

Trump's False Claims About His Response to the Coronavirus

The president inaccurately described travel restrictions he had announced, falsely blamed his predecessor for testing shortages and misstated the role Google was playing in mitigating the outbreak.



By Linda Qiu

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As he declared a national emergency over the coronavirus outbreak, President Trump attempted to deflect criticisms of his administration's response to the virus with inaccurate claims. Here's a fact-check.

WHAT THE FACTS ARE

Mr. Trump wrongly blamed the Obama administration for coronavirus testing shortages and falsely said it “didn’t do testing” during the swine flu epidemic of 2009.

WHAT MR. TRUMP SAID

“I don’t take responsibility at all because we were given a set of circumstances and we were given rules, regulations, and specifications from a different time.”

False. The Food and Drug Administration issued a “draft guidance” in 2014 in which it sought to extend its authority to regulate laboratory-developed tests. But it’s wrong to blame that effort for the scattered and insufficient delivery of coronavirus tests as the guidance was not particularly relevant to emergency situations and was never finalized or generally enforced.

A law enacted in 2004 created the process and requirements for the use of unapproved products in public health emergencies. Under the law and guidance set by the Trump administration itself, the Food and Drug Administration requires developers of laboratory-developed tests to submit information and to comply with certain procedures.

The agency said in early March that it would permit unapproved tests for the coronavirus for 15 days while developers are preparing their emergency authorization request. Neither the 2004 law nor subsequent amendments restricted the Trump administration from doing so, nor did it hamper previous administrations in fast-tracking testing for other health crises.

WHAT MR. TRUMP SAID

“If you go back to the swine flu, it was nothing like this. They didn’t do testing like this, and actually they lost approximately 14,000 people, and they didn’t do the testing. They started thinking about testing when it was far too late.”

False. This is blatantly wrong. Diagnostic tests for the swine flu were approved and shipped out less than two weeks after the H1N1 virus was identified and a day before the first death in the United States.

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The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention identified the first case of the virus on April 14, 2009. The Obama administration declared swine flu a public health emergency on April 26. The Food and Drug Administration approved a rapid test for the virus two days later. At the time, the C.D.C. had reported 64 cases and zero deaths. The C.D.C. began shipping test kits to public health laboratories on May 1 (at

141 cases and one death) and a second test was approved in July. From May to September 2009, the agency shipped more than 1,000 kits, each one able to test 1,000 specimens.

Different tests developed by companies also came into widespread use, though researchers found flaws and limitations in them. A vaccine became available in early October but, amid reports of shortages, President Obama declared the outbreak a national emergency later that month. The estimated death toll in the United States from the H1N1 epidemic was 12,469 from April 2009 to April 2010.

WHAT THE FACTS ARE

Mr. Trump inaccurately described a website in development to mitigate the outbreak.

WHAT MR. TRUMP SAID

"I want to thank Google. Google is helping to develop a website, it's going to be very quickly done, unlike websites of the past, to determine whether a test is warranted and to facilitate testing at a nearby convenient location."

This is misleading. Mr. Trump misstated the company developing the website and exaggerated its scope. After Mr. Trump spoke, Google issued a statement on Twitter from Verily, a separate subsidiary of Google's parent company.

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"We are developing a tool to help triage individuals for Covid-19 testing. Verily is in the early stages of development, and planning to roll testing out in the Bay Area, with the hope of expanding more broadly over time," the statement read.

A spokeswoman for Verily said it had originally intended for the website to be used only by health care workers. Mr. Trump's statement prompted the company to make it available to the public. The site will direct people to "pilot sites" for testing in the Bay Area, the spokeswoman said. If the pilot goes well, Verily aims to deploy the project nationwide, but there is no timetable for a national rollout.

WHAT THE FACTS ARE

Mr. Trump again mischaracterized travel restrictions imposed on certain European countries.

WHAT MR. TRUMP SAID

"As you know, Europe was just designated as the hot spot right now and we closed that border a while ago."

This is misleading. Mr. Trump imposed some travel restrictions on 26 European countries on Wednesday night, but those restrictions do not go into effect until midnight on Friday and do not amount to a total shutting down of the border.

The restrictions bar the entry of foreign nationals who have been to any of the 26 countries that make up Europe's Schengen Area of open borders within 14 days. That area does not include more than 20 other European countries, including Britain. The proclamation also does not apply to American citizens, permanent residents, their immediate families, or those who are members of air or sea crews.

WHAT THE FACTS ARE

Mr. Trump described telemedicine technology as "fairly new," though it's been used for decades.

WHAT MR. TRUMP SAID

"This includes the following critical authorities — the ability to waive laws to enable telehealth, a fairly new and incredible thing that has happened in the not-so-distant past."

This is exaggerated. The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services expanded access to telehealth services — for example, virtual check-ins and telephone consultations with doctors — for Medicare beneficiaries this week. But these technologies have been in use since the 1960s.

The University of Nebraska used video links to provide exams and diagnoses with a state hospital 112 miles away in 1964. Three years later, the University of Miami and a local fire department transmitted cardiac rhythms using radio channels. Federal agencies initiated a host of other services in the 1970s and 1980s.

A 1997 government report noted a severely injured sailor aboard the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln was able to be treated by a doctor in San Diego 6,000 miles away through telemedicine. By 2014, "more than 20 federal agencies were engaged in some aspect of telehealth," according to the Congressional Research Service, with the Department of Veterans Affairs providing more than 2.1 million telehealth consultations in the 2015 fiscal year.

WHAT THE FACTS ARE

Mr. Trump said he was not responsible for disbanding the White House's pandemic team.

WHAT MR. TRUMP SAID

"When you say me, I didn't do it. We have a group of people I could ask — perhaps my administration — but I could perhaps ask Tony about that because I don't know anything about it."

This is misleading. The top White House official tasked with leading the country's response to a pandemic left the administration in May 2018 and his team was disbanded by Mr. Trump's national security adviser at the time, John R. Bolton, The Washington Post has reported.

While there is no evidence that Mr. Trump personally directed the ousting of these officials, he also did not replace them in the nearly two years since, despite repeated bipartisan urgings from lawmakers and experts.

WHAT THE FACTS ARE

Mr. Trump announced his administration would temporarily waive interest on some student loans.

WHAT MR. TRUMP SAID

"To help our students and their families, I have waived interest that all student loans held by federal government agencies, and that will be until further notice."

This needs context. Interest rates will be temporarily waived for borrowers, but their monthly payments will not actually decrease, according to a Department of Education spokeswoman. Instead, borrowers' full payments will go toward the principal on their loans.

The waiver also does not cover student loans issued through state agencies, big private lenders, a majority of Federal Family Education Loans or school-held Perkins loans.

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Daisuke Wakabayashi contributed reporting from San Francisco.

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• When will this end?

This is a difficult question, because a lot depends on how well the virus is contained. A better question might be: "How will we know when to reopen the country?" In an American Enterprise Institute report, Scott Gottlieb, Caitlin Rivers, Mark B. McClellan, Lauren Silvis and Crystal Watson staked out four goal posts for recovery: Hospitals in the state must be able to safely treat all patients requiring hospitalization, without resorting to crisis standards of care; the state needs to be able to at least test everyone who has symptoms; the state is able to conduct monitoring of confirmed cases and contacts; and there must be a sustained reduction in cases for at least 14 days.

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