

# 美國這樣錯過抗疫最關鍵 70 天

華盛頓郵報 20200404

## The U.S. was beset by denial and dysfunction as the coronavirus raged

From the Oval Office to the CDC, political and institutional failures cascaded through the system and opportunities to mitigate the pandemic were lost.

4 月 4 日，《華盛頓郵報》推出這篇深度調查文章，全景式的深度回顧了美國在冠狀病毒危機最初 70 天的失敗經歷和深層原因，文章是基於對美國政府官員、公共衛生專家、情報官員和其他參與抗擊這一流行病的人員的 47 次採訪。

當特朗普宣佈自己是戰時總統而冠狀病毒是他的敵人的時候，美國正面臨著這樣的可怕前景：最終死於新冠病毒的人數可能會超過了（美國在）朝鮮戰爭、越南戰爭、阿富汗戰爭和伊拉克戰爭（傷亡）的總和。

美國採取了一系列戰時措施，這是該國歷史上從未一起採取過的措施，包括禁止來自兩大洲的入境旅客，貿易處於近乎停滯的狀態，招募製造緊急醫療設備的行業，以及將 2.3 億美國人困在自己的家中，一切都是為了試圖躲過一個看不見的對手的攻擊。

儘管採取了各種極端的措施，而且美國一向被認為是應對流行病準備最充分的國家，但最終卻被新型冠狀病毒災難性地擊敗，傷亡人數比其他任何國家都要多。

事情本不必以這種方式發生。儘管沒有做好充分的準備，但與幾十個最終在抵禦病毒方面表現得好得多的國家相比，美國確實擁有更多的專業知識、資源、計劃和流行病學經驗。

這一失敗讓人想起了 911 事件之前發生的一切：包括政府最高層在內的各方都發出了警告，但布什總統對這些警告充耳不聞，直到敵人發動攻擊。

### 一、最初的預警

1 月 3 日，特朗普政府收到了冠狀病毒的第一個正式通知。幾天之內，美國情報機構在給總統的每日簡報中對這種冠狀病毒威脅的嚴重性發出了警告，這是西方各國中第一次對這種病毒發出警告。

然而，直到接到最初的通知 70 天后，特朗普才終於認識到，這種冠狀病毒不是一種遙遠的威脅，也不是一種受到良好控制的無害流感病毒，而是一種致命的可怕力量，是一種可能擊潰美國防禦體系、隨時可能殺死數萬公民的致命力量。

現在終於能看清楚，這兩個多月的時間成了被浪費掉的關鍵時刻。

特朗普在那幾周做出一些毫無根據的斷言，包括他聲稱一切都“奇跡般地”消失，結果在公眾中造成了巨大的困擾，並與公共衛生專家發出的緊急信息相矛盾。

“儘管媒體更喜歡編造白宮內的陰謀論這種作法人髮指，但特朗普總統和本屆政府仍會全天候關注美國人的健康與安全，全天候進行工作，以減慢病毒的傳播，擴大檢測範圍並加快疫苗接種的速度，”總統發言人賈德·迪爾說：“由於總統的領導，我們將健康、強大、經濟繁榮，並在增長的挑戰中脫穎而出。”

總統的行為和他好鬥的言論，只是更深層次上的功能障礙可見的一面。

最嚴重的失敗是，（早期）開發診斷測試的努力失敗了。這種測試本來可以大規模生產，並在美國各地分發，讓相關機構能夠發現疾病的早期爆發，並採取隔離措施加以控制。

有一次，美國食品和藥物管理局（FDA）的一名官員，開撕美國疾病控制與預防中心的實驗室官員，告訴他們各種失誤，包括擔心實驗室不符合無菌條件的標準的問題是如此嚴重，以至於 FDA 說，如果 CDC 是商業實體而不是政府實體，早就被關門了。

其他故障遍及整個防疫系統。在對病毒傳播做出反應，關閉大門時，政府通常似乎落後了幾周。白宮與公共衛生機構之間關於資金的曠日持久的爭論，再加上現有的應急物資儲備很少，使得該國大部分醫療保健系統都沒有保護裝備，直到新冠病毒成為大流行為止。

內鬥，地盤之爭和領導層的突然變動阻礙了冠狀病毒工作隊的工作。

我們可能永遠也不知道，如果採取更加一致、緊急和有效的應對措施，是不是有可能避免很多人死亡和數百萬人感染。但即便是現在，仍有許多跡象表明，特朗普政府對危機的處理可能帶來毀滅性的後果。

甚至總統的基礎支持者也開始面對這一現實。3 月中旬，當特朗普把自己標榜為戰時總統，姍姍來遲地敦促公眾一起減緩病毒的蔓延，共和黨領導人正在審視嚴峻的民意測驗數據，這些數據表明特朗普正在使他的追隨者在面對致命的威脅時陷入一種錯誤的安全感。

民調顯示，特朗普對病毒的輕蔑描述，以及福克斯新聞(Fox News)和其他保守派電視臺對病毒的嘲諷報道，對共和黨的影響遠遠超過了民主黨。結果，令人沮喪的是，很多共和黨人拒絕改變旅行計劃，拒絕遵循“社交距離”（編者注：人與人之間保持 2 米左右的距離）的指導方針，拒絕囤積補給品，拒絕認真對待冠狀病毒的威脅。

“否認不太可能是一個成功的生存策略，”共和黨民意調查專家尼爾·紐豪斯在一份文件中總結道。這份文件在國會山被共和黨領導人分享，並在白宮被廣泛討論。它說，特朗普最堅定的支持者“正在把自己和所愛的人置於危險之中”。

隨著這份報告席捲共和黨高層，特朗普也發生了變化。最近幾天，特朗普很憤怒，因為有人提醒他曾聲稱感染案例將很快“降至零”。

到目前為止，美國已有超過 7000 人死於冠狀病毒，大約有 24 萬病例報告。但特朗普承認，新的模型顯示，最終的全國死亡人數可能在 10 萬到 24 萬之間。

除了成千上萬的受害者和他們的家人即將遭受的苦難之外，這一結果還會改變美國的國際地位，損害並削弱了美國在極端困境時期作為全球領導者的聲譽。

美國國家情報委員會前主席格雷戈裏·f·特雷弗頓說，“這對那種認為美國有能力的感覺是一個真正的打擊。”

該委員會是政府最資深的情報分析機構。特雷弗頓在 2017 年 1 月辭職，現在在南加州大學任教，他指出，“這是我們全球角色的一部分。傳統的朋友和盟友信任我們，因為他們認為我們能夠勝任地在危機中與他們一起工作，而不是相反。”

## 二、我們已經完全控制住了

美國的公共衛生部門和反恐官員、軍事規劃人員、航空當局以及其他人員一樣，都是一種特殊類型的公務員，他們的職業生涯都花在了考慮最壞的情況上。

公共衛生部門用來對付病毒入侵的武器庫非常強大，能夠在爭搶治癒方法的同時扼殺一種新的病原體，但如果不及時動員起來，也很容易被擊垮。因此，美國衛生與公眾服務部、美國疾病控制與預防中心(CDC)和其他機構的官員每天都在密切關注新出現的危險。

美國疾病控制與預防中心於 12 月 31 日獲悉冠狀病毒病例，並於 1 月 1 日開始為美國衛生與公眾服務部編寫報告。但美國官員收到的有關這種冠狀病毒最明確的警告是 1 月 3 日 CDC 主任羅伯特·雷德菲爾德到了電話，一種神秘的呼吸系統疾病正在蔓延。

