Despite the Negative Press Covfefe:

How Former President Donald Trump Influenced the Spread of COVID-19 Conspiracies

and Misinformation

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Conspiracy theories and misinformation are rampant in our society especially with the use of social media. While belief in conspiracy theories may seem crazy from the outside, they actually provide many people a sense of understanding and explanation for what is going on around us. While the spread of misinformation has had an undoubtedly negative impact on today's society, we have to step into the shoes of those who believe in conspiracies and their perceived benefits

from them to be able to understand how they spread so quickly. Humans have an innate desire to find answers that explain what we see around us. We love to be able to wrap up everything in our lives into neat little boxes. Conspiracy theories come into play to create answers that seem more reasonable to big issues. For someone who is truly convinced that aliens exist, it is easier for them to accept that the government must be hiding all of the evidence from us rather than looking at their belief in aliens and why this is something they are confident exists despite being told otherwise. This simplified explanation for why people believe in conspiracies can be expanded into the need for epistemic, existential, and social satisfaction. **Why People Turn to Conspiracy Theories**

Epistemic motivation comes from the need to find knowledge and explanations. This is the feeling that drives many to read books or learn more about the world around them and how it works. Epistemic need makes up half of the popular social-epistemic model to explain belief in conspiracies and can be used to understand why heightened epistemic mistrust brought on by the pandemic increased the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories. Issues including uncertainty, xenophobia, racism, paranoia, and trauma all increase epistemic mistrust (Pierre, 2020). These were all increased during the pandemic. We have a need to understand what is happening in the world around us. Due to the medical nature of the pandemic, some people

turned to conspiracy theories when there were no layperson explanations of why the pandemic happened or why everything happened the way it did. There was also a wide mistrust of the science and expertise of the medical professionals sharing information about the pandemic. While epidemiologists exist, how were they able to figure out so much information about the

pandemic so quickly? How were doctors and medical researchers able to create vaccines so quickly and still ensure that they were safe and had no long term side effects? Questions like these led to an increased mistrust of medical professionals, especially for those who already did not trust vaccines for other diseases. This mistrust of "conventional knowledge and authoritative accounts along with a biased appraisal of false counter-narratives" (Pierre, 2020) led many people to seek out conspiracies and alternate answers that explained what they were seeing better than official accounts.

Existential needs can often be met by conspiracies, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic as they help provide explanations that are comforting and lead to inner calm. The pandemic, especially in its early days, caused large changes in every aspect of our lives that were uncomfortable and produced deeper existential needs. Many people lost their jobs or loved ones, events that are hard to process and take time to deal with without the added stress of the pandemic. For those who were not as severely impacted by the pandemic, being stuck at home with significantly less social interaction and completely new routines often caused internal and external conflict. Conspiracy theories helped provide an explanation for why every aspect of life was changing so quickly that official scientific explanations could not keep up. When it did not feel like scientists knew what was happening, people found comfort in any explanation they could find, leading to an increase in conspiracy theories.

4

Social satisfaction is especially relevant when looking at the rise in COVID-19 conspiracy theories. We have an innate "desire to belong and to maintain a positive image of the self and the in-group" (Douglas et al., 2017). During the pandemic, it felt like groups were pitted

against each other for resources and media coverage. One big example of this was the increase in xenophobic violence against Asian Americans due to the fact that COVID originated in China and was nicknamed "China virus" or the "Kung Flu" by Former President Donald Trump("Donald Trump Calls Covid-19 'kung Flu' at Tulsa Rally," 2020). There was also an increase in strife between Democrats and Republicans due to their differing approaches to handling the pandemic. Additionally, other events that happened during the pandemic led to increased tensions between groups. Most notably, the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement added to the strong emotions that corresponded with the pandemic while not actually being related to the COVID-19 virus at all. It felt that everything had higher stakes and it was more important to ensure that groups or demographics you are a part of and strongly identify with remained on top.

Why Refutation Attempts Were Widely Ineffective During the Pandemic Our brains love to remember things we are not supposed to. The secret we were not supposed to hear and the Christmas present we were told to forget about before the holiday rolled around stick around longer than your total at the grocery store or the name of that one restaurant. This is especially true when we are told specifically to forget something. This makes it hard to refute conspiracy theories because people are not going to stop believing in or thinking about something just because someone told them not to. This is especially true when refutation attempts come from governmental agencies or an expert in the field covered by the conspiracy

theory. Many people who believe in conspiracy theories already have a mistrust of the government due to the fact that many popular modern conspiracy theories rely on the fact that

the government is hiding information to us or lying about what they know.

