

Bill Kaplan: Coronavirus has changed circumstances

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Coronavirus has changed economic, health and social circumstances. Over 300,000 cases and thousands dead nationally, with Wisconsin cases doubling to over 2,000. The economy is in free fall. 13 percent unemployed nationally, a record near-300,000 jobless claims in Wisconsin and state dairy farmers dumping milk with no markets. However, the Trump administration denies any responsibility for its delayed and incompetent pandemic response.

At every step the White House bungled: ignoring early warnings from intelligence agencies, lessons learned from a 2019 pandemic simulation and a study by White House economic advisors that said a pandemic would cripple the economy. Doctors and scientists were not heeded. Trump failed on accumulating vital medical supplies, using the Defense Production Act (DPA) to direct U.S. industry to make needed medical equipment and large-scale coronavirus testing rapidly. Wisconsin Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin has repeatedly raised Trump's refusal to use the DPA.

But Trump blames others, while touting his TV ratings and Facebook prominence. Compare to WWII D-Day General (and future GOP president) Dwight Eisenhower. If the invasion of Nazi-occupied France failed, Eisenhower was prepared to say: "any blame or fault ... is mine alone." In the void, Democratic and (many) GOP governors stepped up. They mostly acted decisively with compassion and empathy, adapting to changing circumstances and their citizens' needs. Unimaginable in the White House.

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Wisconsin Democratic Governor Tony Evers has moved forward, while GOP legislators falter. For example, only the GOP-led legislature can postpone an election. Evers unsuccessfully beseeched GOP leaders to do so based on public health and safety. They have cavalierly rejected his proposals, while stoking the rural-urban divide. Wisconsin Republicans are out of step with Republicans across the country. 15 states, including 7 GOP-led, have postponed their primaries. Alaska and Wyoming, solid red, moved to voting entirely by mail. Are Wisconsin GOP leaders seeking partisan gains with expected low turnout?

Evers has led on other fronts. His “Safer at Home” policy is on the same page as 40 other states, including 16 GOP-led. But top Wisconsin GOP legislative leaders have dragged their feet, threatening investigations down the road. They are not listening to Maryland GOP Governor Larry Hogan and head of the National Governors Association. Hogan has strongly endorsed stay at home, and has not been timid in pointing out the bungling of the White House. It’s long past time for Wisconsin Republicans to grow up.

Evers is thinking outside the box, announcing “a new public-private partnership ... to increase Wisconsin’s laboratory testing capacity for COVID-19” (coronavirus). It will make testing more widely available throughout Wisconsin. Marshfield Health System CEO Doctor Susan Turney said: “Our ability to now test for COVID-19, and turn results around within a day or less, is a monumental step in terms of ... more precisely allocating our resources to patients ... (and) understanding the scope of the pandemic on a local level.”

Finally, because circumstances have changed, Medicaid expansion is no longer just a choice. It’s a necessity because of mass unemployment and the enormous fiscal advantages for Wisconsin.

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