

Politics

‘Something has to be done’: Trump’s quest to rewrite history of the Russia probe

By Philip Rucker

<https://wapo.st/3aJhj44>



President Trump speaks about border security in the South Court Auditorium of the White House on Feb. 14. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

The U.S. intelligence community long ago produced evidence of Russia’s illegal interference in the 2016 presidential election to try to boost Donald Trump’s candidacy. Then the special counsel investigating the matter detailed myriad ways President Trump sought to stymie the probe. And then Robert S. Mueller III testified to Congress about Trump’s conduct — and warned of Russia’s continued interest in thwarting U.S. elections.

But it is Trump who is trying to have the last word.

Seven months after Mueller's marathon testimony brought finality to the Russia investigation, Trump is actively seeking to rewrite the narrative that had been meticulously documented by federal law enforcement and intelligence officials, both for immediate political gain and for history.

Turbocharged by his acquittal in the Senate's impeachment trial and confident that he has acquired the fealty of nearly every Republican in Congress, Trump is claiming vindication and exoneration not only over his conduct with Ukraine — for which the House voted to impeach him — but also from the other investigations that have dogged his presidency.



The president was acquitted on both charges of impeachment by the Senate, with Sen. Mitt Romney crossing the aisle and voting to convict on one charge. (The Washington Post)

This includes lawsuits filed against Trump by the state of New York over his finances as well as alleged misuse of charity funds by his nonprofit foundation. Trump sought last week to turn the page on these probes, declaring on Twitter ahead of a White House meeting with Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo (D) that "New York must stop all of its unnecessary lawsuits & harrassment."

Still, Russia is foremost on Trump's mind. Since even before he was sworn in as president, Trump has viewed the FBI's Russia investigation as a dark cloud over his administration that threatened to delegitimize his claim on the office. And more than three years in, Trump remains haunted by all things Russia, according to advisers and allies, and continues to nurse a profound and unabated sense of persecution.

As his reelection campaign intensifies, Trump is using the powers of his office to manipulate the facts and settle the score. Advisers say the president is determined to protect his associates ensnared in the expansive Russia investigation, punish the prosecutors and investigators he believes betrayed him, and convince the public that the probe was exactly as he sees it: an illegal witch hunt.

"The whole Mueller investigation was a shakedown and a disgrace. It probably should be expunged," Trump said in an interview last week with radio commentator Geraldo Rivera, a longtime friend.

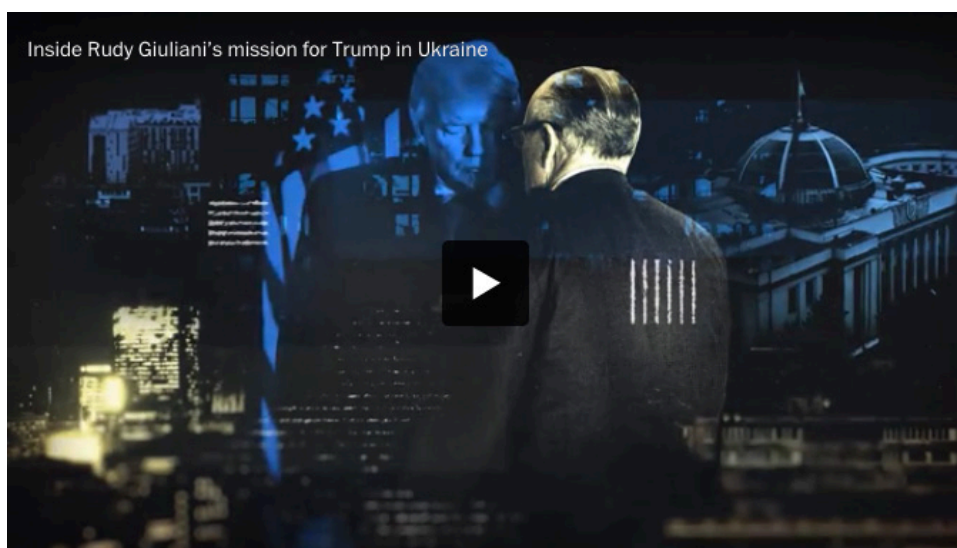


Former special counsel Robert S. Mueller III arrives at the Rayburn House Office Building to testify before Congress on July 24. (Matt McClain/The Washington Post)

Referring to Mueller, Trump added: “I don’t call him special counsel because special counsel is not an accurate term. It’s a special prosecutor, because what he and his 13 angry Democrats — all horrible, just horrible people — what they did to destroy the lives of people that you know, but to destroy the lives of many, Geraldo, should never be forgiven, should never be forgotten, and something has to be done about it.”

Central to this pursuit were Trump’s efforts this past week to lessen the government’s sentencing recommendation for longtime friend and adviser Roger Stone. Attorney General William P. Barr’s extraordinary intervention on the Stone case, as well as Trump’s own declaration of his right to meddle in criminal cases whenever he chooses, tested the nation’s rule of law and sent chills throughout the Justice Department, which has long shielded its independence from political influences.

The criminal justice system could soon be tested further. U.S. District Judge Amy Berman Jackson — whom Trump targeted and disparaged last week — is set to decide Stone’s sentence on Thurs-



Rudy Giuliani set out to Ukraine to vindicate the president. Instead, he helped set an impeachment scandal in motion. (The Washington Post)

day. The president has indicated he may commute Stone's sentence. Asked last week whether he was open to issuing a pardon, Trump told reporters: "I don't want to say that yet."

Last week alone, Trump called the Russia investigation "tainted," "dirty," "rotten," "illegal," "phony," a "disgrace," a "shakedown," a "scam," "a fixed hoax" and "the biggest political crime in American History, by far."

He argued that the probe into Russian election interference was based on false pretenses, despite a recent report from the Justice Department's inspector general stating the opposite even as it criticized the FBI's surveillance of a former Trump campaign aide. And he claimed, again without evidence, that Mueller, a former FBI director regarded for his precision with facts, lied to Congress — which happens to be one of the charges Stone was convicted of by a jury last November.

Absent from the president's many public comments about the Russia investigation, however, was a warning to Russia not to interfere



Roger Stone, a longtime friend and political adviser to President Trump, poses in 2017 in his office in Oakland Park, Fla. (Andrew Innerarity/for The Washington Post)

in the next election, or even an acknowledgment that U.S. intelligence agencies believe Russian President Vladimir Putin is seeking to do so.

“As Bob Mueller said — and the entire intelligence community confirmed — Russia is still coming at us,” said Chuck Rosenberg, a former U.S. attorney and former counsel to Mueller at the FBI. “Not only is the president offering a false narrative to the American people about that threat, but there is no leadership from him on this incredibly important issue. We are still being attacked. It is as if the Russians invaded Alaska and the president either said they are not actually there or that they are there but it does not really matter because we have 49 other marvelous states.”

Frank Figliuzzi, a former senior FBI official who also worked for Mueller, said Trump’s efforts to spin a new history of the Russia investigation are cause for alarm.

“What Trump is doing is canceling what we all have proven, what the courts have proven, as in Roger Stone, as in Manafort, as in Flynn, in a form of jury nullification at a presidential level,” Figliuzzi said, referring to former Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort and former national security adviser Michael Flynn.

“The president is doing it on steroids because of the power of his office,” Figliuzzi said. “People have to see the danger in that.”

Ruth Ben-Ghiat, a history professor at New York University and a scholar of authoritarianism, said she sees darker motives in Trump’s actions.

“It’s all about manipulating information and recasting the narrative to be what you need it to be,” Ben-Ghiat said. “Even more than censoring, which is old-school, rulers like Trump — and Putin is the master at this — manipulate opinion by manipulating information.”



President Trump speaks during a meeting with Ecuadoran President Lenín Moreno in the Oval Office of the White House on Feb. 12. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

Trump's defenders said the president is wise to try to seize control of the public narrative of the Russia investigation at the start of a campaign year, and they argued that his retelling will find a sympathetic audience.

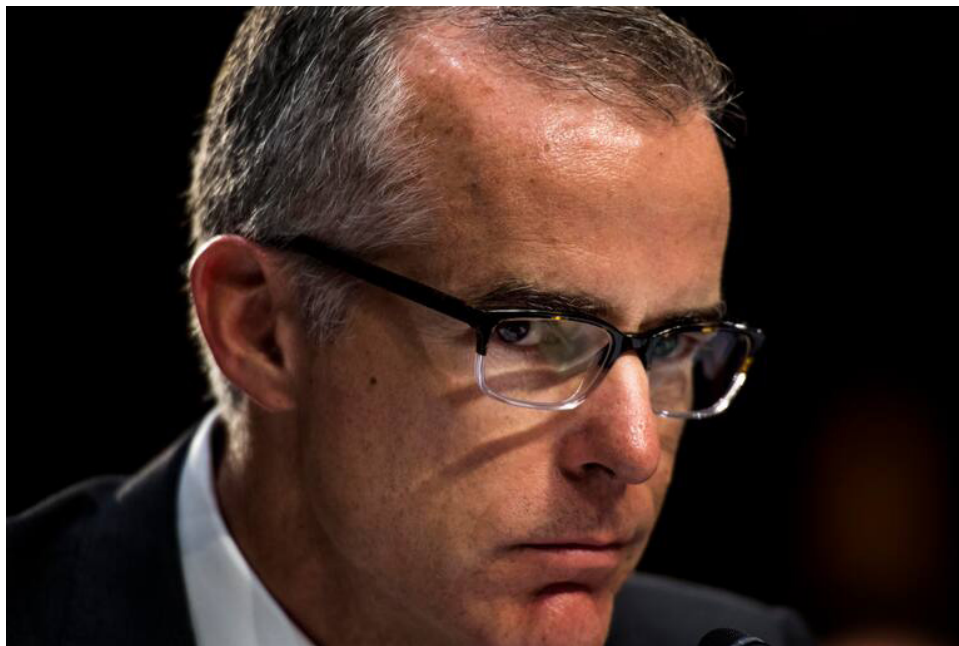
"Winners write the history books. President Trump is aware of this and realizes that unless he defines the previous three years of witch hunts, then it will in fact be the people who unsuccessfully launched these witch hunts who will define the legacy," said Jason Miller, a former Trump campaign adviser who co-hosts "War Room," a pro-Trump radio show and podcast, with former Trump strategist Stephen K. Bannon.

