

The 3 Weeks That Changed Everything

James Fallows

Coping with a pandemic is one of the most complex challenges a society can face. To minimize death and damage, leaders and citizens must orchestrate a huge array of different resources and tools. Scientists must explore the most advanced frontiers of research while citizens attend to the least glamorous tasks of personal hygiene. Physical supplies matter—test kits, protective gear—but so do intangibles, such as “flattening the curve” and public trust in official statements. The response must be global, because the virus can spread anywhere, but an effective response also depends heavily on national policies, plus implementation at the state and community level. Businesses must work with governments, and epidemiologists with economists and educators. Saving lives demands minute-by-minute attention from health-care workers and emergency crews, but it also depends on advance preparation for threats that might not reveal themselves for many years. I have heard military and intelligence officials describe some threats as requiring a “whole of nation” response, rather than being manageable with any one element of “hard” or “soft” power or even a “whole of government” approach. Saving lives during a pandemic is a challenge of this nature and magnitude.

It is a challenge that the United States did not meet. During the past two months, I have had lengthy conversations with some 30 scientists, health experts, and past and current government officials—all of them people with firsthand knowledge of what our response to the coronavirus pandemic should have been, could have been, and actually was. The government officials had served or are still serving in the uniformed military, on the White House staff, or in other executive departments, and in various intelligence agencies. Some spoke on condition of anonymity, given their official roles. As I continued these conversations, the people I talked with had noticeably different moods. First, in March and April, they were astonished and puzzled about what had happened. Eventually, in May and June, they were enraged. “The president kept a cruise ship from landing in California, because he didn’t want ‘his numbers’ to go up,” a former senior government official told me. He was referring to Donald Trump’s comment, in early March, that he didn’t want infected passengers on the cruise ship *Grand Princess* to come ashore, because “[I like the numbers being where they are](#).” Trump didn’t try to write this comment off as a “joke,” his go-to defense when his remarks cause outrage, including his June 20 comment in Tulsa that he’d told medical officials to “[slow the testing down, please](#)” in order to keep the reported-case level low. But the evidence shows that he has been deadly earnest about denying the threat of COVID-19, and delaying action against it.

[David Frum: This is Trump’s fault](#)

“Look at what the numbers are now,” this same official said, in late April, at a moment when the U.S. death toll had just climbed above 60,000, exceeding the number of Americans killed in the Vietnam War. By late June, the total would surpass 120,000—more than all American military deaths during World War I. “If he had just been paying attention, he would have asked, ‘What do I do first?’ We wouldn’t have passed the threshold of casualties in previous wars. It is a catastrophic

failure.”

As an amateur pilot, I can't help associating the words *catastrophic failure* with an accident report. The fact is, confronting a pandemic has surprising parallels with the careful coordination and organization that has saved large numbers of lives in air travel. Aviation is safe in large part because it learns from its disasters. Investigators from the U.S. National Transportation Safety Board go immediately to accident sites to begin assessing evidence. After months or even years of research, their detailed reports try to lay out the “accident chain” and explain what went wrong. In deciding whether to fly if I'm tired or if the weather is marginal, I rely on a tie-breaking question: *How would this look in an NTSB report?*

Controlling the risks of flight may not be as complex as fighting a pandemic, but it's in the ballpark. Aviation is fundamentally a very dangerous activity. People are moving at high altitudes, at high speed, and in high volume, with a guarantee of mass casualties if things go wrong. Managing the aviation system involves hardware—airframes, engines, flight control systems—and “software,” in the form of training, routing, and coordinated protocols. It requires recognition of hazards that are certain—bad weather, inevitable mechanical breakdowns—and those that cannot be specifically foreseen, from terrorist episodes to obscure but consequential computer bugs. It involves businesses and also governments; it is nation-specific and also worldwide; it demands second-by-second attention and also awareness of trends that will take years to develop.

The modern aviation system works. From the dawn of commercial aviation through the 1990s, [1,000 to 2,000 people would typically die each year in airline crashes](#). Today, the worldwide total is usually about one-10th that level. Last year, before the pandemic began, more than 25,000 commercial-airline flights took off each day from airports in the United States. Every one of them landed safely.

In these two fundamentally similar undertakings—managing the skies, containing disease outbreaks—the United States has set a global example of success in one and of failure in the other. It has among the fewest aviation-related fatalities in the world, despite having the largest number of flights. But with respect to the coronavirus pandemic, it has suffered by far the largest number of fatalities, about one-quarter of the global total, despite having less than one-20th of the world's population.

[James Fallows: Is this the worst year in modern American history?](#)

Consider a thought experiment: What if the NTSB were brought in to look at the Trump administration's handling of the pandemic? What would its investigation conclude? I'll jump to the answer before laying out the background: This was a journey straight into a mountainside, with countless missed opportunities to turn away. A system was in place to save lives and contain disaster. The people in charge of the system could not be bothered to avoid the doomed course.

The organization below differs from that of a standard NTSB report, but it covers the key points. Timelines of aviation disasters typically start long before the passengers or even the flight crew knew anything was wrong, with problems in the design of the airplane, the procedures of the maintenance crew, the route, or the conditions into which the captain decided to fly. In the worst cases, those decisions doomed the flight even before it took off. My focus here is similarly on conditions and decisions that may have doomed the country even before the first COVID-19 death had been recorded on U.S. soil.

What happened once the disease began spreading in this country was a federal disaster in its own right: Katrina on a national scale, Chernobyl minus the radiation. It involved the failure to test; the failure to trace; the shortage of equipment; the dismissal of masks; the silencing or sidelining of professional scientists; the stream of conflicting, misleading, callous, and recklessly ignorant statements by those who did speak on the national government's behalf. As late as February 26, Donald Trump notoriously said of the infection rate, "You have 15 people, and the 15 within a couple of days is going to be down close to zero." What happened after that—when those 15 cases became 15,000, and then more than 2 million, en route to a total no one can foretell—will be a central part of the history of our times.

