



MEMORANDUM

TO: Democratic Officeholders and Communicators
FROM: Kate Bedingfield, Deputy Campaign Manager, Biden for President
RE: Trump's Coronavirus Failure
DATE: April 21, 2020

Many of you have asked for guidance on how to communicate to the American people a way of understanding the scope and nature of Donald Trump's failed handling of coronavirus: one of the worst policy mistakes any president has made in our history. This memo answers these requests for such guidance.

Brief Summary

Donald Trump hasn't taken responsibility for fighting coronavirus, or for the mistakes he has made in failing to do so. He ignored the warnings from health experts, from his own advisers, and from Joe Biden. He squandered precious time during which he should have been preparing. The result: America is seeing the worst death toll from the coronavirus of any country, and precipitous loss of jobs.

Trump made four critical errors. (1) The Chinese government: He praised its leader and did not fight anywhere near hard enough to get the facts. (2) Cover-up: He denied and downplayed the danger. (3) Chaos: His mismanaged response did not get us ready. (4) Corporate favoritism: He dithered when it came to using the Defense Production Act to require companies to produce tests and medical gear (and is still refusing to use it much at all -- plus, his bailout favors big companies and those with special access over small businesses).

Overview

Tens of thousands of Americans have lost their lives, at least 22 million have filed jobless claims, and our economy is in a downward spiral. The United States, the wealthiest nation in the history of the world, has been hit harder by this global pandemic than any other country despite our expertise, global leadership position, and resources. The reason why is indisputable: Donald Trump failed us. His public health and intelligence experts continuously warned him for months that we had to take forceful action and that this was a deadly threat to our people and to our economy.

By contrast, Joe Biden sounded the alarm about this crisis [early](#) and called for action. But instead of leading, Trump downplayed and lied about the enormous danger we faced.

Why? Because he believed the Chinese government's propaganda about containment, despite his advisers [urging](#) him not to. Because he thought the longer he kept public alarm suppressed, the more time he was buying before the stock market declined. And because he wanted to reserve his political capital for his trade negotiations with China, hoping to tout a deal when campaigning for re-election.

Joe Biden himself publicly [warned](#) Donald Trump about this, on 2/26:

- "Were I president now, I would not be taking China's word for it. I would insist that China

allow our scientists in to make a hard determination of how it started, where it's from, how far along it is. Because that is not happening now.”

This is what Donald Trump [said](#) three days later, when asked about taking steps to protect the American people from the virus:

- “Some measures. We’ve been in very close contact with China, including myself with President Xi. He very much wanted this to happen. He wanted this to get out and finished and be done. He worked — he’s been working very, very hard, I can tell you that. And they’re making a lot of progress in China.”

When other countries, like our ally South Korea, mobilized and ramped up testing, Donald Trump bought the Chinese Communist Party’s spin and went AWOL on the worst public health crisis in more than 100 years. And now innocent people, through no fault of their own, are paying the price for it.

The bottom line: if Donald Trump had listened to Joe Biden, fewer Americans would be dying, losing loved ones, losing their jobs, or losing their retirement savings. Crucially, Trump has continued to abjectly fail us -- to this day. He still has not robustly used the Defense Production Act and we still have nowhere near enough tests, personal protective equipment, or financial support for families struggling to get by.

Vice President Biden has exhibited the qualities that the country needs in a leader now: competence, wisdom, strength, and compassion. And Joe Biden is the leader we need at this moment, to pull us back from Trump’s coronavirus failure and lift the country up again.

Two Awful Facts

Donald Trump has failed us on a historic scale, responsible for unimaginable pain and suffering - and we need to be clear and unshakeable in communicating this to the American people. Due to Trump’s failed, mismanaged response, two incontrovertible facts will now define it forever:

- Over 40,000 Americans have already lost their lives to COVID-19.
- We are losing millions of jobs at an unprecedented speed in our history.

