



U.S. intelligence reports from January and February warned about a likely pandemic

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U.S. intelligence agencies were issuing ominous, classified warnings in January and February about the global danger posed by the coronavirus while President Trump and lawmakers played down the threat and failed to take action that might have slowed the spread of the pathogen, according to U.S. officials familiar with spy agency reporting.

The intelligence reports didn't predict when the virus might land on U.S. shores or recommend particular steps that public health officials should take, issues outside the purview of the intelligence agencies. But they did track the spread of the virus in China, and later in other countries, and warned that Chinese officials appeared to be minimizing the severity of the outbreak.

Taken together, the reports and warnings painted an early picture of a virus that showed the characteristics of a globe-encircling pandemic that could require governments to take swift actions to contain it. But despite that constant flow of reporting, Trump continued publicly and privately to play down the threat the virus posed to Americans. Lawmakers, too, did not grapple with the virus in earnest until this month, as officials scrambled to keep citizens in their homes and hospitals braced for a surge in patients suffering from covid-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus.

Intelligence agencies “have been warning on this since January,” said a U.S. official who had access to intelligence reporting that was disseminated to members of Congress and their staffs as well as to officials in the Trump administration, and who, along with others, spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe sensitive information.

“Donald Trump may not have been expecting this, but a lot of other people in the government were — they just couldn’t get him to do anything about it,” this official said. “The system was blinking red.”

Spokespeople for the CIA and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence declined to comment, and a White House spokesman rebutted criticism of Trump’s response.

“President Trump has taken historic, aggressive measures to protect the health, wealth and safety of the American people — and did so, while the media and Democrats chose to only focus on the stupid politics of a sham illegitimate impeachment,” Hogan Gidley said in a statement. “It’s more than disgusting, despicable and disgraceful for cowardly unnamed sources to attempt to rewrite history — it’s a clear threat to this great country.”

Public health experts have criticized China for being slow to respond to the coronavirus outbreak, which originated in Wuhan, and have said precious time was lost in the effort to slow the spread. At a White House briefing Friday, Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar said officials had been alerted to the initial reports of the virus by discussions that the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had with Chinese colleagues on Jan. 3.

The warnings from U.S. intelligence agencies increased in volume toward the end of January and into early February, said officials familiar with the reports. By then, a majority of the intelligence reporting included in daily briefing papers and digests from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence and the CIA was about covid-19, said officials who have read the reports.

The surge in warnings coincided with a move by Sen. Richard Burr (R-N.C.) to sell dozens of stocks worth between \$628,033 and \$1.72 million. As chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Burr was privy to virtually all of the highly classified reporting on the coronavirus. Burr issued a statement Friday defending his sell-off, saying he sold based entirely on publicly available information, and he called for the Senate Ethics Committee to investigate.

A key task for analysts during disease outbreaks is to determine whether foreign officials are trying to minimize the effects of an outbreak or take steps to hide a public health crisis, according to current and former officials familiar with the process.

At the State Department, personnel had been nervously tracking early reports about the virus. One official noted that it was discussed at a meeting in the third week of January, around the time that cable traffic showed that U.S. diplomats in Wuhan were being brought home on chartered planes — a sign that the public health risk was significant. A colleague at the White House mentioned how concerned he was about the transmissibility of the virus.

“In January, there was obviously a lot of chatter,” the official said.

Inside the White House, Trump’s advisers struggled to get him to take the virus seriously, according to multiple officials with knowledge of meetings among those advisers and with the president.

Azar couldn’t get through to Trump to speak with him about the virus until Jan. 18, according to two senior administration officials. When he reached Trump by phone, the president interjected to ask about vaping and when flavored vaping products would be back on the market, the senior administration officials said.

On Jan. 27, White House aides huddled with then-acting chief of staff Mick Mulvaney in his office, trying to get senior officials to pay more attention to the virus, according to people briefed on the meeting. Joe Grogan, the head of the White House Domestic Policy Council, argued that the administration needed to take the virus seriously or it could cost the president his reelection, and that dealing with the virus was likely to dominate life in the United States for many months.