But what happened in the two months before Trump's statement, when the United States still had a chance of containing the disease where it started or at least buffering its effects, is if anything worse.

1. The Flight Plan

The first thing an airplane crew needs to know is what it will be flying through. Thunderstorms? Turbulence? Dangerous or restricted airspace? The path of another airplane? And because takeoffs are optional but landings are mandatory, what can it expect at the end of the flight? Wind shear? An icy runway? The biggest single reason flying is so much safer now than it was even a quarter century ago is that flight crews, air traffic controllers, and the airline "dispatchers" who coordinate with pilots have so many precise tools with which to anticipate conditions and hazards, hours or days in advance.

And for the pandemic? Since at least the early years of the George W. Bush administration, the U.S. government has devoted scientific, military, and intelligence tools toward refining its understanding of what diseases might be emerging and where, and what might be done about them. One reason for this increased emphasis was the overall heightened (and sometimes overhyped) domestic-security awareness after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Another was the series of anthrax attacks soon after 9/11, in which envelopes containing toxins were mailed to media and political figures on the East Coast.

But the most important event was the H5N1 "bird flu" outbreak, in 2005. It originated in Asia and was mainly confined there, as the SARS outbreak had been two years earlier. Bush-administration officials viewed H5N1 as an extremely close call. "We were deeply and genuinely concerned about the potential for human-to-human transmission of the bird flu," John R. Allen, now president of the Brookings Institution, told me. Allen is a retired four-star Marine Corps general who during the Bush administration was an early participant in the contingency planning efforts to assess the lessons of the H5N1 threat. "We realized that if it had spread worldwide, the numbers would have been enormous. So the national-security system was pulled right into the process of improving our awareness mechanisms, and developing a national pandemic strategy."

The awareness mechanisms were a combination of military and civilian, structured and informal, open-source and classified, with a heavy emphasis on the then-infant tools of artificial intelligence, or AI. For instance, in Bush's second term, an unclassified government-funded project called Global Argus—named for the all-seeing giant of Greek mythology—began sifting through news reports, radio broadcasts, road-traffic patterns, business data, and other kinds of open-source

information for signs of abnormalities that, in turn, could be early indicators of disease.

[Read: How the pandemic will end](#)

“Epidemics cause social disruption,” the program’s creators explained, in a PowerPoint presentation from that era that I have seen. “Social disruption is a common feature that can be tracked and used *in lieu* of direct reporting of disease.” As a person involved in the process explained to me, the direct and indirect indicators of social disruption could range from reports of hospital-admission rates to unexplained changes in food prices. “Suddenly the price of chicken goes down in Thailand, and it gets your attention,” a man who worked on Global Argus told me. “It may mean that farmers have seen that their flock is sick, and they slaughter them all at once and send them to market.” This project aspired to process 250,000 bits of news per day, in nearly three dozen languages, for advance warning of anomalies that could possibly indicate disease.

Fifteen years later, in the age of autonomous tracking of everything, that scale might seem quaint. A current app like Waze, for instance, is at any given moment combining readings from tens of millions of cellphones to gauge current traffic conditions on roads across the country. But Bush-era programs like Global Argus predated the introduction of the very first iPhone, and naturally algorithmic powers have increased at least as fast as civilian technology has. These days, “AI has the capacity to ingest virtually all open-source media around the world, all day every day,” a person with direct experience in the process told me. “That can provide us with the early warning that would give the opportunity for the U.S. to move out quickly with civilian medical specialists, and military-logistics teams if necessary.” Then, with these early warnings in place, this person said, “we could focus our advanced national-intelligence assets there and be able to go at a moment’s notice. We would prepare to go to ground zero, help them understand what was happening, and do everything to keep the disease from spreading.”

What might such help entail? The metaphor several people used was of firefighters from Oregon and Idaho traveling to help contain a forest fire in California before it can spread. The U.S. has many times in the past 20 years deployed scientists, doctors, and logistical-support teams to Africa, Asia, and the Middle East during the disease outbreaks.

The U.S. military excels in logistics: mobile hospitals, teams of medics, food and water, masks and gowns. American scientists, at leading universities as well as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (despite [its well-documented recent hollowing-out and politicization](#)) are still seen as world leaders in many fields.

[Read: ‘How could the CDC make that mistake?’](#)

Shortly before Barack Obama left office, his administration’s Pandemic Prediction and Forecasting Science and Technology Working Group—yes, that was a thing—released a report reflecting the progress that had been made in applying remote-sensing and AI tools since the early days of Global Argus. The report is freely [available online](#) and notes pointedly that recent technological advances “provide opportunities to mitigate large-scale outbreaks by predicting more accurately when and where outbreaks are likely to occur, and how they will progress.”

James Giordano, a biosecurity expert at Georgetown University Medical Center who

has been extensively involved in pandemic-response planning, told me this spring: “Absolutely nothing that has happened has been a surprise. We saw it coming. Not only did we see it, we ran the models and the gaming exercises. We had every bit of the structure in place. We’ve been talking about a biohazard risk like this for years. Anyone who says we did not see this coming has their head in the sand, or is lying through their teeth.”

