

34 days of pandemic: Inside Trump's desperate attempts to reopen America

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Sun

The epidemiological models under review in the White House Situation Room in late March were bracing. In a best-case scenario, they showed the novel coronavirus was likely to kill between 100,000 and 240,000 Americans. President Trump was apprehensive about so much carnage on his watch, yet also impatient to reopen the economy — and he wanted data to justify doing so.

So the White House considered its own analysis. A small team led by Kevin Hassett — a former chairman of Trump's Council of Economic Advisers with no background in infectious diseases — quietly built an econometric model to guide response operations.

Many White House aides interpreted the analysis as predicting that the daily death count would peak in mid-April before dropping off substantially, and that there would be far fewer fatalities than initially foreseen, according to six people briefed on it.

Although Hassett denied that he ever projected the number of dead, other senior administration officials said his presentations characterized the count as lower than commonly forecast — and that it was embraced inside the West Wing by the president's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, and other powerful aides helping to oversee the government's pandemic response. It affirmed their own skepticism about the severity of the virus and bolstered their case to shift the focus to the economy, which they firmly believed would determine whether Trump wins a second term.

For Trump — whose decision-making has been guided largely by his reelection prospects — the analysis, coupled with Hassett's grim predictions of economic calamity, provided justification to pivot to where he preferred to be: cheering an economic revival rather than managing a catastrophic health crisis.

Trump directed his coronavirus task force to issue guidelines for reopening businesses, encouraged "LIBERATE" protests to apply pressure on governors and proclaimed that "the cure can't be worse than the problem itself" — even as polls showed that Americans were far more concerned about their personal safety.

"It's going to go. It's going to leave. It's going to be gone. It's going to be eradicated," the president said Wednesday, hours after his son-in-law claimed the administration's response had been "a great success story."

The span of 34 days between March 29, when Trump agreed to extend strict social-distancing guidelines, and this past week, when he celebrated the reopening of some states as a harbinger of economic revival, tells a story of desperation and dysfunction.

So determined was Trump to extinguish the deadly virus that he repeatedly embraced fantasy cure-alls and tuned out both the reality that the first wave has yet to significantly recede and the possibility of a potentially worse second wave in the fall.

The president sought to obscure major problems by trying to recast them as triumphs. He repeatedly boasted, for instance, that the United States has conducted more tests than any other country, even though the total of 6.75 million is a fraction of the 2 million to 3 million tests per day that many experts say is needed to safely reopen.

And though Trump was fixated on reopening the economy, he and his administration fell far short of making that a reality. The factors that health and business leaders say are critical to a speedy and effective reopening — widespread testing, contact tracing and coordinated efforts between Washington and the states — remain lacking.

“We wasted two months denying it. We’re now wasting another two months by just dithering around,” said Kathleen Sebelius, a former Kansas governor and health secretary in the Obama administration. “The administration seems to have washed their hands of it and said [to governors], we’re out of it. You’re on your own. Figure it out.”

“That’s really the story of all this,” agreed one outside adviser to the Trump administration. “The states are just doing everything on their own.”

This story documenting Trump’s month-long struggle to reopen America is based on interviews with 82 administration officials, outside advisers and experts with detailed knowledge of the White House’s handling of the pandemic. Many of them spoke on the condition of anonymity to recount internal discussions or share candid assessments without risk of retribution.

Some of Trump’s closest advisers rebutted on the record the suggestion that the pandemic response has been anything but successful.

“This is a historically new challenge, and we’ve really risen to the occasion,” Kushner said in an interview. “When history looks back on this, they’ll say, man, the federal government acted really quickly and creatively, they threw a lot at the problem and saved a lot of lives.”

White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany agreed. “President Trump’s swift and unprecedented action has saved American lives,” she said, pointing out that governors from both parties have praised some of the administration’s work.

Trump's interactions with the states during the time were jarringly inconsistent. One day, he called himself a wartime president with total authority; the next day, he said he was merely President Backup, there to help states as he deems necessary.

Trump crowned himself "the king of ventilators" and boasted of his work shoring up supply chains, yet shamed governors for asking for too many supplies for besieged hospitals and health-care workers in their states. At one point, he seemed to suggest that hospitals were selling protective gear provided by the federal government on the black market.

