

Crisis: Bureaucratic Politics, the Trump Administration, and Covid-19

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This paper is part of a larger project examining bureaucratic politics in Trump administration foreign policy and national security decision-making. The focus (i.e., the unit of analysis) is not the efficacy of the administration's outcomes, which was, on the whole, abysmal, but on the outputs and how they came about. This paper does not delve into the psychology of Donald Trump. Instead, it looks at his efficacy: how were decisions made and how capable was Trump in achieving his preferred outputs? In short, how did the pulling and tugging between players (including the president) that characterizes bureaucratic politics shape the administration's response to the pandemic?

The pandemic represented a true crisis – an issue which could not be avoided or ignored, and one in which bad decisions would have massive consequences for the United States. While Trump's trade wars had negative overall economic consequences and soured international relations, the U.S. economy overall remained strong. Trump's decisions on the use of force and military deployments may have had devastating consequences for those in the relevant region, but were barely noted by an American public that had been at war for the past decade and a half. It is a great luxury that for the United States, buffered by vast oceans and wealth, so many issues are a matter of choice. The pandemic was an exception.

Nor was it in any real sense avoidable. Nations that by every metric handled Covid better than the United States still suffered. Canada had less than half the deaths from Covid per capita compared to the U.S. This would still have translated to nearly a half million fatalities. Better, but still a tragedy. Important aspects of the American failure were not due to Trump, although they may have exacerbated his own instincts. The difficulties developing an early reliable test were not due to Trump, the failure was the CDC, with an assist from the FDA. Initial CDC

analyses were rooted in the agency's own incomplete data collection efforts.¹ The muddled early messaging about masks came from highly regarded experts, most notably Dr. Anthony Fauci.²

Others have taken on the question of Trump's leadership failings and their centrality to the poor U.S. response to Covid-19.³ This probably cost Trump the election. The outcome of Trump's policy and decision-making was failure. But from a process standpoint, Trump often achieved the outputs he sought. He undermined public health measures, believing that doing so would keep the economy growing and ensure re-election. At the same time, some bureaucratic leaders and White House officials sought to resist or elide Trump's efforts to downplay the virus, while others enabled the president. The interesting questions for the purpose of this paper are how and when Trump and these other players succeeded and failed.

Motivation and Overview

In statistics and data science, Eigenvectors do not change direction in a transformation. In practical terms, Eigenvectors are those features in which the vector remains consistent after a transformation. In layperson's terms, the Eigenvectors are the vectors that simplify the analysis and show what is really going on within the data.⁴

Donald Trump represents a sort of Eigenvector of a politician (and possibly of a human being), in which complex and competing motivations are compressed into a general trajectory – a basic belief that a few key issues with simple solutions will bring him re-election. All presidents make their decisions with an eye towards their political implications. And all presidents struggle to enact their preferred policies. Trump's blunt and blatant approaches to exercising his powers throw into sharp relief how bureaucratic politics operate and what it takes to be president.

¹ *Silent Invasion* 107-109.

² *I Alone Can Fix It* 81.

³ Charlie F. Parker and Eric Stern, "The Trump Administration and the COVID-19 crisis: Exploring the warning response problems and missed opportunities of a public health emergency," *Public Administration* 2022, 1-17; Naim Kapucu and Donald Moynihan, "Trump's (mis)management of the COVID-19 pandemic in the US," *Policy Studies* (forthcoming). https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3845558.

⁴ Krut Patel, "Eigenvalues and eigenvectors: All you need to know," *Towards Data Science*, November 30, 2019. <https://towardsdatascience.com/eigenvectors-and-eigenvalues-all-you-need-to-know-df92780c591f>.

Crises also bring out the best and worst in an administration. Eric Stern describes crises as “moments of periods of truth in which the mettle of leaders and the robustness of institutions are tested and frailties are quickly revealed to colleagues, journalists, and citizens.”⁵ This holds true in any administration, but given the nature of the Trump administration, the effects of bureaucratic machinations are thrown in particularly sharp relief.

Thus, the working hypothesis of this paper is that the pattern of bureaucratic politics and how they shaped administration outputs were continued and exacerbated by the pandemic.

This paper mirrors the previous parts of this project, examining how the conclusions drawn about different actors and issues in the administration hold true in the face of Covid. The first section is on Vice President Pence, who in theory was well-placed to exercise influence in the Trump White House but struggled to do so. The second section examines the unlikely emergence of Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin as a hero of the pandemic. Mnuchin had previously been examined as one of the “winners” in the Trump administration in that he survived the entire administration in a substantial position. His combination of absolute public loyalty to the president with smart engagement with critical power centers continued to serve him well.⁶ This is followed by an analysis of the role of the National Security Advisor and National Security Council during the pandemic. For most presidents, a well-run NSC becomes a critical tool for enacting national security policy, but for Trump, mired in scandal, it became a distrusted hindrance. The paper will end with an in-depth examination of how Trump pursued his preferred policy of keeping the country open in the face of Covid. This parallels earlier sections on Trump administration’s decision-making and implementation of other policies such as Afghanistan, in which an initial openness to expert opinion eventually yielded to Trump’s own instincts.