The system the government set up was designed to warn not about improbable “black swan” events but rather about what are sometimes called “[gray rhinos](#).” These are the large, obvious dangers that will sooner or later emerge but whose exact timing is unknown. Did the warning system work this time, providing advance notice of the coronavirus outbreak? According to everyone I spoke with, it certainly did. A fascinating [unclassified timeline](#) compiled by the Congressional Research Service offers a day-by-day and then hour-by-hour chronology of who knew what, and when, about developments in central China. By at least late December, signs were beginning to show something seriously amiss—despite foot-dragging, lies, and apparent cover-up on the Chinese side. A different kind of Chinese government might have done a different job, calling for help from the rest of the world and increasing the chances that the coronavirus remained a regional rather than global threat. But other U.S. leaders had dealt with foreign cover-ups, including by China in the early stages of the SARS outbreak in 2002. Washington knew enough, soon enough, in this case to act while there still was time.

[Read: Coronavirus researchers tried to warn us](#)

Through routine work or personal emails and other means of contact, U.S. and other international scientists began hearing from their Chinese colleagues very late last year about a new outbreak of what was initially referred to as pneumonia or flu. On December 31, the open-source platform ProMED—the Program for Monitoring Emerging Diseases—carried a translated “Chinese media report about the outbreak.” According to all of the intelligence-community veterans I spoke with, signals like this would certainly have been enough to alert U.S. officials to a significant development. “From these early indications, a pattern would have been discernible, and we would have slewed the rest of the system to find out more about it,” one of these people said. “Particularly since we’d know what to look for. If Martians were invading, we wouldn’t know what that would look like. But we have been down this road before, with MERS and SARS and Ebola, and we know the indications that are visible and detectable.”

With cues like these, the intelligence apparatus directed more attention at the area around the city of Wuhan. “China is a very hard target,” a man who recently worked in an intelligence organization told me. “We have to be very deliberate about what we focus on”—which in normal times would be military developments or suspected espionage threats. “The bottom line is that for a place like Wuhan, you really are going to rely on open-source or informal leads.” During the Obama administration, the U.S. had negotiated to have its observers stationed in many cities across China, through a program called [Predict](#). But the Trump administration did not fill those positions, including in Wuhan. This meant that no one was on site to learn about, for instance, the unexplained closure on January 1 of the city’s main downtown Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market, a so-called wet market where wild animals, live or already killed, were on sale along with fish and domesticated animals. It was at this market that the first animal-to-human transfer of the virus is generally thought to have occurred, probably from a bat. But by that time, as Marisa Taylor of Reuters

[first reported](#), the Trump administration had removed dozens of CDC representatives in China.

Nonetheless, information came in. By the final days of December, and no later than January 1, a warning would have appeared in the President's Daily Brief—the classified summary of international developments distilled from all intelligence agencies and passed to the president and a handful of advisers. “It was in the briefings by the beginning of January,” a person involved in preparing the president's briefing book told me. “On that there is no dispute.” This person went on: “But knowing it is in the briefing book is different from knowing whether the president saw it.” He didn't need to spell out his point, which was: Of course this president did not.

To sum up: The weather forecast showed a dangerous storm ahead, and the warning came in plenty of time. At the start of January, the total number of people infected with the virus was probably less than 1,000. All or nearly all of them were in China. Not a single case or fatality had been reported in the United States.

2. The Air Traffic Controllers

From the sky you see only the natural features that separate countries and continents—mountains, water—and not the political demarcation lines. The system that makes flying safe has done so by means of a thoroughgoing, borderless internationalism.

Controllers and flight crews around the world are supposed to be competent in the same spoken language—English—and use the same formulaic instructions that serve as an unambiguous code. For instance: Aviation English prescribes “tree” as the pronunciation for *three*, in part because the *th-* sound can be difficult for non-native speakers. Controllers around the world say “Climb and maintain 4,000 feet” rather than “Climb to 4,000 feet,” because *to* could be misheard as *two*. Controllers in Paris sequencing a Korean Air plane to land between ones from Lufthansa and Aeromexico at Charles de Gaulle Airport must be sure that all the nationalities involved will follow the same procedures in the same way.

In cases of disease outbreak, U.S. leadership and coordination of the international response was as well established and taken for granted as the role of air traffic controllers in directing flights through their sectors. Typically this would mean working with and through the World Health Organization—which, of course, Donald Trump has made a point of not doing. In the previous two decades of international public-health experience, starting with SARS and on through the rest of the acronym-heavy list, a standard procedure had emerged, and it had proved effective again and again. The U.S, with its combination of scientific and military-logistics might, would coordinate and support efforts by other countries. Subsequent stages would depend on the nature of the disease, but the fact that the U.S. would take the primary role was expected. When the new coronavirus threat suddenly materialized, American engagement was the signal all other participants were waiting for. But this time it did not come. It was as if air traffic controllers walked away from their stations and said, “The rest of you just work it out for yourselves.”

[Read: America's patchwork pandemic is fraying even further](#)

From the U.S. point of view, news of a virulent disease outbreak anywhere in the world is unwelcome. But in normal circumstances, its location in China would have

been a plus. Whatever the ups and downs of political relations over the past two decades, Chinese and American scientists and public-health officials have worked together frequently, and positively, on health crises ranging from SARS during George W. Bush's administration to the H1N1 and Ebola outbreaks during Barack Obama's. As Peter Beinart extensively detailed in [an Atlantic article](#), the U.S. helped build China's public-health infrastructure, and China has cooperated in detecting and containing diseases within its borders and far afield. One U.S. official recalled the Predict program: "Getting Chinese agreement to American monitors throughout their territory—that was something." But then the Trump administration zeroed out that program.

"We had cooperated with China on every public-health threat until now," Susan Shirk, a former State Department official and longtime scholar of Chinese affairs at UC San Diego, told me. "SARS, AIDS, Ebola in Africa, H1N1—no matter what other disputes were going on in the relationship, we managed to carve out health, and work together quite professionally. So this case is just so anomalous and so tragic." A significant comparison, she said, is the way the United States and the Soviet Union had worked together to eliminate smallpox around the world, despite their Cold War tensions. But now, she said, "people have definitely died because the U.S. and China have been unable to cooperate."

