Opinion



by Michael Sean Winters

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Stop what you are doing and read this. In The New York Times, Michael J. Sandel demonstrates again why he is the nation's most thoughtful social critic. He looks at the way the pandemic invites us to examine our societal assumptions about meritocracy. One of several money quotes, no pun intended:

> Meritocracies also produce morally unattractive attitudes among those who make it to the top. The more we believe that our success is our own doing, the less likely we are to feel indebted to, and therefore obligated to, our fellow citizens. The relentless emphasis on rising and striving encourages the winners to inhale too deeply of their success, and to look down on those who lack meritocratic credentials.

Sandel correctly notes that these unattractive attitudes — "meritocratic hubris" — are at the heart of the populist resentment of, and backlash against, elites. Joe Biden needs to understand this reality and articulate a different vision if he has any chance at defeating President Donald Trump, who plays this resentment like Anne-Sophie Mutter plays the violin.

Speaking of Biden, it is too late to ask if he could cogently discuss the pandemic and the various levels of response we need, with the cogency displayed here by Sen. Elizabeth Warren in her interview with Jon Favreau, one of the hosts of Pod Save America? It is not too late to demand that Biden put Warren on the ticket and let her handle the economic reconstruction the country faces.

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If you are looking for a legal primer as various issues of rights as brought forward by this pandemic, you should start with the Supreme Court decision in *Jacobson* v. *Massachusetts*. Faced with a defendant, Jacobson, who claimed the commonwealth's mandatory vaccination law was a violation of his rights under the U.S. Constitution, the high court ruled:

> The liberty secured by the Constitution of the United States to every person within its jurisdiction does not import an absolute right in each person to be, at all times and in all circumstances, wholly freed from restraint. There are manifold restraints to which every person is necessarily subject for the common good. On any other basis, organized society could not exist with safety to its members. Society based on the rule that each one is a law unto himself would soon be confronted with disorder and anarchy. Real liberty for all could not exist under the operation of a principle which recognizes the right of each individual person to use his own, whether in respect of his person or his property, regardless of the injury that may be done to others.

At Politico, a look at how the intentionally chaotic voting situation in Wisconsin last week could be a harbinger of nasty things to come from the GOP. A friend asked if this whole "need to vote during a pandemic/can't trust mail-in voting" mantra emanating from the Republicans is this year's version of the Merrick Garland affair. It is a good question, and it is not clear how to frustrate their design if that is their design.

Unsurprisingly, those who wish to frustrate democratic norms in order to maintain their grip on power have a friend in the Kremlin. In The New York Times, William Broad looks at the health disinformation campaign Vladimir Putin has mounted

against the U.S. "It's all about seeding lack of trust in government institutions," author Peter Pomerantsev told the Times. Hold that thought, as I shall address it tomorrow.

Imagine how much more terrible the social consequences of this pandemic would be if we did not have unemployment insurance. Better yet, consider how much less terrible it would be if we had a social contract more akin to what many European countries have, in which they are expecting unemployment to tip up, but by very little when compared to the United States. Michael Birnbaum at The Washington Post has the story.

Competence, which is not the same thing as expertise, although no one should be casting aspersions on either in the era of Trump, is not situation-specific but it helps to know the landscape within which one is called upon to exercise power and at least not to have a built-in, reflexive hostility to those with the acquired knowledge to demonstrate competence in a crisis. This, alas, is not a lesson that has been learned by the arsonists in the Trump administration. Anita Kumar and Gavin Bade at Politico look at the lengths to which state governors are forced to go to try and get what they need from the Trump administration, filled as it is with sycophants and incompetents.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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