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What's Left? A New Life for Progressivism

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NEW YORK--In the aftermath of September 11, pundits were quick to proclaim the American left a victim of the war on terrorism, for two reasons.

The first is that progressives, since Vietnam, have stood solidly in opposition to the use of US military force. This stance could be honorably maintained then and during a host of sordid US military ventures since, but leaves them unbalanced or marginal in today's case, where force seems justified.

The second is that this war is about securing the "open society" that terrorism threatens--a society in which individual and corporate freedoms, resting on secure property rights, can be exercised worldwide without restraint. But the left--in its World Trade Organization protests in Seattle and Genoa, in its opposition to fast track--has been most visible for opposing the corporate domination that naturally follows from such rules. And so, the pundits reason, any left support now for the war against terrorism is at odds with its recent actions. But this reasoning strikes us as wrong. Only the pacifist left has ever opposed all use of US military force; other progressives simply have strong views on when it is appropriate and believe that blank, ubiquitous endorsement of military action does not serve the country. And there is no reason to equate opposition to terrorism, a crime against humanity, with support for a particular program on how humanity should be organized, a matter that remains a subject of legitimate debate.

If anything, the war on terrorism creates an opening for progressives, not closure--indeed, it presents the opportunity of a lifetime.

It is a truism of modern politics that war generally mobilizes and helps the democratic left. It does so, despite the repression of dissent that wartime also often brings, because war raises the stakes in politics and invites consideration of wider goals, including justice. War's mobilization of the populace against a shared threat also heightens social solidarity, while underscoring the need for government and other social institutions that transcend or replace the market. And war's horrors daily press the question of how military action can be avoided in the future without abandoning core principles of domestic order.

All this shifts the playing field of political debate away from those who counsel "let's leave it to the market or the military" as the answer to all human concerns. Far from seeming hard-nosed and realistic, they suddenly appear beside the point, if not immoral. Those who believe in social justice and shared democratic effort in problem solving, by contrast, seem onto something important and even admirable.

Consider the birth of "new normal" America. On September 11 the public saw terrorists flying into buildings to kill innocents--most of them ordinary workers, many of them foreign-born. It saw public servants running in to save them, freely sacrificing their own lives in doing so. It was not private corporations that lined up afterward to find the dead and comfort the families, but volunteer workers, more public servants, and nonprofits of all kinds.

From this, the public drew some natural conclusions. Government regulation--of airport safety, offshore banks, weapons dealers, etc.--is sometimes a bargain despite the costs. "Big government" is no longer automatically a "big evil." Public-sector workers, precisely because they are not profit-seeking, are essential in emergencies--when what's required is "whatever it takes," not bare satisfaction of the terms of some previously negotiated private contract. Moreover, as America's response to 9/11 began, the public was reminded that taking on a stateless enemy requires the cooperation of other states--and that unilateralism and isolationism have their limits. Americans also got a crash course in the unsavory aspects of US foreign policy.

And so, along with the odd spectacle of Congressional Republicans voting blank checks to federal relief and reconstruction efforts, and now even authorizing the federalization of airport security, "new normal" America gives us opinion polls showing the strongest support for and trust in the federal government in a generation and the greatest support for international peace institutions like the United Nations in forty years. Meanwhile, in communities and families, each new act of hostility toward the foreign-born has been swamped by countless personal efforts of understanding and engagement. And the hot Christmas dolls this year are firefighters, emergency medical personnel and municipal police.

In brief, September 11 has made the idea of a public sector, and the society that it serves, attractive again. It enlarged the public's view that unilateral military action is a bad recipe for international peace. This doesn't describe a political space from which the left is forever excluded, but one in which it is virtually invited to reenter mainstream politics.

The real question today is whether progressives have the wit and collective will to accept that invitation. Doing so will require us to affirm our values in ways understood and respected by ordinary Americans, to present a concise and clear agenda for advancing those values and to enter and compete for support in electoral arenas. At these things, American progressives have not been particularly effective over the past generation, whatever their other achievements--most notably, in helping make this society a more tolerant one. We have largely hidden from our values, missing opportunities to state them in publicly understood terms of opportunity, fair dealing and responsibility. Our organizational divisions have obscured our fundamental shared agenda--to build a high-road economy of shared prosperity, to protect and repair the environment, to fix our broken system of campaign finance and voting, to seek peace through sustainable development, not just military threat, and to provide universal access to quality health care, education and housing. And, until recently, we have avoided the hard, grimy work of fighting in electoral arenas, which the right has increasingly occupied by default.

Now is the time to change this. Far from losing faith or withdrawing from politics, American progressives should assert their public presence more forcibly than they have in a generation, rededicating themselves to practically advancing America's democratic promise and acting with renewed confidence that the American people, given half a chance, are prepared to help in that good work.