

Joseph Needle

HIST: 129A

Essay #2

*A Reflection on Unprecedented Times*

It is the objective of this essay to speak to my thoughts and emotions regarding the current COVID-19 pandemic. My name is Joseph Needle, I am a twentyone-year-old third-year undergraduate at UCLA studying history and will soon be applying to law school later this year in the fall of 2020. If you are reading this essay and are not my professor, then it is my understanding that it has probably been decades since I have written this. If that is the case, I can only imagine how much has changed, how different life is, and what kind of world-changing events have taken place that have consequently shaped your life. When you read this, the history of the COVID-19 Pandemic will have been written. The blame will have been cast, the winners and losers of this momentous moment will have been cemented, and the events of this time will have been recorded in the history books of the world. Now, as many decades may have past, I may sound to you a narcissist, someone so full of themselves that they believe the small-time on the planet they have will be so important that it will be documented with the utmost importance. To be honest, I do not know how I will come across after reading this, perhaps everything I say will be incorrect in a few years and this moment is nothing but a dot in the history of the United States and the world. Nevertheless, I am writing this for you today so that you can understand how I feel right now, while this is happening, in this frightening moment in history.

To begin, I will say this. It has been over nine weeks since I have been able to leave my apartment besides going to the grocery store or the occasional jog. I remember the day this all

began for me clearly, it was March 18th, 2020. It was a Wednesday, and there were two days left before finals week began. As I came home to my apartment that night after the library, class, and work, all nine of my roommates were checking their email, updating twitter, and every TV we had was turned onto the news to find out what was going on. This was not the first time we had heard of COVID, the news had been discussing it for weeks but nothing had changed, we were still living our normal college lives, and to be honest, no one was that worried. Later that Wednesday night or early the next day we received an email from UCLA administration that all in-person activity had been canceled, classes, work, exams, everything would now be online. Now, at this point, my friends and I really still had no idea what was going on, and to tell you the truth, the only thing my friends and I were worried about was how on earth were we going to take our final exams. It's funny to think that just nine weeks ago that was our biggest worry. Each day after that for the next few weeks we were barraged with constant breaking news, and it seemed like every day got worse and the updates scarier, as Anthony Fauci began to inform the public of the seriousness of this pandemic. Soon after March 18th, everything shut down. UCLA moved to online classes and most of the students left campus, businesses closed, airlines stopped flying, restaurants stopped serving, and you could drive down the 405 without a hint of traffic. It was like the world just ended - nothing, and I mean nothing, was happening. Now, nine weeks after it first began, I find myself still in my apartment not able to leave for the most part. To clarify, I'm not forced to stay here by law, I can walk around outside if I want, but nothing is open. There are no bars to go to, no beaches to hang out at, no places to grab food with friends, nothing.

The past few months haven't been easy. Staying inside, being restricted from doing almost anything, really can bring upon a negative mindset and a sense of depression. Today is May 13th, and the most recent reports from UCLA, the Los Angeles Times, and other institutions are predicting that the fall quarter of classes will be online due to the risk of an infectious outbreak on campus. It would be a logical decision to make - keeping everyone safe is obviously of the utmost importance. Nevertheless, it's difficult. Sometimes it feels as if this is never going to end. It may be selfish, but I really just want life to return to a sense of normalcy. I must digress, it's easy to feel bad for myself, but it is not just me struggling. As of today, almost 4.5 million people are infected and almost 300,000 have died. Beyond the absolute tragedy that is the number of people on this earth dying, is the devastation it has brought to every level of the economy. As of now, 14.7% of the US population is currently unemployed - the highest number since the time of the Great Depression. I myself lost my job on campus, and sure money is a little tighter without the extra income, but there are millions of people in this country without a paycheck for their family. That's heartbreaking. I was just a baby when 9/11 shook this country and a boy when the financial markets collapsed in 2008, but this is different. It's different because every single person in this entire world is struggling with this global crisis. In a strange way, it's almost comforting.