With the seemingly wide spread belief that COVID-19 was either created or worsened by the Chinese government, there are a lot of different reasons why refutation attempts were unsuccessful. To begin, most people who were strongly convinced that the pandemic was caused by the Chinese likely already held negative views of the Chinese and their government. The United States and China do not have a history of agreement on most topics including the fact that China uses a communist system that right-leaning Americans are widely opposed to. This makes it harder to refute information associated with the Chinese government because it is harder to change strongly held political beliefs, such as ones that see China and communism in a negative way. Specifically for the pandemic, the Chinese become the perfect scapegoat for all of the negative impacts. If the virus was purposely created in a lab or if it just naturally and accidentally occurred, it still had roots in China. This made it easy to blame the Chinese for the pandemic while making it even harder to debunk information about why and how the pandemic started.

If refutation attempts do not work because "it is harder to eliminate the influence of misinformation after people have been exposed to it" (Traberg et al., 2022), how can we prevent belief in conspiracy theories and the spread of misinformation. One of the most effective ways to reduce susceptibility to misinformation is to "inoculate" against future persuasion attempts similar to how we use vaccines to inoculate against viruses such as the flu. This method, called inoculation theory, was originally developed by William McGuire in the 1960s to prevent the impact of anti-American propaganda against American prisoners of war. This method is hard to

use with the pandemic because it works better if people are inoculated before their exposure, just like how flu shots do not work as well after you have already had the flu. One of the biggest spreaders of COVID-19 misinformation was Former President Donald Trump. However, this complicates the use of the inoculation method. Most of the people who have the biggest need for inoculation due to increased chance of conspiracy theory belief are also followers of Trump and are more likely to already trust what he says. The politicalization of the pandemic makes it significantly harder to prevent misinformation about it because it was intertwined with topics that are deeply personal and commonly used as key parts of our identities in an increasingly political world.

The politics surrounding COVID-19 make it significantly harder to prevent the spread of misinformation and falsehoods. It has been found that attempts to prevent belief in conspiracy theories, specifically debunking, works better when used for health topics rather than politics (Walter & Murphy, 2018). But what happens when health and political issues are deeply intertwined. It is hard to try to correct someone's views about the pandemic or convince them to get vaccinated when they feel that you are attacking their political beliefs and therefore themselves. It is undeniable that the pandemic is first and foremost a public health issue but it became so connected to politics that it was practically impossible to separate the topics. For example, when vaccines came available they almost became a political status symbol instead of a measure of public health. This differs from other health topics that are not as strongly connected to political identities.

Overall, the efficacy of attempts to debunk or reduce misinformation during the pandemic were greatly reduced by the increased politicalization of COVID-19. This can be

viewed through

the tweets and public statements of Former President Donald Trump. As the leader of the United States during the pandemic, he had a large influence over the country's response to COVID-19 as well as how Americans viewed the pandemic. However, Trump commonly used his platform to spread misinformation rather than educate Americans about how to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and create a feeling of unity between Americans and the world. Trump creates an interesting study into how and why misinformation spreads as well as allowing for a real time view of conspiracy theories and their creation.

Trump Using Misinformation to Raise His Credibility and Blame Others for the Pandemic

Former President Donald Trump is first and foremost a businessman and politician. He does not have the medical background needed to be a trusted source for information on the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this did not stop Trump's followers from listening to what he had to say about the pandemic. Trump's followers are a strong and devoted group however, there are definitely some that were persuaded by the way he talked about the pandemic. Even when directly proven false, Trump is a strong and charming orator who is able to gain the attention and trust of those with similar ideals. He was able to extend common conservative beliefs to support his opinions on the pandemic. Typically, conservatism focuses on an "every man for himself" method rather than the liberal ideals that lead to things like universal healthcare. Trump's tweets, especially during the pandemic and about COVID-19, tended to take an "us" versus "them" perspective. This tended to make it feel as if we needed to be working against

