread business closures and a mask, I’ll take the mask.

As usual, in the end, pragmatism won out.

But, of course, I’m just one person. In this country, mask wearing has become a political statement, unfortunately. It seems that not wearing a mask has become as performative as wearing one might have been in the pandemic’s early days.

As I gaze ahead into our unknown future, I have several hopes as we eventually emerge from the wreckage of the coronavirus.

First of all, I hope that we’re able to limit the spread of the disease as much as possible.

As I write this column, we seem to be profoundly failing at this goal in much of the country. Lacking a national policy, we have 50 different state responses, which is less of a plan than a wildly out-of-control experiment.

Secondly, I hope for the least possible damage to the economy, especially to our local businesses. So far, in Harrisburg, our small businesses have shown remarkable resilience, particularly our large number of bars, restaurants and cafés. But how long can that last, especially if there’s a second wave?

Thirdly, I’m focused like a laser on ensuring that TheBurg remains viable until we bust out the other side of this. As you may know, the news industry was in dire straits before the pandemic hit, and I fear the virus may be the proverbial final nail for many papers. Already, we recently lost the venerable Press & Journal, a 166-year-old newspaper out of Middletown, underscoring the fragility of this vitally important industry.

These are the reasons that I finally came to embrace the mask. Well, honestly, I still hate it. I still find it profoundly dehumanizing. But I’ve reached the unfortunate conclusion that we’re going to have to mask up to muddle through. **B**

Lawrance Binda is co-publisher/editor-in-chief of TheBurg.

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Illustration by Rich Hauck



TO THE AGES

With his death, Steve Reed has gone from former mayor to one of Harrisburg's most important historical figures.

BY LAWRENCE BINDA

Three years ago, I was told to “lay off.”

That directive came after I had written a column critical of former Mayor Steve Reed, following his guilty plea to theft-related charges.

It didn't come from anonymous hate mail (I got that, too), but from someone whom I know and respect.

“Enough already,” she said, sternly, looking me directly in the eye. “Steve did a lot for the city.”

Her comment got me thinking that maybe I had judged the seven-term mayor too harshly, a thought I had again following his death in late January.

In official statements and on social media, city officials, community leaders and ordinary folks spoke fondly of Reed, pointing to all he had done through 28 years in office. They also praised his character, though, as a journalist, I'm most interested in his actions and importance as a political and historical figure.

I suppose that my harsher assessment had something to do with my own timing. I came to Harrisburg at the tail end of his lengthy tenure, so didn't know him well or experience his achievements, but I did experience the fallout.

I didn't know of Harrisburg before the Hilton and Whitaker Center and Harrisburg University and a revived downtown, all things many credit to Reed's vision and hard work. But I did know first-hand of the city's subsequent financial collapse.

In other words, I missed half the story.

Since I cover and write about Harrisburg, it's important for me to consider the totality of Reed's service. He was one of the most significant historical figures in Harrisburg over the past century, ranking right up there with Harvey Taylor, with arguably an even greater impact on the city.

So, I'm going to give another go at writing about his legacy, which, as it turns out, isn't radically different from my first try three years ago. I consider his mayoralty to be a mixed bag—granted, a very impactful mixed bag.

Stephen R. Reed became mayor in 1982, 32 years old, already a veteran politician, having served in the state Assembly and as Dauphin County commissioner. He immediately attempted to turn around a demoralized city that had experienced little but bad news for 30 years.

Arguably, his first big success came a few years later, when his failed attempt to build a hydroelectric dam threw off enough interest from a bond offering to pay for cleaning and building up then-seedy City Island. Other victories followed: a new flagship hotel downtown, a minor league baseball team, an impressive arts/science center.

Reed dreamed big, but his big dreams came with equally big price tags. To finance his ambitions, he turned the city's utility authority into an investment bank, surreptitiously diverted bond fees to buy artifacts for museums he hoped to build, and burned through hundreds of millions trying to salvage the city's debt-laden incinerator. If you're reading this column, you probably know all how it all ended—with a financial collapse practically unrivaled in U.S. history.

When assessing Reed's place in history, it's important to look at both ends of his legacy. His successes were huge, but so were his failures. He was not a man of small measures.

Ultimately, I believe that the bad outweighed the good, but that's because I believe strongly in fiscal prudence and in transparency. Furthermore, I don't believe government should micromanage the economy, and Reed often treated Harrisburg as a real-life version of Sim City.