"Who he's trying to speak to are the people who supported him in 2016, who think it's ridiculous what partisan Democrats and unelected administrative-state bureaucrats have tried to do to him over these past three years, and to put things into proper context as we head into this fall," Miller added.

In private discussions with advisers and friends, Trump has long groused angrily and obsessively about the Russia investigation. The president believes he and his campaign were unfairly targeted by what he bemoans as a “deep state” conspiracy — and he faults former FBI director James B. Comey and deputy director Andrew McCabe, among others.

Trump regularly complains that Comey and McCabe have avoided jail time for what he is convinced is wrongdoing, while Stone, Manafort, Flynn and other Trump associates have been prosecuted.

“They put a man in jail and destroy his life, his family, his wife, his children — nine years in jail. It’s a disgrace,” Trump told reporters last week about Stone, referring to the seven- to nine-year prison sentence initially recommended by federal prosecutors. “In the meantime, Comey walks around making book deals. The people that launched this scam investigation — and what they did is a disgrace. And, hopefully, it’ll be treated fairly.”



Andrew McCabe, then acting director of the FBI, testifies before the Senate Intelligence Committee on June 7, 2017. (Melina Mara/The Washington Post)

Trump's grievances spill beyond the Russia matter to include his conviction that former vice president Joe Biden has not faced sufficient scrutiny for his son Hunter's dealings in Ukraine.

"The president is obsessed with his view of fairness," said one Trump adviser, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to candidly describe the president's state of mind. "Most of these items have arisen because the president doesn't think things are fair. His reaction to Joe Biden's son is mostly not a reaction of trying to harm a political opponent, but it's a reaction of not believing that the treatment of the Bidens is in any way similar to how he's been treated. His reaction to McCabe, Comey, various other enemies of the president is a reaction to what he believes is an unfair result happening to his allies."

This adviser added: "Not only is it about fairness, but it's about making sure that when the books are written and the films are being made, that he and his allies come out in the best possible light. All of this relates to perception."

Ben-Ghiat, the New York University professor, credited Trump with his foresight and skill.

"While Trump is impulsive and there's always the question of, is he a chessmaster or is he just moving blindly out of emotion, this strategy of manipulating information and creating a false narrative are the actions of someone who thinks long-term, who thinks about legacy," Ben-Ghiat said. "He's a builder. He thinks about the future. And this is a story about someone building an alternate history for the future."

Toluse Olorunnipa contributed to this report.

Politics

Americans kept wondering what the president wanted them to do about coronavirus. Finally, Trump offered some guidance.

By Philip Rucker

<https://wapo.st/3bAL8mm>



Trump issues new, tougher recommendations on closures and social distancing

President Trump held a news conference alongside the coronavirus task force on March 16 and told Americans to avoid gathering in groups of 10 or more. (The Washington Post)

President Trump for weeks dismissed the danger of the novel coronavirus. He distracted himself by stoking unrelated feuds and nursing grievances. He shared little concrete information about the spreading pandemic, and much of what he did share was false.

Governors and mayors, as well as leaders of businesses large and small, stepped into the leadership vacuum to make difficult decisions affecting their constituents, employees or customers. In the

absence of unambiguous guidance from the president for the citizens he was elected to lead, the frustration of governors boiled over.

And then on Monday, nearly eight weeks after the first coronavirus case was reported in the United States, Trump conveyed that he at last recognizes the magnitude of the crisis that is threatening lives across the nation, disrupting the economy and fundamentally upending the daily rhythms of American life.



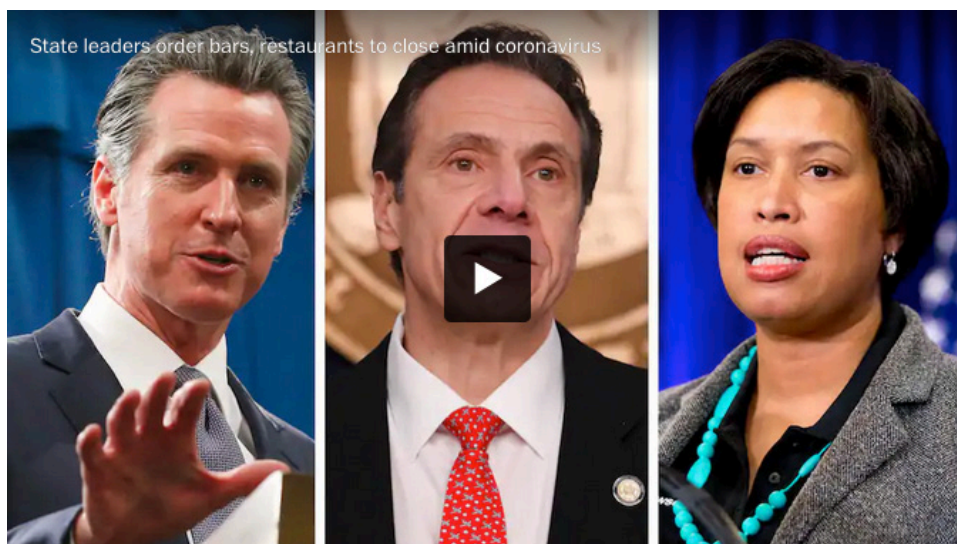
President Trump leads a coronavirus news conference in the White House press briefing room on Monday. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

“We have an invisible enemy,” Trump said at a news conference Monday, where he presented a notably changed demeanor and tone from his previous coronavirus briefings.

Trump and his team of public health experts laid out detailed guidance for state and municipal leaders, as well as for individual families. They recommended closing schools, restaurants, bars, gyms and other such venues, and limiting gatherings to no more than 10 people.

The president — who six days earlier promised “it will all go away” and as recently as Sunday advised Americans to “just relax” — suggested Monday that the outbreak could last until July or August.

Trump had whacked a beehive of angst earlier Monday when he convened a conference call with the nation’s governors. He told them that the states should not rely on the federal government to provide respirators, ventilators and other equipment to aid the infected, and that states should work on obtaining their own.



State leaders, including various governors and the D.C. mayor, announced that all bars and restaurants will be closing in order to slow the spread of covid-19. (The Washington Post)

Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam (D) compared the comment to being at war and “we just heard our leader say you all need to get your own weapons at the state level to defeat this. But that’s the way it’s been.”

Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan (R), who chairs the National Governors Association, said in an interview that “some of my colleagues were pretty upset,” although he allowed for the possibility that the president may have misspoken.

“There’s not enough supplies,” Hogan said, explaining that there has been a backlog getting items distributed from a federal stockpile. In addition, he said, “There’s the issue of testing, there’s sort of these all-day-long issues. But it’s not about who said what, or whose feelings were hurt or what happened. It doesn’t do any good to be Monday-morning quarterbacking. We just have to get this stuff done. There’s a lot of tension and frustration [among] the governors.”

On Monday morning, the governors of Connecticut, New Jersey and New York announced an emergency joint action, directing all restaurants and bars, gyms, movie theaters and casinos in the tri-state area to close.

New York Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo (D), whose state has become an epicenter of coronavirus cases, decried the “hodgepodge” of efforts in various states to mitigate the spread, which he blamed on an absence of presidential leadership that has created “chaos” and a feeling that “the country’s out of control.”



New York Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo (D), center, tours a covid-19 infection testing facility Friday at Glen Island Park in New Rochelle, N.Y. (John Minchillo/AP)

“This is a national problem, and there are no national rules,” Cuomo said at a morning news conference, before the call with Trump. “If the federal government isn’t going to do what it should do, then the states have to try their best.”

The president admonished Cuomo on Twitter, writing that the New York governor ought to “do more.”

Cuomo tweeted back at Trump, “I have to do more? No — YOU have to do something! You’re supposed to be the President.”

About a half-hour later, Trump stepped into the White House press briefing room to unveil the new federal guidelines.

Some Republican governors also have sought to lead where Trump had not until Monday, most especially Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine, who has been at the forefront of enforcing social distancing.

Midday Sunday, as Trump tweeted about Hillary Clinton’s emails, a possible pardon for former national security adviser Michael Flynn and the “Fake and Corrupt News,” DeWine was busy finalizing a dramatic order to make Ohio the first state to close restaurants and bars.

And Sunday evening, as Trump watched the Democratic presidential debate and rendered his judgment to his 73 million Twitter followers — “I must say, that was a VERY boring debate” — the governors of California, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts and Rhode Island, as well as Connecticut, New Jersey and New York, announced or prepared to roll out similarly strict regulations in their states.