雷德菲爾德很快把這個令人不安的消息轉告給了衛生與公眾服務部(HHS)的部長亞曆克斯·阿紮(Alex Azar)。衛生與公眾服務部負責監督疾控中心和其他公共衛生機構。而阿紮則確保白宮得到通知，指示他的幕僚長與國家安全委員會分享報告。

從那一刻起，政府和病毒就陷入了一場爭分奪秒的競賽，在病原體和預防措施之間能否爭得先機，這將決定病毒襲擊美國後的規模，並將決定有多少人會生病或死亡。

最初的反應是有希望的，但官員們也立即遇到了障礙。

美國衛生與公眾服務部的高級官員就已經開始召集一個機構內部的工作小組，成員包括 CDC 主任雷德菲爾德、阿紮爾和美國國家過敏和傳染病研究所所長福西。

接下來的一周，白宮還與國家安全委員會和國務院的官員舉行了零散的會議，主要討論何時以及是否將政府雇員帶回美國。

美國官員開始採取初步措施以應對潛在的疫情爆發。到 1 月中旬為止，作為空軍軍官和衛生與公眾服務部防備和響應助理秘書的羅伯特·卡德爾茨，已指示下屬制定應急計劃以執行《國防生產法》，該措施使政府能夠強迫私人公司生產對國家安全至關重要的設備。

助手們對是否執行該法案產生分歧，好幾周過去了都沒有發生任何事情。

1 月 14 日，卡德爾茨在他的筆記本上潦草地寫下了一個詞：“冠狀病毒!!”

儘管特朗普政府較低級別的官員已經開始了一系列的準備工作，但是直到 1 月 18 日特朗普在海湖莊園度週末時，衛生部長阿紮爾才向他詳細彙報了有關冠狀病毒的情況。

甚至在衛生部長還沒來得及插話之前，特朗普就打斷了他，開始批評阿紮爾對電子煙產品的聯邦禁令流產的處理方式，這一禁令讓特朗普很惱火。

當時，特朗普正處於一場彈劾戰的痛苦之中，原因是他被指試圖從烏克蘭領導人那裏獲得政治好處。共和黨控制的參議院似乎肯定會宣判特朗普無罪，但特朗普全神貫注於這場審判，在深夜裏向參議員們大聲疾呼，並列出他認為的敵人名單，以便在針對他的案件結束後進行懲罰。

官員們說，事後看來，阿紮爾還是有可能更加有力地敦促特朗普，至少將他的一些注意力轉向新的威脅，這一威脅將很快對他的總統職位進行更嚴峻的考驗，將使大批美國人喪生，在特朗普第一屆總統任期的最後一年。

但與特朗普和其他政府官員關係緊張的國務卿向總統保證，相關責任人正在處理和監督這個問題。阿紮爾告訴幾名助手，總統認為他是“危言聳聽者”，因為阿紮爾努力讓特朗普的注意力集中在新問題上，甚至向一名密友徵求意見。

幾天之內，又出現了新的警報。

1 月 21 日，一名最近有國外旅行歷史的西雅圖男子在冠狀病毒檢測中呈陽性，成為美國本土第一例已知感染病例。

也是在這個時候，美國官員開始正視自己在應對危機方面的失敗。

在 911 恐怖襲擊和 2005 年禽流感爆發等危機期間，阿紮爾曾在美國衛生與公眾服務部擔任高級職位，他對危機管理非常熟悉。

他指示下屬迅速採取行動，建立一個全國性的監測系統，跟蹤冠狀病毒的傳播——這是疾病控制與預防中心每年監測普通流感新毒株所做工作的升級版。

美國疾病控制與預防中心 1 月 8 日首次發佈了有關冠狀病毒的公開警報，並於 17 日開始監測洛杉磯、舊金山和紐約的主要機場，這些機場每天都有大量乘客抵達。

然而，在其他方面，情況已經失控，西雅圖的病例成倍增加，公眾提出的問題越來越多，沒有任何措施阻止受感染的旅客從國外抵達。

在這一關鍵時刻，特朗普離開了美國，參加了在瑞士達沃斯舉行的年度全球經濟論壇。隨行的高級官員包括國家安全顧問羅伯特·奧布萊恩，他接到了焦慮不安的阿紮爾打來的跨洋電話。

阿紮爾對奧布萊恩說，這是白宮的“混亂”，衛生與公眾服務部的官員被迫在同一天向三個人提供幾乎相同的簡報。

阿紮爾敦促奧布萊恩，讓國家安全委員會介入，對一件可能影響到航空旅行、移民當局、國務院和五角大樓的事情進行協調。奧布萊恩似乎意識到了這種緊迫性，並讓他的副手馬修·波廷格負責協調仍處於萌芽階段的美國應對措施。

但政府內部日益加劇的焦慮似乎並沒有反映在總統身上。1月22日，特朗普在達沃斯接受CNBC採訪時，第一次被問及冠狀病毒。當被問及他是否擔心潛在的流行病時，特朗普說：“不擔心。我們已經完全控制住了，就一個案例，一切都會好起來的。”

### 三、傳播開始不受控制

美國國家安全委員會其實有一個機會控制疫情，可以重新調整美國的戰略，在可能的情況下控制病毒，並想辦法準備好醫院在美國爆發疫情時所需的資源，包括防護口罩和呼吸機等基本設備。

但美國官員似乎更關心後勤問題，包括如何將美國人撤離疫區，而不是動員起來應對即將發生的事情。

在華盛頓，當時的代理幕僚長米克·馬爾瓦尼和波廷格開始在白宮召集衛生與公眾服務部、疾控中心和國務院的高級官員開會。

這個小組包括了阿紮爾和福西，以及行政部門的其他9人，組成了後來成為美國政府冠狀病毒特別工作組的核心。但它主要關注的是如何阻止外國的感染者前往美國，同時疏散數千名美國公民。

這些會議並沒有嚴肅地把重點放在測試或供應上，事後證明這些才是特朗普政府面臨的最具挑戰性的問題。

工作組於1月29日正式宣佈成立。

“這個組織的初衷是圍繞邊境控制和遣返，”一名參與會議的高級官員表示。“它不是一個全面的、包括政府各個部門的組織來管理一切。”

據與會者說，國務院的議程主導了這些早期討論。官員們開始制定包機計劃，撤回6000名美國人。他們還就政府可能發佈的旅遊建議的措辭展開了辯論。

1月29日，國代理白宮辦公廳主任馬爾瓦尼在白宮形勢室主持了一次會議，會上官員們討論了將旅行限制提升到“4級”的問題，這意味著國務院將發出“禁止旅行”的警告。

1月31日，阿紮爾宣佈了限制措施，禁止在過去兩周內一直在疫區的非美國公民進入美國。

特朗普有理由指出，這種限制措施是證據，表明他在疫情爆發之初就做出了積極回應。這是整個危機期間為數不多的符合特朗普本能的干預選擇之一。他似乎總是專注於劃定邊界，將外國人擋在國門之外（編者注：華郵在這裏暗諷特朗普總希望排斥移民和難民）。