something or that a group that personally wronged us. Since COVID-19 originated in China, this usually was expressed by pitting Americans against the Chinese since according to the narrative that Trump built they purposely introduced this virus into our country. It was found that "Trump intended to

portray himself positively by criticizing others or by presenting others in a negative way through nomination, argumentation, and intensification"(Luo et al., 2022) and widely used his tweets to meet this goal. When it came to issues that involved America and another country or Democrats versus Republicans, Trump tended to put America and Republicans in a positive light while bashing other countries or groups. Trump's tweets during the pandemic tended to paint a picture of America as a superior or winning country while China and the World Health Organization were commonly blamed for the pandemic (Luo et al., 2022). It was also common for Trump to tweet about himself being an authority on the pandemic and an American hero (Luo et al., 2022). This bias in Trump's tweets significantly changes how his followers see him. When they are told that Trump is doing a good job with the pandemic but Democrats and the World Health Organization are making it worse, they will begin to believe this and accept it as truth. Trump also plays America as the victim of the pandemic by calling it the "China virus" rather than accepting that the Chinese did not choose to create the virus and are not targeting America. Additionally, how many cases and deaths a country or region had during the pandemic was highly connected to how leaders handled the pandemic. In areas where it was taken more seriously and was not divided into an "us" versus "them"

situation, citizens were more likely to wear masks and take other precautions to help

everyone around them stay healthy. Trump's way of making himself, America, and

Republicans look better ties back to the need for social explanations and closure

satisfied by conspiracy theories.

   It is easier to blame someone else for something out of your control than to admit that it

   naturally happened. With blaming the pandemic on the Chinese, there are a lot of people,

  President Trump included, who are more satisfied with this explanation than with just accepting

that the pandemic happened naturally and hypothetically could have come from any country,

even America. This is one of the most central aspects of conspiracy theories even from Karl

Popper's original coinage in 1949. Popper described conspiracy theories as the common view

that "whatever happens in society—including things which people as a rule dislike, such as war,

poverty, shortages—are the results of direct design by some powerful individuals or

groups"(Popper, 1949). It is common to blame things you dislike on other groups, especially if

you already have a negative view of them. In this way, blaming the pandemic on the Chinese is

similar to why there are only bad referees when your team loses or how politicians you support

are only responsible for the economy when it is good. The pandemic was also a widely traumatic

event for many people. This causes a need for closure similar to what is seen with grief. For

some people, conspiracy theories provide a more fulfilling explanation than what is officially

available, allowing them to process large events like the pandemic faster than they could without

alternative explanations. One study (Abebe et al., 2023) of Canadian Twitter posts tracked the

emotions represented in the tweets with the Kübler-Ross Model, more commonly known as the

five or seven stages of grief depending on which version is used. The wide-scale grieving process mirrored what is typically experienced by individuals, although not completely linear. Feelings of shock and denial were higher at the beginning of the pandemic as people had to deal with the massive changes and accept the fact that almost everything in their lives had changed and may never be the same. Canada had much stricter lockdown rules and restrictions, which may lead to variations in perceived feelings as they experienced a larger change with less of an end in sight. Feelings of frustration and depression peaked later in the pandemic in June and July,

respectively. This tracks with the continuation of lockdowns into summer and the feeling that the pandemic and restrictions were never-ending.

The large changes in emotions throughout the pandemic helped drive people towards conspiracy theories to explain what was happening around them and find satisfaction. Just like the grieving process in other situations, we naturally looked for closure during the pandemic. However, this was hard to find when there was no set end and very little control over the situation. We naturally want large events to have an equally large explanation (Leman & Cinnirella, 2007) and tend to think that the size of the impact of the event should directly correspond to the size of the cause. The pandemic had an impact on every imaginable aspect of life and caused widespread death and unemployment. However, it has what feels like a simple explanation: it is a virus that just happened to make the jump from animals to humans. With something natural like a virus, there is a limited range of potential conspiracy theories. There is no denying that COVID-19 exists so the focus is on how and why it exists. Believing

that it was purposely created by the Chinese gives a much bigger explanation than what actually happened. It also allows for a scapegoat to make the pandemic easier to process. While there are other conspiracy theories surrounding the start of the pandemic, most of them come back to it being the fault of the Chinese government due to the pandemic starting there. This idea is rooted in racism and imperialism but conspiracy theories would likely be very similar if the pandemic started in another country, as long as it did not start in the United States.

