

THREE

THE WHITE HOUSE VIRUS
DENIER COUNCIL AND TASK
FORCE OF DOOM

The Task Force is not moving anywhere near fast enough on just about everything—vaccines, facemasks, clinical trials. I talk to [Secretary Alex] Azar at [the Department of Health and Human Services] and light a fire under him. . . . Russ Vought, the OMB Director, is fairly dismissive of giving money to HHS and sees them as spendthrifts. I emphasize the seriousness of the crisis and promise him a granular budget by Tuesday.

—PETER NAVARRO, JOURNAL ENTRY, FEBRUARY 16, 2020

It's the Nevada caucus today. I talk to [Acting Chief of Staff Mick] Mulvaney in his office and he's sick as a dog after coming back from Great Britain. I do not rule out that he has the coronavirus. I tell him we may face an election future in which there won't be any traveling to rallies. . . .

That will not play to our advantage.

—PETER NAVARRO, JOURNAL ENTRY, FEBRUARY 22, 2020

The coronavirus is spiraling out of control. The stock market has its fastest correction in history. . . . We are not running against the Democrats. We are running against the virus.

—PETER NAVARRO, JOURNAL ENTRY, FEBRUARY 27, 2020

With his announcement of the China travel ban on January 31, President Trump got off to the strongest possible start battling the pandemic. He hit a pitch-perfect tone as a wartime president ready to make courageous decisions in a time of great national crisis.

But it's not how you start; it's how you finish. And the Boss was surrounded by a group of advisers who would discount the potential lethality of the virus and the high probability that we were headed for a deadly pandemic.

BAD PERSONNEL IS BAD POLICY

Here I want to be clear about the criticisms I am about to levy. Donald Trump ran as a Populist Economic Nationalist in 2016, speaking directly to American voters. During the Republican primary, he vanquished every single one of his seventeen Republican opponents. And that November, he prevailed over the presumed Clinton succession.

After that victory, President Trump found himself in a difficult position when it came to staffing the White House, the cabinet, and a myriad of federal agencies. Most of the people in the Republican Party most experienced in government were not Trump Populists and Loyalists but rather Traditional Republican Globalists.

Far too many of those Globalists found their way into key positions in the Trump administration. When a deadly virus emerged from Communist China, President Trump's limited personnel options would come home to roost.

I got my first glimpse of this problem shortly after 9:00 a.m. on February 3 in the West Wing at our weekly senior staff meeting. There, in the Roosevelt Room, I watched as the director of the National Economic Council, Larry Kudlow, told the assembled throng of twenty or so staffers, "This

China thing is no worse than the flu. Don't worry about it. We've got it under control."

That was very bad news. With Kudlow telling the president, "Don't worry, be happy," it would be all the more difficult to get the White House moving into high pandemic-fighting gear.

Over the course of the next several months, Kudlow's de facto National Council of Virus Deniers would be populated most prominently by Acting Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney, Treasury secretary Steve Mnuchin, and Vice President Mike Pence's chief of staff, Marc Short. Those high-ranking officials did tremendous damage by propagating two falsehoods that would cut against the grains of both common sense and science.

The first falsehood was that we had the virus under control. The second was that the pandemic posed little or no threat to the American public.

According to the virus deniers, we were overreacting to a disease that was no worse than the flu. Of course, that fantasy quickly ran into the brick-wall reality of a virus that would kill more than six hundred thousand Americans in a little more than a year.

In contrast, over the last ten years, annual flu deaths have ranged from a low of around twelve thousand in the 2011–2012 season to a high of sixty-one thousand in 2017–2018.¹ I'll take the flu anytime.

THE FOLLY OF A PAST-TENSE PANDEMIC

From the get-go, Larry Kudlow in particular kept saying imprudent stuff in the media. Just consider this early January 29, 2020, exchange with anchor David Asman on Fox Business:

ASMAN: How much are you expecting this virus to affect the American economy?