[From May 2020: H. R. McMaster: What China Wants](#)

What did the breakdown in U.S.-Chinese cooperation mean in practice? That the U.S. knew less than it would have otherwise, and knew it later; that its actions brought out the worst (rather than the merely bad) in China's own approach to the disease, which was essentially to cover it up internally and stall in allowing international access to emerging data; that the Trump administration lost what leverage it might have had over Chinese President Xi Jinping and his officials; and that the chance to keep the disease within the confines of a single country was forever lost. "If Trump had been following the norm of previous presidents, we would have known about this informally, because our people would have been on the ground in China," Shirk said. "But the Trump administration pulled them out, and the last epidemiologist who worked for the U.S. government left last year."

In addition to America's destruction of its own advance-warning system, by removing CDC and Predict observers, the Trump administration's bellicose tone toward China had an effect. Many U.S. officials stressed that a vicious cycle of blame and recrimination made public health an additional source of friction between the countries, rather than a sustained point of cooperation, as it had been for so many years. Through Trump's time in office, official American attitudes toward China have been a mixture of servility and truculence. Trump himself has been almost as personally flattering and subservient to Xi Jinping as he has been to Vladimir Putin. In his speeches and tweets he has emphasized that Xi is a "great leader" and his personal friend. (And if former National Security Adviser John Bolton's [account](#) is to be believed, Trump told Xi that he liked the idea that Xi was holding Muslim Uighurs in concentration camps in Xinjiang.) But at the official level, Trump's administration has been as hostile to China as Trump sounds in his rally speeches, when he utters "*Chy-nah*" as if the word itself were profane. Visa allowances have been tightened; long-standing cooperative arrangements have been cut; "thought leaders" of the administration, from Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo onward (but not including Trump, who is a "tone leader"), have suggested that it's time for a new Cold War, with China as the existential foe.

“The state of the relationship meant that every U.S. request was met with distrust on the Chinese side, and every Chinese response was seen on the American side as one more attempt to cover up,” Paul Triolo, a former U.S. government official with extensive experience in Asia (and who is now with the Eurasia Group), told me. “There was a huge distrust of China as a malign actor on all levels, that you would never want to help them in any way. At the working level, this had a significant impact.”

In January, Trump-administration officials asked to send back into China some of the CDC observers they had previously withdrawn. The Chinese declined. “One of the puzzles has been why the Chinese initially said no when we finally offered to send people there,” Susan Shirk said. “I think they must have been alienated by our having pulled those people out.” Several weeks later, [some observers did get in](#).

[Read: Don't believe the China hype](#)

In normal circumstances—three words I heard often as a qualifier in these conversations, sometimes also phrased as “in a normal administration” or “with a normal president”—the president’s national security adviser would have called his counterpart in Beijing, and worked out a quiet *modus vivendi* for dealing with the pandemic. Or the president himself would have called his Chinese counterpart. What the U.S. would have wanted early in the process—at the beginning of January, while the Chinese were still covering up the extent of the disease, or in February, when the disease was beginning to spread more rapidly—would be (ironically) more U.S. scientists on the scene, and more Chinese openness to the world.

Would Xi Jinping have been willing to consider such requests, if he had received a call from the president? “I think there would have been leverage,” Ryan Hass, now of Brookings, who was the senior NSC staffer for China policy under Barack Obama, told me. “Not out of goodwill. Just pure self-interest. If we would have privately brought to the Chinese leadership’s attention that they had a potential pandemic outbreak in one of their provinces and we wanted to provide assistance in locating the source and scale of its spread, they would have answered the phone call.”

Several officials who had experience with China suggested that other presidents might have called Xi Jinping with a quiet but tough message that would amount to: *We both know you have a problem. Why don't we work on it together, which will let you be the hero? Otherwise it will break out and become a problem for China and the whole world.*

These calls never happened. Donald Trump has claimed that impeachment proceedings, which ran through much of January, preoccupied him. That didn’t keep him from making five separate campaign trips to rallies during that same month, or from watching television (and tweeting about it) for several hours every day.

Beginning with Jimmy Carter’s administration and continuing through Obama’s, the U.S. and Chinese governments had woven an ever-denser web of institutional and personal connections. U.S. Treasury officials met regularly with officials from the Chinese ministry of finance; the Pentagon and the People’s Liberation Army had exchange programs; the Federal Aviation Administration trained Chinese air traffic controllers; and on through a long list, whose combined intention was to buffer inevitable superpower strains. Under Trump, most of these stopped. The only influential U.S. officials who had regular contact with Chinese counterparts were Steven Mnuchin, the Treasury secretary, and Robert Lighthizer, the trade

representative. They were intent on getting the “phase one” U.S.-China trade deal signed, and all other business ran a distant second to that. Mnuchin and Lighthizer “didn’t want to be pressing Xi Jinping with anything else,” a former intelligence official told me.

[Read: China has dominated the West before](#)

“CDC asked for access, and was denied it [by the Chinese government],” Ron Klain, who coordinated efforts against the Ebola pandemic during the Obama administration, told me. “In normal circumstances, that request would have gone up the chain, and you would have had senior-level people in the NSC pressing at senior levels. My guess is that it wasn’t pressed in this case because the senior people were Mnuchin and Kudlow, and they had other priorities.” (Larry Kudlow, the director of the National Economic Council at the White House, was also pushing aggressively for a trade deal.)

“It would have taken diplomatic pressure on the Chinese government to allow us to insert our people” into Wuhan and other disease centers, Klain said. “The question isn’t what leverage we had. The point is that we gave up leverage with China to get the trade deal done. That meant that we didn’t put leverage on China’s government. We took their explanations at face value.”