Trump will try to “spin” that the death toll from COVID-19 was lower than some models forecast; that economic statistics later in the year reflect a comeback; or other metrics concocted to dodge accountability for these results. But these two facts – **the high death toll, the record-pace job loss** – cannot be denied, disputed, or ignored.

COVID-19 is a global pandemic. But Trump’s failure is a uniquely American phenomenon; the product of his actions and inactions. No country had more confirmed cases or more deaths than the US. The US, which had its first confirmed case the same day as South Korea, has seen, as of the night of April 19, a per capita death rate about 30 times higher; ours more than doubles Germany’s and about triples Canada’s.

Four Central Explanations

The mistakes made by Donald Trump in handling COVID-19 are countless, and he will not be able to deflect his way out of accountability for them. He alternatively says that no one saw the disease coming – and that he knew it was a pandemic all along; that he has done a great job, and that he has no responsibility at all for what went wrong; that he has made all the tough decisions, and that the key decisions are in the hands of the Governors.

To cut through all this confusion, it is important to focus on the four “C’s” of Trump’s coronavirus failure that we need to all emphasize and drive home to voters:

1. The Chinese Government: He Bought the Chinese Government’s Obvious Spin and Turned a Blind Eye to the Danger

In the earliest phase of the coronavirus threat, Donald Trump turned a blind eye to an emerging global danger coming from China. Before the outbreak, he terminated an essential program launched and strongly supported by the Obama-Biden Administration (literally called “PREDICT”), that had disease detectives around the world – including in China – to watch for emerging threats. This program even worked specifically to identify coronaviruses in Wuhan, China – where COVID-19 emerged. Trump left the position for a US observer in China’s disease control agency vacant. He failed to adequately press the Chinese government to allow CDC officials to get into the key sites in China to find out what was going on.

Instead of pressuring China’s leaders for answers, Trump slathered their handling of COVID-19 with praise. He said that China was being “transparent” and that “on behalf of the American People, I want to thank President Xi” for his handling of the disease. He said that China’s government had it “under control.” He [praised](#) China 15 times in January and February for its handling of the disease. Well after the outbreak started, his administration urged the export to China of key protective gear needed for U.S. hospitals.

Damningly, the Washington Post [reported](#) that “Trump has consistently praised Chinese President Xi Jinping despite warnings from U.S. intelligence and health officials that Beijing was concealing the true scale of the outbreak and impeding cooperation on key fronts.”

It has been reported that Trump did this because he was focused on appeasing China’s leaders as he was trying to clean up the mess in trade relations that he created. He also employed a general strategy of downplaying the pandemic threat and trying to keep the stock market elevated in the short term, with no plan for what happened to us when time ran out.

Joe Biden took a different approach. He spoke out publicly against the Chinese government’s stonewalling on COVID-19, and said that, were he President, he would insist on getting US experts on the ground in China.

In the February 25th Democratic presidential debate in South Carolina, Biden said, “I would be on the phone with China and making it clear, we are going to need to be in your country; you have to be open; you have to be clear; we have to know what’s going on; we have to be there with you, and insist on it and insist, insist, insist.”

Trump defends his handling of this crisis by pointing to his restrictions on travel from China. But this defense is unavailing in three respects. First, Trump was not “bold” in placing travel restrictions from China – 45 other countries had those restrictions in place before the US did. Second, the restrictions were riddled with exceptions, rendering them of marginal efficacy: 40,000 people came here from China after they were put in place. And third, as discussed below, Trump squandered the time for preparation that the travel restrictions provided.

2. Cover-up: He Downplayed and Dismissed it, Delayed the Response

The first case of COVID-19 from China arrived in the US on January 15. What did Trump do in the next two months to contain the virus, and prepare us for the crisis? He downplayed and

dismissed the threat. This was the COVID-19 Cover Up.

Notwithstanding all the warnings that Trump received – from his own intelligence community, his own Secretary of Health and Human Services, his own CDC – Trump continually claimed that there was no serious threat here.

The Washington Post recently [compiled](#) at least 34 times that Trump downplayed this imminent danger.