It is unlikely that Trump knew the theories and science behind why the concept that COVID-19 was the "China virus" became so popular. However, he has been known to continue to do whatever gets the most retweets and media attention, leading to the widespread use of

11

terms like "China virus" and "Kung Flu". This along with the strength of his followers, led to the widespread use of the #chinesevirus hashtag which then increased the use of other more blatantly racist hashtags. These include "#bateatingchinese, #yellowmanfever,

#makethecommiechinesepay, #disgustingchinese, #commieflu, #chopstickchins, and #chinkflu" (Hswen et al., 2021). While some people argued that calling it the "Chinese virus" was accurate because that is where it came from, the World Health Organization had already released information about why diseases should not be named after the places they originate from. This naming style places blame on a certain region for whatever the disease causes. This is similar to how AIDS was commonly called "gay

cancer" when the epidemic first began. Associating a disease with one specific group of people leads to increased hate towards that group. Just like the nickname "gay cancer" led to increased homophobia during the AIDs crisis, calling COVID-19 the "Chinese virus" led to increased racism and xenophobia. In both of these cases, the increased violence and hate can be attributed to an increase in preexisting discrimination against minority groups. Trump helped fan the flames by continuing to use racist nicknames for COVID-19. This helped place the blame for most of the pandemic on the Chinese and outsiders rather than his lack of strong COVID protocols and resistance to wearing masks or taking other preventative measures. This interplays with the way Trump talked about the pandemic to spread doubt about the seriousness of COVID-19 and discourage Americans from taking action to protect themselves.

Trump Using Misinformation to Spread COVID-19 Doubt

While the COVID-19 pandemic technically started much earlier, it did not have a large impact on most Americans until March 2020. This turning point in the pandemic was when

12

lockdowns and other significant life changes started. It is also when Former President Donald Trump started to truly publicly acknowledge the impact of the pandemic and the fact that it was likely not going to go away on its own. On March 17th, Trump stated "I've always known this is a — this is a real — this is a pandemic. I've felt it was a pandemic long before it was called a pandemic" at a White House press briefing (Gore, 2020). This marks what felt like the start of the pandemic for many Americans as well as the first time that Trump publicly acknowledged it as a pandemic and not just a small flu that would go away on its own. However, just because

Trump said that it was a pandemic does not mean that he treated it like one or continued to take it seriously.

At a press briefing on April 3rd, 2020 where the CDC announced their recommendation of wearing cloth masks in situations when social distancing would be impractical, Trump highlighted the fact that it was simply a recommendation and not a requirement. He said that "You don't have to do it. I'm choosing not to do it… It's only a recommendation. It's voluntary" (Gore, 2020). At the time of this statement, Trump was one of the most powerful and influential people in the United States. Not only was he president but he also had a large group of followers who would have done whatever he said. By saying that he was not going to follow the CDC's recommendation of wearing masks, he deterred many American's from also wearing them. Why would they need to do something that the President himself chose not to do? By hearing Trump announce the recommendation and then immediately emphasize that it was voluntary and Americans did not have to follow it took away from the message intended by the CDC. It also downplayed the strength and impact of the virus by making it seem as if wearing masks would not help. While Trump did acknowledge the benefits of masking by saying "It may be good.

Probably will"(*Remarks by President Trump, Vice President Pence, and Members of the Coronavirus Task Force in Press Briefing – The White House*, n.d.), he immediately downplayed it, making actions used to prevent COVID seem unnecessary.

Later in the pandemic, Trump downplayed increases in COVID cases by suggesting that it just showed that America had improved testing capabilities. "So when we have a lot of cases, I don't look at that as a bad thing; I look at that as — in a certain respect, as being a good thing

because it means our testing is much better" (Gore, 2020). While increased testing capabilities can lead to what seems like more COVID cases, there is also a chance that infections have stayed at the same level but are more likely to be reported. By making America's high numbers of COVID cases seem like a good thing, Trump takes away the sense of urgency and makes the pandemic not seem like a deadly emergency.