但在那之前的一個月裏，已有30萬人回到美國。根據世界衛生組織發佈的數據，截至1月底，全球只有7818例新冠病毒感染確診病例，但很明顯，病毒正在失控地傳播。

當時，白宮亞洲政策顧問波廷格正在推動另一項旅行禁令，這一次限制了來自意大利和歐盟其他國家的旅行者的流動，這些國家正迅速成為疫情的主要新節點。

波廷格的建議得到了包括福西在內的主要衛生保健官員的支持，他們認為關閉病毒可能進入該國的任何途徑是至關重要的。

這一次，該計劃遭到了財政部長史蒂文·努欽和其他擔心對美國經濟造成不利影響的人士的抵制。這是美國政府內部緊張的早期跡象，導致特朗普政府出現分裂，把公共衛生放在優先位置的人，與決心在選舉年避免對經濟和增長造成任何不利影響的人之間，產生了對立。

那些站在經濟一邊的人在特朗普那裏占了上風。一個多月後，政府才發佈了一項姍姍來遲、令人困惑的禁令，禁止從歐洲飛往美國（注：剛開始居然不包括英國）。

在此期間，又有成千上萬的人橫渡了大西洋。

#### 四、抵抗之牆

當有關旅行禁令的爭論在白宮上演時，公共衛生官員開始對關鍵醫療設備的嚴重短缺感到恐慌，包括醫生和護士的防護口罩，以及用於支付這些東西的資金迅速減少。

到2月初，政府迅速動用了1.05億美元的國會基金，以應對傳染病的爆發。當時，對大多數公眾來說，冠狀病毒對美國的威脅即使不是完全虛構的，也似乎是遙遠的。

但對負責為最壞情況儲備物資的衛生官員來說，災難似乎越來越不可避免。

美國儲備的N95防護口罩、防護服、手套和其他物資在多年資金不足後已經嚴重不足，危機打亂了海外的供應鏈，這一危機的爆發突然威脅到美利堅這家商店的補貨前景。

這些設備的大部分生產早已轉移到國外，那裏的工廠現在已經關閉，因為工人被要求留在家中。與此同時，各國正在購買口罩和其他設備，為本國的冠狀病毒爆發做準備，這推高了成本，並壟斷了供應。

在 1 月底和 2 月初，衛生與公眾服務部的領導人們向白宮管理和預算辦公室發出了兩封信函，要求利用其權力將該部 1.36 億美元的資金轉移到可用於抗擊冠狀病毒的資金池中。阿紮爾和他的助手們也開始向國會提出一項數十億美元的追加預算申請。

然而，白宮預算鷹派人士認為，在美國只有少數幾個感染案例的情況下一次性撥款太多，會被視為危言聳聽。

美國國內政策委員會主席喬·格羅根與衛生官員在應對措施方面發生了衝突。他不相信這筆錢會被正確使用，並質疑衛生官員如何使用以前的備災資金。

2 月 4 日，在特朗普發表國情咨文演講時，阿紮爾與白宮管理和預算辦公室代理主任拉塞爾·沃特進行了交談。沃特似乎很樂意，並讓阿紮提交了一份建議。

第二天，阿紮爾就這麼做了，起草了一份 40 多億美元的追加申請，管理預算辦公室的官員和白宮的其他人認為這是令人憤怒的伸手要大錢。

據三名知情人士透露，阿紮爾當天抵達白宮，在戰況室和他們進行了緊張的會面，隨後爆發了一場爭吵。

預算辦公室的一名代表指責阿紮爾搶先向國會遊說，索要一筆白宮官員沒有興趣批准的巨額款項。阿紮對這些批評感到憤怒，並為緊急採購的必要性進行了辯護。但在冠狀病毒危機開始之前，他在白宮官員心目中的地位就已經搖搖欲墜，這場爭吵進一步損害了他。

幾周後，美國出現了令人擔憂的冠狀病毒疫情，白宮官員的態度有所緩和。管理和預算辦公室的團隊將阿紮的要求削減到了 25 億美元，這筆錢只能在當前財年使用。國會無視這一數字，批准了一項 80 億美元的補充法案，特朗普於 3 月 7 日簽署成為法律。

但事實再次證明，拖延是代價高昂的。這些爭議意味著，在特朗普政府與其他許多絕望的國家展開競爭之前，美國錯過了一個儲存呼吸機、口罩和其他防護裝備的狹窄窗口期，而受夠了聯邦政府失靈的各州官員開始自己尋找供應。

3 月底，政府訂購了 1 萬台呼吸機，遠遠達不到公共衛生官員和州長們所說的需求。這些機器要到夏季或秋季才會到達美國，根據流行病學預測模型，到那時新冠病毒大流行將會消退。

“這實際上有點像個笑話，”一位參與討論這筆遲來的採購的政府官員表示。

## 五、不確定的測試

雖然病毒傳播是看不見的，但公共衛生官員已經開發出詳細的方法來繪製和跟蹤它們的活動。在許多方面，阻止疫情的爆發或減緩大流行的速度，取決於能否迅速將人群分為受感染人群和未受感染人群。

然而，要做到這一點，關鍵是要有一種準確的檢測方法來診斷病人，並迅速將其部署到全國各地的實驗室。在美國，實現這一目標所花費的時間可能比其他任何失敗付出的代價都要大。

“如果你做了測試，你可以說，天啊，西雅圖有病毒在傳播，我們趕緊行動吧。”一名參與抗擊疫情的高級政府官員說。“可是我們心裏沒底。”

最昂貴的錯誤是，高級衛生官員評估認為，疫情可能會在美國境內規模有限，就像幾十年來其他所有感染病例一樣，而且美國疾控中心可以獨立發展自己的冠狀病毒診斷測試。

美國疾病控制與預防中心（CDC）成立於 20 世紀 40 年代，旨在控制美國南部的瘧疾疫情。在埃博拉病毒、寨卡病毒和 H1N1 病毒等重大疫情的診斷測試方面，該中心一直處於領先地位。但是 CDC 並不是為了批量生產測試而建立的。

疾病控制與預防中心的成功，助長了一種體制上的傲慢，即使面對潛在的危機，CDC 也沒有覺得有迫切的需求，要讓私人實驗室、學術機構、醫院和也有能力開發檢測的全球衛生組織參與。

然而，一些人擔心 CDC 的檢測是不夠的。FDA 專員斯蒂芬·哈恩在 2 月初尋求授權，開始呼籲私營診斷和製藥公司提供幫助。

對於 FDA 專員哈恩親自打電話給他監管的公司，是不是個壞主意，FDA 的頭頭們意見不一。當 FDA 官員諮詢美國衛生與公眾服務部的領導時，他們認為這是個很糟糕的主意。

在這一點上，阿紮爾作為衛生與公眾服務部部長，似乎致力於讓他的機構始終處於響應工作的中心，確保從 CDC 進行測試，然後依靠現有的用於追蹤普通流感的實驗室網絡體系，來建立國家冠狀病毒監測系統。

根據《華盛頓郵報》獲得的一份概述測試策略的文件，在工作組會議上，衛生部長阿紮爾和疾控中心主任雷德菲爾德曾努力爭取 1 億美元的資金來支持該計劃，但由於成本過高而被否決。

