

Bill Kaplan: Coronavirus, candor and competence

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Amid the world-wide spread of the coronavirus and steep plunge of the U.S. stock market and global indices, Trump announced his plan to respond to the deadly virus. Trump struck a self-congratulatory tone: “We’ve had tremendous success ... beyond what many people would’ve thought”. Trump falsely emphasized that the threat to Americans is “very low”. He also stated, with no evidence, that the virus would magically vanish in April and that a vaccine is imminent. Trump put Pence, with no background in public health, in charge. Pence is best known for delaying containment of an Indiana drug use-related HIV outbreak by initially refusing to authorize a needle exchange program.

No one was reassured. The U.S. stock market continued to plunge — the worst week since the 2008 Great Recession. Meanwhile, U.S. coronavirus cases not linked to travel abroad, are emerging, with one fatality. “At a moment that demands sobriety and honesty, Trump is a leader prone to hyperbole and falsehoods. As the financial markets crave order and clarity, Trump has a penchant for creating chaos and confusion. And, at a time when expertise is paramount, Trump has hollowed out (relevant) government agencies... ” (Washington Post).

Before the coronavirus, Trump dismantled public health protections. In 2018, the pandemic response teams at the White House National Security Council and Department of Homeland Security were dismissed. And, for years Trump has tried to cut “global disease-fighting budgets” (Foreign Policy). Moreover, Trump’s recent budget would sharply reduce funding for the CDC by 16 percent, the National Institutes of Health by \$3 billion and eviscerate global health programs. Meanwhile, local and state public health agencies, including in Wisconsin, are underfunded and inadequately staffed. But with markets falling and the coronavirus spreading, Trump and his cronies look for scapegoats. Trump denounced criticism, saying it was a “new hoax”. Rush Limbaugh downplayed coronavirus, calling it the “common cold”. And, Arkansas GOP Senator Tom Cotton falsely claimed it might be a Chinese

bioweapon.

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However, some Republicans in Congress are warning Trump to take coronavirus seriously (Senators Shelby (AL), Kennedy (LA), and Romney (UT)). On February 12, Wisconsin GOP Senator Ron Johnson, to his credit, chaired a hearing by the Senate Homeland Security Committee on coronavirus. Johnson asked the expert health witnesses “what more the federal government could be doing to combat the outbreak of global infectious diseases” However, Johnson acquiesced in allowing Trump administration officials to testify behind closed doors. What were they hiding? Why didn’t Johnson hold their feet to the fire? That’s Johnson’s job.

Wisconsin Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin has been forthright: “The emergency request (by Trump for funding) does not seek the sorts of resources that we need to prepare and fight this (coronavirus) pandemic”. She pointed out the cuts to CDC and firing of global health experts by Trump. Enough is enough. With one coronavirus case in Wisconsin and inadequately funded public health, Wisconsin needs more federal funds. It’s going to get worse. Wisconsin shouldn’t pay the price for Trump’s lack of candor and competence.

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