

EDITOR'S NOTE

One Hundred Seconds

At what feels like an apocalyptic moment, the nation that has always claimed to play a uniquely redemptive role in world history has suddenly been recast in a different mold. In the richest country on earth, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have turned out to be peculiarly catastrophic. For once, America can truly claim to be exceptional. No other nation is facing as dire a combination of medical and economic calamities. The United States has the most deaths in the world, the most unemployment, the most bankruptcies. Time to pull out the foam rubber fingers, pointing upward: We're Number One! Meanwhile the traders on Wall Street continue to hum "We're in the Money," thanks to a multi-trillion-dollar, bipartisan bailout.

The government's failure to confront this crisis is not simply a consequence of Trump's swaggering ineptitude, or of the Democrats' inability to mount any more than a feckless and complicit opposition; nor is it merely an expression of Americans' ruggedly individualist resistance to the regimentation required by public health measures. The mess we are in is an outcome of changes decades in the making: the hollowing out of the public sector through draconian austerity measures, the shrinkage of any notion of a common good, the intensifying vacuity of debate between two political parties both committed to the upward transfer of wealth, and the militarization of police forces designed to contain discontent among the poorest, mostly black and brown, citizens. These are the major consequences of neoliberalism—the consensus Washington worldview for nearly half a century, now revealing its utter inability to provide resources for engaging the dilemmas forced on us by the pandemic.

Since the 1970s, the discourse of liberal democracy has been thoroughly transformed into a neoliberal counterfeit that is neither liberal nor democratic. The dominant political language has become a complete muddle of entrepreneurial fantasy and managerial technique—a technocratic jargon used to legitimate the "creative destruction" unleashed by free-flowing capital. Within this neoliberal

discourse, freedom has been reduced to unbound accumulation, citizenship to voting, efficiency for the public good to efficiency for profit. The civic culture that gave rise to popular American politics in the past—unions, churches, local party organizations—has been largely replaced by billionaires. The triumph of wealth over commonwealth has left the governing classes pathetically unprepared to meet unprecedented catastrophe.

The neoliberal confidence game seduced many Americans, even those who called themselves progressives, by combining the mystique of meritocracy and the allure of technocratic expertise with new conceptions of personal identity. This ideological stew simmered through the last third of the twentieth century, generating a public outlook that might be called progressive neoliberalism, common among affluent, educated professionals—from leftish college professors to enlightened corporate executives. From the business point of view, progressive neoliberalism performed a useful rhetorical service by melding identity politics with market-driven policies. This made it easy for giant corporations to pose as friends of oppressed minorities—a tactic they have accelerated in recent years. It is now unsurprising to see Target offering trans people their choice of bathrooms and Amazon endorsing Black Lives Matter. No incongruity is too strained in the melodrama of high-visibility virtue signaling.

Notions of neoliberal selfhood have reinforced the financialization of health and education—areas previously considered essential to the public good, beyond the reach of mere market considerations. I remember my astonishment when, in the early 1980s, I encountered my first “For Profit” hospital in Columbia, Missouri; what was astonishing then has now become commonplace. The financialization of everyday life has become a *fait accompli*, and the consequences for ordinary citizens all too painfully apparent in the wake of the pandemic, as we are left with (what ought to be) a completely unnecessary Hobson’s choice: between containing a medical threat and relieving economic distress. To transform this crisis from threat to opportunity, we need to acknowledge an unavoidable conclusion—that the coronavirus pandemic reveals the bankruptcy of the neoliberal policies

embraced by both Republicans and Democrats since the Reagan era.

Amid radical uncertainty, Americans have a rare opportunity to imagine a more humane, egalitarian society. Whether they can seize the chance remains an open question, but there have been hopeful signs in recent weeks, as people take to the streets to embrace a more capacious definition of citizenship. The United States is engulfed by mass demonstrations protesting the unpunished murders of black people by white police. The protesters' focus on racist violence is a crucial first step toward a broader public vision, one that acknowledges the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on black communities nationwide, as well as the central role played by the race-based carceral state in the neoliberal political economy. Many people of all races suffer from that economy. It's a long shot, but we can hope that the current demand for police reform, necessary as it is, will enlarge to a demand for a genuine, multiracial social democracy.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to that social democratic vision—besides the capacity of corporate capital to trivialize and neutralize dissent—is a failure of imagination among progressives themselves. With a few shining exceptions, very few on the Left seem interested in discussing foreign policy. This is an astonishing omission. Always a menacing behemoth, the national security state has only expanded its power in recent decades: the power to start wars, topple governments, order the mass murder of civilians, assassinate foreign leaders, illegally spy on its own citizens, commit covert crimes, and annually divert nearly a trillion dollars that could be used for the public good at home to a bloated military presence abroad and a potentially catastrophic nuclear arms race. All of these matters tend to appear as afterthoughts, if they appear at all, in contemporary left discourse.

On the nuclear arms race, the silence of the Left is astounding. Focusing intensely on climate change, progressives seem unable to sustain attention on the most immediate and cataclysmic climate change of all, the one that would follow a nuclear exchange. It's as if the progressive mind can only ponder one apocalypse at a time. Yet the nuclear threat is greater than ever, as the *Bulletin of the Atomic*

Scientists has recently reminded us by moving its Doomsday Clock to one hundred seconds before midnight. So in this issue, *Raritan* proudly presents two bracing efforts to enlarge the public conversation. Lyle Jeremy Rubin recovers the importance of Daniel Ellsberg, “The Man Who Knew Too Much”—too much, at least, for the custodians of the national security state. From their perspective, Ellsberg knew too much about the mendacity behind the Vietnam War, and too much about the dangers of the nuclear arms race—not only the threat of war but of accident, caprice, and mistake. Ellsberg, a true hero for our time, has been largely ignored in the renewed Cold War climate of recent years. Patrick Lawrence describes the ordeal of another hero—Julian Assange, the man whose greatest crime was to reveal American atrocities in Afghanistan and Iraq. While awaiting the decision of a UK kangaroo court regarding his extradition to the United States on fact-free charges of serving as a Russian agent, Assange has been subjected to prolonged physical and psychological mistreatment. Lawrence probes the free-speech issues at stake in Assange’s trial, and reminds journalists of their responsibility to protect their dying profession by protesting his cruel and unusual punishment.

Both these pieces raise issues that demand attention. The US national security state remains the most dangerous institutional force in the world today, whether its operations are conducted by the nationalists of the Trump administration or the internationalists of the Democratic Party. The Democrats’ “indispensable nation” is merely a variant of Trump’s “America First.” No serious effort to imagine a more humane society can proceed without a fundamental reorientation of America’s role in the world. Only by replacing exceptionalist claims with a multipolar vision of global order can we begin to release our war-making resources for peaceful purposes, and to restore our sense of commonweal without invoking a demonic Other.

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