A pandemic does not respect state or municipal boundaries, yet the nation’s response mechanisms differ by locality. In some states, schools and restaurants are closed; in others, families pack amusement parks or revelers party in the streets.



Trump leads a coronavirus news conference in the White House press briefing room on Saturday. (Shawn Thew/EPA/Bloomberg News)

One reason for the varying approaches is a void in guidance from Washington. Although the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has issued a steady stream of direction, Trump had until Monday said little about how Americans should adjust their lives to reduce the threat of the coronavirus, aside from urging people to wash their hands and, as he tweeted Saturday, “SOCIAL DISTANCING!” Much of what Trump has said has been contradictory or false.

Former Virginia governor Terry McAuliffe (D) explained the challenge for state or municipal leaders to make decisions about a widespread public health crisis without the broad data and technical expertise of the federal government.

“If you’re a governor, you deal with earthquakes and tornadoes and flooding and blizzards,” he said. “They’re in your state, you’ve got the information and you make a calculated decision about what’s in the best interests of your citizens. But something like this, a pandemic, you’re only relying on the federal government.”

Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin drew a parallel from today to the Great Depression in the early 1930s, when President Herbert Hoover was so lacking in leadership and unwilling to commit federal aid to help those suffering that it fell to governors to protect their citizens. That was when a New York governor named Franklin D. Roosevelt rose to national prominence by talking about the government's responsibility to lift up society and launched the first public works programs for unemployed citizens. Roosevelt was elected president in 1932.

"We have to have this national leadership right now, which the country is crying out for," Goodwin said.



She added, "Why is it that most of the presidents we remember the best had moments of crisis, whether it's George Washington or Abraham Lincoln or Franklin Roosevelt? It's because they were able to communicate to the people what the crisis was, to make the people feel inspired to be part of working it out through empathy, taking responsibility and setting an example, and then to mobilize every resource in the country."

The vacuum in presidential leadership that Cuomo and other governors decried was evident at Sunday's White House coronavirus briefing, which occurred after Trump had tweeted earlier that day about seven unrelated topics.

"We're going to all be great," Trump said. "We're going to be so good."

The president celebrated the Federal Reserve's extraordinary decision to lower interest rates to zero as "phenomenal" and "terrific," adding that it made him "very happy."

Then he read a list of names of grocery chain executives with whom he had spoken earlier that day and congratulated them: "Very impressive people," he said, "the biggest in the world, in the world of stores and groceries and all." And Trump sought to offer assurances to anyone who might be anxious by empty store shelves.

"Just relax," he said, imploring Americans not to stock up on emergency supplies of food and other essentials because "it all will pass."

Then Trump, after scolding the media, walked away without answering questions from reporters. He ceded the stage to Vice President Pence and the public health experts on the White House task force — the most prominent of whom shared a far different outlook.

"As I've said many times, and I'll repeat it: The worst is, yes, ahead for us," Anthony S. Fauci, the longtime director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said Sunday. "It is how we respond to that challenge that's going to determine what the ultimate endpoint is going to be. We have a very, very critical point now."

By the time Trump reemerged in public view Monday, he was singing the same tune as Fauci.



Trump addresses reporters at Monday's coronavirus news conference. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

“Every one of us has a critical role to play in stopping the spread and transmission of the virus,” Trump said, exhorting all Americans, including the young and healthy, to distance themselves socially.

“This is a very bad one,” he added. “This is bad in the sense that it is just so contagious, sort of record-setting type contagion. . . . My focus is really on getting rid of this problem.”

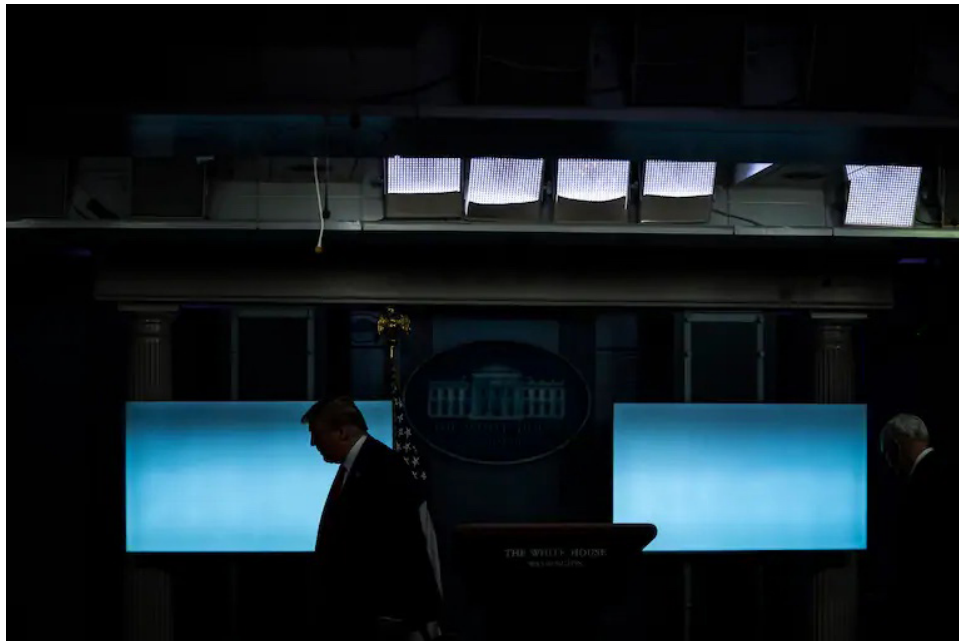
Erin Cox in Annapolis and Gregory S. Schneider in Richmond contributed to this report.

Politics

34 days of pandemic: Inside Trump's desperate attempts to reopen America

By Philip Rucker, Josh Dawsey, Yasmeen Abutaleb,
Robert Costa and Lena H. Sun

<https://wapo.st/3pLBqTA>



President Trump walks away from the podium to play a video during a briefing on the coronavirus pandemic at the White House on April 13. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

The epidemiological models under review in the White House Situation Room in late March were bracing. In a best-case scenario, they showed the novel coronavirus was likely to kill between 100,000 and 240,000 Americans. President Trump was apprehensive about so much carnage on his watch, yet also impatient to reopen the economy — and he wanted data to justify doing so.

So the White House considered its own analysis. A small team led by Kevin Hassett — a former chairman of Trump's Council of Economic Advisers with no background in infectious diseases — quietly built an econometric model to guide response operations.

Many White House aides interpreted the analysis as predicting that the daily death count would peak in mid-April before dropping off substantially, and that there would be far fewer fatalities than initially foreseen, according to six people briefed on it.

Although Hassett denied that he ever projected the number of dead, other senior administration officials said his presentations characterized the count as lower than commonly forecast — and that it was embraced inside the West Wing by the president's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, and other powerful aides helping to oversee the government's pandemic response. It affirmed their own skepticism about the severity of the virus and bolstered their case to shift the focus to the economy, which they firmly believed would determine whether Trump wins a second term.



Over the past two months, President Trump has denied saying things he previously said about the coronavirus at least seven times. (The Washington Post)

For Trump — whose decision-making has been guided largely by his reelection prospects — the analysis, coupled with Hassett's grim predictions of economic calamity, provided justification to pivot to where he preferred to be: cheering an economic revival rather than managing a catastrophic health crisis.

Trump directed his coronavirus task force to issue guidelines for reopening businesses, encouraged "LIBERATE" protests to apply pressure on governors and proclaimed that "the cure can't be worse than the problem itself" — even as polls showed that Americans were far more concerned about their personal safety.

By the end of April — with more Americans dying in the month than in all of the Vietnam War — it became clear that the Hassett model was too good to be true. "A catastrophic miss," as a former senior administration official briefed on the data described it. The president's course would not be changed, however. Trump and Kushner began to declare a great victory against the virus, while urging America to start reopening businesses and schools.

"It's going to go. It's going to leave. It's going to be gone. It's going to be eradicated," the president said Wednesday, hours after his son-in-law claimed the administration's response had been "a great success story."

The span of 34 days between March 29, when Trump agreed to extend strict social-distancing guidelines, and this past week, when he celebrated the reopening of some states as a harbinger of economic revival, tells a story of desperation and dysfunction.

So determined was Trump to extinguish the deadly virus that he repeatedly embraced fantasy cure-alls and tuned out both the reality that the first wave has yet to significantly recede and the possibility of a potentially worse second wave in the fall.



Since the start of the coronavirus outbreak, President Trump has repeatedly said that the virus will disappear. (The Washington Post)

The president sought to obscure major problems by trying to recast them as triumphs. He repeatedly boasted, for instance, that the United States has conducted more tests than any other country, even though the total of 6.75 million is a fraction of the 2 million to 3 million tests per day that many experts say is needed to safely reopen.

And though Trump was fixated on reopening the economy, he and his administration fell far short of making that a reality. The factors that health and business leaders say are critical to a speedy and effective reopening — widespread testing, contact tracing and coordinated efforts between Washington and the states — remain lacking.

“We wasted two months denying it. We’re now wasting another two months by just dithering around,” said Kathleen Sebelius, a former Kansas governor and health secretary in the Obama administration. “The administration seems to have washed their hands of it and said [to governors], we’re out of it. You’re on your own. Figure it out.”

“That’s really the story of all this,” agreed one outside adviser to the Trump administration. “The states are just doing everything on their own.”

