

# Trump's push to shorten the coronavirus shutdown proves the captain is flying blind

To watch Trump is to witness the awesome and terrifying power of the American president over life and death – a burden he is unqualified to bear



President Trump gestures as he asks a question of Dr Deborah Birx, White House coronavirus response coordinator at Monday's marathon briefing. Photograph: Alex Brandon/AP

Due to social distancing, there were only two dozen or so reporters in the White House press briefing room on Monday, making it feel like a flight with numerous empty seats and lots of legroom.

But when Donald Trump let rip for nearly two hours<sup>1</sup>, it was as if the captain had announced a sudden whim to land the plane on water while wearing a blindfold. We sat tight for an unnerving journey.

On a day that a hundred American deaths were reported, the US president made clear his intention to reopen the country for business much sooner than expected<sup>2</sup> and, seemingly, sooner than medical experts believe to be safe. Everything we know about him suggests this impulse has been guided by Fox News, the Wall Street Journal, the stock market, poll numbers, the imminent election and pure gut instinct. Not science.

To watch Trump talk himself into this rash action in real time from a seat 30 feet (10 metres) away was to witness the awesome and terrifying power of the American president over life and death. It is a solemn burden that he, the first White House occupant with no prior political or military experience, is uniquely unqualified to bear.

*"Our country wasn't built to be shut down," he said at the halfway mark of his planned 15 days to slow the spread advice. "America will again and soon be open for business. Very soon. A lot sooner than three or four months that somebody was suggesting. A lot sooner. We cannot let the cure be worse than the problem itself."*

## So it is weeks or months?

*"I'm not looking at months, I can tell you right now," he replied.*

It represented yet another violent policy swing. First, Trump told Americans there was nothing to worry about and the virus would disappear "like a miracle". Then he spun 180 degrees and declared him-

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.c-span.org/video/?470599-1/president-trump-coronavirus-task-force-hold-briefing-white-house>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/23/trump-vows-to-open-up-our-country-even-as-deaths-from-coronavirus-rise>

self “a wartime president”<sup>3</sup>, issuing federal guidelines urging Americans to limit social contact and stay home. Now, it seems, he is pivoting back to the original position.

Perhaps it was just coincidence that, on Sunday, Fox News host Steve Hilton<sup>4</sup> told viewers:

*“You know that famous phrase, the cure is worse than the disease? That is exactly the territory we’re hurtling towards... You think it’s just the coronavirus that kills people? This total economic shutdown will kill people.”*

Perhaps it was also just coincidence that, on Monday, the stock market dropped past its closing level on 19 January 2020, the day before he took his oath of office. The entire Trump stock gain is wiped out<sup>5</sup>.

The economy had been booming with a record number of jobs, he said.

*“We can’t turn that off and think it’s going to be wonderful. There’ll be tremendous repercussions. There will be tremendous death from that. Death. You’re talking about death. Probably more death from that than anything that we’re talking about with respect to the virus.”*



Due to social distancing, there were only two dozen or so reporters in the White House press briefing room. Photograph: Brendan Smialowski/AFP via Getty Images

He pointed to the depressions and suicides caused by economic recession but did not present any evidence the death toll would be higher than from the coronavirus.

He did suggest the mortality rate from the virus is not as bad as initially feared.

*“The whole concept of death is terrible,” he said, “but there’s a tremendous difference between something under 1% and 4 or 5 or even 3%.”*

Trump’s Pollyannish tone was jarring on day that people were dying and hospitals desperately running short of masks and other equipment. It made for a startling contrast with the UK’s prime minister, Boris Johnson, who announced a strict lockdown<sup>6</sup> in Britain, and the draconian measures in place across Europe. It also begged the question of whether citizens would sufficiently trust him to feel safe returning to work or public places and whether state governors would have the final say in any case.

Senator Lindsey Graham, usually a Trump loyalist, warned in a tweet:

*“There is no functioning economy unless we control the virus.”*

But the president insisted

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/mar/22/trump-coronavirus-election-november-2020>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.businessinsider.com/coronavirus-fox-pushing-trump-to-prioritize-the-economy-over-health-2020-3>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/18/investing/stocks-erase-trump-gains/index.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/23/boris-johnson-orders-uk-lockdown-to-be-enforced-by-police>

"we can do two things at one time", adding: "We have a very active flu season, more active than most. It's looking like it's heading to 50,000 or more deaths — deaths, not cases. 50,000 deaths — which is, that's a lot. And you look at automobile accidents, which are far greater than any numbers we're talking about. That doesn't mean we're going to tell everybody no more driving of cars. So we have to do things to get our country open."

Yet last Friday, when the car accident argument was put to Dr Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, he said<sup>7</sup>:

"That's totally way out. That's really a false equivalency ... I don't think with any moral conscience you could say, 'Why don't we just let it rip and happen, and let X per cent of the people die?' I don't understand that reasoning at all."

Like an insufficiently loyal apparatchik in the Soviet Union, Fauci was suddenly nowhere to be seen at Monday night's briefing. The Guardian asked why<sup>8</sup>. Trump said:

"I was just with him ... he's at the task force meeting right now."

Does he agree with you about the need to reopen the economy soon? Trump:

"He doesn't not agree."

But the president was joined by coronavirus task force response coordinator, Deborah Birx. She noted:

"I was not here over the weekend... Saturday, I had a little low-grade fever..."

Trump interjected "Uh, oh!"<sup>9</sup> and cartoonishly recoiled to a distance. Attorney General William Barr smiled devotedly. Birx added:

"I got a test late Saturday night and I am negative."

Trump gave an exaggerated,

"Phew!"

Again Barr smiled. But the room did not erupt in mirth. The president also mentioned that his wife, Melania, had taken a test that came back negative.

Barr was on hand to discuss Trump's executive order to stop hoarding and price gouging.

"If you have a big supply of toilet paper in your house, this is not something you have to worry about," the attorney general said."

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-members-coronavirus-task-force-press-briefing/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://twitter.com/cspan/status/1242234983516966912?s=20>

<sup>9</sup> <https://twitter.com/cspan/status/1242226099683237888?s=20>

*"But if you are sitting on a warehouse with masks, surgical masks, you will be hearing a knock on your door."*

In another reversal, Trump is dialling back his constant references to the "Chinese virus" amid media reports of hate crimes against Asian Americans. He said:

*"It's very important that we totally protect our Asian American community in the United States and all around the world. They're amazing people and the spreading of the virus is not their fault in any way shape or form."*

The briefing finished at 8pm. Trump and co-pilot Pence returned to the cockpit. We're in for a bumpy flight. Gabriel Sherman, special correspondent at Vanity Fair magazine, spoke for many when he tweeted<sup>10</sup>:

*"This is the first time I am genuinely scared. I must have been in denial before. But that presser changed everything."*

### Further reading :

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
- [See all our coronavirus coverage](#)

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<sup>10</sup> <https://twitter.com/gabrielsherman/status/1242239867217743873?s=20>