Physical Effects of Misinformation Spread by Trump

The way Former President Donald Trump talked about the pandemic helped fuel xenophobic and racist hate. In one of his more official statements, Trump said that he was going to issue a temporary suspension of immigration into the United States "in order to protect American workers" (Gore, 2020). While there are definite economic benefits to reducing immigration during an event that caused massive unemployment, actions like these shift the blame from the virus to outsiders who want to sweep in and steal jobs from Americans during their time of needs. Partnered with Trump's other statements and giving COVID-19 nicknames such as the "Kung Flu", makes it seem as if foreigners, especially those who are Chinese or Asian, are personally responsible for the pandemic. This corresponds with a spike in hate crimes against Asian Americans during the early days of the pandemic.

While a direct causation between Trump's words and these hate crimes cannot be proven, there was a correlation between anti-Asian messages and anti-Asian hate crimes. We cannot know what was viewed or thought by every perpetrator of these attacks but it is likely that they saw information that linked the pandemic, and the change brought along with it, as a byproduct of Chinese and Asian people, both American citizens and those abroad. A large aspect of some

theories of conspiracy theory belief is that the in group will do anything to keep the out group from gaining power. This comes from belief that "the social world is hierarchically organized, that people are inclined to act in the perceived material and symbolic interests of their own groups" (Sapountzis & Condor, 2013) that is popular with social identity theorists. If we look at the belief that COVID-19 is a Chinese virus through this lens, it is not hard to see why some people felt that they needed to take action to prevent Chinese Americans from being able to gain more power. If the virus itself was made and released by the Chinese government, it stands to reason that it would have been designed to not have as strong of an impact on their citizens. For this to work, either every Chinese citizen must be exposed to something that makes them immune to COVID or there is a genetic trait that prevents the Chinese, and therefore everyone else of Asian descent, from getting infected by COVID. If those from Asian descent are less likely to get COVID, it gives them an advantage allowing them to gain financial and political power due to not missing work or other events due to being exposed or infected by COVID. This can easily be disproven in part by the fact that Asian Americans actually tend to have higher COVID-19 infection rates compared to white patients (Sze et al., 2020). However, thought processes similar to this one likely allowed anti-Asian sentiments to increase, leading to an increase in violence against Asian Americans. It was found in one report that Anti-Asian hate

crimes reported to police in 15 large American cities increased by 169% in the first quarter of 2020 (Levin, 2021). These numbers do not include microaggressions or acts of aggression that were unreported.

Anti-Asian hate crimes were not the only physical effect that Former President Donald

Trump's statements had during the pandemic. He repeatedly suggested the use of untested medications as well as the internal use of products such as bleach. Trump largely supported the use of two unproven medications for the treatment of COVID-19. Ivermectin was originally designed as a veterinary antiparasitic but has also been used to treat infections in humans ("Ivermectin," 2023). Hydroxychloroquine is currently used to treat malaria in humans as well as arthritis ("Hydroxychloroquine," 2023). Both of these drugs can be deadly if taken improperly. It has been found that hydroxychloroquine can cause conduction disturbances and fatal arrhythmias(Niburski & Niburski, 2020)both conditions that can easily lead to death. Hydroxychloroquine is also related to chloroquine, a more toxic form of the medication that is often used as an aquarium cleaner (Niburski & Niburski, 2020). While it is hard to know if the deaths of COVID patients taking ivermectin or hydroxychloroquine died from the virus or the experimental treatments, some used the drugs without prior COVID-19 infection. This led to side effects without any benefits or reduction of COVID symptoms. It has been found that there was an increase of at least 245% in poison control calls due to ivermectin exposure or overdose between July and August, 2021(Romo, 2021). This increase cannot be directly linked to Trump's tweets and statements but is likely influenced by them.

On April 23rd, 2020, Trump suggested at a press briefing that ultraviolet light might be able to be used to kill COVID-19 both on and inside the body (Gore, 2020). During the same

16

briefing, he also talked about using a disinfectant, such as bleach, "by injection inside or almost a cleaning, because you see [covid] gets in the lungs and it does a tremendous number on the lungs" (Gore, 2020). Both of these uses are in no way recommended and would cause more harm

than good, possibly killing whoever decides to try it rather than the virus. While some people may see this as Trump simply "thinking out loud", something that he has seemed to do before, this statement would have a deadly effect on anyone who tried to follow Trump's suggestion. Fortunately, there are no reports of death or injuries from trying to use household disinfectants, such as bleach, to kill the virus. However, if left unchecked factually untrue statements like this one could have a long lasting effect. There is no direct evidence that Trump killed anyone by suggesting the use of disinfectants but it would not be out of reach for this statement to have a physical effect on at least one of Trump's followers attempting to cure or protect themselves from the virus.