And though administration health officials produced detailed guidelines for reopening, those released by Trump were intentionally vague and devoid of clear metrics, making it easier for the president to avoid responsibility and harder for local leaders to interpret. For instance, Trump initially embraced the aggressive reopening plan by Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp (R), only to quickly abandon Kemp after public outcry.

"It's not going to be coming back like some people think, and part of my job, I think, is to explain to the people of Ohio that we're really not going to be all the way back," said Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine (R), whose safety-first approach has won him enormous praise in his state. "We're not going to be all the way back until we have a vaccine that is available to everyone."

Trump tried to manage the perception of his performance by holding daily, hours-long press briefings that confused and repelled large swaths of the country. As the death toll mounted, the briefings became less about providing critical health information and more a forum for Trump to air grievances, shift blame, stoke feuds, spread misinformation and inspire false hope.

"It's one hell of a difficult situation," said economist Arthur Laffer, an outside Trump adviser. "Whatever he does, if something goes wrong, his critics will say, 'I told you so!' So he's dealing with that, which isn't a healthy environment."

Trump's confidants argue that the president has been moved by the pandemic. "Sometimes — and I felt this way with 9/11 — things are so big, so horrible, that if you're the guy in charge, it makes you a little more humble," said former New York mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, who as Trump's personal lawyer has been speaking regularly with the president. "If you think about how he's handled it, it is tough, it can be humbling."

Yet if Trump felt humbled, he managed to avoid revealing much humility. Aside from reading perfunctory remarks scripted by aides, the president voiced little compassion for the tens of thousands who have lost lives or the tens of millions who have lost their jobs.

By month's end, as businesses in Georgia, Colorado, Texas and elsewhere started to reopen, the total number of dead climbed past 60,000.

“It could get a whole lot worse, and anyone who doesn’t recognize that is really fooling themselves,” said Tom Frieden, a former director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “As we go back out again, the virus is still there. If we don’t have systems to contain it, it can explode again. . . . There is no quick fix.”

Seeking a silver bullet

For a week straight in late March, as businesses shuttered and jobless claims shot up, Trump talked about reopening the country quickly. He picked a start date of April 12, because he liked the idea of church pews packed with parishioners on Easter Sunday. Then he beat a hasty retreat.

Two physicians on the White House task force, Deborah Birx and Anthony S. Fauci, presented dire projections based on publicly-available models showing that without continued social distancing and other mitigation efforts as many as 1.6 million to 2.2 million Americans could die. With a continued lockdown, there would be an estimated 100,000 to 240,000 fatalities. Although some in the administration doubted the death toll would ever rise that high, they shared Birx and Fauci’s goal of persuading the president to take the pandemic more seriously.

Task force members prepared to extend social distancing guidelines, already in place for 15 days, for an additional two weeks and then reassess. But Trump — who also had been influenced by watching television footage of body bags being carried out of a hospital near his Queens boyhood home in New York — surprised them by agreeing to extend social distancing for 30 days, until the end of April. For the doctors, this was a quiet victory.

“He’s a guy that goes with his gut,” said a senior administration official involved in task force discussions. The doctors, this official added, “don’t have that luxury. Their jobs are to make sure he understands where they are on the science and data.”

Trump, meanwhile, used his presidential megaphone to promote what he thought was a silver bullet: hydroxychloroquine. Night after night in late March and early April, he kept hearing about the controversial anti-malarial drug on his favorite Fox News Channel programs, where television doctors and commentators touted its efficacy. He also heard about the drug in a flurry of conversations with Giuliani and other friends.

Hydroxychloroquine became a presidential obsession. He asked about it in meetings — “What’s the hold up?” he would complain — and repeatedly asked Food and Drug Administration commissioner Stephen Hahn if he was moving as quickly as possible to approve it, officials said.

Hahn said in an interview Saturday, “I can assure you 100 percent that the president has never pressured me to make a decision regarding any regulatory aspect of the FDA’s work.”

The commissioner added that in each of their conversations about hydroxychloroquine Trump has said something along the lines of, "It might work, it might not work, but he doesn't see any reason why a doctor can't make that decision. And he totally acknowledged that we might discover it may not work."