⁵ Eric Stern, “Crisis studies and foreign policy: Insights, synergies, and challenges,” *International Studies Review* 5, no. 2 (2003), 183.

⁶ This project began when a student asked me how Steven Mnuchin, with no previous political experience and several high-profile early missteps, had survived the entire administration.

Pence and the Covid Task Force

“...that f---ing council Mike has...”

*Donald Trump*⁷

On February 26, 2020, Vice President Pence was assigned the leadership of the Covid-19 task force. Several of Pence’s recent predecessors had taken on similar line responsibilities, to generally positive effect. George H.W. Bush had overseen crisis management and run a counter-terrorism task force. Al Gore chaired several binational commissions and overseen security preparations for the 1996 Olympics. Joe Biden, Pence’s predecessor, had been placed in charge of the Recovery Act. Pence had done useful work as head of the reinstated Space Council.⁸ With presidential support, a vice presidential task force can advance policies and play a unique role working across agencies and cutting through red tape. Unfortunately, this was not the case for the Covid-19 Task Force.

My dissertation research suggested that Pence would be an extremely influential vice president. There are two primary factors that enable vice presidential influence: first, access to the policy process and president, and second, receptiveness to vice presidential advice. For the first, Pence retained the perquisites of what a leading scholar of the office, Joel Goldstein, calls *the White House Vice Presidency*.⁹ This includes the West Wing office, regular access to the president and the broader policy process, a substantial vice presidential staff, and a playbook for “hidden hand” influence (such as only advising the president in private). The second factor is the outsider-insider paradigm in which outsider presidents turn to their insider vice presidents for advice and to fill policy vacuums. Trump was not only a political outsider, but an outsider to politics altogether.¹⁰

⁷ *Nightmare Scenario*, 155.

⁸ It is worth noting that in her own work Harris has continued many of the policies Pence established leading the Space Council.

⁹ Joel Goldstein, *The White House Vice Presidency: The Path to Significance, Mondale to Biden*, University of Kansas, 2016.

¹⁰ Welcome to my dissertation! Aaron Mannes, *The Evolving National Security Role of the Vice President*. University of Maryland, College Park, 2014. <https://drum.lib.umd.edu/items/f25c17dd-89ac-4a0e-ac8d-2938b47e5c19>. Also see Paul Kengor, Wreath layer or public player? The vice president’s role in foreign policy. *Public Administration Review*. Vol 61, #4, July 2001, p. 500 Jack Lechelt, The vice president and foreign policy:

Given these conditions, there was every reason to believe that Pence, who retained the perquisites of the vice presidency and adopted the hidden hand strategies of his predecessors, would emerge as a key advisor on the complexities of DC to Donald Trump, the ultimate outsider. This proved to be wrong. Trump was not particularly impressed with Pence (who wasn't rich) and appeared to be disappointed by Pence's earlier failure to shepherd through the repeal of the Affordable Care Act. Finally, Pence faced a rival for influence in Jared Kushner.

For his part, Pence played the traditional VP roles, being an extremely loyal surrogate and quietly seeking influence behind closed doors. He had some modest successes in changing the trajectory of presidential policy, particularly persuading the president not to fire (or at least delay firing) a key administration figure [who?]. Pence was probably more successful than any of his predecessors in appointing allies in the administration. Trump's own limited cadre of loyalists with government experience created a vacuum that Pence could fill with his contacts in the religious right and from the libertarian wing of the GOP.¹¹ Trump's first DNI had been former Senator Dan Coates of Indiana, a long-time ally of Pence. The Secretary of HHS Alex Azar had been CEO of Eli Lilly, the Indiana based pharmaceutical giant. Seema Verma, the head of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid, had been Pence's advisor on health policy in Indiana. The chaotic workings of the Trump administration enabled a fair amount of freelancing and policy entrepreneurship. Pence was able to fill certain policy vacuums and work on issues where the president was not engaged.¹² He was also able to advance a host of policies through his network of allies throughout the administration. Still, on major issues, instead of being Trump's Dick Cheney, the Pence vice presidency was more akin to that of his fellow Hoosier, Dan Quayle.

From Mondale to Cheney. Law and Society Recent Scholarship. April 2009; and Paul Light. Vice Presidential Power and Influence in the White House. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1983.

A short take on my predictions about Pence's potential role in the administration can be found here: Aaron Mannes, Vice presidents and foreign policy: A forward looking review of the record. *War on the Rocks*, October 31, 2016. <https://warontherocks.com/2016/10/vice-presidents-and-foreign-policy-a-forward-looking-review-of-the-record/>

¹¹ Pence's top aide, Marc Short, had worked for organizations funded by the Koch brothers.

