

CORONAVIRUS AND THE UNITED STATES

HOW A SUPERPOWER FAILED

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- How did the U.S. respond to the COVID-19 threat?
- Why was the U.S. response not enough to control the COVID-19 spread?
- How will COVID-19 impact the U.S. economy and politics?

INTRODUCTION

Approximately 100 years after the Spanish flu, humanity is shaken by a new plague, the coronavirus (COVID-19). Officially declared as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO),¹ the virus that emerged in Wuhan, China in late 2019 has taken more than 61,000 lives worldwide and more than 1,140,327 infected cases have been reported as of April 4, 2020.² The United States (U.S.) is becoming the new epicenter of the pandemic bypassing the total number of cases in China. Currently 24.5% of the COVID-19 positive cases are found within the U.S. (Fig. 1)

The first case in the U.S. was reported on January 20, 2020, at least three weeks after China reported the several cases of unusual pneumonia in Wuhan to the WHO. Being aware of the threat that this virus could pose, many states started to take measures and prepare for the pandemic. The U.S., however, failed

to respond properly. Despite the facts that the Global Health Security Index, which is an assessment of the global health security capabilities in 195 countries and territories, rated the U.S. with a score of 83.5, the world's highest,³ and that the U.S. spends more than any other country on its health system,⁴ COVID-19 showed us how a superpower can fail when its government does not assess a threat properly.

Based on the official data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), there are approximately 239,279 COVID-19 positive cases in the U.S. as of April 2 (Fig. 2).⁵ However, these numbers are contested by many experts. Trevor Bedford, a well-known virologist in the U.S., for a long time now has argued that the coronavirus began spreading in the U.S. in the beginning of January and that by the end of March there were about 245,000 people infected

1. "WHO Characterizes COVID-19 as a Pandemic," *World Health Organization*, (March 11, 2020), retrieved from <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/events-as-they-happen>.

2. "Coronavirus COVID-19 Global Cases by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering," *Johns Hopkins University*, retrieved April 4, 2020 from <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>.

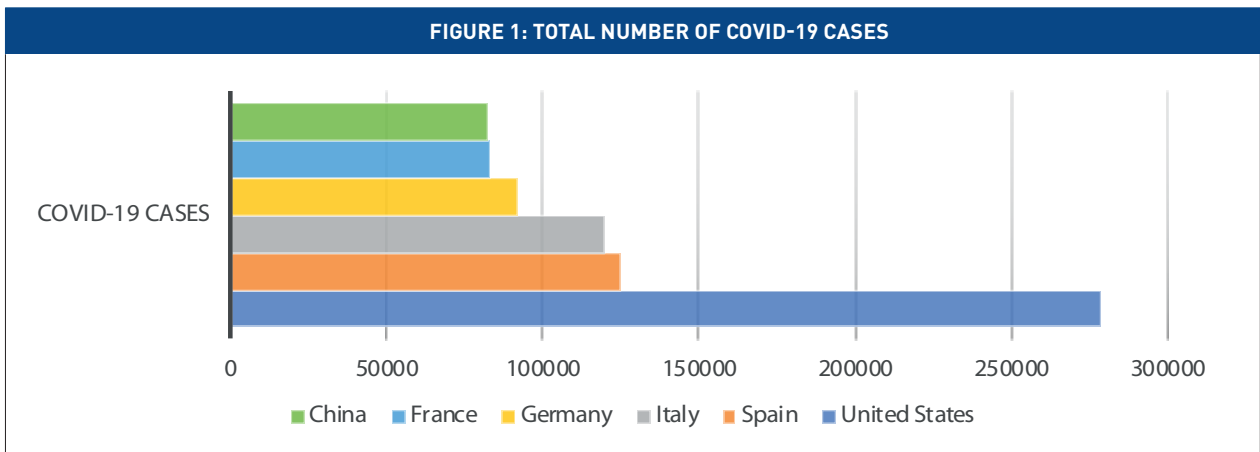
3. "GHS Index Map," *Global Health Security Index*, retrieved from <https://www.ghsindex.org>.

4. "Health Spending," *OECD*, retrieved March 31, 2020 from <https://data.oecd.org/healthres/health-spending.htm>.

