

White House in disarray as coronavirus numbers explode

By Patrick Martin
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The toll of coronavirus infections and deaths in the United States is moving relentlessly upwards as the Trump administration's response descends into chaos. Trump and other aides are denouncing the top US infectious disease expert, Dr. Anthony Fauci, while the White House effectively prevents the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention from carrying out its assigned task of coordinating the fight against the pandemic.

On Wednesday, the US death toll passed 140,000, according to the count maintained by the Worldometer website, and the total number of cases reported reached 3.6 million, meaning that more than one out of every hundred Americans has been infected by the potentially deadly virus.

The one-day total of infections set a new record at 71,670. Over the past seven days, the average one-day total has been more than 62,000, triple the level of one month ago.

It will not be long before the United States experiences more new infections in a single day than China suffered throughout the entire months-long crisis that ravaged the city of Wuhan, where the global pandemic began. Soon after that, the US may hit the 100,000 daily infection rate about which Dr. Fauci warned in his Senate testimony last month.

In cities across the southern and southwestern states, scenes that recall the horrors of April in New York City are now taking place, with hospitals in Miami, Orlando, Houston, Dallas, San Antonio and Phoenix running out of PPE, ICU beds and space to house the dead.

On Tuesday, when there were more than 65,000 new cases across the country, Florida, Texas and California accounted for nearly half. Florida alone had more than 78,000 new cases over the past week, more than most countries have had in the entire course of the pandemic. China, it should be noted, has suffered 83,612 cases of COVID-19 in the eight months since the disease was first discovered in Wuhan.

A front-page analysis in the *Washington Post* gloomily noted that the soaring global coronavirus toll was being powered by a group of poor countries, and by the United States, more or less suggesting that America resembles a third world country in its efforts to fight the pandemic. The newspaper cited one key fact: "Nearly all the countries struggling with a surge share something in common: After weeks or months of trying to

suppress the virus, they reopened their economies, only to find that the virus came roaring back."

The newspaper failed to point out, however, that the reopening in the US was not in response to popular demand. It was rather carried out, in the face of deep-seated opposition from workers, at the orders of the financial aristocracy and its political servants in both parties, Democratic as well as Republican.

Some of the most strident advocates of the reopening have themselves contracted coronavirus. Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt, who hailed the Trump campaign rally held in his state last month at a Tulsa arena, revealed Wednesday that he had tested positive. So did Representative Morgan Griffith of the 9th Congressional District of Virginia, in the Appalachian region, a leader of the ultra-right House Freedom Caucus, who attended a public event in Washington where the participants were generally maskless.

There is a chaotic patchwork, in some cases state by state, in others city by city, of emergency orders, mask mandates and decisions to reopen public schools and other potential flashpoints of a new surge in COVID-19. The Houston Independent School District said it would begin its school year with at least six weeks of online-only instruction, with a plan to review the decision in mid-October. San Francisco announced a similar schedule, while Prince George's County, Maryland, in the Washington D.C. suburbs, said online-only instruction would continue at least until February 2021.

Two more state governors, Republican Kay Ivey of Alabama and Democrat Steve Bullock of Montana, announced they were dropping their previous opposition and issuing statewide orders requiring anyone out in public to wear a mask. The Republican governors of Georgia and Florida, two of the hardest-hit states, are still refusing to issue orders to wear masks.

Many states are being forced to return to some form of partial lockdown, at least banning indoor service at bars and restaurants, in some cases threatening a fuller closing down of the economy.

At her press briefing on Wednesday afternoon, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer revealed that the state's COVID-19 curve had begun to rise again, hitting 891 new cases, the biggest single-day total in two months. Blaming the

population for failing to wear masks, Whitmer warned, “If Michiganders don’t mask up when we’re going out in public, cases could rise and we could be forced to close down more of our businesses, including auto manufacturing plants that employ thousands of Michigan workers, jobs that our whole economy depends on.”

Dr. Joneigh Khaldun, the state’s top health official, said that the resurgence in the coronavirus was driven by younger people, with the highest rate among those aged 20–29, followed by those aged 30–39. She also noted the spread to new areas of the state not previously significantly affected, including the rural Upper Peninsula and the Grand Rapids area, both of which had their highest infection rates since the pandemic began. Michigan schools are still set to reopen on September 8.

Republican Governor Mike DeWine of Ohio gave a statewide address Tuesday night in which he warned that if no action was taken, “Florida and Arizona will be our future.” He warned against any relaxation of social distancing and wearing masks, saying in that case, “we’re literally playing a Russian roulette game with our own lives, and our families’ and our neighbors’.”

In the Virginia, Maryland and Washington D.C. area, the seven-day moving average of new infections has returned to the level that prevailed before the lockdown of nonessential businesses was loosened at the end of May, passing 1,400 per day, with the biggest increase in the Hampton Roads area, which includes the largest US naval base, as well as the tourist center of Virginia Beach.

Against this backdrop of mounting sickness and death, the White House has been thrown into turmoil by attacks on Dr. Fauci, the longtime head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, by Trump and several aides.

Trump referred disparagingly to Fauci’s “many mistakes” in two media interviews last week, and the attack escalated with White House officials releasing a memorandum detailing supposed errors by Fauci and other materials aiming to discredit him. This culminated in a column published Tuesday in *USA Today* by Peter Navarro, Trump’s top trade adviser, under the headline, “Anthony Fauci has been wrong about everything I have interacted with him on.”

The op-ed was an ignorant rant by an official with no public health expertise but plenty of nationalistic spleen directed at China, the country Navarro accuses of deliberately unleashing the virus on the world. Navarro evidently regards Fauci’s scientific advice as an obstacle to the anti-China campaign.

After a media and political backlash, White House aide Alyssa Farah claimed that the Navarro column had not gone through “normal White House clearance processes and is the opinion of Peter alone.” Later in the day, Trump disavowed the Navarro column entirely, saying it was a “rogue” effort and that he did not share Navarro’s view of Fauci. But Navarro was only repeating, in more compressed and pointed form, exactly

what Trump and other White House officials had been saying against Fauci for a week.

Fauci himself, in a media interview Wednesday, stated the obvious about the White House attack on him: “It distracts from what I hope would be the common effort of getting this thing under control, rather than this back-and-forth distraction, which just doesn’t make any sense.”

He continued, “Let’s stop this nonsense and figure out how can we get our control over this now, and looking forward, how can we make sure that next month we don’t have another example of California, Texas, Florida and Arizona, because those are the hot zones now, and I’m looking at the map, saying we got to make sure it doesn’t happen in other states... Let’s focus on that.”

The White House also reaffirmed the directive issued July 10 for hospitals to bypass the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and send information on COVID-19 patients and resources to the Department of Health and Human Services in Washington. The order—a transparent effort to suppress information about the pandemic by centralizing it under the control of the White House—was roundly criticized by professionals in the public health field.

In a press statement, Dr. Thomas File, president of the Infectious Diseases Society of America, called data collection a “core function of the CDC,” which was being undermined by the Trump administration. “Placing medical data collection outside of the leadership of public health experts could severely weaken the quality and availability of data, add an additional burden to already overwhelmed hospitals and add a new challenge to the US pandemic response,” he said.

According to press reports, hospitals will not actually contact the federal government at all to report COVID-19 information. They will report their data to TeleTracking, a private company in the Pittsburgh area, which was awarded a \$10 million no-bid contract to provide HHS with reporting capability.

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