即使美國疾控中心成功地迅速開發出一種可以在全國範圍內分發的有效的檢測方法，但嚴重依賴疾病控制與預防中心也是有問題的。

疫情的規模，以及對大規模測試的需求遠遠超出了以前流感網絡的能力，可能會使該計劃難以實施。該計劃在未來 6 個月內也不會讓商業實驗室公司參與進來。

當疾控中心未能完成建立工作測試的基本任務，並且工作組拒絕了阿紮爾的計劃時，這項工作徹底失敗了。

2 月 6 日，當世界衛生組織報告說，它將向世界各地的實驗室運送 25 萬個檢測包時，美國疾病控制與預防中心開始向少數幾家國立衛生實驗室分發 90 個檢測包。



幾乎在同時，國立實驗室遇到了問題，在超過半數的實驗室的試驗中結果都不準確，這意味著不能依靠它們來診斷真正的病人。疾病控制與預防中心發佈了一項權宜之計，要求實驗室將檢測結果送到位於亞特蘭大的總部，這種做法會將檢測結果推遲數天。

有效檢測手段的缺乏，導致官員們對何時以及如何使用檢測手段加以限制，並推遲了監測檢測。最初的指導方針非常嚴格，以至於各州都不鼓勵對出現症狀的患者進行檢測，除非他們曾到過疫情高發地區，並與確診病例有過接觸，而當時病原體幾乎可以肯定已經更廣泛地傳播到普通人群中。

這些限制讓高層官員對疫情的真實規模基本上一無所知。

2月中旬，醫學專家福西和疾控中心主任雷德菲爾德在“形勢室”舉行的一次會議上對白宮官員說，目前還沒有證據表明美國出現令人擔憂的人際傳播。

事後看來，幾乎可以肯定的是，當時這種病毒已經在社區中紮下了根。但是，即使是該國的頂級專家，也幾乎沒有關於這種威脅在美國的有意義的數據。

福西後來承認，隨著他們瞭解的越來越多，他們的觀點也改變了。

與此同時，雖然特朗普的下屬越來越警惕，特朗普繼續表現出很樂觀。2月10日，他在新罕布什爾州舉行了一場有數千人參加的政治集會，他在集會上宣佈，“到4月，你知道，理論上，天氣稍微暖和一點，它就會奇跡般地消失。”

在新罕布什爾州的集會，是特朗普在被阿紮爾告知有關冠狀病毒之後舉行的八次集會之一，這段時間他還去過高爾夫球場六次。

一天前，也就是2月9日，一群州長參加了在白宮舉行的一場正式晚會，他們與福西和疾控中心主任雷德菲爾德私下會晤。這次簡報讓許多州長感到不安，與總統的說法幾乎沒有相似之處。

馬裏蘭州州長拉裏·霍根(共和黨人)說：“醫生和科學家當時告訴我們的正是他們現在所說的。”

當月，聯邦醫療和公共衛生官員之間的電子郵件中預測越來越可怕，一位退伍軍人事務部的醫療顧問警告說，“我們正在盲目飛行。”

2月晚些時候，美國官員發現有跡象表明CDC實驗室未能達到基本的質量控制標準。在2月27日與多位衛生官員召開的電話會議上，FDA一位高級官員對CDC的反復失誤進行了猛烈抨擊。

FDA設備和放射衛生主管傑弗裏·舒倫告訴疾病預防控制中心，如果受到與私營實驗室同樣的審查，“我會讓你關門。”

2月29日，華盛頓州的一名男子成為第一位死於冠狀病毒感染的美國人。同一天，FDA發佈了指南，表明私人實驗室可以自由地開發自己的診斷方法。

又一個四周的時間被浪費了。

## 六、生命和死亡

一周後，3月6日，特朗普帶著一頂紅色的“讓美國保持偉大”（注：特朗普競選的標誌，但是這句口號的含義其實並不清楚）的帽子參觀了美國疾病預防控制中心的設施。他吹噓說疾病控制中心的測試近乎完美，“任何想要測試的人都會得到測試”，而這一承諾在近一個月後仍未兌現。

他還自稱有敏銳的醫學頭腦。“我喜歡這種東西。我真的明白，”他說。“這裏的人很驚訝我能理解。這些醫生都說，你怎麼知道這麼多？”

事實上，在美國阻止冠狀病毒爆發的許多失敗，要麼是由於他的領導，要麼是由於他的領導而加劇的。

數周以來，他對這場危機幾乎隻字未提，但並未輕描淡寫其嚴重性或傳播明顯的虛假信息，同時他也駁回了其政府中情報官員和公共衛生高級官員的警告。

有時，他對股票市場的走勢表達的擔憂要比對病毒在美國的傳播更為真切，對美聯儲主席等人的指責更加強烈，他似乎從未對可能的美國人大規模感染表現出過強烈的關注。

今年3月，一個州接一個州對公民的日常生活施加全面的新限制，以保護美國人民，這引發了經濟上的嚴重動盪，於是特朗普對這些措施做出了新的預測。

他3月9日在推特上寫道，普通流感每年導致數萬人死亡，“沒有什麼是停止的，生活和經濟仍在繼續。”

一天後，他承諾病毒將“消失”，只需要保持冷靜。

兩天後，特朗普終於下令停止從歐洲來的旅行，此前他的國家安全顧問已經對此政策提議了數周。但是特朗普又用自己的表達方式，把橢圓形辦公室（美國總統正式的辦公室）的聲明搞砸了，白宮官員花了幾天時間試圖糾正錯誤言論，這些錯誤言論導致美國公民在海外逃難回家。

南卡羅來納州共和黨參議員格雷厄姆說：“3月13號，有些人開始認真對待這個問題，才意識到自己身處戰爭之中……就在那時，他採取了決定性的行動，帶來了一些真正的回報。”

在此之前，特朗普已經花費了數周的時間改組領導政府應對危機的責任，剛開始是把阿紮爾任命為工作組負責人，隨後在很短的時候又依靠國家安全顧問波廷格，最後在2月底，將副總統彭斯推到了全面負責的崗位上。

在危機期間，還有其他一些官員試圖來幫助糾正美國的方向，有時也幫助糾正總統的聲明。但就在福西、阿紮爾和其他一些人試圖表明自己的立場時，特朗普卻在幕後求助於那些在應對一場流行病方面沒有任何資格、經驗或可辨別的洞察力的人。

其中最重要的是他的顧問和女婿庫什納，一個向庫什納彙報的團隊佔用了公共衛生部大樓七樓的空間，開展了一系列早期的行動。

其中一項計劃是讓谷歌建立一個網站，將那些有症狀的人引導到測試設施，這些設施本應出現在全國各地的沃爾瑪停車場，但從未實現。

另一個是關於甲骨文公司董事長拉裏•埃利森提出的一個想法，即使用軟件監控未經證實的抗瘧疾藥物對抗冠狀病毒病原體的使用情況。

到目前為止，這些在白宮新聞發佈會上所作的承諾還未能兌現。然而，女婿庫什納的提議常常會打斷那些承受著巨大壓力的人的工作，他們需要管理應對疫情的措施。

現任和前任官員都說，公共衛生部官員，醫學專家福西，疾控中心主任雷德菲爾德和其他人一再不得不將注意力從核心業務轉移到白宮的虛假請求中，他們明白自己不能忽略這些請求。

曾經做出回應的阿紮爾自此被淘汰，其被剝奪了決策權，他的表現受到包括庫什納在內的一系列白宮官員的嘲笑。

一位與前同事經常接觸的前政府高級官員說，福西正試圖推出有史以來最雄心勃勃的臨床試驗，以加快疫苗的開發。然而，美國最高衛生官員會接到了來自白宮或庫什納團隊的電話，他們問，與甲骨文合作不是很好嗎？