Even the President himself: How Trump Used His Own Experience with Covid to Spread Misinformation

On October 2nd, 2020 President Trump announced that he, along with First Lady Melania Trump, had tested positive for COVID-19 (Donald J. Trump [@realDonaldTrump], 2020b). It is believed that they may have tested positive earlier using at home rapid tests but this was never officially released by the White House (O'Donnell, 2020). In the same tweet that he announced that he had COVID, Trump also stated that he and the First Lady would begin their quarantine immediately. This tweet came just over two hours after he announced that he was waiting for his test results due to being exposed to COVID (Donald J. Trump [@realDonaldTrump], 2020a).The Trumps were not the only people in the White House who tested positive for COVID-19. In the

days surrounding Trump's announcement, people who were near him at White House events, including a Rose Garden event held for the confirmation of Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney

Barrett, and a presidential debate. While the start of the spread can be traced to Hope Hicks, one of Trump's advisors, she did not play as big of a role in the spread of COVID as President Trump himself did. Hicks reportedly tested positive for COVID on October 1st, one day before Trump publicly announced his positive test. From what the White House has said, Hicks started quarantining when she started to feel unwell and likely followed most COVID protocols. Including President Trump, the First Lady, and Hope Hicks, it was reported that at least 35 had tested positive for COVID that had been around President Trump or someone who attended one of his events(Niedzwiadek, 2020). This included Kellyanne Conway and Chris Christie who both attended the Rose Garden Confirmation Ceremony of Justice Barrett. Christie was even reported to be precautionarily hospitalized due to preexisting conditions that could worsen his symptoms(Dixon, 2020). Other positive tests came from people who were near Trump at the 2020 presidential debate held in Cleveland. While then Presidential Candidate Joe Biden, his staffers, and debate moderator Chris Wallace all tested negative for the virus, others at the debate later tested positive. This may include Ronna McDaniel, the chair of the Republican National Committee who did not test positive until after a family member did but tested negative after being near Trump. McDaniel's COVID infection may not have come from the same exposure as Trump's but is of interest as it corresponded to the wide spread report of positive tests from other Republican officials and colleagues of Trump. Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany also tested positive after attending multiple events with the president. McEnany gave press conferences while likely infected with COVID but there were no reports of members of the media testing

positive for COVID. This COVID-19 outbreak that impacted mainly friends and colleagues of

Trump and other powerful Republicans showed that they were not immune to the virus despite their constant messaging that the virus was no big deal. One of the most surprising aspects of Trump's COVID infection and later hospitalization was that it did not seem to lessen his outward confidence surrounding the virus.

Despite the fact that Trump was hospitalized for the virus, the President and his officials did not admit that Trump's symptoms were as bad as they likely actually were. Trump's tweets while at Walter Reed made it seem as if he had light symptoms and still felt great. However, he tweeted significantly less often, making it seem as if he did not feel good enough to continue his almost constant tweets and retweets. Trump only tweeted three times on both October 2nd and October 3rd (Brown, n.d.). This is compared to almost 50 tweets on October 1st alone (Brown, n.d.). One of Trump's tweets while he was in the hospital simply said "Going well, I think! Thank you to all. LOVE!!!" (*Donald J. Trump on X: "Going well, I Think! Thank You to All. LOVE!!!" / X*, n.d.) While the tweet does express that Trump felt that his treatment was going well, the addition of saying "I think", makes Trump seem a lot less confident than he usually is. In between announcing that he had COVID and the "love" tweet on October 2nd, Trump tweeted an 18 second long video stating that he was feeling well but was going to Walter Reed hospital. This was likely announced in a video to show that Trump was feeling well and was able to film what seemed like a normal video. However, by some accounts this video may have been more formulated than it seemed. If Trump's condition was as bad as it may have been, releasing a video allowed him to get ahead of any rumors that he was not well enough to still perform his duties.