In one Oval Office meeting, Trump asked advisers about a French study released in late March that tested whether hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin were effective against covid-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus. The small, non-random study was dismissed by many public-health experts, yet Trump seized on it as evidence the drugs might work. As the president said repeatedly in public, "What do you have to lose?" Hahn had to explain that the combination of the medications could cause heart toxicity.

On April 3, Fox host Laura Ingraham paid Trump a visit in the Oval Office to talk up hydroxychloroquine. She brought with her two regular on-air guests in what she dubs her "medicine cabinet": Ramin Oskoui, a Washington-based cardiologist, and Stephen Smith, a New Jersey-based infectious disease specialist. Hahn attended as well, as Smith made a detailed presentation, complete with a spreadsheet, about how hydroxychloroquine works and its value as a treatment during hospitalization.

"I'm a guy who looks at data," Smith said in an interview. "I came as a scientist and physician. I trained under Dr. Fauci and respect him a lot."

Oskoui declined to comment.

Some senior Republicans who heard about the meeting cringed about a television host's special access to offer medical advice to the president, but it fit a pattern of Trump soliciting input from media stars rather than government experts.

In what was widely seen as an effort to placate Trump, the FDA issued an emergency use authorization for the drug, and the drug was added to the Strategic National Stockpile. But the president conflated those efforts with outright approval of the drug, which the senior official said "gave a little more ammo because it created the optics that approval had basically been given to the drug."

Trump at times went to extreme lengths to promote hydroxychloroquine. Keith Frankel, a vitamins executive who occasionally socializes with Trump at his Mar-a-Lago Club in Palm Beach, Fla., said the president asked him to call California Gov. Gavin Newsom (D) on his cellphone and try to make a deal for the nation's largest state to buy millions of tablets of hydroxychloroquine from an Indian manufacturer. Frankel said he got Newsom's phone number from Trump.

Frankel was not working through official U.S. government channels, according to a senior government official. California did not agree to take the drugs being offered, Frankel said, adding that after consulting with Trump he also spoke to hospital officials in New Jersey and

the state health commissioner in New York.

“A guy I know sells products to these guys in India who are making the drug,” Frankel said. He said he learned of the Indian manufacturer through a connection in Turkey. Several million of the pills could have been supplied, he said, but “there ended up being no deal.”

Frankel, who said he was recovering from the coronavirus himself, claimed the drugs would have been sold at cost to the states. “It was totally honest and philanthropic,” he said, arguing that taking the drug had helped him recover.

Trump embraced hydroxychloroquine, as well as azithromycin, as “one of the biggest game-changers in the history of medicine.” In the weeks that followed, however, the dangers became more clear. A Veterans Affairs study released April 21 found that covid-19 patients who were treated with hydroxychloroquine were more likely to die than those who were not. Three days later, the FDA warned that doctors should not use the drug to treat covid-19 patients outside a hospital or clinical trial because of reports of “serious heart rhythm problems.”

Although Trump stopped touting the drug publicly, privately he maintained his support for hydroxychloroquine and got upset with government officials presenting studies or bringing him evidence of its risks or failings, encouraging them to have a more positive outlook, aides said.

'A God complex'

As April began with the extension of social distancing, tensions grew within the administration between the doctors and scientists advising the response and the economic and political aides with longer-standing relationships with the president.

Marc Short, chief of staff to Vice President Pence, exerted significant influence over the coronavirus task force, setting the agenda and determining seating arrangements for meetings as well as helping to orchestrate press briefings. Short also is one of the White House’s most vocal skeptics of how bad the pandemic would be. He repeatedly questioned the data being shared with Trump, and in internal discussions said he did not believe the death toll would ever get to 60,000 and that the administration was overreacting, damaging the economy and the president’s chances for reelection, according to people who have heard his arguments.

Day after day, Short pressed other officials to reopen the entire country, encouraging more risks to get the economy humming again. Short succeeded in pushing for Trump to resume travel, as Pence had done, over the objections of some officials, who argued that leaving Washington endangers the principals and their staffs. Trump plans to visit a mask manufacturing plant in Arizona on Tuesday.