KUDLOW: Very little. . . . Minimal impact. . . . The Chinese have got the virus. This is not going to have any major impact on the United States. . . . This is a Chinese pandemic.²

Of course, that was the very same day I sent my Paul Revere memo to the White House Coronavirus Task Force warning about the possibility of a global pandemic that could kill millions of Americans and cost our economy trillions of dollars.

A little more than a month later, on March 6, Kudlow would double down on his virus denial with CNBC's Carl Quintanilla, opining that the virus "looks relatively contained" and "the vast majority of Americans are not at risk for this virus."³ He also played the "no worse than the ordinary flu" card while urging Americans to "stay at work."⁴

With comments like those, Kudlow, with his high TV profile, did more than any other single senior administration official to propagate the misperception in the public's mind that we in the White House had not a clue about what we were doing. In fact, the opposite was true.

By the way, Larry's worst moment in fanning the flame of public perception that the White House was woefully out of touch with the misery being inflicted upon the American people came at the Republican National Convention. By video, Larry spoke to a world audience about the pandemic *in the past tense*—as if it were gone, dead, buried, and back in China.

That was at a time, mind you, when the death toll was more than one thousand Americans a day with no end in

sight, and Kudlow was rightly roasted for that inanity across the media dial, from MSNBC's *Morning Joe* and Vox to ABC News.⁵ The funniest of the roasts was in *The Atlantic*, where Russell Berman noted, "If the pandemic were truly in the past, however, Kudlow would have been delivering that message to a packed, roaring crowd at the Spectrum Center in Charlotte, North Carolina."⁶

Instead, he was opining from his rustic Connecticut mansion, "a talking head surrounded by bookshelves in the comfort of a home that is not safe to leave."⁷

At least Treasury secretary Steve Mnuchin mostly kept his mouth shut on the subject of the pandemic when he was on television. Instead, he caused his virus denial damage only in our private Oval Office Trade Team meetings with the Boss.

Like Acting Chief of Staff Mulvaney, Mnuchin was big on joking about how the "kung flu" was no worse than the regular flu and nothing to worry about. In truth, I don't believe Mnuchin really believed that nonsense. Rather, his joking about the kung flu was likely far more Machiavellian.

To Mnuchin, all that mattered was keeping the Phase One trade deal with China intact. If POTUS believed that the virus was deadly and blamed China for the plague, he might blow up the trade deal. So in the Oval Office, Mnuchin always downplayed the threat from the virus.

MASKLESS IN SEATTLE

Though Larry Kudlow was the White House's most public face of the "don't worry, it's only the flu" crowd and Mnuchin was its Machiavelli, the vice president's chief of staff, Marc Short, was its Godzilla.

As a virus denier—and a key player on the White House Coronavirus Task Force for Pence—Short literally wore his

indifference on his face for all to see. He adamantly refused to wear a mask. Just wouldn't do it. No way, no how.

Early in the pandemic, Short would commit one of the most foolhardy acts of hubris ever witnessed in the West Wing: he engineered a March 5 trip by the vice president to visit the nation's first virus hot zone in Washington state.

Now, I know it's common for the president or vice president to visit disaster areas and show support for the local population. In fact, a visit from the White House is *de rigueur* after everything from hurricanes and earthquakes to mass shootings.

But at the beginning of a pandemic, when you have absolutely no idea what the risk factors are, you simply do *not* put the vice president of the United States onto a plane and plunge him into a hot zone where the potential for infection is quite high. There are a lot of reasons why you don't do that, but here's the best one:

You don't do that because, by the very next day, the vice president of the United States, along with all of his staff and Secret Service agents who joined him on the trip, will be back in the West Wing with the potential of infecting some of the highest-ranking officials of the US government—including the president, who saw Pence almost daily.

It was precisely because of that virus denial culture within the vice president's office that the Pence staff *very early on* had proportionately more infections of the virus than any other unit in the White House.

FAILURE REALLY IS AN OPTION

As the floor manager for the White House Coronavirus Task Force chaired by VPOTUS, Marc Short wielded tremendous power to steer the course of pandemic history, and as Lord

Acton accurately noted in 1887, “Absolute power corrupts absolutely.” In his role, Short suffered from two fatal flaws.

