

Research Report

President Trump's 9-Month Campaign To Politicize COVID Science & Pressure Public Health Experts

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As we head into the final weeks before what President Trump called “[that special date](#)” that he hopes to have a vaccine approved and announced by and he is clearly becoming increasingly desperate, it is critical that people remember that he has spent months spreading misinformation, intimidating and pressuring scientists and public health officials to cut corners and speed up the development process to help him politically, and eroding public trust in the government’s vaccine development process.

In the coming weeks we fully expect President Trump to continue misleading the public to make it seem like vaccine and treatment approvals are imminent, which would erode public trust even further as people realize it’s not true. And we remain worried that he will once again pressure public health officials in his Administration to make emergency approvals in violation of their released guidance and against the advice of their career scientists and public health experts.

We need safe and effective vaccines to be developed and approved as quickly as possible and we need people to be able to trust them. That’s why it’s so important that the public understand his history on this and that people push back against any attempt by Trump to politicize and undermine this process even more in the coming weeks than he has already.

February 2020

Trump Threatened To Fire CDC Expert Nancy Messonnier For Warning Of Community Spread, Pandemic Risk With COVID. “On Feb. 25, Nancy Messonnier, a CDC official, said the agency was preparing for a potential pandemic and that community spread of the virus was likely. The stock market plunged. At a media briefing later that day, Mr. Azar sought to quell concerns, saying the virus was “contained.” But it was too late. A furious Mr. Trump, flying back to Washington from India, called Mr. Azar and threatened to oust Dr. Messonnier.” [Wall Street Journal, [4/22/20](#)]

Headline: The Hill: “Trump threatened to fire CDC's chief of respiratory diseases in February: report.” [The Hill, [4/22/20](#)]

March 2020

FDA Issued Emergency Use Authorization For Hydroxychloroquine Under Pressure From President Trump Despite Limited Evidence And Known Dangerous Side Effects. “The Food and Drug Administration has given emergency approval to a Trump administration plan to distribute millions of doses of anti-malarial drugs to hospitals across the country, saying it is worth the risk of trying unproven treatments to slow the progression of the disease caused by the novel coronavirus in seriously ill patients. There have been only a few, small anecdotal studies showing a possible benefit of the drugs, hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine, to relieve the acute respiratory symptoms of covid-19 and clear the virus from infected patients. Health experts warn the drugs’ well-known side effects could become commonplace with wide use. In particular, they say, patients with existing heart problems or taking certain drugs, such as anti-depressants that affect heart rhythm, are at risk of a fatal episode. Experts recommend screening before the drugs are prescribed to prevent drug-related deaths.” [Washington Post, [3/30/20](#)]

HHS Secretary Azar Praised Trump’s “Bold Leadership” In Announcing Authorization For “Taking Every Possible Step To Protect Americans From The

Coronavirus And Provide Them With Hope. “Trump has repeatedly stated his belief that the drugs will work to treat coronavirus. One of his top advisers on the government response, Anthony S. Fauci, chief of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, has stated the public should view the drugs with caution because of the paucity of evidence. In a news release Sunday night announcing the unprecedented action, Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar hailed Trump for ‘taking every possible step to protect Americans from the coronavirus and provide them with hope.’ Azar cited the president’s “bold leadership” for making possible the donations of pills by Novartis’s generic subsidiary, Sandoz, as well as Bayer.” [Washington Post, [3/30/20](#)]

Headline: Politico: “White House pressures FDA on unproven Japanese drug.” [Politico, [3/31/20](#)]

Headline: Washington Post: “Trump versus the scientists: The president’s tug-of-war with experts over coronavirus policy.” [Washington Post, [3/24/20](#)]

April 2020

BARDA Director Rick Bright Removed From Post After Raising Doubts About Trump Administration’s Push For Hydroxychloroquine. “The official who led the federal agency involved in developing a coronavirus vaccine said on Wednesday that he was removed from his post after he pressed for rigorous vetting of hydroxychloroquine, an anti-malaria drug embraced by President Trump as a coronavirus treatment, and that the administration had put “politics and cronyism ahead of science.” Rick Bright was abruptly dismissed this week as the director of the Department of Health and Human Services’ Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority, or BARDA, and removed as the deputy assistant secretary for preparedness and response.” [New York Times, [4/22/20](#)]

