

# Infighting, missteps and a son-in-law hungry for results: Inside the Trump administration's troubled coronavirus response

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 [washingtonpost.com/politics/infighting-missteps-and-a-son-in-law-hungry-for-action-inside-the-trump-administrations-troubled-coronavirus-response/2020/03/14/530c28b4-6559-11ea-b3fc-7841686c5c57\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/infighting-missteps-and-a-son-in-law-hungry-for-action-inside-the-trump-administrations-troubled-coronavirus-response/2020/03/14/530c28b4-6559-11ea-b3fc-7841686c5c57_story.html)

The economy was grinding to a halt. Stocks were in free fall. Schools were closing. Public events were being canceled. New cases of the novel coronavirus were popping up across the country.

And then, on Wednesday, the day the World Health Organization designated the coronavirus a pandemic, Jared Kushner joined the tumult.

President Trump's son-in-law and senior adviser — who has zero expertise in infectious diseases and little experience marshaling the full bureaucracy behind a cause — saw the administration floundering and inserted himself at the helm, believing he could break the logjam of internal dysfunction.

Kushner rushed to help write Trump's widely panned Oval Office address to the nation. His supermodel sister-in-law's father, Kurt Kloss, an emergency room doctor, crowdsourced suggestions from his Facebook network to pass along to Kushner. And Kushner pressed tech executives to help build a testing website and retail executives to help create mobile testing sites — but the projects were only half-baked when Trump revealed them Friday in the White House Rose Garden.

Kushner entered into a crisis management process that, despite the triumphant and self-congratulatory tone of public briefings, was as haphazard and helter-skelter as the chaotic early days of Trump's presidency — turning into something of a family-and-friends pandemic response operation.

The administration's struggle to mitigate the coronavirus outbreak has been marked by infighting and blame-shifting, misinformation and missteps, and a slow recognition of the danger. Warring factions have wrestled for control internally and for approval from a president who has been preoccupied with the beating his image is taking.

The scramble for solutions is occurring in an overriding atmosphere of trepidation of saying something that Trump might perceive as disloyal and of fear that their fumbles could cost the president his reelection in November.

"The problem is no one is sure who is in charge," a senior administration official said. "Unless someone comes to you and says, 'I was with the president five minutes ago,' and you know they're telling the truth, getting irreversible direction is a little difficult."

This portrait of Trump and his administration's management of a pandemic that in a few short days has completely altered American life is based on interviews with 19 senior administration officials and other people briefed on the internal deliberations, many of whom spoke on the condition of anonymity to share candid assessments.

## Oversold and inflated

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In a bid to produce swift action, Kushner helped orchestrate a Rose Garden event Friday that he hoped would rally Wall Street at the close of a brutal week of trading, but the administration's marquee announcements were not fully formed.

The news conference had the intended immediate effect, fueling a rise in the stock markets before they closed at 4 p.m. But things unraveled from there once it became clear the picture of progress that Trump presented to the public was, at best, considerably inflated.

Trump announced that Google was developing a website — "It's going to be very quickly done, unlike websites of the past," he said — where Americans can input their symptoms, find out if a test is necessary and then be directed to a testing site near their homes.

"We have many, many locations behind us, by the way," the president said.

But Google clarified the president's broad proclamation with a statement narrowing the scope of its project, explaining that its sister company Verily was only "in the early stages of development," with a planned roll out first in the San Francisco Bay area, but "with the hope of expanding more broadly over time."

There is some confusion inside the administration about how quickly the Bay Area pilot could be ready and anxiety that the president might under deliver on his promises. One White House official said they are optimistic they can begin scaling up in hard-hit states quickly.

This was not the only plan Trump oversold. His vow that Americans could go to testing sites in places like their local Walmart parking lots was premature. Several key participants said the plans were overstated, including the timetable and number of sites.

Some state and federal health workers — who would be responsible for performing the tests — were caught by surprise, although a White House aide said administration officials were on the phone throughout Friday with some state and local officials in virus hot spots to discuss plans for new testing locations.