I must now turn my thoughts outward and discuss what is the disastrous, despicable, and range-invoking political atmosphere that is currently plaguing our country. This is the fourth year of Donald Trump's presidency in the United States of America, and every day I hope that this November he will lose the election. While I do not have the time, energy, or space on these pages to discuss every event that has taken place under his presidency, I beg you to find out for

yourself with the vast amount of resources you possess at your fingertips. I will say, however, that Trump has turned a global health crisis into a political conflict between the right and left, and even more so with other countries such as China (who the president is currently blaming for all of the problems in the US). In the early days of this crisis, Trump, and thus the federal government, refused to react in a timely fashion. This event has only been occurring for a few months, and health experts have already stated that if the federal government had responded sooner, both the death toll and economic catastrophe could have been immensely less damaging. As just one example, on the 24th of April, Trump recommended, during a national press conference, injecting bleach and Lysol disinfectant products directly into the body. Hours later, health officials around the world made public statements warning people not to drink bleach. Yes, they actually had to say that. Sure, this is one anecdotal story and I understand that, but events and situations like this are happening constantly every single day to distract the citizens of this country from the true crisis that is happening right now. I was born in 1999, on the eve of our war against terror. Growing up, there existed a notion that our country, the United States, was the greatest place in the world. It was instilled in me from my very first years in school, that we stood for liberty, for justice, and for the equal opportunity for every person who lives within these borders to pursue their dream and their happiness. Maybe I was naive, or maybe the world is just currently bleak, but I no longer see that notion as true. Again, I digress. The newest tactic being used this week by Trump is attacking former President Barack Obama of “the greatest political crime ever committed”. Has he provided any proof or even said what the crime actually is? No, of course not. By circulating fake news, creating false conspiracies, and by making China and President Obama (just to name a few) scapegoats, the President is attempting to distract the

public from the fact that thousands of Americans are dying and it is because of the incompetence of the federal government. I will end my criticism here, but I implore you, whether you believe me or not, to read the tweets of this current president and to see for yourself how our he has acted in this time of crisis. The people "have a right, an indisputable, unalienable, indefeasible, divine right to that most dreaded and envied kind of knowledge-- I mean of the character and conduct of their rulers" - John Adams, the second President of the United States of America.

Now, as this is a global health crisis, I'd like to turn your attention now to the state of healthcare in this country. It is now an undisputed fact that without a job, it is incredibly difficult for a person in this country to receive proper health care. But ponder this, in a pandemic, when all businesses in this country (and the entire world for that matter) are either closed or mostly closed, how is it possible for people to protect themselves against a pandemic that as of now has no vaccine, cure, or treatment? For the millions of Americans that do not have a disposable income during this time, it is simply not possible. I believe that this health crisis has revealed true faults in the very foundations of this country, of its moral identity, and what as Americans our responsibility is to each other and this country. It is my hope, as someday soon we will be able to emerge out of our homes and back into "normal" life, that the people of this country fight for their right of equal access to basic healthcare. Looking at our current political situation, I do not see this changing in the next few years, but I am hopeful and eager to see the day come. If I was to make a prediction, I would like to believe that this healthcare crisis will awaken the country to this ideal. Only time will tell.

I do believe there is light at the end of this tunnel, and I think the lessons of history can show that to be so. Starting with the greatest achievement in the history of our country, victory in

World War II. The rise of Nazism and the global war that took place was the greatest challenge the United States has ever had to face. I would never, ever, compare the struggle of Americans then to us now. But if we can learn something from them to help us in our time of need now, I believe it is that in the times of greatest struggle, the greatest qualities of our people reveal themselves. Neighbor helping neighbor, friend helping friend, and stranger helping stranger. I believe that is what we can learn to help us in this time. More so, I am currently writing this essay for a class focused on Spain and Portugal from the era of about 1300 to 1800, and I believe there are lessons to take away from that history as well. Spain, from the time period I just mentioned, faced enormous change and many crises, from the bubonic plague, to war, to economic disaster. In facing these problems, the rulers of Spain were forced to adapt to their situation, to change. The great rulers of Spain such as Isabella and Ferdinand had no choice but to move forward and create a better, stronger, country. From the factional kingdoms of the 13th and 14th centuries rose the great empire of Spain by the 16th and 17th centuries. I believe we can learn from them, and the many others that came before us, that the people do not make the times, but the times make the people.

I write these closing words with conflicting emotions. I am scared for the present but hopeful for the days to come. I am infuriated by our current political situation but joyful in seeing so many people in the world come together to fight for the same cause. When you read this essay, I implore you to reach out to me (you can find anyone on the internet today, I'm sure it will be even easier in thirty years). I will be old, in my forties or fifties, and you will be the young student. When your generation faces its great crises, I hope you can benefit from the

history of those that came before you, as I attempt to today. *Written, May 2020, on the empty, but still gorgeous, UCLA campus.*