

Name: Alert ID: TMML2024035388489 The fundamental purpose of government is rather simple: protect the citizenry. Any deliberate perversion of this priority is an exercise of corruption—especially when that basic aim is supplanted by the goal of personal gain. That’s why Donald Trump’s slow, ineffectual, self-serving, and deadly response to the coronavirus has been the most consequential act of corruption in the history of American governance. It eclipses Watergate, Teapot Dome, Iran-Contra, you name it. It also happens to be the continuation—perhaps the culmination—of the corruption that Trump started spreading like a virus the moment he tramped into the White House. Corruption in government is generally thought of as an official exploiting power or position for personal benefit, often to line his or her pockets or those of a favored associate, relative, or corporation. There has been plenty of that during the Trump years. And Trump was impeached for an act of outright corruption. He leveraged his office—his ability to grant a foreign leader a White House meeting and to hold up nearly \$400 million in military assistance—to pressure the new president of Ukraine to initiate unfounded investigations that would help Trump politically. In the case of the coronavirus crisis, Trump embraced a similar me-first course. He prevented the government from performing actions that could keep Americans safe because he believed downplaying the burgeoning crisis best served his political interests. He corrupted the mission of the US government—as a result, one hundred thousand Americans (and counting) have died and the economy collapsed. (Trump also corruptly enlisted the US military as a prop for his own political gain, when he responded to the nationwide wave of protests spurred by the police-killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis.) Trump’s record of inaction, incompetence, and inane remarks during the first months of the pandemic has been well documented. Yet he wasn’t merely flailing. He purposefully thwarted official action because of concerns about his own electoral prospects. He resisted an aggressive push for testing because that could yield higher numbers of confirmed coronavirus cases, and he believed that lower levels would be better for his reelection campaign. When Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar warned Trump of an impending pandemic in late January, Trump brushed him off as an alarmist. Azar’s message was not in sync with Trump’s decision to discount the coronavirus threat. In late February, Nancy Messonnier, an official at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, publicly said her agency expected widespread transmission and was preparing for a pandemic. Wall Street plunged, and an enraged Trump—who had recently declared that the virus “miraculously goes away” and the situation was “very much under control”—threatened to fire her. Trump failed to move quickly and impeded a fast and comprehensive response. His self-interest was always paramount—to an absurd extent. He touted the “ratings” his coronavirus press conferences received and devoted more time during these briefings to deflecting responsibility, attacking journalists, and blaming Democratic politicians than to mourning the dead. And his administration oversaw a \$2 trillion economic rescue and bailout that was practically designed to facilitate corruption. A huge piece of it was turned over to banks to manage, and the banks rigged the system for preferred customers, which froze out many small businesses, particularly outfits owned by people of color. (In several cases, the funds went to companies—some run by Trump donors—that hardly seemed the most needy.) This package also included a pot of \$500 billion for Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin to distribute to large corporations with few strings attached and little public oversight. Democrats justifiably called it a “slush fund.” In a further blow to transparency, Trump ousted the inspector general who was leading the task force assigned to monitor this relief package. (This move was part of the war on IGs waged by Trump, who has sought watchdogs that are loyal to him, not the goal of corruption-busting.) Trump’s attitude toward the federal government at the start of the pandemic— it’s all about me —was an extension of the rampant and more conventional corruption that’s defined his regime. Once Trump, the longtime narcissistic pitchman, entered the White House, he viewed the government as an expansion of his own business ventures and personal brand and showed not a whit of concern for rules, norms, and constitutional provisions that had been established to hinder corruption. He brazenly ignored the emoluments clause of the Constitution, which prohibits a president from accepting payments from foreign entities. His properties—particularly the Trump hotel in Washington, DC—became favorite spots for overseas visitors, including government officials, to stay, hold events, and wine and dine. This placed money into Trump’s bank account. (Ivanka Trump, who owns a big piece of the Washington hotel, also bags millions of dollars a year from its revenue.) Here was an easy way for foreign governments, Washington lobbyists, wannabe players, and others seeking