In addition, representatives from CVS, Target, Walgreens, Walmart and other retailers said after Trump's announcement that they still did not yet know exactly how the tests would be administered or other basic details, including when or where they would begin.

Trump, habitually in salesman mode, has long had a tendency to overpromise and overhype deals he is announcing, whether for a new condo development or bilateral trade.

Nonetheless, some White House officials still remained optimistic that by Sunday night, they would have a clearer plan to present to the public. Still others griped that the president and his team had yet again gotten ahead of themselves, bungling a potentially positive development.

“Neither one of the announcements were ready for prime time,” said another senior administration official. “People wanted news to announce.”

Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.) said Friday’s announcement was a positive, if tentative, step, noting that Kushner told him he had “cold called” some of these companies to solicit help.

“Jared has the confidence of the president,” Graham said. “He’s the right arm of the president in terms of reporting to the president and keeping the system moving.”

Graham said that after speaking Friday night with Trump and Kushner, as well as first lady Melania Trump, the president had gotten past some of his frustrations with news coverage of the coronavirus and was “all in” on developing mitigation plans. Still, Graham said, “There’s a long way to go, and it’s going to get worse before it gets better.”

## 'An ad hoc free-for-all'

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The severity of the crisis came into sobering relief for administration officials late in the week when Deborah Birx, a physician and ambassador who is serving as the White House’s coronavirus response coordinator, presented a statistical model predicting a large uptick in cases in the United States over the subsequent five to seven days. The model showed that the coronavirus likely would continue to infect many Americans for at least two months.

Birx joined the West Wing two weeks ago as an adviser to Vice President Pence, who leads the coronavirus task force. Each day — including some weekends — Pence convenes an afternoon meeting of roughly 20 officials in the White House Situation Room, and about 10 more in an overflow room.

The task force meetings often last about 2½ hours. At best, they have been forums to suggest and debate a broad range of ideas, from disease mitigation to public communications. At worst, they have been dens of discord, with officials with varying portfolios feuding over policy or even simply power and position. The mood has turned especially tense over frustrations with testing delays.

Few decisions are made in these meetings, however. Trump has only occasionally attended, usually when Pence requests his time. Neither Kushner nor his wife, Ivanka Trump, the president’s daughter and also a senior White House adviser, has attended —

though Kushner's focus is now on the coronavirus and he has assembled many of his allies in the government to assist.

The West Wing these past few weeks has felt like the early days — brimming with chaos, beset by backbiting, and now populated by return characters. Hope Hicks, the former communications director and Trump confidante, is back, this time as a top aide to Kushner. Hicks has been involved in the coronavirus response, as have Kushner deputy Avi Berkowitz and Adam Boehler, another Kushner ally who is chief executive of the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation.

Trump is between chiefs of staff — acting chief Mick Mulvaney is transitioning out while Rep. Mark Meadows (R-N.C.) prepares to replace him — and the lack of a forceful gatekeeper has led to the president conducting decision-making as he prefers: With upward of a half-dozen aides and advisers in the Oval Office, all scrambling to perform for him as they await his decisions, which sometimes depend on his mood.

"People just show up in the Oval and spout off ideas," said a former senior administration official briefed on the coronavirus discussions. "He'll either shoot down ideas or embrace ideas quickly. It's an ad hoc free-for-all with different advisers just spitballing."

One White House official defended this practice, arguing that it was an example of the president being decisive in a moment of crisis.

But Leon Panetta, who has served as White House chief of staff, defense secretary and CIA director for past Democratic presidents, said this was the opposite of the kind of steady, methodical and fact-based process necessary to successfully manage crises.

"It's a game of ambivalence at a time of great uncertainty, and the last thing you need is this kind of ambivalence," Panetta said. "It really is a very convoluted process because this president is not somebody who wants it to be organized or requires the best information possible."