However, I certainly understand if you weigh the man's actions and reach the opposite conclusion. Heck, I walk around downtown Harrisburg daily, and I look up and see the buildings and institutions he helped create. What if those weren't there?

Reed was an ambitious builder and used the public purse in unorthodox, sometimes troubling ways. Many of his projects were moonshots. Some failed horribly, some succeeded magnificently, and others survived but still struggle today, as does the city government itself.

The ones that have succeeded most had great leaders who built upon what Reed seeded, even when the foundations were shaky. Harrisburg University may be the best example of that. On the other hand, the city school district, which Reed took over and promised to turn around, fared poorly then and even worse since.

If I'm still around in 10 or 20 years, I should revisit this subject again, with another reassessment of Reed's legacy. When enough time passes and all the bills finally get paid, I may agree with his supporters that, yes, Reed made some mistakes, but, in the end, he was the leader that Harrisburg needed. **B**

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Illustration by Rich Hauck.

VIRAL LOGIC

*Round 1 is ending.
We need to approach
Round 2 with more
wisdom, greater
balance.*

BY LAWRENCE BINDA



Back in forever ago (mid-March), an old college buddy called me for a chat.

He phoned just as his region, the San Francisco Bay Area, was beginning to hunker down for the foreseeable future. The same thing was happening here.

“This doesn’t feel right to me,” I said, as the streets of Harrisburg emptied almost overnight.

We went on to discuss how bizarre it was that a place could be so busy and thriving one day and, like someone flipped a switch, vacant and desperate the next. He was more convinced than I was that a lockdown was the way to go.

“What would you do differently?” he asked, sounding like the college professor that he is.

“I’m not sure,” I responded. “But layering on a profound economic and social crisis to a health crisis doesn’t seem like the best solution to me.”

And, months later, as I sit here in my empty office, having walked from my empty house, through an empty city, I continue to think two things.

First, unlike the Twitter jockeys who populate my feed, I don’t mind admitting ignorance. This is an unprecedented and incredibly complex situation with many moving parts and no easy answers. No one truly knows how to yield an optimal outcome.

Not Gov. Wolf or Secretary Levine. Not President Trump. Not you, not me, not anyone. We’re all making it up as we go along, whether we’re creating national policy, state policy or household policy. I think it’s healthy to admit that and to have tolerance for mistakes and corrections.

And, secondly, I continue to think that a scorched-earth policy derived from panic almost always leads to disastrous unexpected consequences.

I actually told my friend that I wished that we, as a country, had prepared better, that we had the ability to quickly mobilize a system of wide-scale testing and the rapid deployment of needed resources. But I guess, upon reflection, we all wish that. To me, this lack of preparation shows an extraordinary failure at the highest levels of our federal government.

Concurrently, I told him, that, from the beginning, we should have acted to vigilantly protect our most vulnerable people. And, in fact, the pandemic’s grim statistics show that we also failed to do that. COVID-19 has burned through nursing homes and other care centers at a shocking rate. As I write this, 65 percent of all deaths from the disease in PA have been in congregant care centers.

So, where to now?

Throughout May, Pennsylvania began slowly opening back up. In most areas of the state, the governor switched his “red” to “yellow,” allowing some activities to resume in places with low or falling rates of COVID-19.

As summer progresses, we’ll continue to see fewer reds and more yellows and greens.

My hope is that we learned something—actually, a lot of things—from our first big battle with the coronavirus, because it likely won’t be our last.

Absent a vaccine, we’re going to have to learn to live with this monster.

So, here’s hoping that, during a second or third round, we do things far better than the first time around, making decisions based more on knowledge and less on panic and improvisation.

We need a solid plan based on more testing, better therapies, contact tracing where possible, and a concerted community effort to protect our most vulnerable. Well, I’ll leave the rest to the experts because I’m certainly not one.

However, I will say this—we cannot shut down society cold again. That should be the baseline on which we operate. There needs to be some balance between our health, our economic and our social needs, which all are important.

I’ve thought many times about what Harrisburg will look like on the back end of this. Will we be able to spring back? As I sit here, after more than two months of shutdown, I’m cautiously optimistic. But I also know that time is not our friend. How long before all we’ve built begins to crumble? Some businesses are already on their last legs, patience is wearing thin, and people are taking sides. The unity of the early days is dissipating as the weather warms and the suffering continues.

In the end, I hope that we’ve learned many things from what may be a warm-up for future outbreaks. We’ve had our trial-and-error period. Next time around, we must take our collective experience and newfound wisdom and do it all much, much better. **B**

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