



Roosevelt
Institute for
American
Studies

Public Health and Disease in the American Century

Middelburg, The Netherlands

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The COVID-19 crisis has confronted historians with the disruptive power of infectious disease. The impact of the crisis has been multifaceted, global, and immense in its scale and ramifications. For the United States, the experience has been especially confrontational. As of the time of writing, the US has among the highest rates of infection and the highest number of deaths of any country on the planet. The virus (and the measures taken to contain it) has disrupted almost every aspect of American life, revealed and exacerbated social, economic, racial and political fault lines, and raised major constitutional issues concerning the role of federal and state authorities in maintaining social well-being.

This public health emergency has also set in motion an as yet uncertain set of consequences for the US's position in the world. President Donald Trump has increased his criticisms of China as the source of the pandemic, and his decision to withdraw funding from the WHO was also an act to push back against Beijing's controlling influence in that organization. Yet these steps also represent a blatantly nationalist shift, where the former role of the US in bolstering world order through multilateral institutions is being replaced by a boisterous chauvinism. The role of the federal government, both domestically and internationally, in taking responsibility for public health has come into question.

Historically, this is a pivotal moment. The arrival of the 'American century' at the end of the Second World War (for which the seventy-fifth anniversary celebrations have been disrupted by the pandemic) also heralded the end of global disease – a view exemplified by Secretary of State George Marshall's 1948 prediction that the majority of infectious diseases would be eradicated within the twentieth century. Advancements in medical science, harnessed to US economic and military power, produced significant achievements in global public health – from the invention of the polio vaccine to the eradication of smallpox and the utilization of the calorie as a basic unit of nutrition. Yet the prospect of an epidemic-free world has proved illusory. Indeed, disease has made a comeback since the 1970s, as previously unknown afflictions, from HIV to Ebola and COVID-19, moved to exploit the connections, as well as the iniquities, of a globalizing world.

This conference seeks to interrogate the American Century through the lens of the US government's responsibility for improving public health and fighting disease. It takes a broad, parabolic view of the 20th century, book-ending both domestic (the local responses to containing the Spanish flu outbreaks in 1918-1920 and the federal-state contest for control in 2020) and international developments (the Wilsonian

blueprint for world order after WWI and the Trumpian abandonment of the WHO in 2020). How does the subject of public health, both domestically and internationally, change our understanding of the American Century and where we are now in 2020/2021?

We welcome conference papers on any of the following subjects:

- Disease and US foreign policy – disease and development aid, military intervention, and as a national security threat;
- The US, internationalism, and global public health;
- The role of government and non-government organizations in public health and the shifting lines of responsibility
- The connections between public health, socio-economic and racial inequalities, and political action
- Cultural, literary, and artistic reflections on disease, social (dis)order, and public health

If you would like to join us as a speaker at this event, please send a CV and 250-word proposal to info@roosevelt.nl.

The deadline for proposals is **1 December 2020**.

All proposals will receive a reply by 31 January 2021.

The conference will be based on pre-circulated papers. Participants will be asked to prepare and send in a draft paper of 3000 words by 1 September 2021.

We hope to be able to hold the conference on location at the Institute. Of course, should this prove impossible or unwise, we will consider either postponing or switching to some form of online format.