This story documenting Trump’s month-long struggle to reopen America is based on interviews with 82 administration officials, outside advisers and experts with detailed knowledge of the White House’s handling of the pandemic. Many of them spoke on the condition of anonymity to recount internal discussions or share candid assessments without risk of retribution.

Some of Trump’s closest advisers rebutted on the record the suggestion that the pandemic response has been anything but successful.

“This is a historically new challenge, and we’ve really risen to the occasion,” Kushner said in an interview. “When history looks back on this, they’ll say, man, the federal government acted really quickly and creatively, they threw a lot at the problem and saved a lot of lives.”



White House custodial staff clean ahead of a coronavirus task force briefing at the White House on April 14. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany agreed. “President Trump’s swift and unprecedented action has saved American lives,” she said, pointing out that governors from both parties have praised some of the administration’s work.

Trump’s interactions with the states during the time were jarringly inconsistent. One day, he called himself a wartime president with total authority; the next day, he said he was merely President Backup, there to help states as he deems necessary.

Trump crowned himself “the king of ventilators” and boasted of his work shoring up supply chains, yet shamed governors for asking for too many supplies for besieged hospitals and health-care workers in their states. At one point, he seemed to suggest that hospitals were selling protective gear provided by the federal government on the black market.

And though administration health officials produced detailed guidelines for reopening, those released by Trump were intentionally vague and devoid of clear metrics, making it easier for the president to avoid responsibility and harder for local leaders to interpret. For instance, Trump initially embraced the aggressive reopening plan by Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp (R), only to quickly abandon Kemp after public outcry.

“It’s not going to be coming back like some people think, and part of my job, I think, is to explain to the people of Ohio that we’re really not going to be all the way back,” said Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine (R), whose safety-first approach has won him enormous praise in his state. “We’re not going to be all the way back until we have a vaccine that is available to everyone.”

Trump tried to manage the perception of his performance by holding daily, hours-long press briefings that confused and repelled

large swaths of the country. As the death toll mounted, the briefings became less about providing critical health information and more a forum for Trump to air grievances, shift blame, stoke feuds, spread misinformation and inspire false hope.

“It’s one hell of a difficult situation,” said economist Arthur Laffer, an outside Trump adviser. “Whatever he does, if something goes wrong, his critics will say, ‘I told you so!’ So he’s dealing with that, which isn’t a healthy environment.”

Trump’s confidants argue that the president has been moved by the pandemic. “Sometimes — and I felt this way with 9/11 — things are so big, so horrible, that if you’re the guy in charge, it makes you a little more humble,” said former New York mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, who as Trump’s personal lawyer has been speaking regularly with the president. “If you think about how he’s handled it, it is tough, it can be humbling.”

Yet if Trump felt humbled, he managed to avoid revealing much humility. Aside from reading perfunctory remarks scripted by aides, the president voiced little compassion for the tens of thousands who have lost lives or the tens of millions who have lost their jobs.

By month’s end, as businesses in Georgia, Colorado, Texas and elsewhere started to reopen, the total number of dead climbed past 60,000.

“It could get a whole lot worse, and anyone who doesn’t recognize that is really fooling themselves,” said Tom Frieden, a former director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “As we go back out again, the virus is still there. If we don’t have systems to contain it, it can explode again. ... There is no quick fix.”



President Trump holds a briefing in response to the coronavirus pandemic at the White House on March 31. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

Seeking a silver bullet

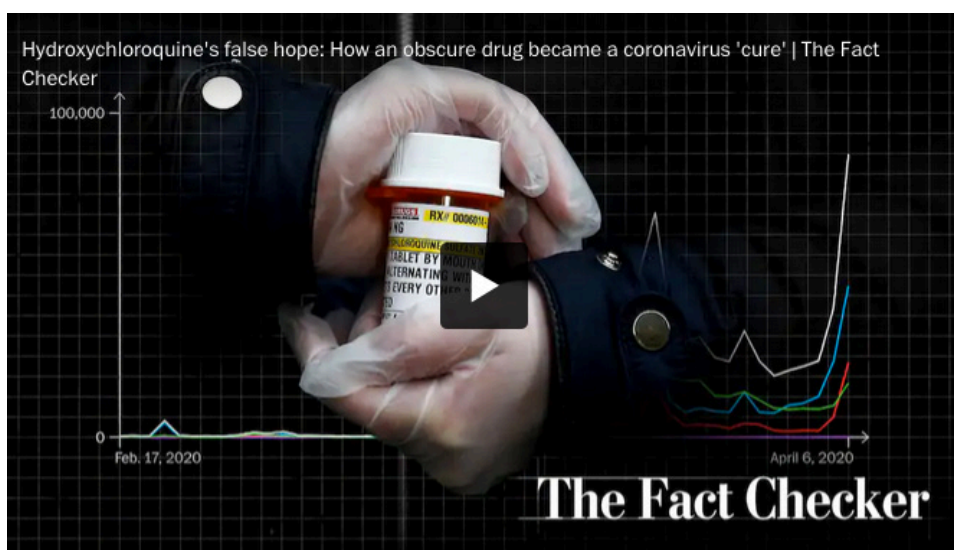
For a week straight in late March, as businesses shuttered and jobless claims shot up, Trump talked about reopening the country quickly. He picked a start date of April 12, because he liked the idea of church pews packed with parishioners on Easter Sunday. Then he beat a hasty retreat.

Two physicians on the White House task force, Deborah Birx and Anthony S. Fauci, presented dire projections based on publicly-available models showing that without continued social distancing and other mitigation efforts as many as 1.6 million to 2.2 million Americans could die. With a continued lockdown, there would be an estimated 100,000 to 240,000 fatalities. Although some in the administration doubted the death toll would ever rise that high, they shared Birx and Fauci's goal of persuading the president to take the pandemic more seriously.

Task force members prepared to extend social distancing guidelines, already in place for 15 days, for an additional two weeks and then reassess. But Trump — who also had been influenced by watching television footage of body bags being carried out of a hospital near his Queens boyhood home in New York — surprised them by agreeing to extend social distancing for 30 days, until the end of April. For the doctors, this was a quiet victory.

“He’s a guy that goes with his gut,” said a senior administration official involved in task force discussions. The doctors, this official added, “don’t have that luxury. Their jobs are to make sure he understands where they are on the science and data.”

Trump, meanwhile, used his presidential megaphone to promote what he thought was a silver bullet: hydroxychloroquine. Night after night in late March and early April, he kept hearing about the controversial anti-malarial drug on his favorite Fox News Channel programs, where television doctors and commentators touted its efficacy. He also heard about the drug in a flurry of conversations with Giuliani and other friends.



Claims about hydroxychloroquine to treat covid-19 have gained traction despite a lack of scientific evidence. How did this happen? (The Washington Post)

Hydroxychloroquine became a presidential obsession. He asked about it in meetings — “What’s the hold up?” he would complain — and repeatedly asked Food and Drug Administration commissioner Stephen Hahn if he was moving as quickly as possible to approve it, officials said.

Hahn said in an interview Saturday, “I can assure you 100 percent that the president has never pressured me to make a decision regarding any regulatory aspect of the FDA’s work.”

The commissioner added that in each of their conversations about hydroxychloroquine Trump has said something along the lines of, “It might work, it might not work, but he doesn’t see any reason why a doctor can’t make that decision. And he totally acknowledged that we might discover it may not work.”

In one Oval Office meeting, Trump asked advisers about a French study released in late March that tested whether hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin were effective against covid-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus. The small, non-random study was dismissed by many public-health experts, yet Trump seized on it as evidence the drugs might work. As the president said repeatedly in public, “What do you have to lose?” Hahn had to explain that the combination of the medications could cause heart toxicity.

On April 3, Fox host Laura Ingraham paid Trump a visit in the Oval Office to talk up hydroxychloroquine. She brought with her two regular on-air guests in what she dubs her “medicine cabinet”: Ramin Oskoui, a Washington-based cardiologist, and Stephen Smith, a New Jersey-based infectious disease specialist. Hahn attended as well, as Smith made a detailed presentation, complete with a spreadsheet, about how hydroxychloroquine works and its value as a treatment during hospitalization.



FDA Commissioner Stephen Hahn at a coronavirus task force briefing at the White House on March 30. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

“I’m a guy who looks at data,” Smith said in an interview. “I came as a scientist and physician. I trained under Dr. Fauci and respect him a lot.”

Oskoui declined to comment.

Some senior Republicans who heard about the meeting cringed about a television host’s special access to offer medical advice to the president, but it fit a pattern of Trump soliciting input from media stars rather than government experts.

In what was widely seen as an effort to placate Trump, the FDA issued an emergency use authorization for the drug, and the drug was added to the Strategic National Stockpile. But the president conflated those efforts with outright approval of the drug, which the senior official said “gave a little more ammo because it created the optics that approval had basically been given to the drug.”

Trump at times went to extreme lengths to promote hydroxychloroquine. Keith Frankel, a vitamins executive who occasionally socializes with Trump at his Mar-a-Lago Club in Palm Beach, Fla., said the president asked him to call California Gov. Gavin Newsom (D) on his cellphone and try to make a deal for the nation's largest state to buy millions of tablets of hydroxychloroquine from an Indian manufacturer. Frankel said he got Newsom's phone number from Trump.

Frankel was not working through official U.S. government channels, according to a senior government official. California did not agree to take the drugs being offered, Frankel said, adding that after consulting with Trump he also spoke to hospital officials in New Jersey and the state health commissioner in New York.

