

Column: Maskless



Jessica Alexander, a member of the Temecula City Council in Temecula, Calif., insisted that she was emulating Rosa Parks, a secretary in Montgomery, Alabama, in refusing to wear a mask to reduce the risk of spreading Covid-19 to her colleagues and coworkers. Rosa Parks, an African-American woman living in the deep south, took a stand against the dehumanizing Jim Crow laws of Alabama in 1955 by refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white man. She was arrested for her civil disobedience and risked losing her life, property, and loved ones in an environment that did not tolerate black women or men standing up against the status quo.

Jessica Alexander is a white California lawmaker who refused to wear a cloth mask over her mouth and nose when meeting with fellow lawmakers or, for that matter, at any other time. Even mentioning these two Americans in the same paragraph is yet another injustice to Rosa Parks.

I grant you that most Americans are unfamiliar with the history of our nation, but for a lawmaker to compare refusing to put some fabric over her virus dispersion system (her airway) to Rosa Parks' historic act of courage in a place and time that routinely witnessed and tolerated the disappearance of African Africans who dared to question, let alone challenge, the injustice they faced is simply bewildering.

I lived in New York City when it was the epicenter of the Covid-19 pandemic, and I heard from colleagues who refused to leave the hospitals for fear of spreading the virus to their families and neighbors. They wore protective equipment that makes a face mask look as inconvenient as a handkerchief in the breast pocket of a suit. They took extreme precautions to keep people, like Jessica Alexander, from getting Covid-19.

They helped load the refrigerator trucks lined up outside the New York City hospitals with the dead victims of Covid-19 while the Jessica Alexanders of America insisted that the threat to our nation was a myth or at least overblown. Now that the Jessica Alexanders are asked to do something so trivial that it should not even need enforcement, they invoke their right as Americans to refuse.

I was interviewed for one of many positions I never got because of my admittedly unconventional answers to conventional questions. My inquisitor wanted my views on public health policy. He proposed a situation much like the one we have faced over the past 15 months. The general population faces an epidemic that could sicken or kill a substantial number of people.

He did not suggest more than 500,000 dead and tens of millions seriously ill, numbers generated by our current pandemic, but we were talking about an event on the scale of a Covid-19. He suggested there were few preventive measures that could be adopted and no cure for those who contracted the disease.

I indicated the preventive measures would need to be provided and distributed by a government agency with the resources to do so. He prophetically suggested that many people would simply refuse to adopt the measures recommended. "In that case," I offered, "they need to be educated. They must be convinced that what they are being told to do is in their best interest." "But what if," he insisted, "you have made your best effort to convince them, and they still refuse?" Without giving it much thought, I responded, "They must be convinced or compelled." He smiled and thanked me for dropping by.

The fact is that in America we stop listening after we hear the word “compelled,” even if it means doing something that might save lives. When I first moved to New York, I read that two slightly drunk men made a wager to swim across the Hudson River. Whoever made it across would get a modest sum of money. Neither man was clear on what would happen to the loser. Remarkably, they both made it to New Jersey and were promptly arrested.

Apparently some of their friends had alerted the police to this wager just after the knuckleheads dove into the river. The men were charged with reckless endangerment of themselves. They were briefly jailed and fined, but the point was made: it is illegal to risk your own life for no good reason. Cherry-pickers will be rushed to skyscrapers when climbers try to scale them. Fire-fighters will frustrate suicide attempts by jumpers by inflating impact absorbing balloons at likely landing sites.

Why then does Jessica Alexander have the right to risk her own health and life and that of those breathing in the air she is breathing out by refusing to wear a one-ounce piece of fabric? Why was Senator Rand Paul allowed in the Senate chamber without wearing a mask even after he tested positive for Covid-19 and his fellow senators implored him to put on a mask?

Apparently, if you start talking about “compelled,” these lawmakers will refer you to Americans who demonstrated real courage, the implication being that their willingness to risk the lives and health of their friends and colleagues takes real courage. I disagree.

The irony behind this buffoonery is that America does have long accepted methods for compelling its citizens to protect themselves and those around them from avoidable risks. My children could not attend classes in public schools until I provided proof that they had received vaccinations for communicable diseases.

I could not legally drive a car until I passed a government-dictated test and purchased insurance. Identifying which laws promote the health and welfare of the general public

and distinguishing them from rules (like the Jim Crow laws) that humiliate, denigrate, and subjugate individuals of a specific race, creed, religion, etc. does not require a medical degree.

We may not be able to fully define injustice, but we know it when we see it. Requiring a lawmaker to wear a mask before, during, and after he or she bloviates [look it up!] is neither cruel nor unjust. It is a common courtesy. Consider the historical impact if Mary Mallon had simply washed her hands before preparing dinner for those families employing her as a cook. They would not have sickened and died, and she would not have been known as Typhoid Mary.

Jessica Alexander will never be worthy of mention in a sentence that recalls Rosa Parks, but she certainly merits comparison to Mary Mallon.

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