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Trump lied about science

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When President Donald Trump began talking to the public about coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in February and March, scientists were stunned at his seeming lack of understanding of the threat. We assumed that he either refused to listen to the White House briefings that must have been occurring or that he was being deliberately sheltered from information to create plausible deniability for federal inaction. Now, because famed *Washington Post* journalist Bob Woodward recorded him, we can hear Trump's own voice saying that he understood precisely that severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) was deadly and spread through the air. As he was playing down the virus to the public, Trump was not confused or inadequately briefed: He flat-out lied, repeatedly, about science to the American people. These lies demoralized the scientific community and cost countless lives in the United States.

Over the years, this page has commented on the scientific foibles of U.S. presidents. Inadequate action on climate change and environmental degradation during both Republican and Democratic administrations have been criticized frequently. Editorials have bemoaned endorsements by presidents on teaching intelligent design, creationism, and other antiscience in public schools. These matters are still important. But now, a U.S. president has deliberately lied about science in a way that was imminently dangerous to human health and directly led to widespread deaths of Americans.

This may be the most shameful moment in the history of U.S. science policy.

In an interview with Woodward on 7 February 2020, Trump said he knew that COVID-19 was more lethal than the flu and that it spread through the air. "This is deadly stuff," he said. But on 9 March, he tweeted that the "common flu" was worse than COVID-19, while economic advisor Larry Kudlow and presidential counselor Kellyanne Conway assured the public that the virus was contained. On 19 March, Trump told Woodward that he did not want to level with the American people about the danger of the virus. "I wanted to always play it down," he said, "I still like playing it down." Playing it down meant lying about the fact that he knew the country was in grave danger.

It also meant silencing health officials who tried to tell the truth. On 25 February, Nancy Messonnier, director of the National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases (of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), said, "It's not so much a question of if this will happen anymore, but

rather more a question of exactly when this will happen and how many people in this country will have severe illness." She was right and Trump knew it. But he shut her down. He also tried to control messaging from Anthony Fauci, the nation's foremost leader on infectious diseases. Trump's supporters insisted that Fauci and Messonnier were not being muzzled, but now we have clear evidence in emails that they were.

Trump also knew that the virus could be deadly for young people. "It's not just old, older," he told Woodward on 19 March. "Young people, too, plenty of young people." Yet, he has insisted that schools and universities reopen and that college football should resume. He recently added to his advisory team Scott Atlas—a neuroradiologist with no expertise in epidemiology—who has advocated for a risky and misguided course: somehow isolating the older and more vulnerable while allowing the virus free rein among young people. The opening of colleges and schools has accelerated the spread of the virus and will mean untold suffering among both students and the people to whom they are now spreading the virus.

Monuments in Washington, D.C., have chiseled into them words spoken by real leaders during crises. "Confidence," said Franklin Roosevelt, "thrives on honesty, on honor, on the sacredness of obligations, on faithful protection and on unselfish performance."

We can be thankful that science has embraced these words. Researchers are tirelessly developing vaccines and investigating the origins of the virus so that future pandemics may be prevented. Health care workers have braved exposure to treat COVID-19 patients and reduce the death rate; many of these frontline workers have become infected, and some have died in these acts of courage. These individuals embody Roosevelt's call to faithful protection and unselfish performance.

They have seen neither quality exhibited by their president and his conspirators. Trump was not clueless, and he was not ignoring the briefings. Listen to his own words. Trump lied, plain and simple.

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