

MEMO FROM EMMETT MAYOR GORDON W. PETRIE

SUBJECT: LOVING YOUR NEIGHBOR IN THE TIME OF OUR PANDEMIC

Our Idaho world changed on March 25th. We are now in what some believe could be the “new normal”. Good grief, I hope not. Remembering back to 2002, I recall Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld once infamously quipping in response to a reporter’s question about Iraq giving terrorist groups WMD—our *other* new normal time: “As we know, there are known knowns. There are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns. That is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns, the ones we don’t know we don’t know.” Instructive, *n’est-ce pas?*

About two years later, I was sitting in a jet-plane hangar in Kuwait not 30 meters from the SECDEF when he answered another question, this one from a soldier. The question generating his response came from a Guard member representing a state not affiliated with the 116th Brigade Combat Team.

The mass assembly occurred as we prepared to cross the line from Kuwait into Iraq. The SECDEF wanted to give us a “Pep Talk”. Frankly, we just wanted to get the heck out of Kuwait and get on with our Iraqi mission. Nevertheless, the soldier’s question can be paraphrased thusly: “Mr. Secretary, my unit has been scrounging at the junkyard for the last week for pieces of steel to weld on our soft-shelled Humvees so we have at least some armored protection as we travel through Iraq on the way to our area of operations. Why can’t we have up-armored Humvees like you have in Washington, D.C.”?

Rumsfeld’s answer amounted to what one might expect from a Naval aviator and flight instructor who never saw combat, although I still honor his service. He simply replied, “A nation goes to war with the equipment it has.” Thank you, Captain (USNR) Obvious!

Indeed, a prior SECDEF, Robert McNamara, couldn’t have put it better than Rummy’s “bean counter” response. I don’t believe he meant anything nefarious or harmful by it. He simply responded without thinking through how it might be perceived by young (and many, like me, not-so-young) men and women; too many of whom would, within the year, be deceased or horrifically maimed and scarred—physically and emotionally—a byproduct of their service.

I know Secretary Rumsfeld might have said, “Soldier, you’re right. Washington, D.C. is secure enough. My highest priority is keeping you soldiers safe over here. I will order all up-

armored vehicles in CONUS to be shipped forthwith to Iraq and Kuwait.” But that’s not what the SECDEF said. His answer amounted to this: “Embrace the suck, son. Just be happy you at least have some kind of “kit” provided to you by Uncle Sam to fight this thing we didn’t ask for.”

Sadly, the SECDEF personified the inside military joke about military headquarters and how they issue their equipment: they keep the best and issue the rest. What a strange time, then. Indeed, what a strange time, now. I don’t know if COVID-19 is the greatest existential threat confronting POTUS since our Civil War as no less a historian and medical expert than Alan Dershowitz suggests. The danger exceeds World War II and 9/11, the good professor declared. Perhaps.

Yet, consider the final estimates from the “Swine Flu” pandemic for its first year, April 12, 2009 to April 10, 2010. Then, H1N1 produced approximately 60.8 million cases, 274,304 hospitalizations, and 12,469 deaths in just the US alone. If each of us follows the rules in this time of self-isolation, chances are good we won’t come anywhere near those numbers for COVID-19. This means federal and state leadership did its job well. Isn’t it curious, then, that those areas where people preach to the rest of us—we, the great unwashed, about how to live our lives—that those areas happen to be the epicenters of the most and deadliest cases of COVID-19?

Still, too many around here have thought only of themselves and their immediate families since the arrival of the most recent pandemic “we didn’t ask for” resulted in panic buying of toilet paper, hand sanitizer, baby wipes and other cleaning materials, not to mention basic staples such as meat, bread and eggs. People from “over the hill” even raided our town early in March. Later, observed locals literally attacked a resupply truck at one of the stores with a high volume in our town as its driver tried to offload cargo. We’re better than that, aren’t we?

Are there shut-ins or seasoned citizens in your neighborhood? Do you have their phone number? Can you get it? Are you regularly checking on them, making sure they’re okay and have the basics they need? If we “stick together” with social distancing and adhere to the self-isolation designed to slow the spread, we’ll win this fight. Otherwise, perhaps both Professor Dershowitz *and* Ron White are correct.