Short aligned with Hassett, Kushner, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and National Economic Council Director Larry Kudlow, among others, who shared the belief that the economy had been shut down for long enough. A former senior administration official briefed on the internal dynamics described the consensus mind-set among this bloc as believing health officials were “like the school nurse trying to tell the principal how to run the school.”

Hassett’s data analysis helped affirm this view internally. Hassett said he merely built a tool to evaluate the evolution of data from the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington. He confirmed that he shared his charts internally and that they often showed fewer deaths than IHME or others were projecting — but that he was drawing a curve based on real-time mortality data versus what the charts predicted would happen for the same days.

“I have never, ever said that that’s my projection of what the death count was going to be, and no administration policy has been influenced by my projections,” he said, adding, “It’s an utterly false story that I’ve been a rosy-scenario guy inside the White House.”

The task force members with medical degrees — Birx, Fauci and Hahn, as well as CDC Director Robert Redfield, Surgeon General Jerome M. Adams and Brett Giroir, who leads the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps — splintered off in mid- to late-March and began meeting on their own almost daily, three senior administration officials said. Some in the “doctors group” were distressed by what one official dubbed the “voodoo” discussed within the broader task force.

The CDC, which traditionally takes the lead in public health responses, has not held a media briefing since March 9. But Redfield said he enjoyed “a prime position on the ladder of the decision-making process.”

“The one thing that has been extremely gratifying is that the public health message has been respected as the public health message,” Redfield said.

The doctors group strove to present a unified front to the president on various medical and scientific issues. They recently discussed how antibody tests, designed to identify people with possible immunity from the virus, are not a panacea to reopening the country because the results sometimes are inaccurate.

“There’s a little bit of a God complex,” one senior administration official said of the group. “They’re all about science, science, science, which is good, but sometimes there’s a little bit less of a consideration of politics when maybe there should be.”

With health professionals and other new faces suddenly in his midst, Trump sought comfort from the familiar. Hope Hicks, an original staffer on the 2016 campaign who left the White House in 2018, returned in March in a senior adviser capacity.

Hicks accompanied the president to most every meeting and planned his daily schedule, aides said, suggesting themed events, tweaking his scripted public comments and even calling Cabinet secretaries to convey the president's directives. She attended coronavirus task force meetings most days, even though Trump often skipped them, sitting prominently along with doctors and economists.

Trump has peppered his new chief of staff, Mark Meadows, and other senior aides with phone calls "in almost every single hour of the day," sometimes well after midnight, according to one senior official. The president was often in a sour mood, complaining about media coverage and carping that he does not get enough credit.

'The system is broken'

One of the more political issues during this period was the fight for supplies, such as ventilators, testing machines and swabs, and masks and other protective gear. Amid disruptions to the global supply chain, governors pleaded with the White House for help obtaining equipment from the Strategic National Stockpile, but the administration did not quickly meet their needs, and Trump derided governors when he thought they were asking for too much or not praising him enough.

Kushner struck a nerve on April 2 when he said that "the notion of the federal stockpile was it's supposed to be our stockpile. It's not supposed to be states' stockpiles that they then use."

Drive-throughs were the centerpiece of the administration's national testing plan, pieced together by Kushner and his team and hastily rolled out by Trump on March 13 in the Rose Garden. The president promised that 5 million tests would be distributed before the end of the month. A few days earlier, Pence had been even more optimistic, announcing that more than 1 million tests already had been distributed and another four million would be sent out by the end of that week.

But Trump's promise of a drive-through testing site at your neighborhood CVS or Walmart never materialized. The administration ultimately stood up 78 testing sites, rather than the thousands initially promised, and then the president placed responsibility for testing on the states.

"The need to reopen, that was not based on a clear road map of how people were going to be tested," said Bhaskar Chakravorti, dean of global business at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. "The system is broken at every point."

Trump has tried to claim testing as an unambiguous success. "We want to get our country open, and the testing is not going to be a problem at all," he said Monday in the Rose Garden. "In fact, it's going to be one of the greatest assets that we have."

Yet even as the administration helped significantly ramp up testing capacity, problems persisted. Several states grew frustrated as they tried to procure testing supplies through the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Federal and state officials said it was unclear who was in charge, leading to rampant confusion, and tests went unused because there were not enough other supplies to administer them.

