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The Truth about the National Security Council's Pandemic Team

By **REBECCA HEINRICH** | April 1, 2020 6:30 AM



President Donald Trump, joined by Vice President Mike Pence and members of the White House Coronavirus Task Force, points to a reporter for a question during a coronavirus update briefing at the White House, March 16, 2020. (Tia Dufour/White House)

It wasn't shuttered but reorganized, and any evaluation of the administration's response is still incomplete.

NRPLUS MEMBER ARTICLE

IF anyone is to blame for the spread of the novel coronavirus, it's [ultimately](#) Xi Jinping's Chinese Communist Party, thanks to its [lies and obfuscations](#). Nonetheless, at this stage in the pandemic, President Trump is responsible for protecting Americans, working with our allies, and mitigating the effects of COVID-19.

Many are already condemning the Trump administration's handling of the disease. It's generally too early for that. We won't be able to see the extent of the wisdom in most of the administration's decisions and the timing of them until the country gets through this crisis, and we have the benefit of hindsight. Even so, the scale and scope of the domestic response would have been much better informed had we had more information sooner from the Chinese.

As for the matter of containing and mitigating the disease, Americans should have an idea about whether they can have confidence in their government. Dealing with a potentially devastating new disease to which the population has no immunity and of which there are no known vaccines is frightening enough without worrying about the government's competence.

That's why this charge from former Obama-administration officials — including [Beth Cameron](#), who served as the senior director for global health security and biodefense on the National Security Council (NSC) under Obama — is so serious: that the Trump administration's decision to "dismantle" the directorate the Obama administration created to quarterback pandemic responses is to blame for "leaving the country less prepared for pandemics like COVID-19."

Former Trump officials, including [former national-security adviser John Bolton](#) and [Tim Morrison](#), have disputed Cameron's characterization. They say that there has always been a highly competent team at the NSC focused on and coordinating efforts to recognize and handle the threat of pandemics.

The facts back up Bolton and Morrison. During the summer of 2018, Bolton reorganized the Trump NSC. In January 2017, there were directorates for nonproliferation and arms control, for weapons of mass destruction and terrorism, and for global health security and biodefense. Bolton merged the three directorates into a "counterproliferation and biodefense" directorate. According to administration officials I spoke with, this reorganization was designed in part to have better cooperation between those monitoring and preparing for intentional biological threats on one hand and for naturally occurring biological threats on the other. This directorate is now headed by Anthony Ruggiero.

In fact, the reorganization of a president's NSC is standard. Consider President Obama's NSC. He presided over the largest NSC in the nation's history; during the first part of his administration, some of his cabinet officials were frustrated by the NSC's [overbearing micromanagement](#). Obama's national-security adviser, Susan Rice, sought to make the NSC more efficient. She even [counts as one of her accomplishments](#) her downsizing of what was an excessively large organization. Practically speaking, her reorganization meant eliminating or absorbing various directorates. According to the NSC historical records, the following directorates were eliminated or absorbed during the Obama administration under national-security adviser Rice:

- 2013–2014: The Community Partnerships Directorate (COMMPART), Arms Control & Nonproliferation section of the Coordinator for Weapons of Mass Destruction Directorate (NONPRO), and Office of the Vice President, National Security Affairs OVP-NSA).
- 2014–2015: The Defense, Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction, and Arms Control Directorate (DEFWMD).
- 2015–2016: The Afghanistan-Pakistan Directorate (AFPAK), Arms Control & Nonproliferation Directorate (ARMSCONTROL), and Ebola Response Directorate (EBOLARESPONSE).
- 2016–2017: The Development Policy for Food Security (DEVDEM) and Multilateral Affairs & Human Rights Directorate (MULTILAT).

If it is true that consolidating issues and directorates necessarily means that those issues left the United States ill prepared to handle those threats, President Obama's administration sure has a lot to answer for. Of course, it is not true.

If high-level documents outlining presidential support and focus and development of strategy are any indication, then the NSC under Trump has remained focused on the looming threat of a pandemic. The [2017 National Security Strategy](#) highlighted the threat of pandemics. Even after the reorganization of the NSC in 2018, the NSC led the development of the National Biodefense Strategy and related National

Security Presidential Memoranda to counter either natural or deliberate biological threats to Americans. Presumably, none of that would be possible without a team of people tracking these issues — a team of people who have experience in virology, infectious-disease epidemiology, biosecurity, and national security.