Trump flattered Xi Jinping in public statements until the trade deal was signed, on January 15, and for a while kept on flattering him. On January 22, the U.S. had its first diagnosed case—a traveler who had arrived from Wuhan a week earlier. On that day, Trump referred to this traveler and said, “[It’s one person coming in from China. We have it under control.](#)” Eight days later, on January 30, he said, “We’re working very closely with China and other countries, and we think it’s going to have a very good ending for us.” The next day, Trump issued his partial ban on travel from China, but through February he was still publicly complimenting Xi Jinping. “[He is strong, sharp, and powerfully focused on leading the counterattack on the coronavirus,](#)” Trump said of Xi on February 7.

By the middle of March, Trump had switched to blasting the “Chinese virus,” which he continued doing through much of the month. On March 11, [he gave a poorly received national address from the Oval Office](#), in which he bungled the announcement of an upcoming ban on most (or maybe all; it wasn’t clear) air travel to the U.S. from Europe. Several people who have dealt with past disease outbreaks told me that, in a normal administration, one option for mid-January would have been a temporary, but total, ban on *all* inbound international flights to the United States. “A serious option in all contingency planning would be total closure of the airspace,” a former senior official with experience in pandemic response told me. “We learned from the bird flu that as long as the airspace was open, we were completely vulnerable as a population. It is a draconian approach that could strand thousands of people. But as we look back—when taking early intelligence into serious consideration from the start—this one option would be an early choice for the president to make. It would be followed immediately by humanitarian support, and then transitioned through hubs to permit a measured flow of people to key locations. Follow-on screening would also take place prior to any further travel.”

[Graeme Wood: The ‘Chinese virus’ is a test. Don’t fail it.](#)

Not everyone I spoke with agreed that a total travel freeze, similar to the multiday shutdown on air travel after the 9/11 attacks, would have been feasible. All agreed

that [Trump's limitations on travel from China](#), in late January, and from parts of Europe, six weeks later, made a bad situation worse. The Chinese “ban” was a further irritant to the Chinese government (despite Trump’s ongoing personal praise of Xi Jinping), and because it wasn’t absolute, some 40,000 U.S. citizens and others [flew into American airports from China](#), with minimal testing, screening, or quarantine provisions. The ban might even have worsened the situation, by impelling Americans (who might have been exposed) to get back while they still could. The president’s advance notice of the partial European ban almost certainly played an important part in bringing the infection to greater New York City. Because of the two-day “warning” Trump gave in his speech, every seat on every airplane from Europe to the U.S. over the next two days was filled. Airport and customs offices at the arrival airports in the U.S. were unprepared and overwhelmed. News footage showed travelers queued for hours, shoulder to shoulder, waiting to be admitted to the U.S. Some of those travelers already were suffering from the disease; they spread it to others. On March 11, [New York had slightly more than 220 diagnosed cases](#). Two weeks later, it had more than 25,000. [Genetic testing showed](#) that most of the infection in New York was from the coronavirus variant that had come through Europe to the United States, rather than directly from China (where most of the early cases in Washington State originated).

Officials in New York and elsewhere made their own errors, but the game was already over. The strategy for a potential pandemic should have been like that for a forest fire: do everything possible to contain it where it first broke out. Once that chance was missed, it was gone for good.

3. The Emergency Checklist

For me, as an amateur pilot, the most gripping moments in the Tom Hanks movie *Sully* come immediately after the bird strike. The film recreates Captain Chesley Sullenberger’s feat of safely gliding a fully loaded US Airways plane to a landing in the Hudson River, after it flew through a flock of Canada geese and lost power in both of its engines. Obviously the moment of touchdown brings drama. But what I found most remarkable was the calm with which the captain and his first officer systematically worked through their cockpit emergency checklist, looking for every possibility to regain power as the plane headed down.

Aviation is safe because, even after all the advances in forecasting and technology, its culture still imagines emergencies and rehearses steps for dealing with them. Especially in the post-9/11 era of intensified concern about threats of all sorts, American public-health officials have also imagined a full range of crises, and have prepared ways to limit their worst effects. The resulting official “playbooks” are the equivalent of cockpit emergency checklists. Following steps in the cockpit checklist was not enough for Captain Sullenberger to restart his plane’s engines. But following the steps in the main U.S.-government pandemic playbooks would have saved tens of thousands of lives.

Anything that Barack Obama had recommended, Donald Trump was predisposed to ignore. Of the many lies Trump and his defenders have spun, none is more flatly false than the claim, as stated by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell in May, that the Obama administration “[did not leave ... any kind of game plan for something like this](#).”

In response to McConnell’s claim, Ron Klain tweeted about the official pandemic

playbook left for Obama's successors. [McConnell, surprisingly, retracted his statement](#)—but the White House spokesperson, [Kayleigh McEnany, then claimed](#) that whatever “thin packet of paper” Obama had left was inferior to a replacement that the Trump administration had supposedly cooked up, but which has never been made public. The 69-page, single-spaced Obama-administration document is officially called “Playbook for Early Response to High-Consequence Infectious Disease Threats and Biological Incidents” and is freely [available online](#). It describes exactly what the Trump team was determined not to do.

What I found remarkable was how closely the Obama administration's recommendations tracked with those set out 10 years earlier by the George W. Bush administration, in response to its chastening experience with bird flu. The Bush-era work, called “National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza” and publicly [available here](#), differs from the Obama-era playbook mainly in the simpler forms of technology on which it could draw. But the premises, recommendations, and warnings are fundamentally similar in each—and at complete odds with the “let's just ignore it” nature of the Trump administration's response.