"A guy I know sells products to these guys in India who are making the drug," Frankel said. He said he learned of the Indian manufacturer through a connection in Turkey. Several million of the pills could have been supplied, he said, but "there ended up being no deal."

Frankel, who said he was recovering from the coronavirus himself, claimed the drugs would have been sold at cost to the states. "It was totally honest and philanthropic," he said, arguing that taking the drug had helped him recover.

Trump embraced hydroxychloroquine, as well as azithromycin, as "one of the biggest game-changers in the history of medicine." In the weeks that followed, however, the dangers became more clear. A Veterans Affairs study released April 21 found that covid-19 patients who were treated with hydroxychloroquine were more likely to die than those who were not. Three days later, the FDA warned that doctors should not use the drug to treat covid-19 patients outside a hospital or clinical trial because of reports of "serious heart rhythm problems."

Although Trump stopped touting the drug publicly, privately he maintained his support for hydroxychloroquine and got upset with government officials presenting studies or bringing him evidence of its risks or failings, encouraging them to have a more positive outlook, aides said.



Anthony S. Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases; Deborah Birx, White House coronavirus response coordinator; Robert Redfield, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; and U.S. Surgeon General Jerome Adams listen as President Trump speaks during a briefing at the White House on April 22. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

‘A God complex’

As April began with the extension of social distancing, tensions grew within the administration between the doctors and scientists advising the response and the economic and political aides with longer-standing relationships with the president.

Marc Short, chief of staff to Vice President Pence, exerted significant influence over the coronavirus task force, setting the agenda

and determining seating arrangements for meetings as well as helping to orchestrate press briefings. Short also is one of the White House's most vocal skeptics of how bad the pandemic would be. He repeatedly questioned the data being shared with Trump, and in internal discussions said he did not believe the death toll would ever get to 60,000 and that the administration was overreacting, damaging the economy and the president's chances for reelection, according to people who have heard his arguments.

Day after day, Short pressed other officials to reopen the entire country, encouraging more risks to get the economy humming again. Short succeeded in pushing for Trump to resume travel, as Pence had done, over the objections of some officials, who argued that leaving Washington endangers the principals and their staffs. Trump plans to visit a mask manufacturing plant in Arizona on Tuesday.

Short aligned with Hassett, Kushner, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and National Economic Council Director Larry Kudlow, among others, who shared the belief that the economy had been shut down for long enough. A former senior administration official briefed on the internal dynamics described the consensus mind-set among this bloc as believing health officials were "like the school nurse trying to tell the principal how to run the school."

Hassett's data analysis helped affirm this view internally. Hassett said he merely built a tool to evaluate the evolution of data from the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington. He confirmed that he shared his charts internally and that they often showed fewer deaths than IHME or others were projecting — but that he was drawing a curve based on real-time mortality data versus what the charts predicted would happen for the same days.

“I have never, ever said that that’s my projection of what the death count was going to be, and no administration policy has been influenced by my projections,” he said, adding, “It’s an utterly false story that I’ve been a rosy-scenario guy inside the White House.”

The task force members with medical degrees — Birx, Fauci and Hahn, as well as CDC Director Robert Redfield, Surgeon General Jerome M. Adams and Brett Giroir, who leads the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps — splintered off in mid- to late-March and began meeting on their own almost daily, three senior administration officials said. Some in the “doctors group” were distressed by what one official dubbed the “voodoo” discussed within the broader task force.



Deborah Birx and Anthony S. Fauci arrive for a coronavirus task force briefing at the White House on April 1. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

The CDC, which traditionally takes the lead in public health responses, has not held a media briefing since March 9. But Redfield said he enjoyed “a prime position on the ladder of the decision-making process.”

“The one thing that has been extremely gratifying is that the public health message has been respected as the public health message,” Redfield said.

The doctors group strove to present a unified front to the president on various medical and scientific issues. They recently discussed how antibody tests, designed to identify people with possible immunity from the virus, are not a panacea to reopening the country because the results sometimes are inaccurate.

“There’s a little bit of a God complex,” one senior administration official said of the group. “They’re all about science, science, science, which is good, but sometimes there’s a little bit less of a consideration of politics when maybe there should be.”

With health professionals and other new faces suddenly in his midst, Trump sought comfort from the familiar. Hope Hicks, an original staffer on the 2016 campaign who left the White House in 2018, returned in March in a senior adviser capacity.

Hicks accompanied the president to most every meeting and planned his daily schedule, aides said, suggesting themed events, tweaking his scripted public comments and even calling Cabinet secretaries to convey the president’s directives. She attended coronavirus task force meetings most days, even though Trump often skipped them, sitting prominently along with doctors and economists.

Trump has peppered his new chief of staff, Mark Meadows, and other senior aides with phone calls “in almost every single hour of the day,” sometimes well after midnight, according to one senior official. The president was often in a sour mood, complaining about media coverage and carping that he does not get enough credit.



Jared Kushner listens to President Trump during a briefing at the White House on April 2. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

‘The system is broken’

One of the more political issues during this period was the fight for supplies, such as ventilators, testing machines and swabs, and masks and other protective gear. Amid disruptions to the global supply chain, governors pleaded with the White House for help obtaining equipment from the Strategic National Stockpile, but the administration did not quickly meet their needs, and Trump derided governors when he thought they were asking for too much or not praising him enough.

Kushner struck a nerve on April 2 when he said that “the notion of the federal stockpile was it’s supposed to be our stockpile. It’s not supposed to be states’ stockpiles that they then use.”

Drive-throughs were the centerpiece of the administration’s national testing plan, pieced together by Kushner and his team and

hastily rolled out by Trump on March 13 in the Rose Garden. The president promised that 5 million tests would be distributed before the end of the month. A few days earlier, Pence had been even more optimistic, announcing that more than 1 million tests already had been distributed and another four million would be sent out by the end of that week.

But Trump's promise of a drive-through testing site at your neighborhood CVS or Walmart never materialized. The administration ultimately stood up 78 testing sites, rather than the thousands initially promised, and then the president placed responsibility for testing on the states.

"The need to reopen, that was not based on a clear road map of how people were going to be tested," said Bhaskar Chakravorti, dean of global business at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. "The system is broken at every point."

Trump has tried to claim testing as an unambiguous success. "We want to get our country open, and the testing is not going to be a problem at all," he said Monday in the Rose Garden. "In fact, it's going to be one of the greatest assets that we have."

Yet even as the administration helped significantly ramp up testing capacity, problems persisted. Several states grew frustrated as they tried to procure testing supplies through the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Federal and state officials said it was unclear who was in charge, leading to rampant confusion, and tests went unused because there were not enough other supplies to administer them.

A federal official who recently met with Birx said "she knows they are far behind on testing, no matter what the president says."

In a White House meeting with other officials in early April, Birx said that many of the testing labs were still only operating at 10 percent of capacity. Birx said she needed to learn where all the machines and labs were, and that the government did not know.



Deborah Birx listens as President Trump speaks during a briefing at the White House on April 6. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

During one call, Kemp told the president testing was such a problem in Georgia that he was working with the National Guard.

Trump has often touted a testing system created by Abbott that can run nearly 500 tests in 24 hours. But the vast majority of Abbott's tests are going unused because of a shortage of materials and staff to run them, two senior administration officials said.

Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker (D) said Trump was either confused about what is required to administer tests or deliberately glossing over the urgent problems.

"The truth of the matter is that the president doesn't seem to under-

stand the difference between testing capacity and getting testing results,” Pritzker said. “We don’t have the supplies to run those tests.”

In Wisconsin, for instance, Gov. Tony Evers (D) requested 60,000 plastic tips needed to store reagents and 10,000 testing swabs and numerous reagent kits from FEMA in late March. But by April 21, the day Pence visited Wisconsin to tout the administration’s pandemic response, Wisconsin had only received 2,800 tips and 3,500 testing swabs, according to Rep. Mark Pocan (D-Wis.).

When members of the congressional delegation appealed to FEMA Director Peter Gaynor and some of his deputies, the agency said in a conference call that it did not have enough supplies and that the state would need to work with the CDC, according to Pocan, who was on the call. Then, on April 8, FEMA changed its policy to make it the responsibility of states to procure supplies from commercial distributors, Pocan said.

“Just telling us to go to the private market isn’t a solution,” Pocan said. “It’s an excuse.”

Without assistance from Washington, Wisconsin began working with Illinois, Michigan and other states in a regional alliance to obtain supplies and develop a strategy. States in other regions of the country also are partnering with one another, forming a patchwork of alliances.

“The government is showing up in split screen, where Washington is dominated by whatever President Trump is thinking moment by moment,” Sebelius said. “What’s very difficult in a country that is as big and mobile as the United States is to have the state-by-state or city-by-city decision-making process. Nothing could be more confusing to people.”

In Maryland, Gov. Larry Hogan (R) quietly entered into negotiations with South Korea, with the help of his wife, Yumi, a Korean American. Exasperated with the lack of tests in his state, Hogan spent about 22 days arranging to procure 500,000 tests, negotiating with eight different Maryland agencies, the Korean embassy and officials at the State Department.

Once the FDA and U.S. Customs and Border Protection signed off on the deal, a Korean Air jet touched down at Baltimore-Washington International Marshall Airport on April 18 to deliver the supplies. Hogan said he was worried federal officials would try to commandeer the tests, so he had Maryland Army National Guard members and Maryland State Police officers escort and protect the cargo.

