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The major news today, both at home and abroad, is the spread, containment, and management of coronavirus. I am going to write about its political implications. I am neither a doctor nor an epidemiologist, and cannot weigh in on anything other than what this moment looks like to a political historian.

And, while that sounds like a strange lens through which to see this new disease, the virus is actually quite important for American politics.

By now, everyone knows the key elements of the coronavirus story: a pneumonia outbreak appeared in December in Wuhan, China, and scientists traced it to a new strain of coronavirus. After the disease claimed a number of lives, China issued the largest quarantine in history, keeping about 45 million people home from work and public spaces. Epidemiologists were impressively fast off the mark, isolating the new virus and beginning to develop models for how it spreads and vaccinations for how to stop it. But it has moved quickly. As of 9:30 tonight, there have been slightly over 80,000 confirmed cases around the world and 2,699 confirmed deaths. (Let me reiterate: these are the existing numbers, but there are many reasons why they are not in any way definitive as a measure of health or of the epidemic. I'm just giving a sense of the scope of the crisis here for a political read on it.)

Last weekend, as I wrote here, the World Health Organization suggested that the window for containing the coronavirus was closing, but many scientists think the window has already closed.

And yet, the U.S. seems to be unprepared. In May 2018, under then-National Security Advisor John Bolton, the administration got rid of the official in charge of overseeing a U.S. response to a pandemic and disbanded his global health security team. Today Acting Deputy Secretary of Homeland Security Ken Cuccinelli went on Twitter to ask people if they, too, were having trouble accessing the coronavirus map maintained by Johns Hopkins University. "'Has the Johns Hopkins map of the coronavirus stopped working for other people, or just me?" Cuccinelli tweeted. "I just tried again, and it looks like Johns Hopkins put the information behind a membership wall of some kind. Seems like bad timing to stop helping the world with this (previously) useful resource. Here's hoping it goes back up soon."

Newspaper columnist Max Burbank shared the popular outrage: "Thanks for inspiring confidence. Shouldn't YOU GUYS have a map of this? Shouldn't the CDC? You know who they are, right? Isn't there anyone in charge of response to this? Or did someone colossally stupid eliminate that position?" American historian L. D. Burnett tweeted: "there is literally an ENTIRE FEDERAL AGENCY working for you that you could ask to provide you and all Americans with the latest information on the Coronavirus." Health policy professor Howard Forman begged: "PLEASE can someone tell me that this is a parody account and that our

Executive branch has a CLUE of what is going on? PLEASE!?” Forman then helpfully included links to useful resources for his followers.

The administration has been uncharacteristically quiet about the crisis, and seems unable to figure out how to handle it. I wrote before about its decision to return 14 infected people from the cruise ship the Diamond Princess to America in the same plane as uninfected people despite the protests of CDC officials, and now officials find themselves unable to find a place to house those people still in quarantine because of the flight. The infected travelers have brought the official count of U.S. cases to over 50, but experts think the number might be higher because we are not testing for it.

In 2014, when 2 health care workers infected with the Ebola virus were brought back to America for treatment, Trump had plenty to say. He tweeted: “Ebola patient will be brought to the U.S. in a few days — now I know for sure that our leaders are incompetent. KEEP THEM OUT OF HERE!” The next day he continued: “The U.S. cannot allow EBOLA infected people back.... People that go to far away places to help out are great — but must suffer the consequences!” He called for strict flight bans and quarantines and called it “morally unfair” when President Barack Obama sent troops to help contain the outbreak.

This time, though, Trump has been largely silent about the crisis except to say it is under control. On February 16, the Washington Post reported that Trump was worried by a 600 point stock market drop on January 31 after major airlines suspended flights to China. Afraid that strong action against the virus would worry people and thus hurt the economy, he focused on calming the markets by staying quiet, since he sees a strong economy as his primary strength going into the election. “The biggest current threat to the president’s reelection is this thing getting out of control and creating a health and economic impact,” according to Chris Meekins, a former Trump administration emergency-preparedness official.

Today, the administration’s silence changed. It requested \$2.5 billion in emergency funding for the crisis (significantly less than the \$6 billion Obama asked for to combat Ebola), and Trump, who is on a trip to India, weighed in. “The Coronavirus is very much under control in the USA. We are in contact with everyone and all relevant countries. CDC & World Health have been working hard and very smart. Stock Market starting to look very good to me!”

Trump appears to have been pressured into acknowledging the crisis by its growing impact on the economy. The Chinese quarantine has slowed or stopped production there, emptying the pipeline of supplies flowing to American manufacturing and merchants, and this weekend’s news that the virus is spreading outside Asia sparked economic fears. The U.S. stock market dropped 1000 points today, a drop of 3.5%, its worst in two years. Airline stocks led the slide. And now, tonight, which is Tuesday morning in Japan, Tokyo stocks opened down about 1000 points on coronavirus fears. (The market was closed on Monday.)

As I say, I am 100% not going to weigh in on this as a medical issue—I am neither a doctor nor an epidemiologist—but as a political historian I will note two things. First, Trump’s instincts are right: this health crisis will definitely slow down the economy and could trigger a recession, and that would indeed cripple his reelection campaign.

Second, our public safety should matter more to a president than his reelection campaign.

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Notes:

Stats on

coronavirus: <https://gisanddata.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/bda7594740fd40299423467b48e9ecf6>

Dismissal of pandemic officer: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/to-your-health/wp/2018/05/10/top-white-house-official-in-charge-of-pandemic-response-exits-abruptly/>

Tweets: <https://www.newsweek.com/homeland-security-deputy-secretary-cuccinelli-criticized-asking-twitter-where-find-coronavirus-1488863>

New funding: <https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/24/politics/white-house-1-25-billion-coronavirus-request/index.html>

<https://apnews.com/39d9c237bfc75c93016870b00ac6dab8>

https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/obama-seeks-6-billion-from-congress-to-fight-ebola-in-africa-united-states/2014/11/05/12e00f10-6511-11e4-bb14-4cfea1e742d5_story.html

35 cases: <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/02/covid-vaccine/607000/>

50 cases and quarantine: https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/california-judge-delays-decision-on-moving-coronavirus-exposed-americans-to-costa-mesa/2020/02/24/c6fdcac-574e-11ea-9b35-def5a027d470_story.html

Calm markets: https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trumps-soft-touch-with-chinas-xi-worries-advisers-who-say-more-is-needed-to-combat-coronavirus-outbreak/2020/02/16/93de385a-5019-11ea-9b5c-eac5b16dafa_story.html#click=https://t.co/UYEO6HYb4i

Stock market: <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/02/24/us-futures-coronavirus-outbreak.html>

<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/02/25/business/financial-markets/nikkei-plunges-1000-points-tokyo-markets-reopen-amid-coronavirus-fears/#.XISY6BNKjzI>

Obama speech: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/10/18/weekly-address-what-you-need-know-about-ebola>

<https://www.politico.com/news/2020/02/21/coronavirus-trump-white-house-116650>