[Read: We were warned](#)

The Bush report explained clearly why new diseases would inevitably emerge, and why they would constitute a severe threat to national security in the broadest terms. Its central premise was the importance of working seamlessly with other governments so as to contain outbreaks before they spread worldwide. “Given the rapid speed of transmission and the universal susceptibility of human populations, an outbreak of pandemic influenza anywhere poses a risk to populations everywhere,” the report explained. “Our international effort to contain and mitigate the effects of an outbreak of pandemic influenza beyond our borders is a central component of our strategy to stop, slow, or limit the spread of infection to the United States.”

I'm tempted to devote the next 20 pages of this article to quoting whole passages from the Bush report. But here is a sample—and remember, this was an official assessment by the U.S. government more than a dozen years before the first case of COVID-19 was diagnosed:

The animal population serves as a reservoir for new influenza viruses ... It is impossible to predict whether the H5N1 virus [in 2005] will lead to a pandemic, but history suggests that if it does not, another novel influenza virus will emerge at some point in the future and threaten an unprotected human population.

The economic and societal disruption of an influenza pandemic could be significant. Absenteeism across multiple sectors related to personal illness, illness in family members, fear of contagion, or public health measures to limit contact with others could threaten the functioning of critical infrastructure, the movement of goods and services, and operation of institutions such as schools and universities. A pandemic would thus have significant implications for the economy, national security, and the basic functioning of society.

It is almost as if we had been warned. Here is one more sample. I know that long block quotes can be off-putting. But consider the one below, and see how, sentence by sentence, these warnings from 2005 match the headlines of 2020. The topic was

the need to divide responsibility among global, national, state, and community jurisdictions in dealing with the next pandemic. The fundamental premise—so widely shared that it barely needed to be spelled out—was that the U.S. federal government would act as the indispensable flywheel, as it had during health emergencies of the past. As noted, it would work with international agencies and with governments in all affected areas to coordinate a global response. Within its own borders it would work with state agencies to detect the potential for the disease’s spread and to contain cases that did arise:

Unlike geographically and temporally bounded disasters, a pandemic will spread across the globe over the course of months or over a year, possibly in waves, and will affect communities of all sizes and compositions. In terms of its scope, the impact of a severe pandemic may be more comparable to that of war or a widespread economic crisis than a hurricane, earthquake, or act of terrorism. In addition to coordinating a comprehensive and timely national response, the Federal Government will bear primary responsibility for certain critical functions, including: (1) the support of containment efforts overseas and limitation of the arrival of a pandemic to our shores; (2) guidance related to protective measures that should be taken; (3) modifications to the law and regulations to facilitate the national pandemic response; (4) modifications to monetary policy to mitigate the economic impact of a pandemic on communities and the Nation; (5) procurement and distribution of vaccine and antiviral medications; and (6) the acceleration of research and development of vaccines and therapies during the outbreak.

This was produced by an administration that at the time was still enmeshed in doomed warfare in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. Even so, it laid out a plan for dealing with security threats of a different sort.

The Obama playbook, like the Bush report, is chillingly prescient. Its emphasis is on the step-by-step “how to” of the government’s response. In an airplane cockpit, the emergency checklists have a series of decision trees and yes/no choices for coping with failures. If the engine fails, first check the fuel supply, and so on. The Obama playbook was something like that. To give just one example, here was the checklist on deciding when and whether to ban travel from infected areas:

screenshot from Playbook for Early Response to High-Consequence Emerging Infectious Disease Threats and Biological Incidents
(Source: Playbook for Early Response to High-Consequence Emerging Infectious Disease Threats and Biological Incidents)

Referring to the detailed pandemic playbooks from the Bush and Obama administrations, John R. Allen told me: “The moment you get confirmation of a problem, you would move right to the timeline. Decisions by the president, actions by the secretary of defense and the CDC, right down the list. You’d start executing.”

Or, in the case of the current administration, you would not. Reading these documents now is like discovering a cockpit checklist in the smoking wreckage.

4. The Pilot

You don't need to have seen *Top Gun* or *The Right Stuff* to be aware that pilots can be too proud of their cool bravado. But a virtue of *Sully* is the reminder that when everything else fails—the forecasts, the checklists, the triply redundant aircraft systems—the skill, focus, and competence of the person at the controls can make the difference between life and death.

So too in the public response to a public-health crisis. The system was primed to act, but the person at the top of the system had to say, “Go.” And that person was Donald Trump.

“Here is the way I would put it,” a person who has been involved with the President’s Daily Brief process told me, referring to Trump. “The person behind the desk is the same person you see on TV”—emotional, opinionated, fixed on his own few hobbyhorses and distorted views of reality, unwilling or unable to absorb new information. “In a normal administration, the president would have seen the warnings unfolding from January onward. But this president hadn’t absorbed any of it.”

[Peter Wehner: The Trump presidency is over](#)

John R. Allen, who during his military career had extensive experience coordinating and commanding multinational efforts, told me, “No matter how good your planning is, or how prescient your scientists and generals, in our system you depend on the commander in chief. After you’ve given your very best advice, if the commander in chief decides not to accept it, there you are.”

People I spoke with described the ways in which staffers tried to catch or sustain Trump’s interest. Everyone recognized that he would never even look at the President’s Daily Brief. The trick was seeing whether crucial information could spark interest among others on the staff and eventually drift its way to Trump. “Does he just willfully ignore all outside information?” Paul Triolo asked. “I don’t think he ever saw or read any of the intel reports. He does listen to Navarro”—Peter Navarro, the former labor economist who had become a leading hawk on trade policy toward China. On January 29—after the trade deal Navarro championed had been signed—Navarro [sent Trump a memo](#) warning of the pandemic threat spreading from China. Navarro had no public-health background, and the people I spoke with viewed the memo mainly as an extension of his overall perspective on China. Whatever its merits, there is no evidence that Trump read or absorbed this memo or any other written documents.