Headline: New York Times: “Health Dept. Official Says Doubts on Hydroxychloroquine Led to His Ouster.” [New York Times, [4/22/20](#)]

Headline: New York Times: “Trump Calls This Drug a ‘Game Changer.’ Doctors Aren’t So Sure.” [New York Times, [4/22/20](#)]

Trump Nominated Replacement For HHS Inspector General Following Critical Report On Administration’s COVID Response. “President Trump moved to replace the top watchdog at the Department of Health and Human Services after her office released a report on the shortages in testing and personal protective gear at hospitals during the coronavirus pandemic. In a Friday night announcement, the White House nominated a permanent inspector general to take the reins from Christi A. Grimm, the principal deputy inspector general who has run the office since January.” [Washington Post, [5/2/20](#)]

Headline: Washington Post: “Trump replaces HHS watchdog who found ‘severe shortages’ at hospitals combating coronavirus.” [Washington Post, [5/2/20](#)]

Trump Denounced HHS Inspector General At Press Conference, On Twitter After IG Staff Report Found “Severe Shortages” Of Testing Kits, Result Delays, PPE Shortages. “Trump laced into Grimm at a news conference in April, after her staff report found “severe shortages” of testing kits, delays in getting coronavirus results and “widespread shortages” of masks and other equipment at U.S. hospitals. The president

demanded to know who wrote the report, calling the findings “wrong.” He then accused reporters of having withheld that Grimm had worked in the Obama administration. “Where did he come from, the inspector general? What’s his name? No, what’s his name? What’s his name?” Trump responded on April 6, when asked about the report, which he said was politically biased. He then attacked Grimm on Twitter, writing, “Why didn’t the I.G., who spent 8 years with the Obama Administration (Did she Report on the failed H1N1 Swine Flu debacle where 17,000 people died?), want to talk to the Admirals, Generals, V.P. & others in charge, before doing her report.”” [Washington Post, [5/2/20](#)]

White House Ordered NIH To Halt Funding For Study Of Coronavirus Transmission From Bats After Project Was Linked To Wuhan Lab Subject To Unproven Conspiracy Theories About Pandemic Origin. “Top infectious disease doctor Anthony Fauci told POLITICO that the White House ordered the National Institutes of Health to pull funding for a project showing how coronaviruses spread from bats to people, POLITICO’s David Lim and Brianna Ehley report. That decision came shortly after the project, run by nonprofit EcoHealth Alliance, was linked to the Wuhan Institute of Virology — a facility that’s been subject to unproven conspiracy theories about the pandemic’s origins. — The White House immediately shifted responsibility for the cancellation, saying that while it encouraged the decision, it was HHS that made the final call. An HHS spokesperson in turn said the research grant for the project was not in compliance with the NIH’s policies.” [Politico Pulse, [6/24/20](#)]

Headline: NPR: “Why The U.S. Government Stopped Funding A Research Project On Bats And Coronaviruses.” [NPR, [4/29/20](#)]

Headline: Washington Post: “Under Trump, coronavirus scientists can speak — as long as they mostly toe the line.” [Washington Post, [4/22/20](#)]

May 2020

President Trump, White House Officials Successfully Pressured CDC Director To Allow Houses Of Worship To Reopen And To Strip Language From CDC Guidance. “In one previously unreported Oval Office meeting, the president and top White House officials in May pressed CDC Director Robert Redfield to declare houses of worship essential and allow them to reopen. Later, they pushed to strip certain language from the guidance, current and former administration officials said. Both efforts were successful. ... CDC guidance on how to reopen houses of worship this spring drew particular scrutiny from the White House. On May 19, the CDC and state health officials published a Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report article about a large Covid-19 outbreak at a rural Arkansas church involving 61 people, including four who died. They had either attended church events or were contacts of people who attended. Days later, Dr. Redfield received a call from Mr. Trump on reopening houses of worship, current and former administration officials said. The president was incensed by reports that some states were declaring liquor stores and abortion clinics essential but not houses of worship, and told his CDC director: “We need to get this done.”” [Wall Street Journal, [10/15/20](#)]

