

This is the biggest blunder in presidential history

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By Jennifer Rubin Opinion writer

President Trump, as he often does when he has made a mistake or revealed his ignorance, changed course to claim that he knew all along that we were facing a pandemic.

As a preliminary matter, this is a lie,

“Trump didn't cause the pandemic. What he did was squander America's only advantage—a lag time during which to prepare for the crisis—thus encouraging the spread of the disease when it might have been contained. He has, in real and material ways, made this crisis worse.” pic.twitter.com/dpfEqH02uI

— Sarah Longwell (@SarahLongwell25) [March 17, 2020](#)

The president has consistently downplayed, denied and misled the public about the seriousness of the threat. Moreover, since the first cases appeared in China in late December, he took few steps to prepare the country for the pandemic before it inevitably reached our shores. We are to believe that he knew there was a pandemic but willfully allowed the crisis to get worse.

There are two possibilities here. The first is that he was ignorant, buying into the Fox News disinformation loop. (*Disclaimer: I am an MSNBC contributor.*) The second is that he was thinking of his election — which he thinks is tied to the economy — so he refused to take action that would have spooked stock markets. (It's not logical because the pandemic would eventually hit, but it would be emblematic of Trump's short-term thinking.)

I am agnostic about which scenario is true. However, what is inescapable is that had the president not frittered away valuable time that could have been spent deploying tests (which could have been obtained from the World Health Organization), building up medical equipment and facilities and preparing for a series of escalating steps to promote social distancing, he might have reduced the strain on our health-care system and saved lives.

This is the biggest blunder in presidential history. Former Department of Homeland Security official [Juliette Kayyem writes](#) for the Atlantic: “With little guidance from the federal government, governors — along with mayors, CEOs, university presidents, and leaders in the sports and entertainment businesses — have taken it upon themselves to try to slow the spread of the virus before it overwhelms the medical system's capacity to respond.” She adds that “a 50-state strategy has emerged to fill the vacuum left by an administration that is still unable to distribute enough testing kits, is still focused on closing borders, and was slow to tell the American public to just stay home.” In essence, Trump's delinquency has

turned the governors into rivals for scarce resources.

Trump did not show any real recognition of the magnitude of the problem until his administration got hold of a study from Britain. “The Imperial College London group reported that if nothing was done by governments and individuals and the pandemic remained uncontrolled, 510,000 would die in Britain and 2.2 million in the United States over the course of the outbreak,” The Post reports. Even if we now institute uniform, serious measures to mitigate the spread of the virus, we would “reduce mortality by half, to 260,000 people in the United Kingdom and 1.1 million in the United States.”

We have lost the window of opportunity that Singapore had, for example, to enact severe measures to test and quarantine infected persons. As The New York Times reports, “Early intervention is key. So are painstaking tracking, enforced quarantines and meticulous social distancing — all coordinated by a leadership willing to act fast and be transparent.” It is not clear whether we were capable of undertaking the swift measures Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong took; but had we begun any efforts at suppressing the virus, the task of now mitigating its damage likely would have been made more manageable. (Singapore acted as swiftly as it did not only because of its invasive surveillance, which might not have been acceptable in the West, but because it “has spent years building a public health system that includes designated clinics for epidemics and official messaging urging the public to wash their hands or sneeze into tissues during flu season.”)

Trump shares the blame for failing to develop an infrastructure to fight pandemics (and removing structures put in place by the Obama administration). But, to borrow a phrase, “he alone” made the crisis infinitely worse by doing nothing for so long when leaders around the world were responding forcefully.