In a resigned way, the people I spoke with summed up the situation this way: You have a head of government who doesn’t know anything, and doesn’t read anything, and is at the mercy of what he sees on TV. “And all around him, you have this carnival,” an intelligence officer said. “Pompeo is very ambitious to take the reins of the anti-China campaign. Mnuchin and [Commerce Secretary Wilbur] Ross are thinking about their trade deals. You end up thinking that the voice of reason is ... Jared”—Kushner, the president’s son-in-law, whose many areas of responsibility in the administration have included the China relationship.

One truth through the decades, under presidents Republican and Democratic alike, is that what the president cares about, everyone else cares about, too. “As the president said in his State of the Union address” is the way White House staffers begin a typical conversation with staffers of Cabinet departments. Or, “as I heard directly from the president.” This president was saying that the disease didn’t matter, or would solve

itself. No one was capable of attracting his attention, or changing his mind, or even using his indifference as a shield for behind-the-scenes preparation for a response.

A military official told me, “I have wondered, as a thought experiment: If the outbreak had been in Tennessee rather than Wuhan, would the outcome for the world have been worse, better, or the same?” This person said that he thought the disease might have spread even more rapidly. Why? “I think it would have been harder to convince Trump to lock things down here, than to throw a ban on China.” Blaming the “Chinese virus” (or, as Trump put it in [Tulsa](#), the “kung flu”) and imposing an ineffective and even counterproductive “ban” was rhetorically and intellectually easy for Trump, after the trade deal had been signed. But the man who has refused ever to be photographed wearing a mask would have been—and has been—slow to impose any domestic controls.

[Read: America is giving up on the pandemic](#)

The United States still possesses the strongest economy in the world, its military is by far the most powerful, its culture is diverse, and, confronted with the vicissitudes of history, the country has proved resilient. But a veteran of the intelligence world emphasized that the coronavirus era revealed a sobering reality. “Our system has a single point-of-failure: an irrational president.” At least in an airplane cockpit, the first officer can grab the controls from a captain who is steering the aircraft toward doom.

5. The Control Systems

The deadliest airline crash in U.S. history occurred in 1979. An American Airlines DC-10 took off from O’Hare Airport, in Chicago—and just as it was leaving the ground, an incorrectly mounted engine ripped away from one of the wings. When the engine’s pylon was pulled off, it cut the hydraulic lines that led from the cockpit to the control surfaces on the wings and tail. From that point on, the most skillful flight crew in the world could not have saved the flight. The commands they desperately tried to give as they pushed and pulled on the yoke in the cockpit had no effect on the plane’s doomed course.

It’s a grisly comparison, but also an instructive one in the case of the pandemic. Suppose the administration had paid attention when it mattered. Suppose Donald Trump had been willing to call Xi Jinping. Suppose Trump had put aside his categorical dismissal of his predecessors’ efforts and looked at the Bush and Obama playbooks. By the time the pandemic emerged, it may have already been too late. The hydraulic lines may already have been too damaged to transmit the signals. It was Trump himself who cut them.

The more complex the organization, the more its success or failure turns on the skill of people in its middle layers—the ones who translate a leader’s decision to the rest of the team in order to get results. Doctors depend on nurses; architects depend on contractors and craftsmen; generals depend on lieutenants and sergeants. A president depends on people who have developed the skills and muscle memory needed to shift a huge bureaucracy’s focus. Because Donald Trump himself had no grasp of this point, and because he and those around him preferred political loyalists and family retainers rather than holdovers from the “deep state,” the whole federal government became like a restaurant with no cooks, or a TV station with stars but no one to turn the cameras on.

“There is still resilience and competence in the working-level bureaucracy,” an intelligence-agency official told me. “But the layers above them have been removed.” Near the end of one full term in office, an unusually large number of senior deputy-secretary and assistant-secretary posts in Cabinet departments remain empty. Donald Trump’s zeal for filling lifetime-appointment judicial vacancies has not extended to the regular government. An unusually large share of those who have been appointed are political staffers, donors, or Trump protégés without experience in their field.

Traditionally, the National Security Council staff has comprised a concentration of highly knowledgeable, talented, and often ambitious younger figures, mainly on their way to diplomatic or academic careers. For instance, during both terms of the Obama administration, the main NSC staffer covering Chinese affairs was Evan S. Medeiros. By the time he joined Obama’s staff, he had a doctorate in international relations and had written many books and papers on military, political, and economic developments in China; he had lived and traveled in the region; he spoke Chinese. Under Donald Trump, the most influential staff figures on China appear to be Robert Lighthizer, the trade representative, who has decades of experience in that field but sees China and Japan almost exclusively through a commercial lens; Peter Navarro, who apparently came to Trump’s attention after Jared Kushner did an online search for books on China and came across Navarro’s inflammatory and thinly researched polemic *Death by China*; and Matthew Pottinger, a Chinese speaker who worked for years in China as a reporter for Reuters and *The Wall Street Journal* and then spent five years [in the Marines](#). The three share a skeptical view of China—Lighthizer on trade, Navarro on everything, and [Pottinger because of](#) the repression and corruption he observed as a foreign correspondent. Even with Pottinger included, this was a shallower pool of China experience than under other administrations.