如果說冠狀病毒暴露了這個國家對自己處理危機能力的錯誤信心，那麼它也讓人們看到了特朗普作為總統的局限性，他對事實、科學和經驗的蔑視。

他在總統任期內經受住了其他挑戰，包括涉及俄羅斯干涉大選的調查和彈劾，主要是通過極力反駁對他不利的現實，並試圖用一連串的謊言來控制公眾對事件的理解。

冠狀病毒可能是特朗普在任職期間面臨的第一個真正危機，成千上萬的死亡和感染是如此的明顯，以至於特朗普的厚黑術失效了。

經過數月淡化冠狀病毒的嚴重性，並抵制要求採取嚴厲措施遏制它的呼籲，在給自己加冕為戰時總統之後，特朗普似乎終於屈服於冠狀病毒的現實。

總統在上個月與橢圓形辦公室的共和黨盟友會面時說，他的競選不再重要，因為他的連任將取決於他的冠狀病毒應對。

終於，他在新聞發佈會上說：“美國人民在未來 30 天內遵守這些指導方針是絕對重要的。”

“這是生死攸關的問題。”

此時是 3 月 31 日。

備註：本文編譯自華盛頓郵報，略有刪減。英文報道原文：  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2020/04/04/coronavirus-government-dysfunction/?arc404=true>

# The U.S. was beset by denial and dysfunction as the coronavirus raged

From the Oval Office to the CDC, political and institutional failures cascaded through the system and opportunities to mitigate the pandemic were lost.

By [Yasmeen Abutaleb](#), [Josh Dawsey](#), [Ellen Nakashima](#) and [Greg Miller](#), 20200404

By the time Donald Trump proclaimed himself a wartime president — and the coronavirus the enemy — the United States was already on course to see more of its people die than in the wars of Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq combined.

The country has adopted an array of wartime measures never employed collectively in U.S. history — banning incoming travelers from two continents, bringing commerce to a near-halt, enlisting industry to make emergency medical gear, and confining 230 million Americans to their homes in a desperate bid to survive an attack by an unseen adversary.

Despite these and other extreme steps, the United States will likely go down as the country that was supposedly best prepared to fight a pandemic but ended up catastrophically overmatched by the novel coronavirus, sustaining heavier casualties than any other nation.

It did not have to happen this way. Though not perfectly prepared, the United States had more expertise, resources, plans and epidemiological experience than dozens of countries that ultimately fared far better in fending off the virus.

The failure has echoes of the period leading up to 9/11: Warnings were sounded, including at the highest levels of government, but the president was deaf to them until the enemy had already struck.

The Trump administration received its first formal notification of the outbreak of the coronavirus in China on Jan. 3. Within days, [U.S. spy agencies were signaling the seriousness](#) of the threat to Trump by including a warning about the coronavirus — the first of many — in the President's Daily Brief.

And yet, it took 70 days from that initial notification for Trump to treat the coronavirus not as a distant threat or harmless flu strain well under control, but as a lethal force that had outflanked America's defenses and was poised to kill tens of thousands of citizens. That more-than-two-month stretch now stands as critical time that was squandered.

Trump's baseless assertions in those weeks, including his claim that it would all just "miraculously" go away, sowed significant public confusion and contradicted the urgent messages of public health experts.

"While the media would rather speculate about outrageous claims of palace intrigue, President Trump and this Administration remain completely focused on the health and safety of the American people with around the clock work to slow the spread of the virus, expand testing, and expedite vaccine development," said Judd Deere, a

spokesman for the president. "Because of the President's leadership we will emerge from this challenge healthy, stronger, and with a prosperous and growing economy."

The president's behavior and combative statements were merely a visible layer on top of deeper levels of dysfunction.

The most consequential failure involved a breakdown in efforts to develop [a diagnostic test that could be mass produced and distributed](#) across the United States, enabling agencies to map early outbreaks of the disease, and impose quarantine measures to contain them. At one point, a Food and Drug Administration official tore into lab officials at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, telling them their lapses in protocol, including concerns that the lab did not meet the criteria for sterile conditions, were so serious that the FDA would "shut you down" if the CDC were a commercial, rather than government, entity.

Other failures cascaded through the system. The administration often seemed weeks behind the curve in reacting to the viral spread, closing doors that were already contaminated. Protracted arguments between the White House and public health agencies over funding, combined with a meager existing [stockpile of emergency supplies](#), left vast stretches of the country's health-care system without protective gear until the outbreak had become a pandemic. Infighting, turf wars and abrupt leadership changes hobbled the work of the coronavirus task force.

It may never be known how many thousands of deaths, or millions of infections, might have been prevented with a response that was more coherent, urgent and effective. But even now, there are many indications that the administration's handling of the crisis had potentially devastating consequences.

Even the president's base has begun to confront this reality. In mid-March, as [Trump was rebranding himself a wartime president](#) and belatedly urging the public to help slow the spread of the virus, Republican leaders were poring over grim polling data that suggested Trump was lulling his followers into a false sense of security in the face of a lethal threat.

The poll showed that far more Republicans than Democrats were being influenced by Trump's dismissive depictions of the virus and the comparably scornful coverage on Fox News and other conservative networks. As a result, Republicans were in distressingly large numbers refusing to change travel plans, follow "social distancing" guidelines, stock up on supplies or otherwise take the coronavirus threat seriously.

"Denial is not likely to be a successful strategy for survival," GOP pollster Neil Newhouse concluded in a document that was shared with GOP leaders on Capitol Hill and discussed widely at the White House. Trump's most ardent supporters, it said, were "putting themselves and their loved ones in danger."

Trump's message was changing as the report swept through the GOP's senior ranks. In recent days, Trump has bristled at reminders that he had once claimed the caseload would soon be "down to zero."

More than 7,000 people have died of the coronavirus in the United States so far, with about 240,000 cases reported. But Trump has acknowledged that new models suggest that the eventual national death toll could be between 100,000 and 240,000.

Beyond the suffering in store for thousands of victims and their families, the outcome has [altered the international standing of the United States](#), damaging and diminishing its reputation as a global leader in times of extraordinary adversity.

“This has been a real blow to the sense that America was competent,” said Gregory F. Treverton, a former chairman of the National Intelligence Council, the government’s senior-most provider of intelligence analysis. He stepped down from the NIC in January 2017 and now teaches at the University of Southern California. “That was part of our global role. Traditional friends and allies looked to us because they thought we could be competently called upon to work with them in a crisis. This has been the opposite of that.”

This article, which retraces the failures over the first 70 days of the coronavirus crisis, is based on 47 interviews with administration officials, public health experts, intelligence officers and others involved in fighting the pandemic. Many spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive information and decisions.

### Scanning the horizon

Public health authorities are part of a special breed of public servant — along with counterterrorism officials, military planners, aviation authorities and others — whose careers are consumed with contemplating worst-case scenarios.

The arsenal they wield against viral invaders is powerful, capable of smothering a new pathogen while scrambling for a cure, but easily overwhelmed if not mobilized in time. As a result, officials at the Department of Health and Human Services, the CDC and other agencies spend their days scanning the horizon for emerging dangers.