A federal official who recently met with Birx said “she knows they are far behind on testing, no matter what the president says.”

In a White House meeting with other officials in early April, Birx said that many of the testing labs were still only operating at 10 percent of capacity. Birx said she needed to learn where all the machines and labs were, and that the government did not know.

During one call, Kemp told the president testing was such a problem in Georgia that he was working with the National Guard.

Trump has often touted a testing system created by Abbott that can run nearly 500 tests in 24 hours. But the vast majority of Abbott’s tests are going unused because of a shortage of materials and staff to run them, two senior administration officials said.

Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker (D) said Trump was either confused about what is required to administer tests or deliberately glossing over the urgent problems.

“The truth of the matter is that the president doesn’t seem to understand the difference between testing capacity and getting testing results,” Pritzker said. “We don’t have the supplies to run those tests.”

In Wisconsin, for instance, Gov. Tony Evers (D) requested 60,000 plastic tips needed to store reagents and 10,000 testing swabs and numerous reagent kits from FEMA in late March. But by April 21, the day Pence visited Wisconsin to tout the administration’s pandemic response, Wisconsin had only received 2,800 tips and 3,500 testing swabs, according to Rep. Mark Pocan (D-Wis.).

When members of the congressional delegation appealed to FEMA Director Peter Gaynor and some of his deputies, the agency said in a conference call that it did not have enough supplies and that the state would need to work with the CDC, according to Pocan, who was on the call. Then, on April 8, FEMA changed its policy to make it the responsibility of states to procure supplies from commercial distributors, Pocan said.

“Just telling us to go to the private market isn’t a solution,” Pocan said. “It’s an excuse.”

Without assistance from Washington, Wisconsin began working with Illinois, Michigan and other states in a regional alliance to obtain supplies and develop a strategy. States in other regions of the country also are partnering with one another, forming a patchwork of

alliances.

“The government is showing up in split screen, where Washington is dominated by whatever President Trump is thinking moment by moment,” Sebelius said. “What’s very difficult in a country that is as big and mobile as the United States is to have the state-by-state or city-by-city decision-making process. Nothing could be more confusing to people.”

In Maryland, Gov. Larry Hogan (R) quietly entered into negotiations with South Korea, with the help of his wife, Yumi, a Korean American. Exasperated with the lack of tests in his state, Hogan spent about 22 days arranging to procure 500,000 tests, negotiating with eight different Maryland agencies, the Korean embassy and officials at the State Department.

Once the FDA and U.S. Customs and Border Protection signed off on the deal, a Korean Air jet touched down at Baltimore-Washington International Marshall Airport on April 18 to deliver the supplies. Hogan said he was worried federal officials would try to commandeer the tests, so he had Maryland Army National Guard members and Maryland State Police officers escort and protect the cargo.

“It was like Fort Knox to us, because it was going to save the lives of thousands of our citizens,” Hogan said. “That was so important to us that we wanted to make sure that that plane took off from Korea safely, landed here in America safely, and that we guarded that cargo from whoever might interfere with us getting that to our folks that needed it.”

The move infuriated Trump, who has long chafed at Hogan’s criticisms and, according to advisers, saw Maryland’s deal with South Korea as a bid to embarrass the president.

White House officials argue the administration has been unusually attentive to the needs of states. After early complaints, the administration ramped up production and delivery of ventilators and the supply is now considered sufficient. Trump had 25 one-on-one calls with governors from at least 14 states in April, aides said, while members of the Cabinet and coronavirus task force had at least 113 such conversations.

“The media have been distracted by examples of disagreement instead of focusing on the vast examples of partnership and coming together of state and federal governments,” said Douglas Hoelscher, the White House’s director of intergovernmental affairs.

Kushner said Saturday that criticisms from governors are outdated and that every state’s testing needs have now been satisfied. He challenged any governor who claims unmet needs to contact his office.

“We’ve figured out how to get all of the states enough complete testing kits to do the testing that they’ve requested,” Kushner said. “We can get to a really big number in May. The biggest thing holding us back is not supplies or capacity; it’s the states’ ability to collect more samples.”

