

# Trump Tells Coronavirus, 'I Surrender'

The president plays the climate-denial playbook on a pandemic.



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Oct. 26, 2020

As we head into the final stretch of the election, Covid-19 is on a roll.

Coronavirus cases keep hitting records — among other things, five aides to Vice President Mike Pence have tested positive. Hospitalizations, which lag behind cases, are soaring. And deaths, which lag even further behind, are starting to rise, too. Put it this way: Just between now and Election Day, we're likely to lose almost twice as many Americans to Covid-19 as died on 9/11.

So how is the Trump administration responding? Actually doing anything about the pandemic is apparently off the table. What we're getting instead is a multilevel public relations strategy: We're doing a great job. Anyway, there's nothing anyone can do. And besides, doctors are faking the numbers so they can make more money.

These are, of course, inconsistent stories, and the smearing of health care workers who put their lives on the line to save others is just vile. But none of this should surprise us.

This is, after all, Donald Trump. Also, we've seen this combination of denial, declared helplessness and conspiracy theorizing before: Trump and company are following the same strategy on Covid-19 that the right has long followed on climate change.

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By now, almost everyone is familiar with the way Trump keeps moving the goal posts to claim success no matter how bad things get. Back in February he predicted zero cases “within a couple of days.” In the spring he said that it would go away when the weather got warmer. Lately he's been claiming triumph because the coronavirus hasn't killed 2.2 million people.

The administration was slower to admit that it was abjectly surrendering to Covid-19. But back in August Dr. Scott Atlas, a believer in “herd immunity” — basically letting the virus rip through most of the community — joined the White House coronavirus task force.

Atlas is a radiologist with no known expertise in infectious disease, and actual epidemiologists like Dr. Anthony Fauci are horrified by his ideas. But Atlas, not Fauci, appears to be calling the shots these days.

And on Sunday Mark Meadows, the White House chief of staff, made it more or less official, saying that “we are not going to control the pandemic” because it is a “contagious virus.”



Mark Meadows, the White House chief of staff, admitted the administration isn't trying to control the pandemic. Stefani Reynolds for The New York Times

This came after a rally in which Trump — who considers himself a victim because the media keep talking about “Covid, Covid, Covid” — claimed that coronavirus fatalities are being exaggerated because “doctors get more money and hospitals get more money” if they say that Covid-19 was the cause of death.

All of these excuses sound very familiar to anyone who has followed the climate debate over the years. According to the right, climate change isn't happening; anyway, there's nothing we can do about it without destroying the economy; and it's all a hoax concocted by a global conspiracy of scientists, who are just in it for the money.

That last bit is, of course, projection. No, the overwhelming scientific consensus that we're experiencing man-made global warming isn't being driven by financial incentives — but those who reject that consensus are.

At this point, climate denial is largely sustained by a network of right-wing think tanks supported by fossil-fuel interests; that is, the “experts” claiming either that global warming isn't happening or that nothing can be done about it are basically professional deniers, who make a living as “merchants of doubt.”

And Covid denial, it turns out, isn't just a similar phenomenon; it's being conducted by pretty much the same people.

Atlas and other administration officials have reportedly been strongly influenced by the Great Barrington Declaration, a manifesto on behalf of herd immunity that grew out of a meeting at the American Institute for Economic Research. What do we know about this institute?

Well, it is, not surprisingly, linked to the Charles Koch Institute. And a perusal of its website reveals that until recently it devoted much of its time to climate denial, putting out articles with titles like “Brazilians Should Keep Slashing Their Rainforest.”

More recently, however, the institute's focus has shifted to Covid denial. Last month, for example, it published an article lauding Gov. Kristi Noem of South Dakota, whose refusal to take action against the coronavirus has turned her state into what the article called “a fortress of liberty and hope protected from the grasps of overbearing politicians.”

Since then, of course, South Dakota has experienced an explosion of infections and soaring hospitalizations, and is now seeing a rapid rise in Covid-19 deaths.

Was there ever a chance that Trump would take the pandemic seriously? Probably not. After all, he has always been a die-hard, conspiracy-theorizing denier of climate change, and his coronavirus response has come straight out of the climate-denier playbook.

In any case, we can predict with high accuracy what he will do if the polls are wrong, and he wins a second term. He will do nothing at all to fight the pandemic; he will, however, try to suppress the truth about what's happening. And many, many more Americans will die.

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