¹² Pence turns vp's office into gateway for lobbyists to influence the trump administration. *Washington Post*, June 15, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/pence-turns-vps-office-into-gateway-for-lobbyists-to-influence-the-trump-administration/2018/06/14/75675bfa-6424-11e8-a69c-b944de66d9e7_story.html

This pattern of influence continued during the Covid crisis. Pence was, in theory, the administration's point person on Covid-19 with his appointment as head of the task force. In reality, his options were constrained by the president's priorities. He was able to take limited measures independently of the president.

Pence's appointment as Covid Task Force lead was haphazard. Trump was dissatisfied with Azar's leadership on Covid and sought a replacement. Seeing Covid-19 primarily as a communications problem, Trump lost patience with Azar when, on February 25, CDC official Nancy Messonnier contradicted the administration's line that the virus was under control: "Disruption to everyday life may be severe. But these are things that people need to start thinking about now."¹³ The stock market plunged, and Trump went ballistic.

Trump had proposed former FDA commissioner Scott Gottlieb, but (acting) chief of staff Mick Mulvaney was concerned that placing a former subordinate of Azar's as his de-facto superior would lead the HHS Secretary to resign and make the administration look bad as the pandemic was starting. Trump then picked Pence, as the vice president outranks a cabinet secretary. Pence's chief of staff, Marc Short, resisted the assignment, but presidential requests are de-facto orders.¹⁴ Based on past vice-presidential assignments, Pence could have been effective in this role and quarterbacked a much needed "whole-of-government" approach to the pandemic. But Pence's uncertain relationship with the president stymied his doing so. This is highlighted in a pair of early cases of pandemic decision-making.

In early March, public health officials, led by CDC head Robert R. Redfield, along with HHS Secretary Azar, pressed for a "no sail" order on cruise ships, which had proven to be ideal environments for Covid to propagate. Pence kept calling for further study, apparently unsure about alienating a powerful industry (and coming out against a very popular activity). He met with cruise ship executives, who promised improved safety measures. It appeared that Pence was

¹³ *Nightmare Scenario* 100.

¹⁴ *Nightmare Scenario* 103-104.

unwilling to make a controversial decision without the president's explicit support and was unable or unwilling to get that explicit support.¹⁵

On March 11, 2020 the Task Force in the Oval Office debated a travel ban from Europe. Public health officials, led by Drs. Redfield, Birx, and Fauci, argued strongly for the ban. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin pointed out the dangers the ban would present to the economy. The task force, debating in front of the president, could not reach a consensus and were ushered out of the Oval Office to continue their discussion in the adjoining Cabinet Room. Kushner had joined the meeting in progress and, although the Task Force was led by Pence, in the Cabinet Room, Pence deferred to the president's son-in-law. Kushner then led the effort to draft the presidential speech, delivered that evening, announcing the travel ban, although Pence and his team were engaged in the process.¹⁶

Since Trump primarily viewed the pandemic as a communications issue, the vice president's office took control over decisions about public appearances by administration officials. Pence's chief of staff Marc Short and communications director Katie Miller took personal charge of clearing all public appearances by administration officials discussing Covid-19.¹⁷ Whatever he counseled in private, Pence himself became a loyal public spokesperson for the administration's Covid policies. In April, Pence visited the Mayo Clinic, which required masks, but Pence – in deference to Trump's skepticism – did not wear one. In June, after the administration had decided against more lockdowns and to focus on re-opening, Pence placed an op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal*, claiming in effect that the worst of the pandemic was over and the public health measures were working to contain it. The op-ed was written to lay the groundwork for a planned June 20 Trump rally in Tulsa. These moves, intended to buttress the administration's position, incurred significant negative media attention and blowback from the public health community.¹⁸

Covid-19 coordinator, Ambassador Deborah Birx, MD, and Pence's aide Olivia Troye found Pence open to and interested in their work, deeply concerned about the virus, and generally

¹⁵ *I Alone Can Fix It* 82-85.

¹⁶ *I Alone Can Fix It* 85-89.

¹⁷ *Nightmare Scenario* 104-105.

¹⁸ *Nightmare Scenario* 343-347.

supportive.¹⁹ But Pence was unwilling to push too hard on their behalf. They both expressed concern that Pence was being hemmed in politically by his top aides Marc Short and Katie Miller.²⁰ After she lost access to the president, Birx brought issues to the vice president, hoping he would relay them to the president, but she was never certain if this occurred or if Pence had any influence. She also sought to cultivate Jared Kushner, who at times fed her information about efforts in the White House to undermine her efforts.²¹ When the president restricted her public appearances, Pence relayed Birx's guidance to governors.²² He encouraged her to continue to meet privately with them and with other officials, in order to provide guidance on Covid mitigation. And, as a former governor, Pence provided insight into how governors would see issues.²³ Significantly, in August, when Trump was being advised by Scott Atlas and advocating for minimal public health mitigation, Birx states that she told Pence that Atlas could not be a part of the Covid Task force and her "Covid Huddles." Pence supported her (although another source states Pence demurred but Atlas stopped attending on his own since the Task Force was moribund). Birx then informed Pence that she would be delivering a strong call for mitigation measures to governors, communities, and the public – directly contradicting the president. Pence, according to Birx, said, "You need to do what you need to do."²⁴