“It was like Fort Knox to us, because it was going to save the lives of thousands of our citizens,” Hogan said. “That was so important to us that we wanted to make sure that that plane took off from Korea safely, landed here in America safely, and that we guarded that cargo from whoever might interfere with us getting that to our folks that needed it.”

The move infuriated Trump, who has long chafed at Hogan’s criticisms and, according to advisers, saw Maryland’s deal with South Korea as a bid to embarrass the president.

White House officials argue the administration has been unusually attentive to the needs of states. After early complaints, the administration ramped up production and delivery of ventilators and the supply is now considered sufficient. Trump had 25 one-on-one calls with governors from at least 14 states in April, aides said, while members of the Cabinet and coronavirus task force had at least 113 such conversations.

“The media have been distracted by examples of disagreement instead of focusing on the vast examples of partnership and coming together of state and federal governments,” said Douglas Hoelscher, the White House’s director of intergovernmental affairs.

Kushner said Saturday that criticisms from governors are outdated and that every state’s testing needs have now been satisfied. He challenged any governor who claims unmet needs to contact his office.

“We’ve figured out how to get all of the states enough complete testing kits to do the testing that they’ve requested,” Kushner said. “We can get to a really big number in May. The biggest thing holding us back is not supplies or capacity; it’s the states’ ability to collect more samples.”



White House chief economic adviser Larry Kudlow and Kevin Hassett, a senior economic adviser, speak as Josh Bolten, president and CEO of the Business Roundtable, waits for President Trump to arrive for a roundtable with industry executives on the plan for Opening Up America Again in the State Dining Room at the White House on April 29. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

‘Get open, get open, get open’

The weekend of April 11, Trump took a break from his daily news conferences in observance of Easter. He spent considerable time on the phone with friends and advisers and began to shift toward concluding that the country could not afford to remain locked down much longer. He was irate with Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar, officials said, screaming and swearing at one ally about how things were so unfair.

The president set his sights on a May 1 reopening.

Trump had been agonizing over the economy, watching the number of Americans filing unemployment insurance claims climb each week. He fretted about the unemployment rate rising to 15 percent or even higher, a milestone that advisers warned him would seriously jeopardize his reelection.

In a private April call with supporters on immigration, Ken Cuccinelli, a top immigration official, said that the numbers would be “so stunning ... that it will be a messaging hit.”

In a sign of how Trump’s priorities were changing, two Situation Room meetings on Saturdays in April began with presentations by Hassett and Kudlow about the economy. They both warned the president of double-digit unemployment and tens of millions of Americans losing their jobs.

In one of the meetings, Hassett had such a negative outlook on the economy that he asked people in the room not to repeat his comments to others, according to people familiar with the meeting. At one point, he suggested that GDP could fall 40 percent and that tens of millions people could lose their jobs. Hassett has since made

similar comments publicly, warning of unemployment levels not seen since the Great Depression.

Trump heard that message from others as well. He held regular calls with a group known internally as “Kudlow’s guys” — generational peers with high media profiles, including Laffer, financier Steve Forbes and economist Stephen Moore.

“Get open, get open, get open — we kept pressing that point,” Moore said. Otherwise, he recalled telling Trump, “You’ll have a mini-Great Depression. You’ll have body bags of dead businesses and jobs that will never be resurrected.”

On April 14, Ingraham returned to the Oval Office to meet with the president. The Fox host reiterated her belief that the country needed to reopen and argued for limits on contact tracing, a person with knowledge of the meeting said.



President Trump participates in a roundtable with industry executives on the plan for Opening Up America Again in the State Dining Room at the White House on April 29. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

As Trump watched television during this period, he sensed popular support. Outside state capitols, a smattering of activists flouted social distancing guidelines to protest governors who had issued stay-at-home orders. Many of them waved Trump campaign flags or sported other Trump-branded paraphernalia.

To create political cover for Trump, White House aides scrambled to put together a business advisory council made up of chief executives from across a range of industries.

“The primary concern from everybody was really safety: Consumer safety, guest safety, and making sure that there was confidence and comfort from the public to be able to go back to wherever, whether it’s a store or a shopping mall or a bank or a restaurant,” said Thomas Keller, a celebrity chef and restaurateur who participated.

Other members said they were only invited to one conference call, and the group has been largely dormant since, with no clear mechanism to share ideas.

As the White House prepared to roll out new guidelines for reopening, CDC and FEMA officials sent a 36-page document on April 10 outlining in detail the recommended stages of reopening, including detailed instructions for schools, child-care facilities, summer camps, parks, faith-based organizations and restaurants.

But on April 16, when Trump and Birx released their guidelines for a slow and staggered return to normal in places with minimal cases of the coronavirus, many of the details fine-tuned by the CDC were stripped out.

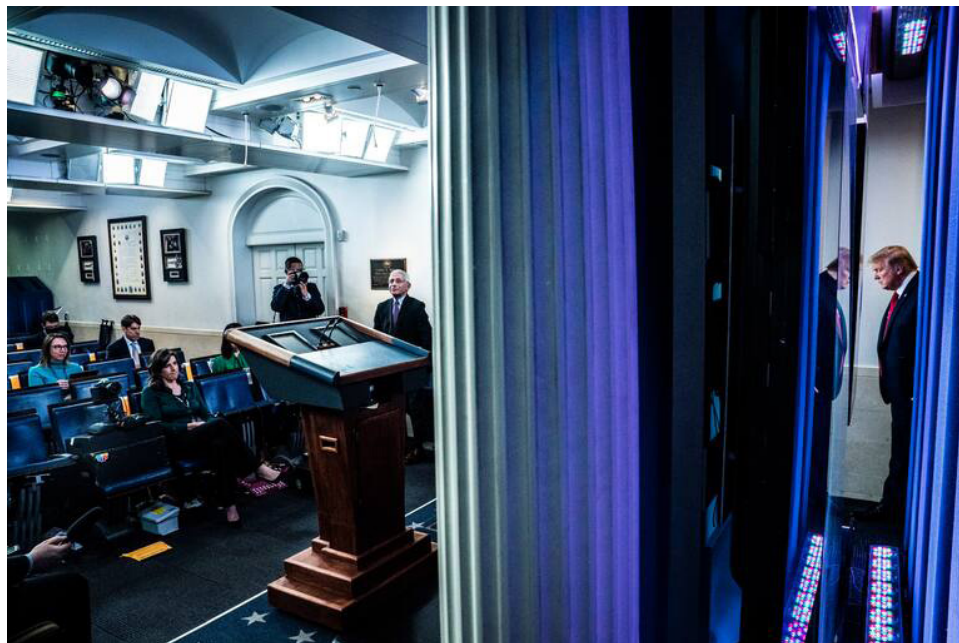
Officials continued to debate how restaurants, bars and houses of worship should operate. The CDC circulated a 17-page document with strong recommendations, but many in the White House

resisted, particularly when it came to restricting parishioners from singing in choirs or sharing hymnals and offering plates, and suggesting that restaurants use digital menus and avoid salad bars. The document has not been made public and is still in the editing process.

Trump formally embraced the quarantine protesters on April 17 with a trio of all-caps tweets: “LIBERATE MICHIGAN!” “LIBERATE MINNESOTA!” and “LIBERATE VIRGINIA.”

Inside the White House, there was disappointment about Trump’s tweets since many of his aides had hoped to frame his decision on reopening as a presidential test he had met with calm. Privately, several of them acknowledged that the “LIBERATE” tweets brought Trump back into the realm of conspiracy and anger, which he considers safe harbor when he feels boxed in.

Even as Trump berated aides last week over the poor pace of testing — “We have no message on testing,” he complained, according to a



President Trump arrives to speak alongside members of the coronavirus task force during a briefing at the White House on April 22. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

senior administration official who directly heard the president — he publicly focused elsewhere. West Wing aides are planning to book more media appearances by Kudlow, Hassett and Mnuchin in coming weeks, with fewer by Birx and Fauci.

“The White House apparatus is totally shifting to the economy,” the senior official said, noting that Trump is convening discussions about reopening this weekend at Camp David.

‘Almost a cleaning’

With Trump engaged in a war of words with governors over testing, public health experts were sounding an alarm about another vulnerability: contact tracing. Finding and isolating infected people and their contacts had been the cornerstone for successful mitigation efforts in South Korea, Singapore and other countries.

For parts of the United States to reopen, health departments need to be ready to extinguish any new outbreaks immediately. That would require an enormous corps of health workers known as contact tracers to track down anyone who might have been exposed to someone with covid-19.

But as with testing, the federal government has placed the onus on states to devise their own contact tracing programs. So state and local health departments started developing programs on their own, or formed regional partnerships.

“We need a national commitment to get this done in order to defeat the virus,” said Michael Leavitt, a former Republican governor of Utah and health secretary in the George W. Bush administration.

Inside the West Wing, there were sharp fights over contact tracing and whether to approve the use of smartphone apps. For example,

in a recent Situation Room meeting, Trump senior adviser Stephen Miller questioned contact tracing because so many people were asymptomatic, advisers said.

Trump, however, rarely mentioned contact tracing. His focus was on more personal challenges. One senior White House official said that the president was among the most animated when discussing what his press appearances would be like: A call-in to the radio? A morning photo opp? An evening news conference? Hicks had to move along the conversation in coronavirus meetings by telling the boss they would decide later.

