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Trump Is Scapegoating the WHO — But Failed to Confirm a U.S. Representative for 3 Years

Trump and the Senate GOP ignored the World Health Organization. Then came the new coronavirus pandemic.

By Cameron Joseph

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WASHINGTON — President Trump has sought to pin the blame for his administration's disastrous response to the novel coronavirus on the World Health Organization, painting it as too corrupt and scared of China to label the novel coronavirus a pandemic until far too late.

But the Trump administration and Senate Republicans never bothered to confirm a permanent representative for the United States' seat on the WHO's executive board, a sign of how little attention the administration paid to the global health organization until recent weeks.

Experts say that left the U.S. without a well-established senior voice in the U.N.'s global health body, surrendering influence to China as it worked to cover up the extent of the growing COVID-19 epidemic in Wuhan, and weakened America's influence on the body during critical early-February meetings when the response to the emerging crisis was debated.

Dr. Nils Daulaire, who had the job for one three-year term under President Obama, said the Trump administration's failure to have a high-level, Senate-confirmed appointee to the board handed China exactly the kind of leverage that Trump has since griped about — and potentially undercut international response to the coronavirus pandemic.

space of power and influence that the United States has relinquished," said Daulaire, who served in the WHO role during his time as Assistant Secretary for Global Affairs at the Department of Health and Human Services. "And clearly, China has been particularly interested in raising their power and influence at the WHO."

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Trump has increasingly sought to use the organization as a scapegoat for the U.S. catastrophic coronavirus outbreak, slamming it as "very China-centric" and claimed it had "pushed China's misinformation." On Saturday, he claimed "we're finding more and more problems" with the WHO, without offering any examples.

Last week, he moved to cut the WHO's funding, even though the organization is the last and best line of defense against pandemics throughout the Third World and the U.S. is its largest contributor. The United States contributes roughly a half-billion dollars a year to the WHO, about 20% of the organization's budget.

3-year absence

But Trump and the GOP-controlled Senate gave up some of the leverage the U.S. might have had at the WHO by failing to confirm a delegate to the executive board. Executive board seats last for three-year terms, with representatives required to be "technically qualified in the field of health." The U.S.' latest term on the board, the WHO's equivalent of the United Nations Security Council, started in 2018 after a required year off in 2017.

term expired around the time Obama left office.

It wasn't until 10 months after the United States' current term began in 2018 when Trump nominated Admiral Brett Giroir, the assistant secretary for health at the Department of Health and Human Services, for the job.

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Giroir, a four-star admiral in the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps, is a medical doctor with a background in infectious diseases who has previously worked on pandemic response. He's a well-qualified and relatively uncontroversial pick by Trump standards. And while Democrats have raised concerns about his views on reproductive issues, he was confirmed by the Senate for his current role at HHS by a voice vote and has met with little Democratic resistance for this nomination.

But since his initial nomination, the White House, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), and the rest of the Senate Republican leadership have shown no urgency about filling the appointment.

Giroir's nomination has sat for so long that the White House had to renominate him twice — once at the beginning of 2019 and again on March 18, 2020, three months after his nomination had expired (which happens at the end of the Senate's calendar year). His nomination sailed through the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in April 2019, and all he needed for confirmation was for McConnell to slot Senate floor time for a vote.

But while McConnell has successfully confirmed hundreds of judges and other administration officials for Trump, including many who faced much stiffer resistance from Democrats, he never bothered giving Giroir a vote.

...the Senate Foreign Relations Committee has not yet done, saying why he never got approved by the Senate was “a White House or McConnell question.”

AWOL at the WHO

The Giroir nomination waited so long that he technically needs to go through committee once again before a floor vote.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee is now working in a bipartisan fashion to rush through Giroir’s confirmation. Sources tell VICE News that Democrats and Republicans agreed Thursday night to waive the committee business meeting normally required for nominees to send him to the full Senate floor, with the hopes of moving his nomination along. There are promising signs he might be able to be confirmed to the WHO quickly by unanimous consent.

But at this point, that’s closing the barn door after the horse is out.

As he often does with favored staff, Trump has used Giroir as a jack-of-all-trades, plugging him in to backstop various roles. Giroir stepped in as temporary head of the Food and Drug Administration for a few months in late 2019.