First, because he really did believe that the virus was no worse than the flu, he saw no reason for the Task Force to do much of anything, much less quickly even though the president was demanding action every hour of every day. It was just one more example of bad personnel disobeying the chain of command, resulting in bad policy.

Second, the kind of government actions that might be required to combat the pandemic—including the invocation of the Defense Production Act of 1950 to ensure adequate supplies of personal protective equipment (PPE) and medicines—ran strictly against Marc Short’s free-market grain.

It was probably for that last reason alone that Short would get up in my grill every time I, as the Defense Production Act policy coordinator, tried to move an action along.

Truth be told, it was a *huge* unforced error—one of the biggest of the administration—to put Mike Pence in charge of the Task Force. With that decision, the buck was clearly going to stop, if not with the president in the Oval Office, then certainly right down the hall and into the lap of President Trump’s 2020 running mate. Talk about an anchor that could drag the Trump-Pence 2020 ticket all the way to the bottom of the Biden sea.

Strategically, it would have been far better to appoint a pandemic czar: someone who was loyal to the president but also tough as nails, smart as the proverbial whip, respected in the scientific community, nimble on his media feet, and welcome on both sides of the political aisle.

If the White House had had such a pandemic czar, we could have better kept the virus at political arm’s length. Alas, no such luck.

And here's what bothered me most about Marc Short's central position on the Task Force: he, along with Mick Mulvaney, was always trying to block my efforts to fight the pandemic and use the Defense Production Act to advance a wide range of pandemic-related goals.

I remember well the call I received on March 5 from Mulvaney's administrative assistant telling me to get right over to the Chief's office. *What now?* I wondered.

With Mulvaney at one end of his couch, Short at the other end, and me across from them in the hot seat, Mulvaney ordered me upon threat of firing to stand down from any further work on anything related to either the Task Force or the pandemic. As Marc Short sat there like a cat that had just eaten a six-pack of canaries, I thought to myself, "F— these guys."

What I *said*, which was memorialized in a *Wall Street Journal* article, was something that I will be proud of until the day I die: "Mick, you do what you gotta do. And I'll do what I gotta do."⁸

Then I got up and left without looking back. Mulvaney would be gone from the White House in two days.

There are too many examples to chronicle in this book of the damage Marc Short did while running the White House Coronavirus Task Force. But if I had to reference just one, it would be this.

It is a story that begins on March 22, 2020, with one of my rare appearances at the podium of the James S. Brady Press Briefing Room during what had quickly become the president's daily coronavirus briefing.

By that time, a disturbing wave of profiteering, price gouging, counterfeiting, and hoarding had begun to plague the United States' personal protective equipment markets.

And together with Attorney General William Barr and the full force of the FBI and Justice Department, I was going to put an abrupt end to it.

With POTUS at my right shoulder as I stood at the podium, here is how we promised to lay down the law:

Brokers are offering millions of items, whether they are goggles, masks, or whatever, and you go through three different brokers, tracing to a warehouse [for example, in Los Angeles] that's allegedly got ten million masks and they want to charge you seven times what they cost. That's price gouging.

A message to the hoarders: If you've got any large quantities of materials that this country needs right now, get them to market or get them to us. We'll pay you a fair price. But if you don't do that, *we're going to come for you and make sure that doesn't happen in this country.*"⁹

Unfortunately, my tough sheriff's talk quickly turned into a terminal case of "all talk, no walk." In the weeks ahead, every time Bill Barr and I tried to come down hard on one of those price-gouging predators, Marc Short, along with the vice president's legal counsel, Greg Jacob, blocked the action. In warehouse after warehouse identified by FBI agents as being stuffed with contraband, we just couldn't get anybody busted.

You can see my exasperation in full bloom in my April 29 journal entry:

We continue in a stalemate. . . . The Department of Justice has queued up five cases we can bust. . . . Greg Jacob is my new nemesis within the Deep State. . . . Out

of exasperation—as opposed to desperation—I called Bill Barr once again and asked him to help me work through it.

It was all to no avail. The urgently needed crackdown never occurred.