On April 21, when New York Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo (D) visited the White House to meet with Trump, the president asked if he would join him at that afternoon's press briefing, an idea Hicks encouraged, according to officials with knowledge of the episode.

Cuomo declined and left the White House without news photographers snapping pictures of him with the president.



Cameras are pointed toward President Trump as he holds a briefing at the White House on April 6. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

The next day, Trump's focus was squarely on his declining political fortunes. His reelection team — including Kushner, campaign manager Brad Parscale and Republican National Committee Chair Ronna McDaniel — staged something of an intervention. They presented fresh polls that painted a picture so grim they hoped the president would be persuaded to curtail his daily press briefings, as the data suggested the performances had damaged him.

One of the polls, an internal RNC survey of voters in 17 battleground states, had former vice president Joe Biden leading Trump 48 to 45 percent, according to an adviser briefed on the 20-page polling memo. The coronavirus ranked as the most important issue to voters, and 54 percent of those surveyed said Trump was too slow to respond to the crisis, while 52 percent said they believed the government should be doing more.

Worse still were the matchups with Biden on a range of core characteristics. Just 36 percent said they considered Trump more honest and trustworthy; 35 percent said he was more compassionate and empathetic; 44 percent said he was more competent; 43 percent said they believed he fights more for people like them; and 36 percent said he was more calm, steady and relatable.

Trump did outperform Biden in some areas, such as being better at getting things done and better in handling a crisis. Still, on a question that historically has helped determine whether incumbents win reelection — whether the country is headed in the right direction — just 37 percent said they believed it was.

The decision to share the data with Trump backfired. The president went into one of his rages. He said he did not believe the numbers, arguing that people “love” his performances at the briefings and think he is “fighting for them,” according to a person with knowledge of the conversation. He berated Parscale for the polling data,

threatening that he might sue his campaign manager — although it was unclear whether he made the remark in jest, and the two would later bury the hatchet.

On April 23, the day after his campaign team's polling intervention, Trump continued with his usual behavior. During a lengthy and at times hostile question-and-answer session with reporters, Trump mused aloud about being treated with ultraviolet light or injecting bleach or another household disinfectant into the body to cure the coronavirus.

"I see the disinfectant, where it knocks [the virus] out in a minute — one minute — and is there a way we can do something like that, by injection inside, or almost a cleaning," Trump said, referring to the human body.

Injecting or ingesting disinfectants is dangerous and can be deadly. Trump would later claim he was being sarcastic, but there was no trace of sarcasm in the president's comments.



Staff and visitors watch as Marine One carrying President Trump departs for Camp David from the South Lawn at the White House on May 1. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

That day, 1,857 Americans died of the coronavirus. The next week, the number of cases reported in the United States surpassed 1 million.

And by month's end, as Trump cheered businesses reopening in Georgia, Texas and several other states "because we have to get our country back," the total dead climbed past 63,000, with no sign of slowing down.

Shane Harris contributed to this report.

Politics

As cities burned, Trump stayed silent — other than tweeting fuel on the fire

By Philip Rucker

<https://wapo.st/2ZJwHXW>



Members of the U.S. Secret Service stand guard in front of the White House as demonstrators gather nearby on Saturday to protest the death of George Floyd. (Evelyn Hockstein for The Washington Post)

In cities across America on Sunday, people awoke to see shattered glass, charred vehicles, bruised bodies and graffiti-tagged buildings. Demonstrators gathered again in peaceful daytime protest of racial injustice. By evening, thousands had converged again in front of the White House, where people had rioted and set fires the night before.

President Trump stayed safely ensconced inside and had nothing to say, besides tweeting fuel on the fire.

Never in the 1,227 days of Trump's presidency has the nation seemed to cry out for leadership as it did Sunday, yet Trump made no attempt to provide it.

That was by design. Trump and some of his advisers calculated that he should not speak to the nation because he had nothing new to say and had no tangible policy or action to announce yet, according to a senior administration official. Evidently not feeling an urgent motivation Sunday to try to bring people together, he stayed silent.

Trump let his tweets speak for themselves. One attacked the Democratic mayor of Minneapolis; another announced that his administration would designate the antifa movement a terrorist organization; a third accused the media of fomenting hatred and anarchy; and in yet another, he praised himself for the deployment of the National Guard and denigrated former vice president Joe Biden.

In one of his missives, Trump wrote, "Get tough Democrat Mayors and Governors. These people are ANARCHISTS. Call in our National Guard NOW. The World is watching and laughing at you and Sleepy Joe. Is this what America wants? NO!!!"

The United States is visibly, painfully broken by the unprecedented confluence of health, economic and social crises, any one of which alone would test a president. It was extraordinary then to hear some in the public arena suggest Sunday that this president ought stay in the background, arguing that Trump lacked the moral authority and credibility necessary to heal the country.

"He should just stop talking. This is like Charlottesville all over again," Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms (D) said Sunday on

CNN's "State of the Union," referring to Trump's equivocations following a deadly white-supremacist rally in 2017. "He speaks, and he makes it worse. There are times when you should just be quiet. And I wish that he would just be quiet."



People protest outside the White House on Saturday. (Evelyn Hockstein for The Washington Post)

This weekend exemplified many of the characteristics that have defined Trump's five years as a presidential candidate and president — chaos and unrest, fear and anger, division and disruption. Some of these themes and qualities helped draw Trump's supporters to him and keep them faithful, giving him a chance at reelection in November despite the carnage on his watch this spring.

Yet these same attributes make it challenging if not impossible for him to inspire unity, according to officials and strategists in both political parties.

It is an open question, too, whether Trump aspires to unite. There is ample evidence that he does not, as he built a political strategy

around pitting groups against one another and declaring winners and losers.

“The rioting in the streets has put an exclamation point on what this president cannot do: To bring people around and say we are all in this together,” said Tom Rath, a longtime Republican official and former attorney general in New Hampshire. “On his automatic transmission, there is one speed. It is not conciliate. It is not comfort. It is not forge consensus. It is attack. And the frustration right now is that nobody is in charge. Anarchy rules.”



President Trump and first lady Melania Trump depart Wednesday for the Kennedy Space Center in Florida to watch the SpaceX launch, which was later postponed due to weather. (Bill O’Leary/The Washington Post)

Inside Trump’s political circle, advisers have expressed conflicting views about how Trump should demonstrate leadership after the death of a black man, George Floyd, in the custody of a white police

officer sparked outrage nationwide. The president, in consultation with some aides, decided not to give a speech Sunday about the violent protests over what many see as systemic racial injustice by law enforcement.

Some on Trump's reelection campaign team, as well as some White House staffers, have been pushing for the president to deliver an Oval Office address, and he could decide to do so later in the week. But aides first want him to embark on a listening tour of sorts to develop constructive ideas, according to a senior administration official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal plans.

To that end, Trump intends to convene events this week with law enforcement officials, black leaders and other stakeholders, which aides see as opportunities for him to address the unfolding situation and develop policies, some in concert with the Justice Department, the official said.

"We want to be talking about law and order, how we can heal the relationship between the police community and the African American community, and what tangible policy steps we can take, and also try to expose these more organized bad actors that are manipulating this moment of tragedy and turn it into an opportunity to sow discord and distrust," the official said.

Attorney General William P. Barr signaled aggressive steps to come in apprehending and prosecuting what he called "groups of outside radicals and agitators" and singled out antifa — protesters who describe themselves as antifascists — as responsible for some of the riots.

"It is time to stop watching the violence and to confront and stop it," Barr said in a statement issued Sunday. "The continued violence

and destruction of property endangers the lives and livelihoods of others, and interferes with the rights of peaceful protesters, as well as all other citizens.”



Trump speaks to journalists at the White House on Saturday before his trip to Florida. (Amanda Voisard for The Washington Post)

Asked Sunday by CNN’s Jake Tapper whether Trump planned to address the nation, national security adviser Robert C. O’Brien replied that the president already had made “very eloquent comments” about Floyd’s death and that he “addresses the country almost every day” on social media or in other ways.

“He’s trying to stop the violence that we saw that took place overnight, and the message to — and it’s a strong message, that we want law and order in this country,” O’Brien said. “We want peaceful protesters who have real concerns about brutality and racism. They need to be able to go to the city hall. They need to be able to petition their government and let their voices be heard. And they can’t be hijacked by these left-wing antifa militants.”

Trump's record of racially insensitive and sometimes outright racist comments over the years has led many Democrats and even some Republicans to conclude that he does not fully comprehend the nation's history of racism and the corresponding tensions that live on today.