In areas in which Pence could operate without presidential approval, he could be helpful. When CDC and FEMA had divergent data streams on Covid-19 rates at hospital, Birx asked Pence for permission to integrate these data streams under the White House Covid Task Force, and he agreed.²⁵

Similarly, when Surgeon General NAME? (one of very African-Americans on the Covid-19 Task Force) expressed concerned about the racial disparities in Covid deaths, Pence encouraged him to speak out on the topic. But Pence's support was limited. When Birx, Redfield, and Hahn

¹⁹ *Silent Invasion* 70; *Nightmare Scenario* 345-347.

²⁰ Birx, in her memoir, thought Troye was effectively spying on her. Worth noting that whatever Birx and Troye thought, Short had been close to Pence for over a decade and the two may have been playing good cop/bad cop with the genial Pence appearing agreeable and Short doing the dirty work.

²¹ *Silent Invasion* 231.

²² *Silent Invasion* 231; *Nightmare Scenario* 367.

²³ *Silent Invasion* 245.

²⁴ *Silent Invasion* 302.

²⁵ *Silent Invasion* 206-207.

appealed to Pence to intervene on their behalf with Secretary Azar, who they felt was pressuring them, Pence demurred.²⁶

Pence and his task force's limited role in addressing shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE) and other critical medical supplies highlights the challenges he faced. Kushner, not Pence, was placed in the lead of efforts to acquire PPE – while states were also told to fend for themselves.²⁷ Governors appealed to Pence, who had once been one of their number, and he was helpful when possible, but key decisions about PPE distribution were made by Kushner. When Pence tried to engage with Operation Warp Speed, Kushner boxed him out, putting Birx on the board overseeing the project, but not Pence.²⁸

Pence had the institutional resources necessary to exercise influence. He had regular access to the president, and he and his staff had access to the White House process. His experienced staff, particularly Marc Short, enabled Pence to fulfill the key function of the task force, which was controlling the administration's message on Covid-19. He had allies throughout the administration. He never lost access to the president, was loyal (to a fault), and carefully tailored his efforts at persuasion. He used these resources for modest changes in policy trajectory. But the critical asset for vice presidential influence is presidential interest. Former National Security Advisors Stephen Hadley and Anthony Lake both told me in my dissertation research that the vice president is uniquely able to combine political and policy analysis and can serve as a sort of junior partner to the president. Pence actively sought this partnership, but Trump, despite the exigencies of the coping with a global pandemic, wasn't looking for a partner.

Mnuchin: Unsung Hero of the Pandemic

Fiscal policy really did save the day in the US, and the lack of it caused enormous economic problems in Europe – not to mention in all the countries that aren't able to borrow money in their own currency at zero interest rates. The man in charge of fiscal

²⁶ *Nightmare Scenario* 293-294.

²⁷ On many issues, even though I disagreed with Trump administration decisions, there was a logic to them. In the case of the administration's PPE policy, it is completely unclear what they were attempting to achieve.

²⁸ *Nightmare Scenario* 377.

policy during all of 2020 deserves no little praise. Take a bow, Steven Mnuchin, movie producer and latter-day action hero.

Felix Salmon, The Phoenix Economy²⁹

Where the Covid-19 diminished Pence, it enhanced the role of Secretary of the Treasury, Stephen Mnuchin. Of the winners of Trump's White House Apprentice, Steven Mnuchin was a surprise. He had no government experience and had made several missteps early in his tenure. Examining the survival strategies of Mnuchin along with two other survivors of the *White House Apprentice*, U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer and CIA Director and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo found certain commonalities. Absolute loyalty to Trump was essential of course, but so was smart bureaucratic politics, as outlined in James Q. Wilson's *Bureaucracy*, most notably engaging and servicing key constituencies. Mnuchin did not release Trump's tax returns to Congress, and expressed public support for Trump after the Charlottesville riot. At the same time, he developed working relationships with Democrats in Congress, mastered the arcana of economic policy, and (as a banker and Goldman Sachs alum) had a solid relationship with Wall Street. The survivors stand in sharp contrast to the ill-fated Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who lost Trump's favor and the support of the press, Capitol Hill, and his own department.³⁰ A final item that was key to survival was avoiding drama. Trump may have enjoyed the reality show spectacle in his administration, but his most successful subordinates avoided it. Mnuchin reportedly was nonplused by Trump's temper tantrums and moved on (again a skill probably honed dealing with giant egos in finance.) The political capitol Mnuchin accumulated served him well in the pandemic.

