

A Complete List of Trump's Attempts to Play Down Coronavirus

He could have taken action. He didn't.



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March 15, 2020

President Trump made his first public comments about the coronavirus on Jan. 22, in a television interview from Davos with CNBC's Joe Kernen. The first American case had been announced the day before, and Kernen asked Trump, "Are there worries about a pandemic at this point?"

The president responded: "No. Not at all. And we have it totally under control. It's one person coming in from China, and we have it under control. It's going to be just fine."

By this point, the seriousness of the virus was becoming clearer. It had spread from China to four other countries. China was starting to take drastic measures and was on the verge of closing off the city of Wuhan.

In the weeks that followed, Trump faced a series of choices. He could have taken aggressive measures to slow the spread of the virus. He could have insisted that the United States ramp up efforts to produce test kits. He could have emphasized the risks that the virus presented and urged Americans to take precautions if they had reason to believe they were sick. He could have used the powers of the presidency to reduce the number of people who would ultimately get sick.

He did none of those things.

I've reviewed all of his public statements and actions on coronavirus over the last two months, and they show a president who put almost no priority on public health. Trump's priorities were different: Making the virus sound like a minor nuisance. Exaggerating his administration's response. Blaming foreigners and, anachronistically, the Obama administration. Claiming incorrectly that the situation was improving. Trying to cheer up stock market investors. (It was fitting that his first public comments were from Davos and on CNBC.)

Now that the severity of the virus is undeniable, Trump is already trying to present an alternate history of the last two months. Below are the facts — a timeline of what the president was saying, alongside statements from public-health experts as well as data on the virus.

Late January

On the same day that Trump was dismissing the risks on CNBC, Tom Frieden, who ran the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for eight years, wrote an op-ed for the health care publication Stat. In it, Frieden warned that the virus would continue spreading. "We need to learn — and fast — about how it spreads," he wrote.

It was one of many such warnings from prominent experts in late January. Many focused on the need to expand the capacity to test for the virus. In a Wall Street Journal article titled, "Act Now to Prevent an American Epidemic," Luciana Borio and Scott Gottlieb — both former Trump administration officials — wrote:

If public-health authorities don't interrupt the spread soon, the virus could infect many thousands more around the globe, disrupt air travel, overwhelm health care systems, and, worst of all, claim more lives. The good news: There's still an opening to prevent a grim outcome. ... But authorities can't act quickly without a test that can diagnose the condition rapidly.

Trump, however, repeatedly told Americans that there was no reason to worry. On Jan. 24, he tweeted, "It will all work out well." On Jan. 28, he retweeted a headline from One America News, an outlet with a history of spreading false conspiracy theories: "Johnson & Johnson to create coronavirus vaccine." On Jan. 30, during a speech in Michigan, he said: "We have it very well under control. We have very little problem in this country at this moment — five. And those people are all recuperating successfully."

That same day, the World Health Organization declared coronavirus to be a "public-health emergency of international concern." It announced 7,818 confirmed cases around the world.

Jan. 31

Trump took his only early, aggressive action against the virus on Jan. 31: He barred most foreigners who had recently visited China from entering the United States. It was a good move.

But it was only one modest move, not the sweeping solution that Trump portrayed it to be. It didn't apply to Americans who had been traveling in China, for example. And while it generated some criticism from Democrats, it wasn't nearly as unpopular as Trump has since suggested. Two days after announcing the policy, Trump went on Fox News and exaggerated the impact in an interview with Sean Hannity.

"Coronavirus," Hannity said. "How concerned are you?"

Trump replied: “Well, we pretty much shut it down coming in from China. We have a tremendous relationship with China, which is a very positive thing. Getting along with China, getting along with Russia, getting along with these countries.”

By the time of that interview, the number of confirmed coronavirus cases around the world had surged to 14,557, a near doubling over the previous three days.

Early February

On Feb. 5, the C.D.C. began shipping coronavirus test kits to laboratories around the country. But the tests suffered from a technical flaw and didn’t produce reliable results, labs discovered.

The technical problems were understandable: Creating a new virus test is not easy. What’s less understandable, experts say, is why the Trump administration officials were so lax about finding a work-around, even as other countries were creating reliable tests.

The Trump administration could have begun to use a functioning test from the World Health Organization, but didn’t. It could have removed regulations that prevented private hospitals and labs from quickly developing their own tests, but didn’t. The inaction meant that the United States fell behind South Korea, Singapore and China in fighting the virus. “We just twiddled our thumbs as the coronavirus waltzed in,” William Hanage, a Harvard epidemiologist, wrote.

Trump, for his part, spent these first weeks of February telling Americans that the problem was going away. On Feb. 10, he repeatedly said — in a speech to governors, at a campaign rally and in an interview with Trish Regan of Fox Business — that warm spring weather could kill the virus. “Looks like by April, you know, in theory, when it gets a little warmer, it miraculously goes away,” he told the rally.