'Get open, get open, get open'

The weekend of April 11, Trump took a break from his daily news conferences in observance of Easter. He spent considerable time on the phone with friends and advisers and began to shift toward concluding that the country could not afford to remain locked down much longer. He was irate with Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar, officials said, screaming and swearing at one ally about how things were so unfair.

The president set his sights on a May 1 reopening.

Trump had been agonizing over the economy, watching the number of Americans filing unemployment insurance claims climb each week. He fretted about the unemployment rate rising to 15 percent or even higher, a milestone that advisers warned him would seriously jeopardize his reelection.

In a private April call with supporters on immigration, Ken Cuccinelli, a top immigration official, said that the numbers would be “so stunning . . . that it will be a messaging hit.”

In a sign of how Trump’s priorities were changing, two Situation Room meetings on Saturdays in April began with presentations by Hasset and Kudlow about the economy. They both warned the president of double-digit unemployment and tens of millions of Americans losing their jobs.

In one of the meetings, Hasset had such a negative outlook on the economy that he asked people in the room not to repeat his comments to others, according to people familiar with the meeting. At one point, he suggested that GDP could fall 40 percent and that tens of millions people could lose their jobs. Hasset has since made similar comments publicly, warning of unemployment levels not seen since the Great Depression.

Trump heard that message from others as well. He held regular calls with a group known internally as “Kudlow’s guys” — generational peers with high media profiles, including Laffer, financier Steve Forbes and economist Stephen Moore.

“Get open, get open, get open — we kept pressing that point,” Moore said. Otherwise, he recalled telling Trump, “You’ll have a mini-Great Depression. You’ll have body bags of dead businesses and jobs that will never be resurrected.”

On April 14, Ingraham returned to the Oval Office to meet with the president. The Fox host reiterated her belief that the country needed to reopen and argued for limits on contact tracing, a person with knowledge of the meeting said.

As Trump watched television during this period, he sensed popular support. Outside state capitols, a smattering of activists flouted social distancing guidelines to protest governors who had issued stay-at-home orders. Many of them waved Trump campaign flags or

sported other Trump-branded paraphernalia.

To create political cover for Trump, White House aides scrambled to put together a business advisory council made up of chief executives from across a range of industries.

“The primary concern from everybody was really safety: Consumer safety, guest safety, and making sure that there was confidence and comfort from the public to be able to go back to wherever, whether it’s a store or a shopping mall or a bank or a restaurant,” said Thomas Keller, a celebrity chef and restaurateur who participated.

Other members said they were only invited to one conference call, and the group has been largely dormant since, with no clear mechanism to share ideas.

As the White House prepared to roll out new guidelines for reopening, CDC and FEMA officials sent a 36-page document on April 10 outlining in detail the recommended stages of reopening, including detailed instructions for schools, child-care facilities, summer camps, parks, faith-based organizations and restaurants.

But on April 16, when Trump and Birx released their guidelines for a slow and staggered return to normal in places with minimal cases of the coronavirus, many of the details fine-tuned by the CDC were stripped out.

Officials continued to debate how restaurants, bars and houses of worship should operate. The CDC circulated a 17-page document with strong recommendations, but many in the White House resisted, particularly when it came to restricting parishioners from singing in choirs or sharing hymnals and offering plates, and suggesting that restaurants use digital menus and avoid salad bars. The document has not been made public and is still in the editing process.

Trump formally embraced the quarantine protesters on April 17 with a trio of all-caps tweets: “LIBERATE MICHIGAN!” “LIBERATE MINNESOTA!” and “LIBERATE VIRGINIA.”

Inside the White House, there was disappointment about Trump’s tweets since many of his aides had hoped to frame his decision on reopening as a presidential test he had met with calm. Privately, several of them acknowledged that the “LIBERATE” tweets brought Trump back into the realm of conspiracy and anger, which he considers safe harbor when he feels boxed in.

Even as Trump berated aides last week over the poor pace of testing — “We have no message on testing,” he complained, according to a senior administration official who directly heard the president — he publicly focused elsewhere. West Wing aides are planning to book more media appearances by Kudlow, Hassett and Mnuchin in coming weeks, with fewer by Birx and Fauci.