Encomiums for Mnuchin's performance during the pandemic came from multiple sources. Democratic Senator Mark Warner stated, "From the beginning, he's had a tough job but has always understood the seriousness of the crisis...Mnuchin has been a very positive force."³¹ In

²⁹ *The Phoenix Economy: Work, Life, and Money in the New Not Normal.*

³⁰ This paper was originally presented at the Midwest Political Science Association in 2021. The study focused on figures in high-profile roles that required Congressional confirmation. Lower tier positions like HUD (where Ben Carson served out the entire administration) draw less scrutiny as long as the occupant avoids illegal activity (of which there was plenty in the Trump administration.) Staffers, that is anyone in a position that did not require confirmation, serve at the president's pleasure and thus rely nearly entirely on presidential favor.

³¹ Jeff Stein, *Washington Post*, December 27, 2020.

Mnuchin, Speaker Pelosi found a Trump official she could do business with (as opposed to her highly public spats with Trump.) House Democrat Katie Porter said of him, “There’s an opportunity to collaborate and to be successful.”³²

Early in the pandemic, Mnuchin argued against a national lockdown – he believed it would be disastrous economically. He lost that argument, but as always when he lost a debate, simply moved on. He was not a member of the faction that vocally opposed public health measures or undercut public health officials. As the U.S. economy contracted dramatically, Mnuchin realized the scale of the aid needed and played a central role in delivering financial aid to the American people.

In shepherding through the first major Covid stimulus, Mnuchin leveraged the working relationships he had developed with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell. In an interview on CNBC, Mnuchin stated that, at the height of the crisis, he spoke with Powell daily. “Sometimes it’s five times, sometimes it’s 30 times.”³³ Mnuchin was also savvy in working with media figures such as CNBC host Jim Cramer, business leaders, and GOP elder statesmen such as former Speaker Newt Gingrich. He also managed GOP demands, ultimately leading the effort to pass a massive stimulus package which Trump signed and praised on March 27. When the stimulus package was criticized by Republicans as being a giveaway to the Democrats, Trump became frustrated and instructed White House chief of staff Mark Meadows to join Mnuchin in negotiating another round of stimulus. Meadows, a Freedom Caucus alum, was not well received about Hill Democrats, but Mnuchin only praised Meadows and their partnership (in addition to regular and consistent praise for Trump).

Mnuchin managed to negotiate a second round of Covid relief, balancing between administration priorities and Capitol Hill Democrats and Republicans. When the \$900 billion stimulus was passed on December 21, Congressional leaders believed Mnuchin was negotiating on Trump’s

³² Sheelah Kohatkar, The high finance mogul in charge of our economic recovery. *New Yorker Magazine*, July 30, 2020. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/07/20/the-high-finance-mogul-in-charge-of-our-economic-recovery>

³³ Kate Davidson and Bob Davis, “How Mnuchin became Washington’s indispensable crisis manager,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 1, 2020.

behalf. But Trump later excoriated the bill. A day after Mnuchin called it “fabulous” on CNBC, Trump called it a “disgrace” in a video he tweeted. Trump was upset that the bill only offered \$600 stimulus checks when Trump wanted \$2000. Trump was also reportedly annoyed that he had been described as sidelined in the negotiations, although Mnuchin’s public statements always made it a point to credit his leadership. Trump ultimately signed the bill, which besides stimulus payments, averted a government shutdown on December 27. In the waning days of the administration, Mnuchin’s credibility took a hit, but it was his efforts that made this second stimulus even possible.

The contrast between the roles of Mnuchin and Pence during the pandemic is useful. A vice president has one asset, time. The Secretary of the Treasury has control of important action channels. Both Pence and Mnuchin were completely loyal to Trump, but Pence did not create an opening for himself in order to serve a substantive advisory role. Mnuchin, by contrast, was able to obtain relative freedom in running the department and pursuing policies. Where Pence had effectively a single source of influence and power, Mnuchin had several and was able to husband them throughout the administration and use this to good effect during the pandemic.

National Security Council Sidelined

Since its establishment after World War II, the National Security Council (NSC), led by the National Security Advisor (NSA), has become a substantial institution, charged with advising the president and coordinating the national security policy of the United States. Some presidents have used the NSC effectively to manage information flows and decision-making processes, and to oversee the vast bureaucracies of U.S. national security. The NSA, as head of this apparatus, has emerged as a leading presidential advisor.³⁴ Trump, to a great extent, reversed this trend. He had strained relationships with his national security advisors and the NSC overall. He was not seeking a Scowcroft-like figure who could help ensure a thorough national security process. Trump was seeking a Kissinger, someone who both shared his worldview and had the skill to enact his preferred policies. He never found one. Few in the DC foreign policy community

³⁴ The best single book on this topic is, undoubtedly, Ivo Daalder and IM Destler (who had the misfortune to be my PhD advisor), *In the Shadow of the Oval Office: Profiles of the National Security Advisors and the Presidents They Served—From JFK to George W. Bush*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011.

shared Trump's worldview. Both HR McMaster and John Bolton had substantial policy differences with Trump, particularly on U.S. military commitments, and both worked in very different ways to subvert him. His first NSA, Michael Flynn, may have shared Trump's worldview and been a loyalist, but his tenure was short-lived, and it is unlikely he had the necessary skill. The NSA during the pandemic, Robert O'Brien, was generally loyal but had limited experience at high-level policymaking.