According to most official statements, Trump had mild symptoms and was "fatigued but in good spirits."(Gringlas & Sprunt, 2020) However, it is possible that Trump's symptoms were significantly worse than officially stated. At one point, a White House official believed to be Mark Meadows, said that "the president's vitals over the last 24 hours were very concerning and the next 48 hours will be critical in terms of his care. We're still not on a clear path to a full recovery"(Gringlas & Sprunt, 2020). This shows a much worse situation than offered by previous reports. Whether the President's condition was as bad as it was in Meadow's statement or if he truly felt great while he was in the hospital, the way Trump and his team handled his positive COVID test and hospitalization was part of their narrative that the pandemic is not a big deal that Americans need to be worried about. Even though the President has access to the best doctors and treatments, if he is able to beat COVID, it should not be a concern for anyone else. This belief is shown by Trump's response after his release from the hospital. He immediately told his followers not to be afraid of COVID or let it control their lives (Donald J. Trump [@realDonaldTrump], 2020c). This was included in the same tweet that Trump announced that he would be leaving Walter Reed and felt better than he did 20 years ago. This advice was extremely dangerous, especially since average Americans did not have access to the same medical treatment that Trump did and would not have a dedicated medical team to ensure their recovery. This is perfectly summed up with a tweet from California congressman Ted Lieu that stated "Virus caused drops in oxygen levels for [Donald Trump]; trouble breathing; hospitalization & possible lung damage. [He] was also given oxygen treatment; an expensive experimental drug; an expensive new drug & a strong steroid. Americans should absolutely be afraid of Covid"(Ted Lieu [@tedlieu], 2020). Trump's experience with COVID is unlike what

almost every other American would experience. They would not have access to the new medications and specialty care that the President was able to receive. This also came before the release of COVID vaccinations or any way to protect Americans from the virus, especially since not letting the pandemic control your life would likely include not following recommendations to wear a mask or social distance. With this one tweet, Trump single handedly risked the lives of Americans and undid any potential good that he could have used his COVID diagnosis for. He could have used this situation to talk about how dangerous COVID is and advise Americans to wear masks and take other precautions to reduce the spread of the virus. However, this would be a complete change in Trump's treatment of the pandemic, making everything he had previously said seem wrong.

Lack of Plausible Deniability: Trump's Awareness of the Misinformation he Spread Trump was fully aware that COVID was much worse than he ever admitted. The country had already lost at least 209,000 people to COVID when he told them not to worry about it (Gringlas & Sprunt, 2020). In an interview with Bob Woodward released after the fact, Trump acknowledged that COVID-19 was much more dangerous than the flu and that it was spread through the air, making it easier to spread. This directly clashes with what Trump publicly stated and Tweeted. On Febuary 7th, 2020 Trump told Woodward that "That's always tougher than the touch. The touch, you don't have to touch things, right? But the air, you just breathe the air and that's how it's passed" (Sanford, n.d.). This directly contrasts Trump refusing to wear a mask and making statements that suggested that they were not needed. Yet this did not stop Trump from stating that masks were just recommendations and downplaying the potential impact they

could have on infection rates. Additionally, Trump told Woodward that COVID-19 was significantly

more deadly than the flu during the same phone call. There are records showing that Trump was aware of how deadly and bad the pandemic could be. However he did not seem to take this into account with anything he said to the public about the pandemic. He may have felt that this was helping reduce fear surrounding the pandemic but he seemed to persuade Americans that they did not need to take the pandemic seriously despite being fully aware that it was incredibly deadly. Trump even admitted to Woodward on March 19th that he "… wanted to always play it down. I still like playing it down because I don't want to create a panic." This suggests that Trump was fully aware of the impact he had on the outcome of the pandemic and likely knew that a lot of his public statements were untrue.

With the evidence that Trump knowingly said things that he was aware were untrue at the time he said them, we can use this to view how easily misinformation can be spread. Over one million Americans died due to COVID-19(CDC, 2020). How many of these deaths could have been prevented if Trump used his power as president to encourage his followers to take the pandemic seriously? How many Americans would still have their friends and family members if Trump had not chosen to downplay the severity of virus and discourage preventative measures? The impact of the misinformation purposely spread by Former President Donald Trump is immeasurable. Conspiracy theories and misinformation are not just simple byproducts of social media. They can have long lasting physical and cultural effects and we all need to be aware of the potential impacts.

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