Mulvaney then began convening more regular meetings. In early briefings, however, officials said Trump was dismissive because he did not believe that the virus had spread widely throughout the United States.

By early February, Grogan and others worried that there weren't enough tests to determine the rate of infection, according to people who spoke directly to Grogan. Other officials, including Matthew Pottinger, the president's deputy national security adviser, began calling for a more forceful response, according to people briefed on White House meetings.

But Trump resisted and continued to assure Americans that the coronavirus would never run rampant as it had in other countries.

"I think it's going to work out fine," Trump said on Feb. 19. "I think when we get into April, in the warmer weather, that has a very negative effect on that and that type of a virus."

"The Coronavirus is very much under control in the USA," Trump tweeted five days later. "Stock Market starting to look very good to me!"

But earlier that month, a senior official in the Department of Health and Human Services delivered a starkly different message to the Senate Intelligence Committee, in a classified briefing that four U.S. officials said covered the coronavirus and its global health implications. The House Intelligence Committee received a similar briefing.

Robert Kadlec, the assistant secretary for preparedness and response — who was joined by intelligence officials, including from the CIA — told committee members that the virus posed a “serious” threat, one of those officials said.

Kadlec didn’t provide specific recommendations, but he said that to get ahead of the virus and blunt its effects, Americans would need to take actions that could disrupt their daily lives, the official said. “It was very alarming.”

Trump’s insistence on the contrary seemed to rest in his relationship with China’s President Xi Jinping, whom Trump believed was providing him with reliable information about how the virus was spreading in China, despite reports from intelligence agencies that Chinese officials were not being candid about the true scale of the crisis.

Some of Trump’s advisers told him that Beijing was not providing accurate numbers of people who were infected or who had died, according to administration officials. Rather than press China to be more forthcoming, Trump publicly praised its response.

“China has been working very hard to contain the Coronavirus,” Trump tweeted Jan. 24. “The United States greatly appreciates their efforts and transparency. It will all work out well. In particular, on behalf of the American People, I want to thank President Xi!”

Some of Trump’s advisers encouraged him to be tougher on China over its decision not to allow teams from the CDC into the country, administration officials said.

In one February meeting, the president said that if he struck a tougher tone against Xi, the Chinese would be less willing to give the Americans information about how they were tackling the outbreak.

Trump on Feb. 3 banned foreigners who had been in China in the previous 14 days from entering the United States, a step he often credits for helping to protect Americans against the virus. He has also said publicly that the Chinese weren't honest about the effects of the virus. But that travel ban wasn't accompanied by additional significant steps to prepare for when the virus eventually infected people in the United States in great numbers.

As the disease spread beyond China, U.S. spy agencies tracked outbreaks in Iran, South Korea, Taiwan, Italy and elsewhere in Europe, the officials familiar with those reports said. The majority of the information came from public sources, including news reports and official statements, but a significant portion also came from classified intelligence sources. As new cases popped up, the volume of reporting spiked.

As the first cases of infection were confirmed in the United States, Trump continued to insist that the risk to Americans was small.

"I think the virus is going to be — it's going to be fine," he said on Feb. 10.

"We have a very small number of people in the country, right now, with it," he said four days later. "It's like around 12. Many of them are getting better. Some are fully recovered already. So we're in very good shape."

On Feb. 25, Nancy Messonnier, a senior CDC official, sounded perhaps the most significant public alarm to that point, when she told reporters that the coronavirus was likely to spread within communities in the United States and that disruptions to daily life could be "severe." Trump called Azar on his way back from a trip to India and complained that Messonnier was scaring the stock markets, according to two senior administration officials.

Trump eventually changed his tone after being shown statistical models about the spread of the virus from other countries and hearing directly from Deborah Birx, the coordinator of the White House coronavirus task force, as well as from chief executives last week rattled by a plunge in the stock market, said people familiar with Trump's conversations.

But by then, the signs pointing to a major outbreak in the United States were everywhere.

Yasmeen Abutaleb contributed to this report.

This story has been updated to note that the House Intelligence Committee received a similar briefing on coronavirus from a senior official in the Department of Health and Human Services as did the Senate Intelligence Committee.

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