The first time Trump even publicly addressed it was on CNBC, when he was asked, “are there worries about a pandemic at this point?” Trump [answered](#), “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.”

This was a horrible pattern that deceived the American people about the approaching disaster. Trump went on to [assure us](#) that China was handling COVID-19 “really well” and that it would simply disappear “like a miracle.”

Joe Biden’s approach was the polar opposite. In his January 27 [op-ed in USA Today](#), he called on the United States to show global leadership and marshal other countries to stop catastrophe, using our successful containment of Ebola during the Obama-Biden Administration as a model: “We brought the world together behind a response that only the United States could mobilize ... That’s the kind of leadership a moment like this demands.” If only Joe Biden had been in charge during those crucial months that we can never get back.

Trump tries to defend his mishandling of the crisis by blaming others, most recently, the World Health Organization (WHO). But whatever mistakes the WHO made, they did – on January 30, 2020 – declare the coronavirus to be a “public health emergency of international concern.” And yet, Trump still did very little to respond to this official and urgent warning until mid-March.

3. Chaos: He Never Got it Together

As the need for action mounted, Trump responded with a chaotic, disorganized, under-powered response. Trump had, in 2018, disbanded the White House’s National Security Council Directorate for Global Health Security and Biodefense, leaving no senior level person at the White House in charge of preparation and response. And then, in the critical five week period from late January to early March, Trump appeared to cycle through at least three different leadership structures as his whims shifted: from HHS Secretary Alex Azar, to Vice President Pence, to finally putting Jared Kushner in charge. Chaos reigned with conflicts over strategy and supplies. The federal government has literally [seized](#) supplies ordered by state governments.

Again, Joe Biden took the polar opposite approach. He was part of the Obama-Biden Administration team that created the global pandemic monitoring and response office at the National Security Council after we contained Ebola, which Donald Trump dismantled. He called for this outbreak to be recognized as the threat it was, and correctly [warned](#) that the Chinese government’s promises about containment could not be trusted. Joe Biden also [released](#) a comprehensive response plan on March 12.

Testing remains the ultimate issue, and even [Republican governors](#) have been very [vocal](#) about how much Trump has failed us on testing. Trump [eschews](#) responsibility for testing but then asserts absolute authority. Experts have repeatedly affirmed that the key to bringing this

outbreak under control is having enough testing capacity, but we are [nowhere close](#) to what is required. Trump assured us that "anybody that wants a test can get a test." He has broken that promise repeatedly. And the United States, the wealthiest country on earth, lags behind much of the world in per capita testing - from the president who claims to put "America First."

4. Corporate Favoritism: He Went Soft on Corporations

President Trump had at his disposal a tool of incredible power, the Defense Production Act (DPA) – which enables federal agencies to ask companies to produce items of great national importance during disasters afflicting the country.

Vice President Biden called on Trump to make use of the DPA to ensure that we were producing desperately needed ventilators to help COVID-19 patients breathe, and the personal protective equipment that our doctors, nurses, and other frontline medical professionals absolutely must have to protect their own lives as they save the lives of others.

But Trump dithered when it came to actually using the DPA, caving to lobbying from big corporations worried that it would hurt their profits. This led to the revealing Bloomberg News [headline](#), "Trump Shuns War Powers to Speed Virus Goods After Chamber Balks." And Trump is still largely refusing to use the DPA in many cases in which it's urgently needed.

There was an unmistakable bias toward giant corporations in the CARES Act, which left out the smallest businesses that power so many American communities and are crucial to keeping millions of workers on payroll. Trump also fired the inspector general who had been charged with overseeing these funds, which is extremely alarming in light of his administration's conflicts of interest and raises the prospect of relief money being given to friends and cronies.

In fact, Trump's Administration is letting hedge funds game the system to try to snatch up funds meant for small businesses, which is an indefensible betrayal of the working people suffering the most from the outbreak.

Due to Trump's mismanagement, our economy is in a tailspin, the impact is crushing the American middle class and working families daily, and Trump refuses to stand up to big corporations and help us climb out of this hole as fast as possible.

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