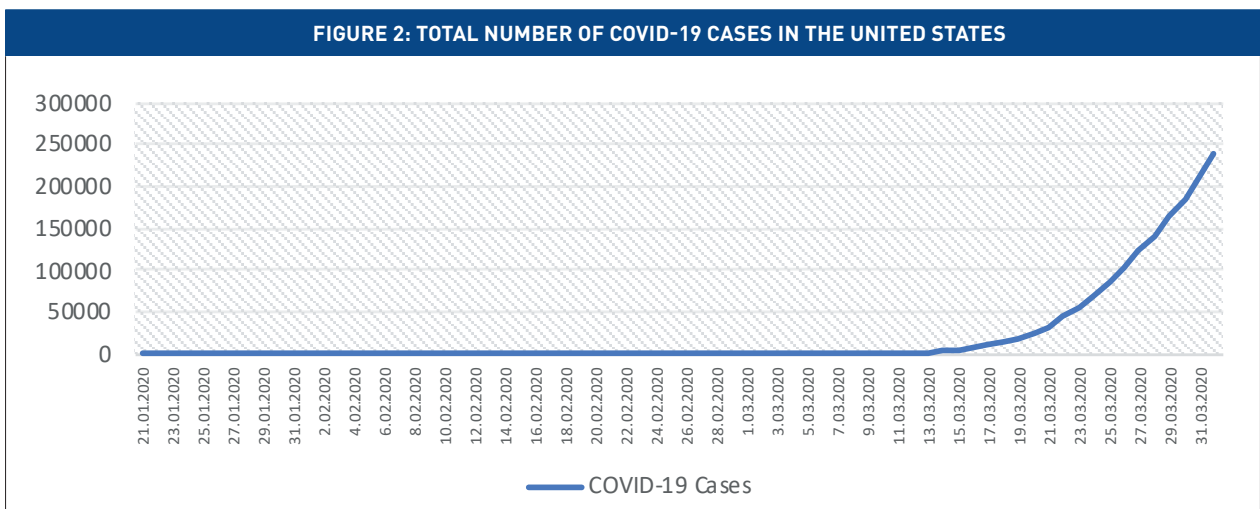
5. "Cases in U.S.," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)*, retrieved April 4, 2020 from <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/cases-in-us.html>.

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Source: Johns Hopkins University.



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

with COVID-19.⁶ As the U.S. surveillance apparatus from the beginning failed to control the situation, the number of deaths has been on a constant rise in the last days and is expected to increase even more in the following weeks. In the U.S., as of April 4, 7,163 people have lost their lives as a result of COVID-19.⁷ Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and the nation’s leading infectious disease expert, claimed that 200,000 Americans could die even if the U.S. takes aggressive

actions.⁸ Another study paints a grimmer picture: unless the United States takes further action this number may increase up to 2.2 million.⁹

Even though, the numbers provided by the CDC are controversial the slope shown in Figure 2 leaves space for much speculation. The number of cases started to increase dramatically after two months indicat-

6. Alexis C. Madrigal and Robinson Meyer, “How the Coronavirus Became an American Catastrophe,” *The Atlantic*, (March 21, 2020), retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/03/how-many-americans-are-sick-lost-february/608521/>.

7. “Coronavirus COVID-19 Global Cases by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering.”

8. “200,000 Americans Could Die even if the U.S. Takes Aggressive Action, Fauci Says,” *The New York Times*, (March 29, 2020), retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/29/world/coronavirus-live-news-updates.html#link-5b249818>.

9. Imperial College COVID-19 Response Team, “Impact of Non-pharmaceutical Interventions (NPIs) to Reduce COVID-19 Mortality and Healthcare Demand,” *Imperial College London*, (March 16, 2020), p. 7, retrieved from <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/medicine/sph/ide/gida-fellowships/Imperial-College-COVID19-NPI-modelling-16-03-2020.pdf>.

ing that the U.S. was not able to deter the virus when the time was appropriate. At the virus's outbreak, the Trump administration either misunderstood or did not want to understand what was going on in the world and in the U.S. As a result, for more than two months the virus spread silently among U.S. citizens while the government took none of the necessary steps to stop it.

There are multiple reasons behind the U.S. failure, as will be discussed below. At the same time, it is possible to argue that a pandemic like this is an exam for each state's government, and based on the current state of affairs in the U.S., the Trump administration is not faring well. In light of this, this article will provide a brief analysis of the steps taken by the U.S. government, what went wrong, and the impacts of such a crisis on the U.S. economy and politics.

