

Bill Kaplan: Tommy Thompson governs, unlike Trump

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The Trump administration will spend \$250 million on a propaganda campaign “to deliver important public health and economic information (so) the administration can defeat despair, inspire hope and achieve national recovery” (Department of Health and Human Services). However, no PR electioneering can conceal the Trump administration’s failures. COVID-19 did not “disappear”. And, Trump-touted treatments, e.g., ingesting disinfectant or taking hydroxychloroquine, were quackery or unproven. Moreover, the economy remains in shambles.

There are over 6.2 million COVID-19 cases nationally and 81,000+ in Wisconsin. U.S. deaths will hit 200,000 shortly, about 1,200 in Wisconsin. “Experts warn U.S. death toll could hit 410,000 by year’s end” (Washington Post). Notwithstanding a welcome decrease in the unemployment rate, job growth has slowed, with “an increasing number of people ... (having) lost their jobs permanently, rather than being temporarily laid off or furloughed – a sign that the crisis is doing lasting damage” (NYT). Worse, Trump and the GOP-led Senate have ended most federal aid. Expect higher jobless numbers.

Trump, having failed to control COVID-19, is hoping for a vaccine. “Trump’s desire to deliver a vaccine – or at least convince the public that one is very near — ... is in part a campaign gambit to improve his standing with an electorate that overwhelmingly disapproves of his management of the pandemic” (WP). And, Trump’s politicization of the CDC and FDA left state officials to improvise.

Former Wisconsin GOP Governor Tommy Thompson, amid the pandemic, has stepped up to become interim president of the UW System. His initial steps make clear that “interim” should be dropped. Thompson wisely asked former Democrat Assembly Speaker Tom Loftus and Republican Scott Neitzel, Walker-appointed head of the Department of Administration, to co-chair a transition team. Then Thompson focused on strengthening the UW System (\$500 million in cuts under Walker). He spoke truth to the GOP-led state legislature: “They don’t trust the university and therefore they feel it’s their responsibility to keep us down. And, we have, as a system, been apologizing and I don’t want to apologize anymore.” Thoughtful ideas

were proposed by Thompson: more tuition aid for low-income and working class students, increase the UW System budget and explain to the public how the UW System is an economic engine helping rural and urban areas.

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But Thompson faces tough COVID-19 challenges. Unlike Trump, Thompson does not mock masks and social distancing. The former Health and Human Services secretary made masks mandatory throughout the UW System. He reopened campuses with social distancing, widespread testing and places to quarantine sick students. I hope this works. However, CBS reported over 50,000 campus COVID-19 cases nationally. Moreover, 420 UW-Madison students in fraternity and sorority houses are quarantined. And, nearly 500 UW-Madison students and employees have tested positive for COVID-19. But a panicky shutdown will only spread COVID-19 throughout Wisconsin.

Thompson deserves support for his “bipartisanship” in fighting COVID-19. Unlike GOP state legislators he didn’t criticize state Democratic Governor Tony Evers’ public health efforts. An Evers-Thompson partnership could help the UW System and Wisconsin during the pandemic.

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