

HERALD-WHIG

My View: Wearing a face mask now a heroic act



Brian McGee is president of Quincy University | Submitted Photo

By BRIAN McGEE, president, Quincy University

Posted: Apr. 12, 2020 12:30 am Updated: Apr. 12, 2020 1:20 am

Face masks are making national headlines.

Using face masks effectively could be one important way to reduce COVID-19 infections. Getting Americans to wear masks, though, will require us to overcome powerful biases against them.

A few days ago, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention began to advise people going out in public to wear "cloth face coverings." Now, some politicians of both parties have begun using masks. The city of Laredo, Texas, is threatening to fine people who do not wear masks in public places.

There is a problem with encouraging the use of masks, though, that is distinctively American. To be blunt, masks in America are strongly associated with criminals, cowards and racists. Asking anyone other than a health professional to wear a mask requires us to overcome this bias.

For decades, movies and television dramas in the U.S. have suggested that criminals wear masks. When a film features bank robbery, for example, the use of masks allows perpetrators to avoid capture and prosecution.

Although different media versions of "The Lone Ranger" describe a heroic figure concealing his identity with a mask, the more typical use of a mask in American Westerns is to prevent the recognition and arrest of a criminal. And even some mask-wearing heroes, like Batman, sometimes behave badly or have an underlying character flaw.

In short, masks are perceived as more often aiding those who want to do harm, not good. When an ordinary person sees someone wearing a mask on the street, the first reaction to the mask is most likely to be fear.

The legal hostility toward masks in the United States is not a product of movies and television, but, to a significant degree, of the long political fight against the Ku Klux Klan.

In both the 19th and 20th centuries, Klan members wore masks and hoods because theirs was a secret society. Masks and hoods were used to hide the identities of Klan members, and this secrecy aided the Klan in various efforts to intimidate or do physical harm to African Americans, Catholics, Jews, immigrants and others the Klan opposed.

The ability to wear masks and hoods made the Klan seem powerful and allowed Klan members to frighten their opponents. The women's Klan in 1920s Indiana was called the "Queens of the Golden Mask." A century ago, critics of the Klan considered their use of masks and hoods to be anti-democratic and called Klan members "cowards in masks" and "hooded hoodlums."

Ultimately, several cities and states eventually passed anti-masking laws (with exceptions for Halloween costumes) as part of the effort to reduce the membership and power of the Klan. Today, in many parts of America, members of the Klan rely on sunglasses to hide their identities, because they know that using a hood or mask could get them arrested or fined.

So, why does this old fight against a masked Ku Klux Klan matter today?

In our culture, and thanks in part to the Klan, it has for many decades been the case that anyone partially or totally covering her or his face is assumed to be doing something wrong. Our cultural bias against masks can probably be overcome, given the magnitude of the COVID-19 crisis, but the CDC, public health officials and politicians should acknowledge this bias.

Today, if ordinary people are going to wear masks voluntarily, they will have to be persuaded that wearing a mask makes someone a hero, not a villain. That's the story about masks the CDC had better start telling.