## 'I don't take responsibility at all'

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Although Trump is the final decision-maker, as his aides are quick to remind people, a number of principals — including Pence, Kushner, Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar, National Economic Council Director Larry Kudlow, Domestic Policy Council Director Joe Grogan and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Robert Redfield — operate as power centers with their own fiefdoms. They compete with one another over ideas, often developed by their own staffs, and at times move to undercut rivals in meetings.

Grogan, for instance, has privately been agitating to try to expedite testing and warning about both the health and political ramifications of the outbreak.

There also have been tensions between the White House press and communications staff and Pence's team, which has been overseeing most of the administration's public messaging on the coronavirus. Stephanie Grisham, who holds three titles — White House press secretary, White House communications director and communications director to the first lady — has played a secondary role during the biggest crisis of Trump's presidency, in part because of a directive that everything be routed through the vice president's office.

Some White House communications and press aides — some of whom already were sensitive because Trump recruited a pair of outsiders, Tony Sayegh and Pam Bondi, to help manage the communications strategy on impeachment — largely refused to help the vice president's overwhelmed staff, at least initially.

Senior officials and members of the task force also said they have to spend significant chunks of their day dealing with leaks, especially as officials try to escape blame for the testing issues that have plagued the administration's response for weeks.

Among those seeking to avoid such blame is the president himself. Asked at Friday's news conference whether he accepts responsibility for the continued shortage of test kits, Trump said, "No, I don't take responsibility at all."

"The whole country is shutting down," Panetta said. But Trump, he added, "tries to feel his way through these crises and it's almost a political approach, or better yet a reality TV approach, which is, 'How is this crisis damaging my image?' 'How bad is it going to get?' 'Can I talk my way out of it?' And, 'Can I avoid having to take responsibility?'"

Friday morning, Adm. Brett Giroir, a doctor and assistant health secretary, was announced as a testing czar, serving as a point person on virus testing, and coordinating between the CDC, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, and private companies and labs. His appointment underscored various communication breakdowns among the various agencies.

There is a fixation both inside the administration and in the media on testing numbers — how many tests are available, how many people have been tested, how many individuals have the virus — and Giroir will work to streamline which numbers are used and ensure that they're accurate.

## 'We'll practice that'

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Kushner was enlisted partly at the request of Pence's chief of staff, Marc Short, who went to his office at the beginning of the week to ask for help wrangling the entire White House staff to prioritize the coronavirus response.

To that end, Chris Liddell — who works closely with Kushner and is the White House deputy chief of staff for policy coordination — has begun organizing various meetings and working groups. He is expected to sometimes lead a premeeting before the full task

force meeting each afternoon, which one White House official said would hopefully help streamline the process.

And for all the problems with his Rose Garden news conference, Trump did manage to achieve one of his key goals: to halt the plunge in the stock markets. The Dow Jones industrial average shot up sharply near the end of the trading day as Trump declared a national emergency and turned his lectern over to a parade of industry chief executives to offer reassuring statements.

Trump's remarks grew more freewheeling just after the markets closed, when he took questions from reporters — including dismissing one by PBS's Yamiche Alcindor as "nasty."

Birx also figured prominently at the news conference, where she held up a large poster explaining how the new testing website would theoretically work. Pence and Kushner personally worked with digital staffers to design the graphic elements of the poster.

The optics of the news conference conveyed mixed messages. While Trump sought to show command, he became a public example for poor practices. After being exposed to people who have tested positive for the coronavirus, Trump all week refused to get tested himself, but announced Saturday he had been tested overnight Friday. (On Saturday night, his physician released a statement saying Trump did not have the novel coronavirus.)

Instead of displaying social distancing Friday afternoon, he closely surrounded himself on the Rose Garden platform with other people, shared a lone microphone with them, and shook hands with an array of executives.

Only one industry leader — Bruce Greenstein, a home health care services executive — tried to demonstrate the behavior advised by public health experts; when Trump leaned in for a handshake, he instead offered an elbow bump.

The president obliged, but seemed slightly taken aback. "Oh, we'll practice that," Greenstein quipped.