The CDC learned of a cluster of cases in China on Dec. 31 and began developing reports for HHS on Jan. 1. But the most unambiguous warning that U.S. officials received about the coronavirus came Jan. 3, when Robert Redfield, the CDC director, received a call from a counterpart in China. The official told Redfield that a mysterious respiratory illness was spreading in Wuhan, a congested commercial city of 11 million people in the communist country’s interior.

Redfield quickly relayed the disturbing news to Alex Azar, the secretary of HHS, the agency that oversees the CDC and other public health entities. Azar, in turn, ensured that the White House was notified, instructing his chief of staff to share the Chinese report with the National Security Council.

From that moment, the administration and the virus were locked in a race against a ticking clock, a competition for the upper hand between pathogen and prevention that would dictate the scale of the outbreak when it reached American shores, and determine how many would get sick or die.

The initial response was promising, but officials also immediately encountered obstacles.

On Jan. 6, Redfield sent a letter to the Chinese offering to send help, including a team of CDC scientists. China rebuffed the offer for weeks, turning away assistance and depriving U.S. authorities of an early chance to get a sample of the virus, critical for developing diagnostic tests and any potential vaccine.

China impeded the U.S. response in other ways, including by withholding accurate information about the outbreak. [Beijing had a long track record of downplaying illnesses](#) that emerged within its borders, an impulse that U.S. officials attribute to a desire by the country's leaders to avoid embarrassment and accountability with China's 1.3 billion people and other countries that find themselves in the pathogen's path.

China stuck to this costly script in the case of the coronavirus, reporting Jan. 14 that it had seen "no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission." U.S. officials treated the claim with skepticism that intensified when the first case surfaced outside China with a reported infection in Thailand.

A week earlier, senior officials at HHS had begun convening an intra-agency task force including Redfield, Azar and Anthony S. Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. The following week, there were also scattered meetings at the White House with officials from the National Security Council and State Department, focused mainly on when and whether to bring back government employees in China.

U.S. officials began taking preliminary steps to counter a potential outbreak. By mid-January, Robert Kadlec, an Air Force officer and physician who serves as assistant secretary for preparedness and response at HHS, had instructed subordinates to draw up contingency plans for enforcing the Defense Production Act, a measure that enables the government to compel private companies to produce equipment or devices critical to the country's security. Aides were bitterly divided over whether to implement the act, and nothing happened for many weeks.

On Jan. 14, Kadlec scribbled a single word in a notebook he carries: "Coronavirus!!!"

Despite the flurry of activity at lower levels of his administration, Trump was not substantially briefed by health officials about the coronavirus until Jan. 18, when, while spending the weekend at Mar-a-Lago, he took a call from Azar.

Even before the health secretary could get a word in about the virus, Trump cut him off and began criticizing Azar for his handling of an [aborted federal ban on vaping products](#), a matter that vexed the president.

At the time, Trump was in the throes of an impeachment battle over his alleged attempt to coerce political favors from the leader of Ukraine. Acquittal seemed certain by the GOP-controlled Senate, but Trump was preoccupied with the trial, calling lawmakers late at night to rant, and making lists of perceived enemies he would seek to punish when the case against him concluded.

In hindsight, officials said, Azar could have been more forceful in urging Trump to turn at least some of his attention to a threat that would soon pose an even graver test to his presidency, a crisis that would cost American lives and consume the final year of Trump's first term.

But the secretary, who had a strained relationship with Trump and many others in the administration, assured the president that those responsible were working on and monitoring the issue. Azar told several associates that the president believed he was "alarmist" and Azar struggled to get Trump's attention to focus on the issue, even asking one confidant for advice.

Within days, there were new causes for alarm.

On Jan. 21, a Seattle man who had recently traveled to Wuhan tested positive for the coronavirus, becoming the first known infection on U.S. soil. Then, two days later, Chinese authorities took the [drastic step of shutting down Wuhan](#), turning the teeming metropolis into a ghost city of empty highways and shuttered skyscrapers, with millions of people marooned in their homes.

“That was like, whoa,” said a senior U.S. official involved in White House meetings on the crisis. “That was when the Richter scale hit 8.”

It was also when U.S. officials began to confront the failings of their own efforts to respond.

Azar, who had served in senior positions at HHS through crises including the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the outbreak of bird flu in 2005, was intimately familiar with the playbook for crisis management.

He instructed subordinates to move rapidly to establish a nationwide surveillance system to track the spread of the coronavirus — a stepped-up version of what the CDC does every year to monitor new strains of the ordinary flu.

But doing so would require assets that would elude U.S. officials for months — a diagnostic test that could accurately identify those infected with the new virus and be produced on a mass scale for rapid deployment across the United States, and money to implement the system.

Azar’s team also hit another obstacle. The Chinese were still refusing to share the viral samples they had collected and were using to develop their own tests. In frustration, U.S. officials looked for other possible routes.

A biocontainment lab at the University of Texas medical branch in Galveston had a research partnership with the Wuhan Institute of Virology.

Kadlec, who knew the Galveston lab director, hoped scientists could arrange a transaction on their own without government interference. At first, the lab in Wuhan agreed, but officials in Beijing intervened Jan. 24 and blocked any lab-to-lab transfer.

There is no indication that officials sought to escalate the matter or enlist Trump to intervene. In fact, 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.

The CDC had issued its first public alert about the coronavirus Jan. 8, and by the 17th was monitoring major airports in Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York, where large numbers of passengers arrived each day from China.

In other ways, though, the situation was already spinning out of control, with multiplying cases in Seattle, intransigence by the Chinese, mounting questions from the public, and nothing in place to stop infected travelers from arriving from abroad.

Trump was out of the country for this critical stretch, taking part in the annual global economic forum in Davos, Switzerland. He was accompanied by a contingent of top officials including national security adviser Robert O’Brien, who took a trans-Atlantic call from an anxious Azar.



Azar told O'Brien that it was "mayhem" at the White House, with HHS officials being pressed to provide nearly identical briefings to three audiences on the same day.

Azar urged O'Brien to have the NSC assert control over a matter with potential implications for air travel, immigration authorities, the State Department and the Pentagon. O'Brien seemed to grasp the urgency, and put his deputy, Matthew Pottinger, who had worked in China as a journalist for the Wall Street Journal, in charge of coordinating the still-nascent U.S. response.

But the rising anxiety within the administration appeared not to register with the president. On Jan. 22, Trump received his first question about the coronavirus in an interview on CNBC while in Davos. Asked whether he was worried about a potential pandemic, Trump said, "No. Not at all. And we have it totally under control. It's one person coming in from China. . . . It's going to be just fine."

### **Spreading uncontrollably**

The move by the NSC to seize control of the response marked an opportunity to reorient U.S. strategy around containing the virus where possible and procuring resources that hospitals would need in any U.S. outbreak, including such basic equipment as protective masks and ventilators.

But instead of mobilizing for what was coming, U.S. officials seemed more preoccupied with logistical problems, including how to evacuate Americans from China.

In Washington, then-acting chief of staff Mick Mulvaney and Pottinger began convening meetings at the White House with senior officials from HHS, the CDC and the State Department.

The group, which included Azar, Pottinger and Fauci, as well as nine others across the administration, formed the core of what would become the administration's coronavirus task force. But it primarily focused on efforts to keep infected people in China from traveling to the United States even while evacuating thousands of U.S. citizens. The meetings did not seriously focus on testing or supplies, which have since become the administration's most challenging problems.

