

## Dr. Robert S. Kiefner: Best of times, worst of times



A thank you sign in April on Centre Street in Concord. Monitor file

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‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity.’

With the opening paragraph of “The Tale of Two Cities,” Charles Dickens provided an overview of our new reality; our lives in the time of COVID-19. First responders, health care workers, maintenance workers, grocery workers, and all of those who allow others to stay home have risen to the occasion at significant personal risk. Yet the pandemic has brought into sharp focus the disturbing realities of American injustice, including poverty, income disparity, ineffective health care delivery, food insecurity, and racism.

We are witnessing the heroic efforts of scientists and public health officials who are working on antiviral medications and vaccines, while developing evidence-based models of viral spread, morbidity, and mortality designed to save as many lives as possible. Sadly, their efforts to promote reason and clarity are consistently undermined by the president, whose daily toxic rants are brimming with delusion and superstition, with his conga line of sycophants bellowing behind him.

We are at our best when neighbors take care of neighbors, when people dust off sewing machines to make masks by the thousands, when teachers and parents work together to educate kids, and when virtual connections bring long lost friends and family together. But we collectively sigh in despair as we witness fellow citizens calling themselves patriots, strutting around state houses without masks, loudly spewing their viral laden aerosols while caressing their AR-15s, jittery fingers on the triggers.

Our better selves shine when we look to alleviate suffering and financial hardship by coming together in support of universal health coverage, no longer tied to employment or one’s ability to pay premiums.

Improved and expanded Medicare for All could provide a measure of security for countless millions of newly unemployed with no insurance or inadequate coverage, while assuring patient choice of provider and reliable prescription drug coverage. But an equal measure of dismay emerges when we are cajoled by well-financed lobbying groups such as the Partnership for America’s Healthcare Future, who exploit the pandemic to bad mouth Medicare for All while promoting the health insurance companies, Big Pharma, and expansive hospital systems. Those who support the status quo for these for-profit entities, especially in the midst of a public health catastrophe, are bereft of compassion, possessed by greed, and blind to the common good.

And finally, the best of times will be realized when elected officials at all levels do the right thing in support of every piece of legislation designed to improve the health and financial security of those who are suffering, regardless of perceived negative impact on their electability. People no longer have bootstraps with which to lift themselves up. These may indeed be the worst of times but better times, if not the best of times, will surely follow.

*(Dr. Robert S. Kiefner lives in Concord.)*