In addition, the NSC is heavily staffed by career officials from throughout the U.S. government. The NSC became a locus of the Trump administration scandals, and Trump became particularly suspicious that it was filled with disloyal denizens of the "deep state." When the pandemic began occupying the nation's attention, Trump had just survived the first effort at impeachment. Several NSC staffers had testified against him, and Trump saw the NSC as an untrustworthy bastion of the deep state that sought to undermine him.

A final important factor, however, may have limited the NSC role in the pandemic. In 2018, NSA John Bolton shuttered the White House's National Security Council Directorate for Global Health Security and Biodefense, as part of a plan to streamline the NSC. The Directorate had been established under the Obama administration after the challenges of coordinating the Ebola response in 2014.

Bolton argued that combining the global health function with the countering WMD function (which included concerns about biowarfare and bioterrorism) would strengthen both functions. Bolton notes that his NSC managed a number of global public health issues without difficulty, including a new outbreak of Ebola in Africa, and that the fundamental problem in the poor American response to Covid-19 was not a reorganization at the National Security Council, but rather the failures of the occupant of the Oval Office. Bolton specifically argued against the directorate:

Obama's staffing reflected the view that the White House had to be involved in often minute operational details, which was contrary to Scowcroft's model of a non-operational NSC....³⁵

Bolton goes on to observe that much of the actual expertise within the NSC was retained and cites *The New York Times* in noting that the NSC functioned properly, giving the president timely warning that the virus potentially would require massive public health measures.³⁶ The problem was in the president's failure to heed these warnings.

In some regards, Bolton's remarks are undoubtedly true. Deputy National Security Advisor Matthew Pottinger, who had been a reporter in China and whose wife was a distinguished virologist (and friend of Dr. Birx), was, by many accounts (including his own), a leading voice in the White House warning about the dangers of Covid-19. Bolton's successor as NSA, Robert O'Brien, was also a regular proponent of aggressive public health measures to contain the virus.

Beth Cameron, who established the Directorate under Obama and led its transition to the Trump administration, argues that the Directorate was a critical assemblage of expertise on public health issues that could quickly bring issues to the very top levels for decision-making. The coordination role might have been more important than channeling information to the president. While there is an argument for NSC staying aloof from operations, there are also issues and crises that may require hands-on White House attention.³⁷ Given the well-documented poor management of issues such as the cruise ships, the PPE shortage, to say nothing of the testing debacles, a dedicated NSC Directorate to manage these issues would have been useful.

From the standpoint of Trump's decision-making, it appears more notable that the NSC played a relatively limited role during the pandemic. In an in-depth article on decision-making and

³⁵ *The Room Where It Happened* 314-316.

³⁶ He could have seen what was coming: Behind Trump's failure on the virus, *New York Times*, April 11, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/11/us/politics/coronavirus-trump-response.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

³⁷ Beth Cameron, I ran the White House pandemic office. Trump closed it. *Washington Post*, March, 13, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/nsc-pandemic-office-trump-closed/2020/03/13/a70de09c-6491-11ea-acc80c22bbe96f_story.html. There are interesting parallels to the second Bush administration's downgrading the NSC office that handled terrorism, believing it was involved in too many operational issues. It cannot be said with absolute certainty that this caused the surprise of 9/11, but it was almost certainly a factor.

conflicts between agencies about bringing Americans on the *Diamond Princess* cruise ship, there is no mention of the National Security Council.³⁸ Instead Trump relied on ad hoc groups such as those led by Jared Kushner and Peter Navarro to address testing and PPE shortages.

The NSC system was developed as the U.S. role in the world and the institutions involved in U.S. national security expanded dramatically and global affairs became increasingly complex. The NSC was established to manage this complexity. Beyond the specific issues cited above, for Donald Trump, complexity and uncertainty were anathemas. Throughout the administration, NSC played a more limited and ad hoc role. During the pandemic, their place on the sidelines only became more entrenched.

Pandemic Decision-making

In examining presidential decisions regarding pandemic response, the key question is not to examine the outcomes, which for the most part were frankly terrible, with the very important exception of Operation Warp Speed. What is being examined is the outputs: was Trump able to have his preferred policy set and implemented and in what circumstances did he succeed and when did he fail?

Elizabeth Saunders uses the principal-agent model to compare decision-making on Iraq in the first and second Bush administrations. She finds that inexperienced leaders lack the resources to effectively monitor their subordinates and are thus subject to bureaucratic drift.³⁹ In the case of Trump, who had the least experience of any modern president, and who faced active opposition to his policies from some quarters, these challenges were particularly stark. Given these challenges, a previous analysis looks at Trump decision implementation in the face of complexity. Looking at Afghanistan and immigration, a pair of complex issues in which Trump had strong positions, two factors were critical: whether the president required extensive cooperation to execute and whether the president had subordinates who supported the decision.