CDC Initially Posted Guidelines That Warned Singing Could Contribute To COVID Transmission – Following Intervention From White House, Warning Was Removed. “When the guidelines went up, they included a warning that “the act of singing may contribute to transmission of Covid-19, possibly through emission of aerosols.” It also urged against the sharing of collection plates. It wasn’t what Dr. Redfield had agreed to—and White House officials were angry. After Olivia Troye, then

an aide to Mr. Pence, alerted Dr. Redfield to the situation, he called a handful of aides and suggested they had posted the wrong version deliberately. “I am the director,” he said, according to Ms. Troye, who was on the call. “This is insubordination.” By the next day, the CDC had updated its guidance, omitting the language about suspending singing. CDC officials later investigated how the mistake had been made and discovered the wrong version had been posted because the final draft with the White House’s changes hadn’t marked what was different.” [Wall Street Journal, [10/15/20](#)]

Headline: New York Times: “Trump Picks Ex-Drug Company Executive to Lead Accelerated Coronavirus Vaccine Effort.” [New York Times, [5/13/20](#)]

June 2020

Over Two Months Later, FDA Revoked Emergency Use Authorization For Hydroxychloroquine As COVID Treatment, Citing Too Many Risks With No Apparent Benefit. “The Food and Drug Administration rescinded the emergency use authorization for hydroxychloroquine to treat hospitalized COVID-19 patients on Monday, saying the drug carries too many risks without any apparent benefit. The authorization was first issued in March, and applied to patients hospitalized with the illness and those in clinical trials. ...” “In light of ongoing serious cardiac adverse events and other serious side effects, the known and potential benefits” of hydroxychloroquine no longer outweigh those risks, the FDA wrote on its website Monday.” [NBC News, [6/15/20](#)]

Headline: Washington Post: “FDA’s hydroxychloroquine reversal raises even bigger questions about Trump’s role in pushing for the drug.” [Washington Post, [6/15/20](#)]

Headline: New York Times: “A Mad Scramble to Stock Millions of Malaria Pills, Likely for Nothing.” [New York Times, [6/16/20](#)]

Headline: Politico: “FDA struggles to remain independent amid race for virus cure.” [Politico, [6/3/20](#)]

Headline: Washington Post: “Trump pushing officials to speed up already-ambitious coronavirus vaccine timeline.” [Washington Post, [6/17/20](#)]

Headline: Politico: “White House pressure for a vaccine raises risk the U.S. will approve one that doesn’t work.” [Politico, [6/15/20](#)]

July 2020

Trump Tweeted Directly At CDC Commissioner Hahn Calling On Him To “Act Now” On Hydroxychloroquine. “The highly respected Henry Ford Health System just reported, based on a large sampling, that HYDROXYCHLOROQUINE cut the death rate in certain sick patients very significantly. The Dems disparaged it for political reasons (me!). Disgraceful. Act now @US_FDA @TuckerCarlson @FoxNews.” [Twitter – President Trump, [7/6/20](#)]

Trump Claimed “Deep State” Could Delay Vaccines or Therapeutics – “I Don’t Need To Have Them Announce On November 4th.” “We’re launching Operation Warp Speed to deliver effective treatments and ultimately a vaccine and therapeutics. More than two hundred and seventy therapies are in clinical trials. Can you believe it? Two hundred and seventy. And you’re gonna be hearing some very good news very, very soon. Now you know we’re dealing with the deep state, right. So I’m watching it very closely. I don’t need to have them announce on November 4th ‘ladies and gentlemen we’ve found the vaccine, it’s perfect.’ I don’t need that. I don’t need that. And hopefully everyone’s looking to do the right thing. We want to get it out quickly. But we’re very close both on therapeutics as well as vaccines.” [Trump speech in Wisconsin, [8/17/20](#)]