[Read: Can the West actually ditch China?](#)

“There is nobody now who can play the role of ‘senior China person,’” a former intelligence official told me. “In a normal administration, you’d have a lot of people who had spent time in Asia, spent time in China, knew the goods and bads.” Also in a normal administration, he and others pointed out, China and the United States would have numerous connective strands—joint working groups on anti-terrorism efforts, or climate projects, or even, yes, pandemic-prevention strategies. “There would be some ballast in the relationship,” this person said. “Now all you’ve got is the trade friction”—plus the personal business deals that the president’s elder daughter, Ivanka, [has made in China](#), as have [relatives of her husband](#), Jared Kushner. What all these figures lack is any experience whatsoever with bureaucracies—that is, with running an organization any larger than their own, family-controlled enterprises.

Every president is “surprised” by how hard it is to convert his own wishes into government actions. In 1960, political scientist Richard E. Neustadt got John F. Kennedy’s attention with his book *Presidential Power: The Politics of Leadership*, which analyzed the range of tools a president must employ to persuade the Congress, the public, foreign leaders, and members of the permanent bureaucracy to work toward his goals. Before that, Harry Truman had famously converted this principle into a joke. When preparing to leave the Oval Office and turn it over to the newly elected Dwight Eisenhower, Truman pointed at his desk and said: “He’ll sit right here and he’ll say ‘Do this, do that!’ And nothing will happen. Poor Ike. It won’t be a bit like the Army.”

Presidents cope with this discovery in varying ways. The people I spoke with had served in past administrations as early as the first George Bush's. George H. W. Bush came to office with broad experience in the federal government—as much as any other president. He had been vice president for eight years, a CIA director, twice an ambassador, and a member of Congress. He served only four years in the Oval Office but began with a running start. Before he became president, Bill Clinton had been a governor for 12 years and had spent decades learning and talking about government policies. A CIA official told me that Clinton would not read his President's Daily Briefs in the morning, when they arrived, but would pore over them late at night and return them with copious notes. George W. Bush's evolution from dependence on the well-traveled Dick Cheney, in his first term, to more confident control, in his second, has been well chronicled. As for Obama, Paul Triolo told me: "By the end of his eight years, Obama really understood how to get the bureaucracy to do what he wanted done, and how to get the information he needed to make decisions." The job is far [harder](#) than it seems. Donald Trump has been uninterested in learning the first thing about it.

In a situation like this, some of those in the "regular" government decide to struggle on. Others quit—literally, or in the giving-up sense. "The problem is not just the president, erratic as he is," an intelligence official told me. "The 'process' is just so chaotic that it's not a process at all. There's no one at the desk. There's no one to read the memos. No one is there."

James Giordano, who continues to work on projects forecasting national-security threats, said that the right-wing "Fire Fauci" trend, though brief, had a powerful demoralizing effect on the experienced professionals who, in the federal government as in any large organization, get the daily work done. (The aviation counterpart would be a pilot who sneered away cautions from maintenance experts, weather forecasters, or air traffic controllers as fraidy-cat "deep state" talk.) During March and April, when Donald Trump thought it advantageous to have hour-long live White House "briefings" on the pandemic day after day, Dr. Anthony Fauci became world famous for his calm, clear, cautionary explanations. Trump loyalists began grouching that Fauci had "better ratings" than his boss. By mid-April, when Fauci had politely but clearly taken his distance from some of Trump's most extreme promises and claims, #FireFauci began circulating on Twitter—and in mid-April, Trump himself retweeted one message in that vein. In practical terms, Trump couldn't actually fire Fauci, who (apart from his personal eminence) held the sort of civil-service position not subject to presidential dismissal without cause. But having an online mob riled up against a civil servant is no joke. My own house, in Washington, is a few blocks from Fauci's—and starting about that time, my wife and I noticed government security vehicles stationed outside it around the clock.

[Read: Anthony Fauci's Gen Z cred](#)

"That hashtag is indicative of the risk-averse climate I am talking about within government at present; clearly a result of top-down influence," Giordano said. "If this could happen to Fauci, it makes people think that if they push too hard in the wrong direction, they'll get their heads chopped off. There is no reason in the world something called #FireFauci should even exist. The nation's leaders should maintain high regard for scientific empiricism, insight, and advice, and must not be professionally or personally risk averse when it comes to understanding and communicating messages about public safety and health."

Giordano concluded, “If I sound frustrated, that is because I am”—and we spoke at a time when the U.S. death toll was “only” about 10,000. “It’s not just personal frustration. It’s professional frustration. In the midst of this emergency, we should have been able to act, swiftly and soundly—and we didn’t.”

Over nearly two decades, the U.S. government had assembled the people, the plans, the connections, and the know-how to spare this nation the worst effects of the next viral mutation that would, someday, arise. That someday came, and every bit of the planning was for naught. The deaths, the devastation, the unforeseeable path ahead—they did not have to occur.

[Read: A devastating new stage of the pandemic](#)

6. The Crash Landing

Today, six months after the president was given his first warnings, more than 2.3 million Americans have been infected by the coronavirus. More than 120,000 have succumbed to the disease. New infections are being reported at the rate of thousands per day—as many now as at what some saw as the “peak” two months ago.

The language of an NTSB report is famously dry and clinical—just the facts. In the case of the pandemic, what it would note is the following: “There was a flight plan. There was accurate information about what lay ahead. The controllers were ready. The checklists were complete. The aircraft was sound. But the person at the controls was tweeting. Even if the person at the controls had been able to give effective orders, he had laid off people that would carry them out. This was a preventable catastrophe.”

The summation by a former senior official was less dry and less clinical. He said to me, “Here we stand, on a mountain of dead.”

*[James Fallows](#) is a staff writer at *The Atlantic* and has written for the magazine since the late 1970s. He has reported extensively from outside the United States and once worked as President Jimmy Carter's chief speechwriter. He and his wife, [Deborah Fallows](#), are the authors of the 2018 book [Our Towns: A 100,000-Mile Journey Into the Heart of America](#), which was a national best seller and is the basis of a forthcoming HBO documentary.*