

Trump Encourages Protest Against Governors Who Have Imposed Virus Restrictions

The president's stark departure from his message on Thursday night, when he announced guidelines for governors to reopen their states and said they would "call your own shots," suggested he was ceding any semblance of national leadership on the pandemic.



By Michael D. Shear and Sarah Mervosh

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WASHINGTON — President Trump on Friday openly encouraged right-wing protests of social distancing restrictions in states with stay-at-home orders, a day after announcing guidelines for how the nation's governors should carry out an orderly reopening of their communities on their own timetables.

In a series of all-caps tweets that started two minutes after a Fox News report on the protesters, the president declared, "LIBERATE MICHIGAN!" and "LIBERATE MINNESOTA!" — two states whose Democratic governors have imposed strict social distancing restrictions. He also lashed out at Virginia, where the state's Democratic governor and legislature have pushed for strict gun control measures, saying: "LIBERATE VIRGINIA, and save your great 2nd Amendment. It is under siege!"

His stark departure from the more bipartisan tone of his announcement on Thursday night suggested Mr. Trump was ceding any semblance of national leadership on the pandemic, and choosing instead to divide the country by playing to his political base.

Echoed across the internet and on cable television by conservative pundits and ultraright conspiracy theorists, his tweets were a remarkable example of a president egging on demonstrators and helping to stoke an angry fervor that in its anti-government rhetoric was eerily reminiscent of the birth of the Tea Party movement a decade ago.

In another series of tweets on Friday, the president returned again to the kind of rank partisanship that has characterized much of his time in office, rekindling a fight with Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo of New York, only days after heaping praise on him. Mr. Cuomo, he said, should "spend more time 'doing' and less time 'complaining.'"

The retort came after the governor said that New York could not fully reopen its economy without more widespread testing and help from the federal government. Even before Mr. Cuomo had finished speaking during his televised daily briefing, Mr. Trump lashed out, tweeting, "We built you thousands of hospital beds that you didn't need or use, gave large numbers of Ventilators that you should have had, and helped you with testing that you should be doing." He said Mr. Cuomo owed the federal government a thank-you.

"First of all, if he's sitting home watching TV, maybe he should get up and go to work, right?" Mr. Cuomo responded in real time. "Second, let's keep emotion and politics out of this, and personal ego if we can. Because this is about the people."

The governor added that he had repeatedly thanked the federal government for its aid.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do — send a bouquet of flowers?" Mr. Cuomo asked.

In unveiling guidelines on Thursday evening at the White House that governors could use to decide when it was safe to phase out restrictions, Mr. Trump had taken a more measured tone, emphasizing that "we are not opening all at once, but one careful step at a time."

Mr. Trump's call for liberation from social distancing rules followed protests around the country as protesters — many wearing red "Make America Great Again" hats — congregated in packed groups around state capitols to demand that restrictions be immediately lifted and to demonize their Democratic governors.

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In Michigan, protesters waved banners in support of Mr. Trump and protested Gov. Gretchen Whitmer by chanting, “Lock her up.” In St. Paul, Minn., a group calling itself “Liberate Minnesota” rallied against stay-at-home orders in front of the home of Gov. Tim Walz, demanding he “end this lockdown!” In Columbus, Ohio, protesters crowded closely together as they pressed up against the doors of the state’s Capitol.

Speaking Friday evening at the White House, the president expressed sympathy for the protesters for having to endure what he called “too tough” social distancing orders in their states, and he dismissed concerns that they could spread the virus by holding demonstrations.

“They seem to be very responsible people to me,” he said.

By embracing the backlash to the coronavirus restrictions, Mr. Trump is tapping into a powerful well of political energy as he seeks re-election this year. The president is also trying to deflect anger about his response to the virus away from him and toward Democratic governors, who he hopes will shoulder the blame for keeping the restrictions in place and for any deaths that occur after states reopen.

The pressure to reopen the economy comes amid skyrocketing joblessness claims and an unemployment rate that is approaching 17 percent, higher than any mark since the Great Depression. On Friday, several governors began responding to that pressure by taking their first, tentative steps toward loosening the rules about work, school and socializing.

In Texas, Gov. Greg Abbott, a Republican, said that by next Friday all retail establishments, not just grocery stores, could operate what he called “retail to go” services in which customers pick up items or have items delivered, but do not physically go inside to shop.

Parks will reopen on Monday, but visitors will be required to wear face coverings and follow social distancing rules, while schools would remain closed for in-person instruction for the rest of the school year.

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“Opening Texas must occur in stages,” Mr. Abbott said.

In Ohio, Gov. Mike DeWine, another Republican, said that as businesses reopen, they will have to enforce six-foot distancing, mask-wearing, and staggered arrival and lunch times. He said there would be more barriers at workplaces, more employees wearing gloves and more frequent cleaning of surfaces. Employees might have their temperatures checked and sent home if they show any symptoms.

