

# Rashomon American Style. Truth Is Somewhere in Between

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Media Disinformation](#),  
[Science and Medicine](#)

*Many journalists and op-ed pundits have been observing how the United States has become two nations that are seemingly divided along a red-blue line, each side believing in “facts” that are irreconcilable with those “facts” believed to be true by the other side. Some are even suggesting that the United States is on the verge of what would be a new civil war. To be sure, each morning it is possible to open Facebook, which is, of course, a managed site that features innuendo, opinion plus outright lies, and immediately see wide divergences in analysis of events that took place the night before. This is particularly true regarding the long running debate over the genesis of the coronavirus and the methods that are being used to combat it.*

On one side in the pandemic crisis debate are all those who, often for ideological reasons, reject government telling people what they should or must do. On the other side is establishment medical thinking and those government officials who believe that the state has an obligation to intervene in what is undeniably a health crisis. The “truth,” if it actually exists, might well recognize that the virus is dangerous and should be treated seriously while also taking steps to minimize the collateral damage in those measures that are being taken to tame it. And, of course, both sides are talking past each other, frequently resorting to ridicule and doling out punishments to make their points. Humiliating a store clerk because she is wearing a mask or simulating a sneeze in the face of someone who is not doing so to express one’s contempt are hardly conversation starters.

Likewise, the “black lives matter” generated protests have not surprisingly also produced strong responses that have gone far beyond the whys or wherefores involving the killing of one man in police custody. Much of the heat is generated by elusive collateral issues that remain stubbornly subject to individual interpretation like “white supremacy” and “systemic racism.” Most Americans caught in the middle of the verbal onslaughts probably would agree that the militarization of police forces in the U.S. since 9/11 has not exactly worked out well in terms of making policing community responsive. But rampaging crowds of looters and provocateurs seemingly dedicated to destruction of both public and private property suggest that the countervailing arguments have gone far beyond the point where anything sensible might come out on the other end.

One is reminded of the Japanese book and movie *Rashomon*. The story was written by Akutagawa Ryunosuke in 1922 and the film, directed by Akira Kurosawa, followed in 1950.

The tale, set in 8<sup>th</sup> Century feudal Japan, involved a rape and a murder with each of the four principal characters providing his and her own version of what had occurred. The murdered samurai speaks through a Shinto psychic, while a bandit-witness in the forest, a traveling monk, and the samurai’s wife, who was the rape victim, all provide alternative versions of

what had taken place. The story reveals how all of the contradictory testimony was fundamentally dishonest, in that each participant was interpreting events to support his or her self-interest in the outcome of the tragedy.

The movie is now considered to be one of the greatest films ever made and the story line, dubbed the "*Rashomon* effect," has been used to describe situations in which eye witnesses to an event provide completely contradictory versions of what took place. One might suggest that the *Rashomon* effect is currently working overtime in the United States. The mainstream "progressive" media sees "peaceful demonstrators" in places like Portland or Seattle because that fits their agenda of anti-Trumpism, while others see mostly burning buildings and cars as well as injured policemen because they are internally wired to condemn the disorder. Particularly in a stress situation, most people will see [what they want to see](#).

Similarly, COVID-19 is a "hoax" because to some the government is inappropriately and "unconstitutionally" getting involved while others are prepared to lock themselves in the basement for three months because they believe the dire warnings they are receiving by way of the media must be true. No one is necessarily lying in an attempt to deceive because those expressing their views actually are convinced by what they are apparently seeing and hearing.

With the virus raging and bLM continues to grow, the federal government has been playing its own little *Rashomon* game in the country's foreign policy. Some observers, like myself, see an escalating *Rashomon*-esque global war of aggression, while the key players in Washington claim to see only threats to American hegemony and the liberal democratic order that the U.S. claims to support. In the Middle East, for example, the U.S. and Israel have been edging towards war with Iran and Syria, possibly suggesting that the recent bombing in Beirut might have been a "plausibly denied" Israeli preemptive strike against Hezbollah. Israel has in fact been the aggressor, having instigated an increasing number of incidents with Hezbollah along the Lebanese border while Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and the Pentagon's leaders [look benignly on](#) and praise Israeli restraint. But other "*Rashomon* effect" witnesses to what is taking place see all the aggression coming from Jerusalem and Washington. Neither side can see any merit in what the other is saying.

China is largely replacing Russia as the most favored "threat" for both the Democratic and Republican parties. Beijing has already been accused of unleashing the coronavirus on the United States while also preparing to interfere in the upcoming November national elections, even though evidence to back up either claim has been lacking. This fearmongering has led the U.S. [to dispatch warships](#), including two aircraft carrier strike groups, to the South China Sea to intercede in a maritime dispute China is having with its neighbors, several of whom are allied to the United States. China has declared a two-hundred-mile economic zone off its coasts and also off some disputed islands which Washington has declared "illegal," in part because it restricts "freedom of the seas." The contested area, which is over 7,000 miles from North America, has been the site of massive U.S. Navy exercises in recent weeks. The increase in military activity has the potential to turn nasty if China opts to contest the U.S. presence. [Some congressmen](#) are already predicting that there will be an armed conflict of some kind within the next three to six months.

So, China sees itself has a regional power that is engaging in economic expansion in competition with countries like the United States while the U.S. sees an increasing threat.

Both are looking at the same data and drawing conclusions that are nevertheless diametrically opposed, just like *Rashomon*. And both are talking past each other. To be sure China is no “gentle giant.” It is a totalitarian state with the world’s largest population and what might currently be the largest economy. It has recently reneged on agreements to maintain Hong Kong as an autonomous region, which has invited international opprobrium. The head of the FBI Christopher Wray [has described](#) Beijing as the “greatest long term threat” to the future of the United States, though he is probably referring to the economic and political challenges rather than its military. China in return is out to supplant the United States as the world’s superpower and has done so by largely peaceful means, expanding its commercial ties to and investments in resource rich regions of the third world, locking in the raw materials that it will rely on to grow even more economically powerful.

Mike Pompeo is uncomfortable with that, [saying last month that](#) “We must admit a hard truth that should guide us in the years and decades to come: that if we want to have a free 21st century, and not the Chinese century of which Xi Jinping dreams, the old paradigm of blind engagement with China simply won’t get it done. We must not continue it and we must not return to it.” So it’s all about a “free 21<sup>st</sup> century,” but in *Rashomon* fashion China wants the freedom to continue to expand economically that Washington sees as a potential threat to “political” freedom and, more generally speaking, to its own dominance. Both countries have their own vision of what they are “seeing” and neither one is listening.

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