

From Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?*

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Prologue

When the coronavirus pandemic hit in 2020, the United States, like many other countries, was unprepared. Despite warnings the previous year from public health experts about the risk of a global viral contagion, and even as China contended with its outbreak in January, the United States lacked the ability to conduct the widespread testing that might have contained the disease. As the contagion spread, the wealthiest country in the world found itself unable to provide even the medical masks and other protective gear that health care providers needed to treat the flood of infected patients. Hospitals and state governments tried vainly to acquire enough life-saving ventilators.

This lack of preparedness had multiple sources. President Donald Trump, ignoring the warnings of public health advisors, downplayed the crisis for several crucial weeks, insisting in late February, “We have it very much under control... We have done an incredible job... It’s going to disappear.”¹ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) at first distributed flawed test kits and was slow to find a fix. And decades of outsourcing by American companies had left the United States almost entirely dependent on China and other foreign manufacturers for surgical masks and medical gear.

But beyond its lack of logistical preparedness, the country was not morally prepared for the pandemic. The years leading up to the crisis were a time of deep division—economically, culturally, politically. Decades of rising inequality and cultural resentment had brought an angry

populist backlash in 2016, resulting in the election of Trump, who, shortly after having been impeached but not removed from office, found himself presiding over the gravest crisis the country had faced since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The partisan divide persisted as the crisis unfolded. Few Republicans (29 percent) trusted the news media to provide reliable information on coronavirus; few Democrats (19 percent) trusted the information Trump provided.²

Amidst the partisan rancor and mistrust came a plague that demanded the kind of solidarity few societies can summon except in times of war. People throughout the world were implored, and in many cases required, to observe social distancing, to abandon work and stay at home. Those unable to work remotely faced lost wages and disappearing jobs. The virus posed the greatest threat to those of advanced age, but could also fell the young, and even those who could ride it out had parents and grandparents to worry about.

Morally, the pandemic reminded us of our vulnerability, of our mutual dependence: “We are all in this together.” Public officials and advertisers reached instinctively for this slogan. But the solidarity it evoked was a solidarity of fear, a fear of contagion that demanded “social distancing.” The public health required that we express our solidarity, our shared vulnerability, by keeping our distance, by observing the strictures of self-isolation.

The coincidence of solidarity and separation made sense in the context of pandemic. Apart from the heroic health care providers and first responders whose help for the afflicted required their physical presence, and the cashiers in grocery stores and the delivery workers who risked their health bringing food and supplies to those sheltering at home, most of us were told that the best way to protect others was by keeping our distance from them.

But the moral paradox of solidarity through separation highlighted a certain hollowness in the assurance that “We are all in this together.” It did not describe a sense of community embodied in an ongoing practice of mutual obligation and shared sacrifice. To the contrary, it appeared on the scene at a time of nearly unprecedented inequality and partisan rancor. The same market-driven globalization project that had left the United States without access to the domestic production of surgical masks and medications had deprived a great many working people of well-paying jobs and social esteem.

Meanwhile, those who reaped the economic bounty of global markets, supply chains, and capital flows had come to rely less and less on their fellow citizens, as producers or as consumers. Their economic prospects and identities were no longer dependent on local or national communities. As the winners of globalization pulled away from the losers, they practiced their own kind of social distancing.

The political divide that mattered, the winners explained, was no longer left versus right but open versus closed. In an open world, success depends on education, on equipping yourself to compete and win in a global economy. This means that national governments must ensure that everyone has an equal chance to get the education on which success depends. But it also means that those who land on top come to believe they deserve their success. And, if opportunities are truly equal, it means that those who are left behind deserve their fate as well.

This way of thinking about success makes it hard to believe that “we are all in this together.” It invites the winners to consider their success their own doing and the losers to feel that those on top look down with disdain. It helps explain why those left behind by globalization would become angry and resentful, and why they would be drawn to authoritarian populists who rail against elites and promise to reassert national borders with a vengeance.

Now, it is these political figures, wary though they are of scientific expertise and global cooperation, who must contend with the pandemic. It will not be easy. Mobilizing to confront the global public health crisis we face requires not only medical and scientific expertise but moral and political renewal.

The toxic mix of hubris and resentment that propelled Trump to power is not a likely source of the solidarity we need now. Any hope of renewing our moral and civic life depends on understanding how, over the past four decades, our social bonds and respect for one another came unraveled. This book seeks to explain how this happened, and to consider how we might find our way to a politics of the common good.

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¹ Remarks by President Trump Before Marine One Departure, February 23, 2020,

[whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-marine-one-departure-83/](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-marine-one-departure-83/);

Remarks by President Trump in Meeting with African American Leaders, February 27, 2020,

[whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-meeting-african-american-leaders/](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-meeting-african-american-leaders/).

² Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) Coronavirus Poll, Table 6, March 2020, [kff.org/global-health-policy/poll-finding/kff-coronavirus-poll-march-2020/](https://www.kff.org/global-health-policy/poll-finding/kff-coronavirus-poll-march-2020/).