preferential treatment and policies from Trump and his administration to engage in what amounts to legal bribery. In 2018, Trump reported income from at least 11 foreign countries. Several countries, including China, have granted Trump and Ivanka valuable trademarks—with one for Ivanka covering voting machines. Trump's own campaign and Republican organizations have held events at his properties, which enriches him and his family. His visits to his golf courses and Mar-a-Lago, his Palm Beach private club, have forced the Secret Service to spend millions that end up with the Trump Organization he still owns. A report first issued in mid-2019 by Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington tallied more than 3,100 actions that raised possible conflicts of interest during Trump's first years as president. Trump has steadfastly refused to follow tradition and release his tax returns. Given the constant stream of Trump administration scandals, it is tough to keep track of the cavalcade of crookedness. Controversies come and go quickly, forming an overwhelming blur of wrongdoing and sleaze. In fact, the high number of scandals provides Trump and his crew a degree of protection. Here are a few you may have forgotten: Top adviser Kellyanne Conway appears to have repeatedly violated the Hatch Act, which prohibits federal employees from using their offices to affect the results of an election. She also used her position to promote Ivanka's clothing line. The White House did the same with first lady Melania Trump's jewelry company. Trump's original heads of the EPA, the Department of the Interior, and the Department of Health and Human Services—Scott Pruitt, Ryan Zinke, and Tom Price—each resigned when faced with credible accusations of corruption. Wilbur Ross, the secretary of commerce, held on to millions of dollars in holdings and apparently violated conflict-of-interest rules. Other top Trump appointees past and present—including Ben Carson and Mick Mulvaney—have been caught engaging in shady dealings. The Trump administration has frequently taken actions that assist industries and companies that donate to Trump and the GOP. His personal lawyer ended up in prison in part because he committed bank fraud while paying hush money to a porn star at Trump's direction. Michael Flynn, Trump's first national security adviser, admitted to violating lobbying laws by failing to disclose that he lobbied for Turkey, which earned him hundreds of thousands of dollars. (Flynn also pleaded guilty to lying to FBI agents during the Trump-Russia investigation—but Attorney General Barr has been trying to undo that prosecution.) Other Trump associates set up lobbying shops in the nation's capital to cash in on their access to Trump. He didn't drain the swamp of Washington; he turned it into a petri dish of corruption for him, his family, and his cronies. Exhibit A: Jared Kushner. He has an honored place on the Trump corruption roll call. Government anti-nepotism rules had to be waived for him to join the White House as an adviser to his father-in-law. Kushner repeatedly did not fully reveal his holdings and potential conflicts. And his security clearance was denied because government officials were concerned about his private business interests and his vulnerability to foreign influence. No problem: Trump ordered Kushner be granted clearance. Kushner has routinely mixed White House business with his own business. As he has advised his father-in-law on matters stretching around the globe—including the Israel-Palestine conflict—his family real estate firm reached out to a Chinese company tied to the Chinese government and then to the Qatari government in efforts to off-load a highly indebted New York City property it owned. (A company largely owned by the Qatari government's investment fund eventually rescued the Kushners.) Until March, Kushner also held a large interest in a real estate startup, Cadre, that launched investment vehicles made possible by a Trump administration program promoted by Kushner and Ivanka Trump. As Trump sees it, the government does not exist to defend the people from killer viruses. It exists to protect and serve him. During the pandemic, Kushner's practice of blurring the line between business and government has been thrown into grotesque relief. As Trump bumbled, Kushner assembled a shadow task force—separate from Vice President Mike Pence's entity—with members drawn from private industries that had keen interests (and perhaps conflicts of interest) related to the policies being considered. This group of investors and entrepreneurs—including a former roommate of Kushner—made supply-chain decisions that could lead to windfalls for certain corporations. The White House refused to reveal all the members of Kushner's task force, which operated in secrecy, using private phones and personal email accounts in possible violation of federal transparency laws, and without any oversight. This was behind-the-scenes government based on Kushner's network of business buddies. His off-the-books effort included a collection of volunteers from investment and consulting firms recruited to hand out government contracts for desperately needed equipment for the pandemic. This squad tried to facilitate

deals, often involving people with inside contacts (including Fox News personalities), while generally botching the job. FEMA officials referred to Kushner's crew as the "children." At the same time, Oscar Health, a health insurance company that was initially controlled by Jared and his brother, Joshua Kushner—before Joshua took solo command—was used sub rosa by the White House to develop a website for a nationwide coronavirus testing program that never materialized. (It was another false promise from Trump.) The company said it did the work for free, but this arrangement might still have breached federal law. So even in the middle of a national crisis, Kushner was freebooting and possibly grifting. There was no way to fully tell because he was defiantly ignoring the normal guidelines for government advisory panels. As the nation suffered—thousands dying, millions confronting economic calamity—Trump turned the government's coronavirus response into another quid pro quo. He threatened to withhold assistance from governors who did not publicly praise him. In fact, Trump proved a prediction cast during the impeachment proceedings. When Stanford law professor Pamela Karlan testified at the House hearings, she presented what at the time seemed to be no more than an intellectual exercise meant to underscore the seriousness of Trump's effort to muscle the Ukrainian president. Imagine living in a state hit by a terrible natural disaster, she said: "What would you think if your governor asked for a meeting with the president to discuss getting disaster aid that Congress has provided for? What would you think if that president said, 'I would like you to do us a favor. I'll meet with you, and I'll send the disaster relief, once you brand my opponent a criminal'? Wouldn't you know in your gut that such a president had abused his office?" You can't say we weren't warned. Trump has weakened the government the way rot ruins a building: It attacks the structure. He doesn't give a damn about the soundness of the system. In this fashion, Trump did little to protect the country from another profound attack: the Russian assault on the American election in 2016 that was mounted to help him win. It was not in Trump's political interest to call attention to this covert warfare, so he didn't. He dismissed that threat and has assailed those agencies of government that investigated the attack and that have warned Moscow is now targeting the 2020 campaign. The president's pandemic response is straight from the same Make Trump First playbook. For all the corruption he has enabled, enacted, and exercised—that we know of—there likely remains more to be rooted out. After all, as Trump sees it, the government does not exist to defend the people from killer viruses or foreign attempts to subvert American democracy. It exists to protect and serve him. (The use of federal security forces to violently clear away peaceful protesters so Trump can hold a meaningless photo-op was a clear example of Trump-uber-alles statism.) That is the core corruption of his presidency. It is manifested in minor acts of sleaze (buy Ivanka's stuff!), major acts of policy (let's kill regulations for industries that donate to us), and monumental decisions with immediate life-or-death consequences for thousands of Americans (don't warn of a pandemic because that could screw up my reelection). Graft, grift, and greed have been—and always will be—a problem in government. But with Trump, corruption kills.