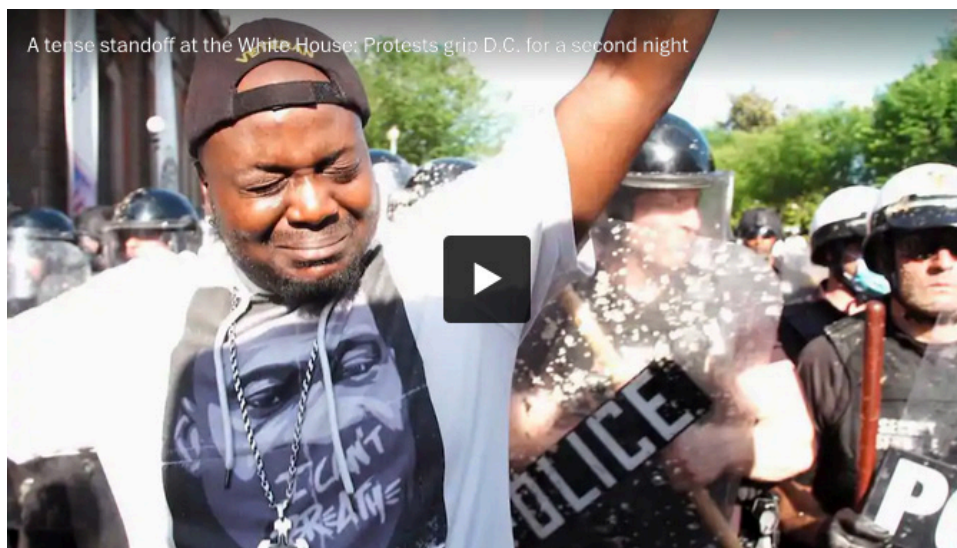
Trump departs for Florida from the White House on Wednesday. (Bill O'Leary/The Washington Post)

"Obviously the unrest and the anger is well justified," said Al Cardenas, a Florida-based Republican strategist and a former chairman of the American Conservatives Union. "Hardly goes a week by when some white person, whether it's a white supremacist or a racist law enforcement officer, does not kill a black person needlessly. ... What the country needs and wants from the president, they're not going to get. This president, I don't believe, relates to the racism, relates to the pain. At least I haven't seen it."

During his visit Saturday to the Kennedy Space Center in Florida — where he and Vice President Pence witnessed the successful launch of the SpaceX spacecraft — Trump addressed Floyd’s death and called it “a grave tragedy. It should never have happened. It has filled Americans all over the country with horror, anger and grief.”

The president described himself as “a friend and ally to every American seeking justice and peace” but said he firmly opposes “anyone exploiting this tragedy to loot, rob, attack, and menace.”

A few hours earlier on Saturday, Trump said on Twitter that demonstrators outside the White House on Friday night were met by Secret Service agents with “the most vicious dogs, and most ominous weapons, I have ever seen,” a seeming reference to the law enforcement practices in America’s segregationist past. He said many agents are “just waiting for action” and claimed that one had told him that fighting protesters was “good practice.”



Crowds protesting the killing of George Floyd clashed with U.S. Secret Service and Park Police officers near the White House on May 30. (The Washington Post)

D.C. Mayor Muriel E. Bowser (D) replied to Trump on Twitter by noting that the president “hides behind his fence” and that “there

are no vicious dogs & ominous weapons. There is just a scared man. Afraid/alone ...”

Sen. Tim Scott (S.C.), the nation’s most prominent black Republican elected official, said he has advised the president to focus on Floyd’s death, to recognize the benefit of peaceful protests and to lead with compassion. As for Trump’s tweets Saturday, Scott said on “Fox News Sunday,” “Those are not constructive tweets, without any question.”

David Greenberg, a history professor at Rutgers University, said past presidents at moments of national crisis, whether George W. Bush after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks or Bill Clinton after the Oklahoma City bombing, have instinctively shifted their message and tactics in an effort to heal.

“Most presidents have found a way to rise to the occasion, even if it meant swallowing hard and suppressing some of their own anger and frustration,” Greenberg said. “There’s no mystery that Trump is not sticking to the normal presidential script here.”

Politics

Trump says he misled on virus to instill calm. But he's governed with scare tactics.

The Debrief: An occasional series offering a reporter's insights

By Philip Rucker

<https://wapo.st/2ZEYIFs>



President Trump speaks at a news conference at the White House on Sept. 10, 2020.
(Salwan Georges/The Washington Post)

A visibly agitated and angry President Trump on Thursday defended his decision to intentionally mislead the public about the lethality of the novel coronavirus by saying he had an obligation as the nation's leader to prevent panic.

Staring down reporters at a White House news conference in the wake of revelations from Bob Woodward's new book, "Rage," Trump

cast his deception as a virtue — a president instilling calm to protect the people.

“I don’t want to jump up and down and start screaming ‘Death! Death!’ because that’s not what it’s all about. We have to lead a country,” Trump said. He added, “There has to be a calmness.”

Trump evidently did not feel the same presidential obligation to imbue serenity a few hours earlier, however, when he sounded the alarm on Twitter about a number of other topics.

“If I don’t win, America’s Suburbs will be **OVERRUN** with Low Income Projects, Anarchists, Agitators, Looters and, of course, ‘Friendly Protesters,’ ” Trump tweeted Thursday morning.

In another morning tweet, he wrote, “Sending out 80 MILLION BALLOTS to people who aren’t even asking for a Ballot is unfair and a total fraud in the making. Look at what’s going on right now!”



Supporters cheer Trump at a campaign rally at Smith Reynolds Airport in Winston-Salem, N.C., on Sept. 8. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

Throughout his five years on the national political stage, Trump has used fear to acquire and keep power. Scare tactics are the hammer and screwdriver of his tool kit.

Trump famously launched his presidential campaign in 2015 with dark warnings that immigrants from Mexico were “rapists” and “bringing drugs” and “bringing crime.”

As president, he has warned darkly — and with considerable hyperbole — of dangers he sees everywhere. At first, it was citizens of majority-Muslim countries bringing terror to the shores of the United States. Then it was MS-13 gang members overtaking tranquil communities. Then it was “caravans” of “illegal aliens” traveling through Central America toward the U.S.-Mexico border. Then it was “un-American” Democrats trying to steal everyone’s guns, obliterate the economy and destroy the country by instituting socialism.

This summer, as polls have shown Trump trailing Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden, the president has warned of a “RIGGED 2020 ELECTION ... IT WILL BE THE SCANDAL OF OUR TIMES!” as he put it in an all-caps tweet on June 22.

And he has sounded urgent calls for “LAW AND ORDER,” as he has tweeted time and again.

He also has warned that the “radical left” seeks to endanger families and wipe out livelihoods in suburbs everywhere, as he claimed in his address last month when he formally accepted the Republican presidential nomination.

“No one will be safe in Biden’s America,” Trump declared.

Instilling calm, this is not.



Trump addresses the rally in Winston-Salem, N.C. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

“His political campaign’s branding strategy is panic. They should put ‘PANIC’ on a red hat,” said Tim Miller, a longtime GOP strategist who advises Republican Voters Against Trump.

Miller said Trump’s assertion that he played down the threat of the novel coronavirus because he did not want to panic the public was “an absurd defense.”

“The person warning about the end of suburbia and migrant caravans looting and raping your daughters, the idea that he’s somebody who wants to turn down the temperature and breathe calm is absurd,” Miller said.

Ruth Ben-Ghiat, a historian at New York University and author of a forthcoming book, “Strongmen,” described Trump as “a chaos agent” and said his strategy of using fear to encourage dependence on him as a leader fits a global pattern.

“All leaders of authoritarian tendencies use methods of psychological warfare on their people by creating environments full of uncertainty,” Ben-Ghiat said. “You never know what to expect from the leader, you never know when he’ll be angry or whom he’ll victimize. They use bureaucratic chaos and create uncertainty to keep people divided, too frightened from mobilizing.”



White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany speaks at a news briefing on Sept. 8. (Bill O’Leary/The Washington Post)

At Thursday’s news conference, Trump argued that he waited many weeks to share what he knew about the virus being airborne and deadlier, far more lethal than the flu, because he did not want to create panic in the public.

“I want to show a level of confidence and I want to show strength as a leader and I want to show that our country is going to be fine, one way or the other,” Trump said.

Asked why he did not level with the American people by calmly presenting information about the virus in real time — as, for instance, German Chancellor Angela Merkel had done — Trump was defensive. He said coronavirus outbreaks across Europe were “much worse than the numbers here,” which is false. He also argued that the United States has “rounded the final turn,” an assessment in conflict with much of the data.

White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany bolstered Trump’s defense by telling reporters Wednesday, “This president does what leaders do — good leaders: It’s stay calm and resolute at a time when you face an unsurmountable challenge.”

But reporting at the time revealed Trump’s motivations for wanting to avoid panic in January and February to be far more nuanced. The president was fixated during that time not on leadership virtues but on the stock market, which he has long seen as a barometer of his reelection chances. He was strongly averse to any government announcement that might scare investors into a sell-off, his advisers explained.

Trump’s critics said the president has been misguided, stoking fear where little exists while trying to instill calm when his silence has had deadly consequences, with the coronavirus death toll now nearing 200,000.

“When we talk about what our real threat is, it’s clearly not the child that’s locked up in a detention center. It’s not the mother displaced in asylum or the people trying to cross the border. Our clearest danger right now is the president of the United States,” said Maria Teresa Kumar, president of Voto Latino, a grass-roots political group.

On Thursday at the White House, Trump lashed out at a pair of reporters who questioned why he hadn’t been truthful with the

public about the lethality of the virus. He effectively said that any suggestion that he should have was nonsense.

“We’re leading a great country and we’re doing a great job,” Trump said. “The people that have done such a good job should be given the kind of credit that they deserve.”



Trump talks to reporters at a news conference at the White House on Sept. 10.
(Salwan Georges/The Washington Post)

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Democracy Dies in Darkness

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By Yasmeen Abutaleb, Ashley Parker, Josh Dawsey and Philip Rucker

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Politics

The inside story of how Trump's denial, mismanagement and magical thinking led to the pandemic's dark winter

Rain falls at the White House in Washington. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)