

# ★ EDITORIAL

By Tobias Naegele

## Innovate to Dominate

**"N**ever let a good crisis go to waste," Winston Churchill said. He knew something about crises, and how to make the most of them. Crises bring out the best and worst in people.

The worst are easy to spot: The worst are easy to spot: The ones who flee from adversity, melt down under pressure, and panic in the face of adversity. The hoarders of toilet paper, who put their fears before the needs of neighbors, and the profiteers who exploit shortages for personal gain materialize in crises like rats on a sinking ship. They were there all along, even if we didn't see them.

The best may be harder to see: Heroes behind masks who treat the sick, build hospitals and clinics, clean up after others, put service before self. They include Airmen achieving the mission despite obstacles, and gloved cleaning crews and grocery clerks behind plexiglass shields, all risking their well-being to ensure life goes on for everyone else.

Let us not forget the innovators, those who responded to calamity with ingenuity, defying impediments in their paths. Some of them are stories sprinkled through this issue of Air Force Magazine, but there are many more whose contributions will remain invisible.

Among them are Airmen at Altus Air Force Base, Okla., who rallied to sew masks for their brothers and sisters in arms; Space Force personnel at Schriever Air Force Base, Colo., who arranged for increased bandwidth to help doctors aboard the Hospital Ship Mercy in Los Angeles; cadets at the Air Force Academy who overcame the tragic deaths of two classmates and the limitations of a lockdown to put forth a unique and memorable graduation; and aircrews in Guam who maintained social distancing, even as they executed a mammoth elephant walk of B-52 bombers—a giant show of force after COVID-19 sidelined an aircraft carrier on that same island a week before.

Don't mess with America, they said. Not now, not ever.

Innovation is suddenly in. Not just talking about it, but doing it—widespread, real-life innovation at the grassroots level. Tech. Sgt. Chad Hardesty and Chief Master Sgt. Ian Eishen at Edwards Air Force Base, Calif., launched Air Force Quarantine University on Facebook, attracting 20,000 members to share home-brewed video presentations on everything from leadership to pancake-making: Instant professional development.

Airmen at Travis Air Force Base, Calif., used 3D printers to manufacture face shields and masks, applying their tools and expertise to help others. Other leaders reorganized schedules and procedures to keep airplanes flying while isolating air and ground crews to minimize risk. Depot managers staggered shifts to ensure airplane overhauls don't pause and technicians don't get sick. Training instructors continued to transform recruits into Airmen, even as schools around the country shut down, finding new ways to impart know-how despite social distancing. Pilots pushed the limits of virtual reality, not because it's possible, but because we now know VR training works.

The so-called frozen middle where new ideas go to die has thawed. Rules change when conditions change. Mission accomplishment trumps tradition and process. This is understandable. The best innovations are disruptive, and crusty NCOs are trained to crush

disruptions, not embrace them. They got where they are by enforcing standard operating procedure—not by breaking the rules. But, they get it when changing the rules is the only way to achieve the mission.

Silicon Valley no longer has the corner on the market for innovation. Necessity being the mother of invention, COVID-19 exposed unanticipated needs, flaws in our emergency planning, and cracks in our supply chains. America, the land of plenty, experienced extended shortages of toilet paper, paper towel, cleaning supplies, and all manner of PPE (personal protective equipment), the newest acronym to enter our collective lexicon (not counting the name of the disease itself).

While some shut their doors, innovators got to work. Even before General Motors and Ford shut down their automobile plants, both organized to start making medical supplies and ventilators, collaborating closely with smaller specialists who could not keep up with demand and leveraging their own trusted supply chains. Together, they somehow managed to turn on a dime. Distilleries and paint makers converted lines to make hand sanitizer.

Who knew that American manufacturing could still be so agile and effective? Could this spark a revolution in modern domestic manufacturing? Would that not be a win for the nation?

Chalk up another win for our incredible, resilient internet. As shocking as it was to experience 22 million lost jobs in a matter of weeks, imagine how much worse it could have been without Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, Cisco's WebEx, and other video conferencing systems that kept millions collaborating while doing their work from home. Web-based cloud platforms saw triple-digit growth, but networks did not crash.

Likewise, our deeply divided Congress managed to come together despite differences, passing emergency legislation in a matter of days. Was there disagreement? Yes. But there was also a deal. Another win.

Here's what America learned. We have not forsaken the gifts bestowed on us by the Greatest Generation. Deep down, we too are made of the right stuff. Boomers, Xers, and Millennials are co-operating and will pull us through to the other side, into what Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. David Goldfein calls "the new abnormal."

Yes, normal may never be the same. We may don masks each winter. We may reopen our economy this summer only to have to shut it back down again next winter. We may never again shake hands, if we follow the advice of Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. We will be different.

That's OK. We Americans already are different, and our Air Force and Space Force are different. Our indomitable spirit is driven by independent and adaptable thinking and a deep and abiding trust: that subordinate commands can be imbued with their commanders' intent and will do the right thing.

Rather than wait for answers from on high, squadron commanders adapted faster than the virus because they were uniquely skilled to solve their own problems, to innovate in the face of challenge, to share the fruits of their innovations with others. We are witnessing the American spirit in action.

Our future is bright.

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