The task force was formally announced on Jan. 29.

"The genesis of this group was around border control and repatriation," said a senior official involved in the meetings. "It wasn't a comprehensive, whole-of-government group to run everything."

The State Department agenda dominated those early discussions, according to participants. Officials began making plans to charter aircraft to evacuate 6,000 Americans stranded in Wuhan. They also debated language for travel advisories that State could issue to discourage other travel in and out of China.

On Jan. 29, Mulvaney chaired a meeting in the White House Situation Room in which officials debated moving travel restrictions to "Level 4," meaning a "do not travel" advisory from the State Department. Then, the next day, China took the draconian step of locking down the entire Hubei province, which encompasses Wuhan.

That move by Beijing finally prompted a commensurate action by the Trump administration. On Jan. 31, Azar announced restrictions barring any non-U.S. citizen who had been in China during the preceding two weeks from entering the United States.

Trump has, with some justification, pointed to the China-related restriction as evidence that he had responded aggressively and early to the outbreak. It was among the few intervention options throughout the crisis that played to the instincts of the president, who often seems fixated on erecting borders and keeping foreigners out of the country.

But by that point, 300,000 people had come into the United States from China over the previous month. There were only 7,818 confirmed cases around the world at the end of January, according to figures released by the World Health Organization — but it is now clear that the virus was spreading uncontrollably.

Pottinger was by then pushing for another travel ban, this time restricting the flow of travelers from Italy and other nations in the European Union that were rapidly emerging as major new nodes of the outbreak. Pottinger's proposal was endorsed by key health-care officials, including Fauci, who argued that it was critical to close off any path the virus might take into the country.

This time, the plan met with resistance from Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and others who worried about the impact on the U.S. economy. It was an early sign of tension in an area that would split the administration, pitting those who prioritized public health against those determined to avoid any disruption in an election year to the run of expansion and employment growth.

Those backing the economy prevailed with the president. And it was more than a month before the administration issued a belated and confusing ban on flights into the United States from Europe. Hundreds of thousands of people crossed the Atlantic during that interval.

### **A wall of resistance**

While fights over air travel played out in the White House, public health officials began to panic over a startling shortage of critical medical equipment including protective masks for doctors and nurses, as well as a rapidly shrinking pool of money needed to pay for such things.

By early February, the administration was quickly draining a \$105 million congressional fund to respond to infectious disease outbreaks. The coronavirus threat to the United States still seemed distant if not entirely hypothetical to much of the public. But to health officials charged with stockpiling supplies for worst-case-scenarios, disaster appeared increasingly inevitable.

A national stockpile of N95 protective masks, gowns, gloves and other supplies was already woefully inadequate after years of underfunding. The prospects for replenishing that store were suddenly threatened by the unfolding crisis in China, which disrupted offshore supply chains.

Much of the manufacturing of such equipment had long since migrated to China, where factories were now shuttered because workers were on order to stay in their

households. At the same time, China was buying up masks and other gear to gird for its own coronavirus outbreak, driving up costs and monopolizing supplies.

In late January and early February, leaders at HHS sent two letters to the White House Office of Management and Budget asking to use its transfer authority to shift \$136 million of department funds into pools that could be tapped for combating the coronavirus. Azar and his aides also began raising the need for a multibillion-dollar supplemental budget request to send to Congress.

Yet White House budget hawks argued that appropriating too much money at once when there were only a few U.S. cases would be viewed as alarmist.

Joe Grogan, head of the Domestic Policy Council, clashed with health officials over preparedness. He mistrusted how the money would be used and questioned how health officials had used previous preparedness funds.

Azar then spoke to Russell Vought, the acting director of the White House Office of Management and Budget, during Trump's State of the Union speech on Feb. 4. Vought seemed amenable, and told Azar to submit a proposal.

Azar did so the next day, drafting a supplemental request for more than \$4 billion, a sum that OMB officials and others at the White House greeted as an outrage. Azar arrived at the White House that day for a tense meeting in the Situation Room that erupted in a shouting match, according to three people familiar with the incident.

A deputy in the budget office accused Azar of preemptively lobbying Congress for a gigantic sum that White House officials had no interest in granting. Azar bristled at the criticism and defended the need for an emergency infusion. But his standing with White House officials, already shaky before the coronavirus crisis began, was damaged further.

White House officials relented to a degree weeks later as the feared coronavirus surge in the United States began to materialize. The OMB team whittled Azar's demands down to \$2.5 billion, money that would be available only in the current fiscal year. Congress ignored that figure, approving an \$8 billion supplemental bill that Trump signed into law March 6.

But again, delays proved costly. The disputes meant that the United States missed a narrow window to stockpile ventilators, masks and other protective gear before the administration was bidding against many other desperate nations, and state officials fed up with federal failures began scouring for supplies themselves.

In late March, the administration ordered 10,000 ventilators — far short of what public health officials and governors said was needed. And many will not arrive until the summer or fall, when models expect the pandemic to be receding.

“It's actually kind of a joke,” said one administration official involved in deliberations about the belated purchase.

### **Inconclusive tests**

Although viruses travel unseen, public health officials have developed elaborate ways of mapping and tracking their movements. Stemming an outbreak or slowing a

pandemic in many ways comes down to the ability to quickly divide the population into those who are infected and those who are not.

Doing so, however, hinges on having an accurate test to diagnose patients and deploy it rapidly to labs across the country. The time it took to accomplish that in the United States may have been more costly to American efforts than any other failing.

“If you had the testing, you could say, ‘Oh my god, there’s circulating virus in Seattle, let’s jump on it. There’s circulating virus in Chicago, let’s jump on it,’ ” said a senior administration official involved in battling the outbreak. “We didn’t have that visibility.”

The first setback came when China refused to share samples of the virus, depriving U.S. researchers of supplies to bombard with drugs and therapies in a search for ways to defeat it. But even when samples had been procured, the U.S. effort was hampered by systemic problems and institutional hubris.

Among the costliest errors was a misplaced assessment by top health officials that the outbreak would probably be limited in scale inside the United States — as had been the case with every other infection for decades — and that the CDC could be trusted on its own to develop a coronavirus diagnostic test.

The CDC, launched in the 1940s to contain an outbreak of malaria in the southern United States, had taken the lead on the development of diagnostic tests in major outbreaks including Ebola, zika and H1N1. But the CDC was not built to mass-produce tests.

The CDC’s success had fostered an institutional arrogance, a sense that even in the face of a potential crisis there was no pressing need to involve private labs, academic institutions, hospitals and global health organizations also capable of developing tests.

Yet some were concerned that the CDC test would not be enough. Stephen Hahn, the FDA commissioner, sought authority in early February to begin calling private diagnostic and pharmaceutical companies to enlist their help.

FDA leaders were split on whether it would be bad optics for Hahn to be personally calling companies he regulated. When FDA officials consulted leaders at HHS, they understood it as a direction to stand down.

At that point, Azar, the HHS secretary, seemed committed to a plan he was pursuing that would keep his agency at the center of the response effort: securing a test from the CDC and then building a national coronavirus surveillance system by relying on an existing network of labs used to track the ordinary flu.

In task force meetings, Azar and Redfield pushed for \$100 million to fund the plan, but were shot down because of the cost, according to a document outlining the testing strategy obtained by The Washington Post.

