

Bill Kaplan: Competent leadership lacking from Trump, Johnson on COVID-19 pandemic

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We face a contagious, virulent coronavirus pandemic. 735,000+ cases nationally, including 4,200+ in Wisconsin (WI) with 40,000+ U.S. deaths and 200+ for WI. No zip code is immune, with spikes in South Dakota and Brown County, WI. There is no vaccine or curative treatment yet. Science mandates social distancing and stay at home.

Our way out will depend on medical and scientific breakthroughs, as well as competent political leaders at all levels. Democratic and many GOP governors are leading, relying on data and science. What has been sorely lacking is competent leadership from the White House and the Republican-led Senate, including WI GOP Senator Ron Johnson. Neither Trump nor Johnson are grounded in governing. Both are incapable of empathy, preferring chaos and division.

As the dead pile up, Trump and Johnson look for scapegoats. Trump said: "I don't take responsibility at all". The White House had several months to prepare, but failed disastrously, coronavirus was not "under control". The testing rollout was bungled, and Trump inexplicably did not use his authority under the Defense Production Act to buildup supplies of personal protective and medical equipment. Trump blames Democrats, Obama, the press, China and the World Health Organization (WHO). Johnson has consistently joined Trump to deflect failure and incompetence.

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Johnson chairs the Senate Homeland Security Committee. He held one inconsequential hearing on the “federal response” to coronavirus. Administration officials testified behind closed doors. Trump’s failures received no public scrutiny. Johnson has settled on a new probe focusing on China, blaming the WHO for supposedly colluding with China to cover-up the origin of the coronavirus and pushing an unproven treatment, in sync with Trump. Despite his frequent praise of China’s containment response to coronavirus, Trump attacks China and the WHO for his failures. Johnson cheerleads. U.S. funding for the WHO has been suspended.

However, Trump and Johnson received serious pushback against the attacks on the WHO. The American Medical Association said: “During the worst public health crisis in a century, halting funding to the ... (WHO) is a dangerous step in the wrong direction that will not make defeating COVID-19 easier. Fighting a global pandemic requires international cooperation and reliance on science and data. Cutting funding to the WHO – rather than focusing on solutions – is a dangerous move” And, the conservative U.S. Chamber of Commerce said: “The Chamber supports a reformed ... WHO... . However, cutting the WHO’s funding during the COVID-19 pandemic is not in U.S. interests given the organization’s critical role in other countries”

Trump and Johnson are also hawking the use of hydroxychloroquine, an anti-malarial medication that also treats lupus and rheumatoid arthritis. Trump quipped: “It may work, it may not work.” Johnson said: “Patients deserve the right to try hydroxychloroquine.” Left unsaid is the lack of hard scientific data, potentially dangerous side effects and the impact on people who depend on this medication. Even the CIA has issued a warning on using this drug. Trump and Johnson advocate quackery. We need competent political leaders.

— Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C., for the *Wisconsin State Journal* from 1995 – 2009.