Trump Tweeted At FDA Commissioner That “Deep State ... Over At FDA” Was Delaying Vaccines And Therapeutics For Political Reasons. “The deep state, or whoever, over at the FDA is making it very difficult for drug companies to get people in order to test the vaccines and therapeutics. Obviously, they are hoping to delay the answer until after November 3rd. Must focus on speed, and saving lives! @SteveFDA” [Twitter – President Trump, [8/22/20](#)]

White House Advisor Peter Navarro Confronted FDA Officials – “You Are All Deep State And You Need To Get On Trump Time.” “Senior health officials in the Trump administration were taken aback last Monday when the president’s trade adviser, Peter Navarro, accused them of being part of the “Deep State” during a meeting that was supposed to be about COVID-19 and the Strategic National Stockpile. ... According to two sources in the Monday meeting, Navarro had aggressively confronted FDA officials, saying, “You are all Deep State and you need to get on Trump Time.” (That’s the expression Navarro uses to describe the speed that he says Trump demands.) Sources familiar with the situation said Navarro has been venting at the FDA for weeks at what he perceives as its slowness to approve therapeutics to fight COVID-19 and help the U.S. “bring our medical supply chain home.”” [Axios, [8/23/20](#)]

Headline: Politico: “Trump wants FDA to ‘feel the heat,’ chief of staff says.” [Politico, [8/23/20](#)]

Headline: CNBC: “Trump says FDA hold on blood treatment therapy use for coronavirus patients ‘could be a political decision.’” [CNBC, [8/19/20](#)]

FDA Commissioner Forced To Apologize After Using “Deeply Misleading” Statistic To Exaggerate Benefits Of Convalescent Plasma In Press Conference With President Trump. “The Food and Drug Administration’s chief has undercut the agency’s assertion that it is basing its decisions on science, not politics. At a White House event Sunday with President Trump, FDA Commissioner Stephen Hahn used a deeply misleading statistic to claim that a treatment the agency had just authorized for treating the coronavirus would save 35 lives out of every 100 people who get the treatment. That false claim has brought withering criticism from scientists, in news articles and on Twitter, who argue that it was a gross exaggeration of the benefits. “I can’t remember a mistake by FDA or the commissioner as serious as this one,” Dr. Eric Topol of the Scripps Translational Research Institute tells NPR. On Monday evening, Hahn tweeted an apology, saying “The criticism is entirely justified.” Hahn tried to explain his error by portraying it as a poor choice of words. “What I should have said better is that the data show a relative risk reduction not an absolute risk reduction.”” [NPR, [8/25/20](#)]

Headline: Washington Post: “Inside Trump’s pressure campaign on federal scientists over a covid-19 treatment.” [Washington Post, [8/30/20](#)]

Headline: CNN: “CDC was pressured 'from the top down' to change coronavirus testing guidance, official says.” [CNN, [8/26/20](#)]

Sec. Carson and MyPillow CEO Lindell Urged Trump to Support Oleandrin in July Oval Office Meeting – According To Lindell, Trump Said FDA Should Approve It. “To the alarm of some government health officials, President Trump has expressed enthusiasm for the Food and Drug Administration to permit an extract from the oleander plant to be marketed as a dietary supplement or, alternatively, approved as a drug to cure COVID-19, despite lack of proof that it works...The experimental botanical extract, oleandrin, was promoted to Trump during an Oval Office meeting in July. It's embraced by Housing and Urban Development Secretary Ben Carson and MyPillow founder and CEO Mike Lindell, a big Trump backer, who recently took a financial stake in the company that develops the product. Lindell told Axios that in the meeting, Trump “basically said: ...'The FDA should be approving it.’” [Axios, [8/17/20](#)]

September 2020

Headline: Politico: “Emails show HHS official trying to muzzle Fauci.” [Politico, [9/9/20](#)]

Headline: Politico: “Trump officials interfered with CDC reports on Covid-19.” [Politico, [9/11/20](#)]

Headline: CNN: “Trump’s HHS alters CDC documents for political reasons, official says.” [Politico, [9/12/20](#)]

Headline: Politico: “HHS chief overrode FDA officials to ease testing rules.” [Politico, [9/15/20](#)]

Headline: Washington Post: “Trump’s appointees sought to censor what government scientists said about the coronavirus, emails show.” [Washington Post, [9/18/20](#)]

