

States Are in Crisis. Why Won't Trump Help?

Federal support for cities and states was a core part of the New Deal. The president is tearing it apart.

By Lizabeth Cohen

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When most people think of the New Deal, they think of the enduring institutions it created — above all, the web of agencies and programs that has provided the social safety net, such as it is, for life in the United States since the 1950s. A national retirement system, public housing, collective bargaining, unemployment insurance, the minimum wage — all had their origins during the Great Depression.

More important than any specific benefits, however, was the way that the New Deal recast the structure of American federalism. Washington stepped in to address a crisis that states and local governments were failing miserably to meet on their own, overwhelmed by tremendous need and limited by the resources and powers at their disposal.

New Deal federalism has shaped American governance for almost a century, and it has played a vital role in our country's success. Now, with the Covid-19 crisis wreaking havoc across every state in America and the president unwilling to hold up Washington's end of the bargain, that system may be falling apart.

For all the New Deal's achievements, the American welfare state would never live up to the fuller protections provided by some European nations and our neighbor Canada. And there were glaring flaws in the programs that were created, such as excluding agricultural and domestic workers from the minimum wage guarantees of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 and refusing to pass anti-lynching legislation. Both of these failures were partly attributable to the fragile coalition of Southern Democrats and Northern liberals that made the New Deal possible.

Still, the New Deal's programs, enhanced by the Great Society's addition of Medicare and Medicaid in the 1960s and President Barack Obama's Affordable Care Act in 2010, made the United States on the eve of the Covid-19 pandemic a far more benevolent place than it had been when the Great Depression hit in 1929.

New Deal federalism likewise made it easier for the states to respond to challenges and emergencies. But in exchange for federal resources, states accepted the federal government's expectations and regulations. That relationship has substantially contributed to historic levels of economic prosperity and notable progress toward greater class and racial equality across regions.

Many of the landmark programs originating in the New Deal and the postwar era were built on this system of governance, with great success. Social Security has reduced poverty among older Americans. Intervention by the U.S. Justice Department helped the struggle to register African-American voters in the South and to integrate public accommodations nationwide. And the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 provided a legal basis for accountability, even if challenging to enforce.

The expansion of federal authority took place under Republican and Democratic presidents alike. When the variation in workplace protections state by state left some workers more endangered than others, the federal government under President Richard Nixon created the Occupational Safety and Health Administration to set national standards for safety.

And faced with wildly unequal welfare benefits across the states, the government instituted the uniform, federally funded Supplemental Security Income program in the early 1970s. Federal consumer protection and clean air and water legislation in the 1960s and 1970s protected citizens in all states, however friendly their local leaders were to mass marketers or polluters.

Surely federal standards were enforced more rigorously in some places than in others. And from Richard Nixon's New Federalism to Ronald Reagan's assertion that "government is the problem" to Bill Clinton's pledge to "end welfare as we know it," a backlash against big government gained ground steadily. For the past 50 years, privatization and deregulation have been the buzzwords of presidential administrations of both parties, and inequalities of wealth have grown.

But the essential core of the New Deal welfare state has survived. The federal government's enormous purse and power continue to deliver benefits and protections, even as it has also undertaken more pernicious national policies, such as the expansion of incarceration.

Until now. The Trump administration's unwillingness or inability to manage the pandemic has called into question the balance of power between the federal government and the states that has prevailed for almost a century. Likewise, a growing chorus of Republican leaders is seizing the moment to try to turn back the clock to the pre-New Deal days, intent on severing the federal obligations to states in crisis.

When Covid-19 reared its ugly head this winter, governors and mayors quite naturally expected the federal government to supply medical equipment, to set strict standards guiding testing and public activity and to mount a national strategy for battling the disease. Instead what they encountered was an anemic federal response that belittled anything more as resembling the menial labor of a shipping clerk.

The Trump White House defined the federal role as the president pontificating at daily briefings and playing a doctor on TV. His “L'état, c'est moi” approach, governors were shocked to discover, left them scrambling to manage the crisis on their own, even finding themselves pitted against one another — and the federal government — in securing crucial supplies. States with areas where the epidemic proved most virulent had no choice but to mount their own foreign-trade policies, securing supplies when possible from abroad.

There is much to lament about Mr. Trump's failure to assume responsibility at this catastrophic time. But the greatest damage, apart from the unnecessary loss of lives, may be the undermining of uniform national standards of benefits and protections that had emerged from a national crisis in the 1930s — and that provided the bedrock for so much subsequent stability and prosperity.

The abandonment of a federalist system where states are accountable to Washington and residents everywhere can expect equitable treatment is recasting the United States of America to favor States over United. That retrenchment may prove to be one of the direst consequences of Covid-19.

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