³⁸ https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/coronavirus-diamond-princess-cruise-americans/2020/02/20/b6f54cae-5279-11ea-b119-4faabac6674f_story.html

³⁹ Elizabeth N. Saunders, No substitute for experience: Presidents, advisers, and information in group decision making, *International Organization* 71, Supplement 2017, S219–S247.

Both immigration policy and a withdrawal from Afghanistan required extensive support from other players within the bureaucracy and White House. In the case of the former, Trump had a cadre of aides who supported his immigration policies and had substantial success enacting them. In the case of withdrawing from Afghanistan, Trump faced deep opposition in the national security bureaucracy and was struggling to complete the withdrawal up until he left office.

This analysis will examine Trump's efforts to frame, first towards public health measures and second towards drug approvals. Both were shaped by Trump's overall view of the pandemic as a communications issue to be talked away.

In his *Theories of Zombies and International Relations*, Daniel Drezner observes that at the beginning of a crisis bureaucrats are most likely to be given a free hand in addressing the crisis, but also most likely to make mistakes. They will gain experience with time but will have lost the trust of their political leaders. This was most certainly the case during the pandemic, and Trump was particularly ready to jettison expert opinion. Throughout his presidency (and for that matter in his presidential campaign) he had experts telling him things that countered his instincts. He won the presidency in the face of skepticism. In Afghanistan, he reluctantly agreed to a troop increase, only to find that there was little progress in the war. He was told his trade policies would be economically disastrous, but with the economy growing successfully, he could state, "Trade wars are easy to win."

Throughout his presidency and his life, Trump found little reason to doubt his efficacy, both his judgment and his capacity to resolve issues – mostly by talking his way out of them. Thus, given the disastrous early response, the unpopularity of the lockdown, and his belief that a strong economy would ensure his re-election Trump viewed Covid (as he viewed nearly everything) as fundamentally a communications problem.

Lockdown Decision-making

Trump's attitude towards the lockdown follows the pattern of Trump's decision-making on Afghanistan. Initially, he had adhered to a reasonable decision-making process. When the

decision to increase U.S. troops in Afghanistan yielded minimal results, he discredited expert advice and relied on his own instincts. This was followed by a period of bureaucratic infighting. Many of the top officials in the administration resisted Trump's call for withdrawal. Trump in turn adopted a number of tactics, including alternative decision-making processes, to implement the withdrawal. In decision-making on public health measures, unlike Afghanistan, Trump had a cadre of aides to enable his preferred vision.

In the early phases of Covid, Dr. Birx and others carefully plotted her approach to Trump to win his support for a lockdown. She worked with the other White House doctors and sought allies such as Domestic Policy Advisor Joe Grogan. She first worked to win over Pence, believing that Trump would be less likely to overrule a recommendation from the person he had appointed to lead the effort to address the virus. She and her colleagues carefully avoided terms like regulation that she knew would be non-starters in the Trump White House and framed the decision-making in terms of Federalism and state responsibility to appeal to Pence, a former governor (with the additional hope that states would voluntarily adopt more stringent measures). Significantly, Birx found she was also wrestling with the CDC, which was not convinced at this point of asymptomatic spread and was ambivalent about masks. If the CDC offered conflicting proposals, their case to the president would be weaker and they were more likely to be overridden. The latter point was dropped. Most significantly, Birx and her allies pushed for a 15-day lockdown, hoping that once it was established, they would be better positioned for a longer period of lockdown and more restrictions later.⁴⁰ The ongoing conflict with the CDC became an issue. The White House lockdown recommendations suggested gatherings of no more than 10. On March 15, Birx made her case for a 15-day lockdown to Pence, the next day the President announced "15 Days to Slow the Spread." However, on the 15th, the CDC independently offered recommendations of gatherings of no more than 50. Birx noted the VP's chief of staff was quick to note this discrepancy and ask for the basis of Birx's recommendations. Fauci was unwilling to criticize the CDC recommendations and risk undercutting the beleaguered agency or its director. The competing messages did little to inspire White House confidence in the public health figures.

⁴⁰ Birx, *Silent Invasion*, 121-126.

By March 24, only part way through the 15 Days to Slow the Spread, Trump began projecting that all restrictions could be lifted by Easter on April 12. CEA analyses were disputing Birx's projects of Covid spread.⁴¹ Trump did agree to an additional 30-day lockdown after Covid hit NYC especially hard and a close personal friend of Trump died from it. Pence advised Birx to up her projected minimum deaths from 80,000 to 100,000 because a big round number would make a bigger impression on the president. On March 29, Birx proposed an additional 30-day lockdown and Trump agreed to it. This was perhaps the high-water mark of the public health experts' influence. Unfortunately, the Birx and Fauci strategy of incrementally expanding the lockdown ran into heavy political headwinds. Six weeks was not sufficient to truly slow the spread, but its failure to do so left Trump and his team deeply skeptical of public health experts.