In Florida, the mayor of Jacksonville announced that beaches and parks would reopen Friday, as long as visitors practiced social distancing. In Washington State, where the virus first emerged and shut down life for weeks, Boeing announced plans to resume commercial airplane production and bring about 27,000 employees back to work, many as soon as next week.

In Vermont, the governor gave the green light to property managers, real estate agents and some construction crews to return to work, but said they must comply with social distancing and mask-wearing. In Minnesota, golf courses and driving ranges could reopen Saturday morning, along with bait shops, shooting ranges and game farms. But campgrounds, recreational equipment rentals, charter boats and guided fishing will remain closed.

In the hours after the president’s tweets, several Democratic governors joined Mr. Cuomo in expressing their exasperation with Mr. Trump.

Gov. Jay Inslee of Washington, who ran an unsuccessful bid for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination, said Mr. Trump’s tweets “encourage illegal and dangerous acts” and said the president was “putting millions of people in danger of contracting Covid-19.”

Mr. Inslee added: “His unhinged rantings and calls for people to ‘liberate’ states could also lead to violence. We’ve seen it before.”

And in Michigan, Governor Whitmer said she hoped the president’s comments would not incite more protests.

“There is a lot of anxiety,” she said. “The most important thing that anyone with a platform can do is try to use that platform to tell people, ‘We are going to get through this.’”

The latest escalation in the back-and-forth between Mr. Trump and the nation’s governors underscored the high stakes as they grapple with how to respond to the pandemic.

Governors of both parties have drawn praise for their decisive actions and calm leadership in shutting down businesses and schools to protect public health, but the decision about when and how to reopen could prove far more politically perilous. Moving too soon comes with the risk of more cases and deaths, but moving too late means people’s livelihoods could be destroyed for good.

For Mr. Trump, the calculation is also perilous as he tries to mobilize his core supporters while abandoning once again his sporadic attempts at bipartisanship.

Openly supporting those who challenge the stay-at-home orders could help the president re-energize the coalition of conservative Republicans and working-class populists who agree with the anti-government sentiment that helped power Mr. Trump's election victory in 2016.

Large majorities of the country — including Republicans — are concerned about the dangers of reopening the country too quickly. But among very conservative voters, 65 percent said they were more worried about reopening too slowly, according to a Pew Research Center poll released on Thursday.

Shaping their views has been Fox News, which has devoted extensive coverage to the protests that took place this week, reminiscent of the way it provided a platform for Tea Party activists early in the Obama administration. For the past several days, the network has shown videos of the crowds gathered outside State Capitols and aired interviews with organizers who fumed at their governors.

Ms. Whitmer, in particular, has become a target of Fox hosts like Tucker Carlson, who has described her quarantine orders, which are among the most restrictive in the country, as “authoritarian.”

“I hope she loses her job because she certainly deserves it,” Mr. Carlson said.

Others, like Fox's Laura Ingraham, have encouraged more demonstrations. Before Mr. Trump put out his “LIBERATE” message on Friday morning, Ms. Ingraham addressed a tweet to Virginians. “When will residents protest and reclaim their freedom?” she wrote.

Among those who have participated in the early resistance movement is Stephen Moore, an adviser to Mr. Trump's Covid-19 economic recovery task force and a founder of a new group lobbying for a quick opening of the economy, Save Our Country.

In an interview on a little-viewed YouTube program called “Freedom on Tap,” first spotted by the progressive group True North Research, Mr. Moore said this week that he had been helping a group organize a protest in Wisconsin and arrange for legal costs that could be associated with mass gatherings during a safer-at-home order in the state.

“We need to be the Rosa Parks here,” he said, “and protest these government injustices.”

Mr. Trump is also providing support to some of the darkest corners of the internet, where far-right activists have encouraged the protesters to defy Democratic governors and demand that restrictions be lifted.

Owen Shroyer, a host on Infowars, a website that disseminates conspiracy theories, called this week for people to gather at a “You Can't Close America” rally on the steps of the Texas Capitol in Austin in violation of a stay-at-home order.

After that announcement, Twitter — which has a policy that it will not tolerate posts that are “a clear call to action that could directly pose a risk to people's health or well-being” — permanently suspended Mr. Shroyer's account, though it said in a statement that he had violated “our platform manipulation and spam policy, specifically creating accounts to replace or mimic a suspended account.”

Michael D. Shear reported from Washington, and Sarah Mervosh from Canton, Ohio. Reporting was contributed by Emily Cochrane from Washington; Dionne Searcey, Jim Rutenberg, Jeremy W. Peters, Adeel Hassan and Michael Gold from New York; and Manny Fernandez from Houston.

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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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