Relying so heavily on the CDC would have been problematic even if it had succeeded in quickly developing an effective test that could be distributed across the country. The scale of the epidemic, and the need for mass testing far beyond the capabilities of the flu network, would have overwhelmed the plan, which didn’t envision engaging commercial lab companies for up to six months.

The effort collapsed when the CDC failed its basic assignment to create a working test and the task force rejected Azar's plan.

On Feb. 6, when the World Health Organization reported that it was shipping 250,000 test kits to labs around the world, the CDC began distributing 90 kits to a smattering of state-run health labs.

Almost immediately, the state facilities encountered problems. The results were inconclusive in trial runs at more than half the labs, meaning they couldn't be relied upon to diagnose actual patients. The CDC issued a stopgap measure, instructing labs to send tests to its headquarters in Atlanta, a practice that would delay results for days.

The scarcity of effective tests led officials to impose constraints on when and how to use them, and delayed surveillance testing. Initial guidelines were so restrictive that states were discouraged from testing patients exhibiting symptoms unless they had traveled to China and come into contact with a confirmed case, when the pathogen had by that point almost certainly spread more broadly into the general population.

The limits left top officials largely blind to the true dimensions of the outbreak.

In a meeting in the Situation Room in mid-February, Fauci and Redfield told White House officials that there was no evidence yet of worrisome person-to-person transmission in the United States. In hindsight, it appears almost certain that the virus was taking hold in communities at that point. But even the country's top experts had little meaningful data about the domestic dimensions of the threat. Fauci later conceded that as they learned more their views changed.

At the same time, as the president's subordinates were growing increasingly alarmed, Trump continued to exhibit little concern. On Feb. 10, he held a political rally in New Hampshire attended by thousands where he declared that "by April, you know, in theory, when it gets a little warmer, it miraculously goes away."

The New Hampshire rally was one of eight that Trump held after he had been told by Azar about the coronavirus, a period when [he also went to his golf courses six times](#).

A day earlier, on Feb. 9, a group of governors in town for a black-tie gala at the White House secured a private meeting with Fauci and Redfield. The briefing rattled many of the governors, bearing little resemblance to the words of the president. "The doctors and the scientists, they were telling us then exactly what they are saying now," Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan (R) said.

That month, federal medical and public health officials were emailing increasingly dire forecasts among themselves, with one Veterans Affairs medical adviser warning, "We are flying blind," according to emails obtained by the watchdog group American Oversight.

Later in February, U.S. officials discovered indications that the CDC laboratory was failing to meet basic quality-control standards. On a Feb. 27 conference call with a range of health officials, a senior FDA official lashed out at the CDC for its repeated lapses.

Jeffrey Shuren, the FDA's director for devices and radiological health, told the CDC that if it were subjected to the same scrutiny as a privately run lab, "I would shut you down."

On Feb. 29, a Washington state man became the first American to die of a coronavirus infection. That same day, the FDA released guidance, signaling that private labs were free to proceed in developing their own diagnostics.

Another four-week stretch had been squandered.

One week later, on March 6, Trump toured the facilities at the CDC wearing a red "Keep America Great" hat. He boasted that the CDC tests were nearly perfect and that "anybody who wants a test will get a test," a promise that nearly a month later remains unmet.

[He also professed to have a keen medical mind.](#) "I like this stuff. I really get it," he said. "People here are surprised that I understand it. Every one of these doctors said, 'How do you know so much about this?'"

In reality, many of the failures to stem the coronavirus outbreak in the United States were either a result of, or exacerbated by, his leadership.

For weeks, he had barely uttered a word about the crisis that didn't downplay its severity or propagate demonstrably false information. He dismissed the warnings of intelligence officials and top public health officials in his administration.

At times, he voiced far more authentic concern about the trajectory of the stock market than the spread of the virus in the United States, railing at the chairman of the Federal Reserve and others with an intensity that he never seemed to exhibit about the possible human toll of the outbreak.

In March, as state after state imposed sweeping new restrictions on their citizens' daily lives to protect them — triggering severe shudders in the economy — Trump second-guessed the lockdowns.

The common flu kills tens of thousands each year and "nothing is shut down, life & the economy go on," he tweeted March 9. A day later, he pledged that the virus would "go away. Just stay calm."

Two days later, Trump finally ordered the halt to incoming travel from Europe that his deputy national security adviser had been advocating for weeks. But Trump botched the Oval Office announcement so badly that White House officials spent days trying to correct erroneous statements that triggered a stampede by U.S. citizens overseas to get home.

"There was some coming to grips with the problem and the true nature of it — the 13th of March is when I saw him really turn the corner. It took a while to realize you're at war," Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.) said. "That's when he took decisive action that set in motion some real payoffs."

Trump spent many weeks shuffling responsibility for leading his administration's response to the crisis, putting Azar in charge of the task force at first, relying on Pottinger, the deputy national security adviser, for brief periods, before finally putting Vice President Pence in the role toward the end of February.

Other officials have emerged during the crisis to help right the United States' course, and at times, the statements of the president. But even as Fauci, Azar and others sought to assert themselves, Trump was behind the scenes turning to others with no credentials, experience or discernible insight in navigating a pandemic.

Foremost among them was his adviser and son-in-law, Jared Kushner. A team reporting to Kushner commandeered space on the seventh floor of the HHS building to pursue a series of inchoate initiatives.

One plan involved having Google create a website to direct those with symptoms to testing facilities that were supposed to spring up in Walmart parking lots across the country, but which never materialized. Another centered on an idea advanced by Oracle chairman Larry Ellison to use software to monitor the unproven use of anti-malaria drugs against the coronavirus pathogen.

So far, the plans have failed to come close to delivering on the promises made when they were touted in White House news conferences. The Kushner initiatives have, however, often interrupted the work of those under immense pressure to manage the U.S. response.

Current and former officials said that Kadlec, Fauci, Redfield and others have repeatedly had to divert their attentions from core operations to contend with ill-conceived requests from the White House they don't believe they can ignore. And Azar, who once ran the response, has since been sidelined, with his agency disempowered in decision-making and his performance pilloried by a range of White House officials, including Kushner.

"Right now Fauci is trying to roll out the most ambitious clinical trial ever implemented" to hasten the development of a vaccine, said a former senior administration official in frequent touch with former colleagues. And yet, the nation's top health officials "are getting calls from the White House or Jared's team asking, 'Wouldn't it be nice to do this with Oracle?'"

If the coronavirus has exposed the country's misplaced confidence in its ability to handle a crisis, it also has cast harsh light on the limits of Trump's approach to the presidency — his disdain for facts, science and experience.

He has survived other challenges to his presidency — including the Russia investigation and impeachment — by fiercely contesting the facts arrayed against him and trying to control the public's understanding of events with streams of falsehoods.

The coronavirus may be the first crisis Trump has faced in office where the facts — the thousands of mounting deaths and infections — are so devastatingly evident that they defy these tactics.

After months of dismissing the severity of the coronavirus, resisting calls for austere measures to contain it, and recasting himself as a wartime president, Trump seemed finally to succumb to the coronavirus reality. In a meeting with a Republican ally in the Oval Office last month, the president said his campaign no longer mattered because his reelection would hinge on his coronavirus response.

"It's absolutely critical for the American people to follow the guidelines for the next 30 days," he said at his March 31 news conference. "It's a matter of life and death."