Simply writing about pandemics might show that the Trump administration was aware of the pandemic threat, but it doesn't necessarily show that they were geared up to actually identify the problem and begin to organize a response. But when Trump decided to shut off travel from China on January 29, he did it based in part on the work of the team he put in place at the NSC. At the time, there were 20,000 people a day traveling from China to the U.S., and few other nations had closed their borders to China. He took the advice of his NSC to close the spigot, and that bought the United States weeks to prepare.

Skeptics might point to known government failures, such as the lack of testing kits on hand, the fact that health-care public servants lack the necessary protective gear, or the low quantity of needed respirators. But on these issues, there is plenty of blame across multiple administrations to go around.

In the case of the testing kits, Dr. Anthony Fauci has blamed cumbersome, systemic Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations for delay. As Luciana Borio and Scott Gottlieb, administration officials from 2017 to 2019, said in a January 28, 2020, article in the Wall Street Journal: "If the number of cases increases, experience from the 2009 swine flu pandemic and the 2015 Zika epidemic suggests that the CDC will struggle to keep up with the volume of screening." Perhaps the president could be blamed for failing to loosen FDA restrictions sooner, [but he did loosen them at the end of February](#), still only weeks from the onset of the very quickly developing situation. And one wonders why the previous administration didn't address those regulations after dealing with multiple serious new illnesses. In any event, Fauci has [insisted](#) that no one person is to blame for "the system's" failure to conduct quick mass testing.

As for the respirator masks that health-care providers need to help aid COVID-19 patients, [Bloomberg has reported](#) that scientists in the Obama administration were aware of the depleted supply after the swine flu. They were never replenished:

Government scientists in 2015 [estimated](#) that a severe flu outbreak infecting 20 to 30 percent of the population would require at least 1.7 billion of the N95 respirators. The national stockpile used to be somewhat more robust. In 2006, Congress provided supplemental funds to add 104 million N95 masks and 52 million surgical masks in an effort to prepare for a flu pandemic. But after the H1N1 influenza outbreak in 2009, which triggered a nationwide shortage of masks and caused a two- to three-year backlog orders for the N95 variety, the stockpile distributed about three-quarters of its inventory and [didn't build back the supply](#).

The supply of personal protective equipment (PPEs), such as N95 respirators, was already too low back in 2015. America's ability to ramp up production in a crisis was already limited. The reasons for this are systemic; on this, too, the blame can be distributed across party lines and administrations. The hard truth is that the U.S. [relies on foreign producers](#) such as Mexico and China for necessary PPEs, and, disturbingly, vital drugs.

This is an American failing — but one that policymakers are waking up to. Since the COVID-19 outbreak, members of Congress — including senators [Marco Rubio \(R., Fla.\)](#), [Josh Hawley \(R., Mo.\)](#) and [Tom Cotton \(R., Ark.\)](#), as well as congressman [Mike Gallagher](#) — have introduced bills to correct this deadly weakness. Just as the United States has fought to protect its sovereignty by gaining energy independence, so, they argue, must it do the same with critical health-care supplies and pharmaceuticals.

There is an exception to the rule of withholding judgment until the crisis has played out. It's fair to criticize the length of time it took Trump's rhetoric to match what he had done. The president's decision to declare a public emergency and to restrict travel to the United States from China on January 29 and from Europe later was wise. So was expediting research on COVID-19 and utilizing funds for the development of a vaccine. But Trump still tweeted on March 9 that the seasonal flu killed 37,000 Americans last year but that "life and the economy" went on, seeming to downplay COVID-19 relative to the seasonal flu. While it may be fair to excuse some of Trump's rhetoric in other areas, the president's messaging to the American people during a pandemic is critical, and his tweet was a mistake.

All this aside, the argument that the U.S.'s lack of preparedness owed to a reorganization of the NSC is simply not credible. Americans should know that downsizing the NSC or reorganizing it does not mean it was less efficient or effective. There is a focused and able team in place advising the president on how best to protect the country. Yes, at the end of the day, the buck stops with the president. He is the one who will decide whether to act on the NSC's advice, who will weigh risk and ultimately make decisions. Like his predecessors and successors, once we are through this chapter in American history, he will get the credit or the blame. But these judgments must be based on the facts.