The new White House chief of staff Mark Meadows, who took office in early March, was skeptical of the need to continue the lockdown, as was Marc Short. The economy was shrinking rapidly, and conservative groups around the country began protesting lockdown measures. It wasn't just the economic impact; the lockdown was seen as a massive "liberal" big government power grab. Trump turned against the lockdown.

Birx and the other doctors on the Covid Task Force found their access to Trump over, and there was broader resistance to all their efforts. Data became a central battleground in the fight over Coronavirus messaging. According to Dr. Birx, the new White House chief of staff Mark Meadows would ask Birx for the raw data she used in her projections. Birx provided it and then found it was used in alternate projections using different assumptions. These assumptions placed the probable deaths from Covid on par with the annual flu and were used by Trump to strengthen his argument that the virus was not a big deal and that the nation should stay open. The alternate analyses were developed at the Council of Economic Advisors. When Birx sent her deputy to consult with the CEA, the CEA refused to engage with her critique of their assumptions. When the CDC tried to develop guidelines for public behavior to reduce transmissions, Trump's OMB head worked to water down the guidance, rendering it almost meaningless.

⁴¹ *Silent Invasion* 141-150.

Trump found alternative sources of medical expertise, most notably Stanford medical professor Scott Atlas. A radiologist with no experience in virology, Atlas was an advocate of herd immunity. He met with the president and became an increasingly common figure in the media. Trump himself spoke frequently, claiming too much testing was the problem with Covid-19. Meanwhile, White House control over public appearances by administration officials was used to limit Birx and others' media profile. Interestingly, Tony Fauci was a civil servant, not a political appointee, and was able to craft somewhat greater independence in his public statements.

From this point on, Birx and her allies were on defense. They could deliver messages below the radar, but any major efforts that did not align with Trump's decision to consider Covid-19 a minor issue were quashed.

The White House doctors and their allies played smart bureaucratic politics, framing their positions in a way that would persuade Trump and building consensus. But Trump's instincts could only be submerged for so long. Reframing Covid-19 and reducing the influence of the federal public health community was complex. Trump was enabled by an array of committed allies and was able to – if not persuade – at least muddy the terms of the discussion.

Drug Approvals

In contrast to Trump's success in controlling the federal government's narrative on Covid-19, he was less able to do so on drug approvals. In fact, overplaying his hand only strengthened the FDA and its supporters in resisting Trump.

From the beginning Trump sought a miracle cure that would end Covid-19 as an issue and allow him to focus on the strong economy. FDA Commissioner James Hahn was initially poorly equipped to resist Trump's pressure. He had only taken office on December 17, 2019. A respected medical researcher and administrator, Dr. Hahn had no previous government experience. In April, under pressure from the administration, he agreed to authorize hydroxychloroquine for use against Covid. To Trump's dismay the emergency use authorization was withdrawn in late June. Again, in July, the administration believed it had found a potential

cure in plasma therapy. In a White House press conference, Dr. Hahn misstated the efficacy of the therapy and was subject to harsh criticism. Aware that he risked politicizing the FDA and undermining confidence in its approvals, he publicly admitted his error and contradicted the administration's statement. A lack of confidence in the approvals would both undermine public willingness to take the eventual Covid vaccine, but it was also a matter of concern to the pharmaceutical industry as a whole as they relied on FDA approvals for public confidence. From that point on, Hahn was more mindful of the political ramifications of his public statements and resisted Trump's pressure to approve the vaccine before Election Day.

Hahn had multiple sources of support, including the pharmaceutical industry, most of the medical profession, and the FDA rank and file. But Hahn's most important support came from the other physicians on the White House task force – Birx, Redfield, and Fauci. All expressed confidence in the others in any public or private statements, while Birx, Redfield, and Hahn (all political appointees) agreed that if one were fired all would resign. This would present a major political problem for the administration if three top public health officials resigned in the middle of a pandemic during an election year.

In this case, Trump's bureaucratic options were limited. He could not execute his orders; they were controlled by the FDA. He sought to develop support and research on behalf of hydroxychloroquine and other miracle cures – including having Peter Navarro (an economist) do in-depth research into the efficacy of hydroxychloroquine. But Hahn had learned the art of bureaucratic politics quickly and was effective in building alliances to defend his agency. Despite Trump's pressure, the vaccine, was approved just after the election – and in record time (although not fast enough for Trump).

Conclusions

The bureaucratic conflicts that characterized the Trump administration continued in the pandemic and became, if anything, more bareknuckled. Those who had played their hand skillfully, such as Mnuchin, found their roles expanded. Others, like Pence and the National Security Council, were increasingly marginalized. Trump struggled to enact his preferred policies, particularly when stymied by bureaucratic players with greater resources and expertise.

Given Trump's limited experience in government, it is remarkable he achieved his preferred policies as often as he did. It highlights the raw power of the presidency, even in the hands of an unskilled operator.