CDC Reverted Back To Original Testing Guidelines On Asymptomatic Spread And Testing After White House Pressured Them Into Revised Guidance To Limit Testing. “The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Friday reversed heavily criticized guidelines on who should be tested for the novel coronavirus after experts inside and outside the agency raised alarms about public confusion over testing and concerns about the country’s ability to control the epidemic. ... Friday’s reversal, which was posted on the CDC’s website, took place after the agency was directed in August by the White House coronavirus task force to shift its testing guidance. The task force-directed recommendation said those without symptoms of covid-19 “do not necessarily need a test.” Last month’s change caused an uproar among public health and medical professionals, who said the move would spark public confusion and impede the contact tracing needed to identify infected individuals and control transmission. They called for the guidance to be reversed.” [Washington Post, [9/18/20](#)]

Headline: New York Times: “C.D.C. Testing Guidance Was Published Against Scientists’ Objections.” [New York Times, [9/17/20](#)]

Headline: ABC News: “CDC reverses testing guidelines after report of interference.” [ABC News, [9/18/20](#)]

Trump Declared In Press Conference That CDC Director Was “Confused,” “Made A Mistake” In Outlining Vaccine Timeline, Stating That Masks Would Be More Critical.

“Trump, at a news conference, said he believed a vaccine will be rolled out much sooner. He said he called Redfield after his testimony to question him about it, and that Redfield appeared to have been confused by the question. “I think he made a mistake when he said that,” Trump said of Redfield’s testimony. “I don’t think he means that. When he said it, I believe he was confused.”” [Reuters, [9/16/20](#)]

Headline: The Hill: “Trump disputes CDC director on vaccine timing, says ‘he made a mistake.’” [The Hill, [9/16/20](#)]

Headline: New York Times: “Emails Detail Effort to Silence C.D.C. and Question Its Science.” [New York Times, [9/18/20](#)]

Headline: The Hill: “Despair at CDC after Trump influence: ‘I have never seen morale this low’.” [The Hill, [9/23/20](#)]

Headline: NBC News: “Redfield Voices Alarm Over Influence Of Trump’s New Coronavirus Task Force Adviser.” [NBC News, [9/28/20](#)]

Headline: Kaiser Health News: “HHS Reallocates \$300M From CDC For Ad Campaign; Celebs Defend Involvement.” [Kaiser Health News, [9/28/20](#)]

October 2020

Headline: Politico: “Memo details HHS push to upend FDA’s testing oversight.” [Politico, [10/2/20](#)]

White House Blocked FDA Guidance On COVID Vaccine Safety, Efficacy Due To Concerns Over Provision That Would Likely Push Authorization Past November 3. “Top White House officials are blocking strict new federal guidelines for the emergency release of a coronavirus vaccine, objecting to a provision that would almost certainly guarantee that no vaccine could be authorized before the election on Nov. 3, according to people familiar with the approval process. Facing a White House blockade, the Food and Drug Administration is seeking other avenues to ensure that vaccines meet the guidelines. That includes sharing the standards — perhaps as soon as this week — with an outside advisory committee of experts that is supposed to meet publicly before any vaccine is authorized for emergency use. The hope is that the committee will enforce the guidelines, regardless of the White House’s reaction.” [New York Times, [10/5/20](#)]

Headline: New York Times: “White House Blocks New Coronavirus Vaccine Guidelines.” [New York Times, [10/5/20](#)]

Headline: Politico: “White House cited drug companies’ objections in overruling FDA’s vaccine standards.” [Politico, [10/5/20](#)]

Trump Complained On Twitter That FDA Vaccine Guidance Was “Political Hit Job.” “New FDA Rules make it more difficult for them to speed up vaccines for approval before Election Day. Just another political hit job! @SteveFDA” [Twitter – President Trump, [10/6/20](#)]

Headline: Politico: “CDC changed report on Covid and kids after Trump official’s request.” [Politico, [10/5/20](#)]

Headline: Daily Beast: “Dr. Fauci: The Trump Campaign Is ‘In Effect, Harassing Me.’” [Daily Beast, [10/13/20](#)]