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And Giroir has his hands full now: Trump named him as the country’s “testing czar,” a day after the head of the CDC couldn’t say who in the administration was in charge of making sure Americans could have access to COVID-19 tests.

Trump himself has howled about the Senate's failure to confirm his nominees, even threatening to take the unprecedented and constitutionally questionable step of forcing Congress to adjourn so he could ram through some nominees without a vote. But Giroir wasn't one of the positions he mentioned he wanted filled in a recent Rose Garden rant.

"We have been clear that Congress should act swiftly to confirm these and the many other outstanding nominations," that official said.

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McConnell aides declined to respond on-record to inquiries about the lengthy delays.

In comes a pandemic

The U.S. absence at the WHO meant that at the organization's February executive board meetings, held as the coronavirus was hurtling toward pandemic proportions, America's seat at the table was filled not with a medical expert with political clout like Giroir but with U.N. Ambassador Andrew Bremberg and lower-level staff.

Bremberg is not a doctor, and while he has some public health experience, he had spent his career in domestic policy before being confirmed as Trump's permanent representative to the U.N. in Geneva three months earlier in October.

Bremberg headed the U.S. delegation at WHO's key February annual meeting, which included debate over how the world should respond to the

“When those really important political issues come up, it’d be important to have someone with the skills for that. I wouldn’t trust Bremberg for that. But I certainly would Brett Giroir — he has the bona fides,” said Kenneth Bernard, who served as a senior adviser on pandemics and biodefense to Presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton. “Bremberg is a domestic policy political appointee, while Brett Giroir is a professional scientist and health expert first and a political appointee second.”

That doesn’t mean the U.S. was flying blind at the meetings. As the Washington Post reported Sunday, the U.S. had more than a dozen researchers, physicians and public health experts working at the WHO’s Geneva headquarters as the novel coronavirus emerged late last year, and they transmitted real-time information about its spread in China back to the Trump administration. But their warnings seemed to go largely unheeded.

This lack of administration emphasis on the WHO has left career officials frustrated.

“Pushing for change at WHO clearly has not been a priority until a week ago.”

“The United States has not officially filled its appointment on the WHO executive board, and has instead sent a rotation of mid-level officials who don’t have the clout to push for real reform in the institution,” said one administration official. “Pushing for change at WHO clearly has not been a priority until a week ago. [That] has been a missed opportunity.”

Daulaire warned that lacking a Senate-confirmed, high-level WHO executive committee member, the U.S. team may not have received the same kind of

risk of the coronavirus.

The intelligence community began raising the alarm about the virus' threat in January, and Daulaire said briefings on the coronavirus could have given the U.S. delegation "significantly more knowledge" about the looming pandemic than what was publicly available.

He also said if the U.S. had been forceful in warning the WHO was moving too slowly to confront the pandemic, and less deferential to the organization's initial findings, it would have "lit a fire" under the WHO and potentially prompted a more vociferous response.

It's unclear whether this intelligence was shared with the U.S. delegation ahead of February's WHO executive board meetings, which set the WHO's agenda for the year. The State Department's Bureau of International Organization Affairs oversees U.S. participation at the WHO, and its assistant secretary left office last November after the department's inspector general issued a report blasting him for harassing and verbally abusing career employees he didn't see as sufficiently loyal to Trump.

When asked if Bremberg and the U.S. delegation were briefed on this intelligence, a senior administration official said "those representing the U.S. at any meeting are fully briefed to enable them to appropriately represent the United States."

Bremberg's most vocal efforts at the meeting were sparring with China for continuing to block Taiwan from WHO information as coronavirus broke out internationally and defending America's decision to restrict travel from China, which the WHO had not recommended.

Bremberg praised China's response to the virus

“We deeply appreciate all that China is doing on behalf of its own people and the world, and we look forward to continuing to work together as we move ahead in response to the coronavirus,” he said.

The WHO didn’t declare the virus a pandemic until more than a month later, but Bremberg congratulated the organization “on progress made an emergency preparedness under the International Health Regulations.”

Cover: U.S. President Donald Trump speaks during a news conference at the White House in Washington D.C., U.S. on Saturday, April 18, 2020. (Photo: Tasos Katopodis/UPI/Bloomberg via Getty Images)

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