“The White House apparatus is totally shifting to the economy,” the senior official said, noting that Trump is convening discussions about reopening this weekend at Camp David.

‘Almost a cleaning’

With Trump engaged in a war of words with governors over testing, public health experts were sounding an alarm about another vulnerability: contact tracing. Finding and isolating infected people and their contacts had been the cornerstone for successful mitigation efforts in South Korea, Singapore and other countries.

For parts of the United States to reopen, health departments need to be ready to extinguish any new outbreaks immediately. That would require an enormous corps of health workers known as contact tracers to track down anyone who might have been exposed to someone with covid-19.

But as with testing, the federal government has placed the onus on states to devise their own contact tracing programs. So state and local health departments started developing programs on their own, or formed regional partnerships.

“We need a national commitment to get this done in order to defeat the virus,” said Michael Leavitt, a former Republican governor of Utah and health secretary in the George W. Bush administration.

Inside the West Wing, there were sharp fights over contact tracing and whether to approve the use of smartphone apps. For example, in a recent Situation Room meeting, Trump senior adviser Stephen Miller questioned contact tracing because so many people were asymptomatic, advisers said.

Trump, however, rarely mentioned contact tracing. His focus was on more personal challenges. One senior White House official said that the president was among the most animated when discussing what his press appearances would be like: A call-in to the radio? A morning photo opp? An evening news conference? Hicks had to move along the conversation in coronavirus meetings by telling the boss they would decide later.

On April 21, when New York Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo (D) visited the White House to meet with Trump, the president asked if he would join him at that afternoon’s press briefing, an idea Hicks encouraged, according to officials with knowledge of the episode.

Cuomo declined and left the White House without news photographers snapping pictures of him with the president.

The next day, Trump’s focus was squarely on his declining political fortunes. His reelection team — including Kushner, campaign manager Brad Parscale and Republican National Committee Chair Ronna McDaniel — staged something of an intervention. They presented

fresh polls that painted a picture so grim they hoped the president would be persuaded to curtail his daily press briefings, as the data suggested the performances had damaged him.

One of the polls, an internal RNC survey of voters in 17 battleground states, had former vice president Joe Biden leading Trump 48 to 45 percent, according to an adviser briefed on the 20-page polling memo. The coronavirus ranked as the most important issue to voters, and 54 percent of those surveyed said Trump was too slow to respond to the crisis, while 52 percent said they believed the government should be doing more.

Worse still were the matchups with Biden on a range of core characteristics. Just 36 percent said they considered Trump more honest and trustworthy; 35 percent said he was more compassionate and empathetic; 44 percent said he was more competent; 43 percent said they believed he fights more for people like them; and 36 percent said he was more calm, steady and relatable.

Trump did outperform Biden in some areas, such as being better at getting things done and better in handling a crisis. Still, on a question that historically has helped determine whether incumbents win reelection — whether the country is headed in the right direction — just 37 percent said they believed it was.

The decision to share the data with Trump backfired. The president went into one of his rages. He said he did not believe the numbers, arguing that people “love” his performances at the briefings and think he is “fighting for them,” according to a person with knowledge of the conversation. He berated Parscale for the polling data, threatening that he might sue his campaign manager — although it was unclear whether he made the remark in jest, and the two would later bury the hatchet.

On April 23, the day after his campaign team’s polling intervention, Trump continued with his usual behavior. During a lengthy and at times hostile question-and-answer session with reporters, Trump mused aloud about being treated with ultraviolet light or injecting bleach or another household disinfectant into the body to cure the coronavirus.

“I see the disinfectant, where it knocks [the virus] out in a minute — one minute — and is there a way we can do something like that, by injection inside, or almost a cleaning,” Trump said, referring to the human body.

Injecting or ingesting disinfectants is dangerous and can be deadly. Trump would later claim he was being sarcastic, but there was no trace of sarcasm in the president’s comments.

That day, 1,857 Americans died of the coronavirus. The next week, the number of cases reported in the United States surpassed 1 million.

And by month's end, as Trump cheered businesses reopening in Georgia, Texas and several other states "because we have to get our country back," the total dead climbed past 63,000, with no sign of slowing down.

Shane Harris contributed to this report.