On Feb. 19, he told a Phoenix television station, “I think the numbers are going to get progressively better as we go along.” Four days later, he pronounced the situation “very much under control,” and added: “We had 12, at one point. And now they’ve gotten very much better. Many of them are fully recovered.”

His message was clear: Coronavirus is a small problem, and it is getting smaller. In truth, the shortage of testing meant that the country didn’t know how bad the problem was. All of the available indicators suggested it was getting worse, rapidly.

On Feb. 23, the World Health Organization announced that the virus was in 30 countries, with 78,811 confirmed cases, a more than fivefold increase over the previous three weeks.

Late February

Trump seemed largely uninterested in the global virus statistics during this period, but there were other indicators — stock-market indexes — that mattered a lot to him. And by the last week of February, those market indexes were falling.

The president reacted by adding a new element to his public remarks. He began blaming others.

He criticized CNN and MSNBC for “panicking markets.” He said at a South Carolina rally — falsely — that “the Democrat policy of open borders” had brought the virus into the country. He lashed out at “Do Nothing Democrat comrades.” He tweeted about “Cryin’ Chuck Schumer,” mocking Schumer for arguing that Trump should be more aggressive in fighting the virus. The next week, Trump would blame an Obama administration regulation for slowing the production of test kits. There was no truth to the charge.

Throughout late February, Trump also continued to claim the situation was improving. On Feb. 26, he said: “We’re going down, not up. We’re going very substantially down, not up.” On Feb. 27, he predicted: “It’s going to disappear. One day — it’s like a miracle — it will disappear.” On Feb. 29, he said a vaccine would be available “very quickly” and “very rapidly” and praised his administration’s actions as “the most aggressive taken by any country.” None of these claims were true.

By the end of February, there were 85,403 confirmed cases, in 55 countries around the world.

Early March

Almost two decades ago, during George W. Bush’s presidency, the federal government developed guidelines for communicating during a public-health crisis. Among the core principles are “be first,” “be right,” “be credible,” “show respect” and “promote action.”

But the Trump administration’s response to coronavirus, as a Washington Post news story put it, is “breaking almost every rule in the book.”

The inconsistent and sometimes outright incorrect information coming from the White House has left Americans unsure of what, if anything, to do. By early March, experts already were arguing for aggressive measures to slow the virus’s spread and avoid overwhelming the medical system. The presidential bully pulpit could have focused people on the need to change their behavior in a way that no private citizen could have. Trump could have specifically encouraged older people — at most risk from the virus — to be careful. Once again, he chose not to take action.

Instead, he suggested on multiple occasions that the virus was less serious than the flu. “We’re talking about a much smaller range” of deaths than from the flu, he said on March 2. “It’s very mild,” he told Hannity on March 4. On March 7, he said, “I’m not concerned at all.” On March 10, he promised: “It will go away. Just stay calm. It will go away.”

The first part of March was also when more people began to understand that the United States had fallen behind on testing, and Trump administration officials responded with untruths.

Alex Azar, the secretary of health and human services, told ABC, “There is no testing kit shortage, nor has there ever been.” Trump, while touring the C.D.C. on March 6, said, “Anybody that wants a test can get a test.”

That C.D.C. tour was a microcosm of Trump’s entire approach to the crisis. While speaking on camera, he made statements that were outright wrong, like the testing claim. He brought up issues that had nothing to do with the virus, like his impeachment. He made clear that he cared more about his image than about people’s well-being, by explaining that he favored leaving infected passengers on a cruise ship so they wouldn’t increase the official number of American cases. He also suggested that he knew as much as any scientist:

I like this stuff. I really get it. People are surprised that I understand it. Every one of these doctors said, ‘How do you know so much about this?’ Maybe I have a natural ability. Maybe I should have done that instead of running for president.

On March 10, the World Health Organization reported 113,702 cases of the virus in more than 100 countries.

Mid-March and beyond

On the night of March 11, Trump gave an Oval Office address meant to convey seriousness. It included some valuable advice, like the importance of hand-washing. But it also continued many of the old patterns of self-congratulation, blame-shifting and misinformation. Afterward, Trump aides corrected three different misstatements.

This pattern has continued in the days since the Oval Office address. Trump now seems to understand that coronavirus isn’t going away anytime soon. But he also seems to view it mostly as a public-relations emergency for himself rather than a public-health emergency for the country. On Sunday, he used his Twitter feed to lash out at Schumer and Joe Biden and to praise Michael Flynn, the former Trump aide who pleaded guilty to lying to the F.B.I.

Around the world, the official virus count has climbed above 142,000. In the United States, scientists expect that between tens of millions and 215 million Americans will ultimately be infected, and the death toll could range from the tens of thousands to 1.7 million.

At every point, experts have emphasized that the country could reduce those terrible numbers by taking action. And at almost every point, the president has ignored their advice and insisted, “It’s going to be just fine.”

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