THE U.S. RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 THREAT

The United States started to take measures against the virus spread a month after the first cases in China began to appear. On January 31, 2020, President Donald Trump restricted and suspended entry into the United States of foreigners who had been physically present in China.¹⁰ However, the restriction did not apply to U.S. citizens who had traveled to China. In the following days, Trump followed with similar steps for foreigners arriving from Iran and Europe, and placed mandatory screening for those arriving from Italy and South Korea.¹¹

In the days that followed, the measures taken by the Trump administration were very vague. Only after the number of cases started to increase dramatically were people asked to stay at home; the first call

came from California's governor on March 20, 2020. Similarly, schools were closed in mid-March, roughly two months after the first COVID-19 case in the United States.

Lastly, Trump signed two important bills a couple of days ago that would help people and businesses in the U.S. The first stimulus package provided free testing for all Americans, paid sick days, paid leave, expanded unemployment insurance, and expanded food security.¹² The second package is even more expansive and focuses mainly on direct payments, an expansion of unemployment insurance, and loans for small businesses.¹³

Compared to many other countries, the actions taken by the U.S. to date are inadequate. Experts such as Derek Thompson have labeled the U.S. a "failed state" in so far as it has failed to "project its authority or adequately ensure the safety of its population."¹⁴ Even Americans are not content with their government's efforts. Based on a poll conducted on March 13-14 by NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist only 46% of Americans thought the government was doing enough, while 61% shared the same opinion in February. Furthermore, the same poll revealed that 49% of participants disagreed with the way Trump was dealing with the pandemic and only 44% approved of his actions.¹⁵

WHY HAS THE U.S. FAILED?

As has become transparent the steps taken by the government came very late: approximately two months after the first case appeared. We all now know that in terms of the coronavirus even minutes matter. The

10. "Proclamation on Suspension of Entry as Immigrants and Nonimmigrants of Persons who Pose a Risk of Transmitting 2019 Novel Coronavirus," *The White House*, (January 31, 2020), retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/proclamation-suspension-entry-immigrants-nonimmigrants-persons-pose-risk-transmitting-2019-novel-coronavirus/>.

11. "President Donald J. Trump Has Taken Unprecedented Steps to Respond to the Coronavirus and Protect the Health and Safety of Americans," *The White House*, (March 11, 2020), retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-taken-unprecedented-steps-respond-coronavirus-protect-health-safety-americans/>.

12. Li Zhou, "Congress Just Passed a Bill that Will Guarantee Free Coronavirus Testing for All Americans," *Vox*, (March 18, 2020), retrieved from <https://www.vox.com/2020/3/18/21185065/congress-coronavirus-tests-paid-sick-days>.

13. Ella Nilsen and Li Zhou, "The Senate Just Passed a \$2 Trillion Coronavirus Stimulus Package. Here's What's in It," *Vox*, (March 25, 2020), retrieved from <https://www.vox.com/2020/3/25/21192716/senate-deal-coronavirus-stimulus>.

14. Derek Thompson, "America Is Acting Like a Failed State," *The Atlantic*, (March 14, 2020), retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/america-isnt-failing-its-pandemic-test/washington-is/608026/>.

15. "NPR/Marist Poll," (March 13-14, 2020) retrieved from http://marist-poll.marist.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/NPR_PBS-NewsHour_Marist-Poll_USA-NOS-and-Tables_2003151338.pdf#page=3, p. 13.

steps taken by the government can be said to have been too little too late and as a result the U.S. has failed to prevent and deter the virus. To understand the United States' failure better we need to focus on three main issues: (i) Trump and his administrations' actions; (ii) the failure of the CDC to create an effective policy; (iii) the testing fiasco and shortage of medical supplies. Needless to say that the latter two are closely related to the former.

President Trump and his administration are held responsible for the most part for the grave situation in the U.S. Accordingly, many believe that Trump failed to assess properly the coronavirus threat and as a result the United States was caught flat-footed. The president himself has been very inconsistent in his announcements and this has confused Americans even more.

On January 25, Trump tweeted: "China has been working very hard to contain the Coronavirus. The United States greatly appreciates their efforts and transparency. It will all work out well. In particular, on behalf of the American People, I want to thank President Xi!"¹⁶ Later, on January 30, during his speech in Michigan, Trump stated that the coronavirus was "a new thing that a lot of people are talking about," despite the fact that there were 8,000 confirmed cases in the world and many states had started closing their borders. He added,

It won't be as bad as some people think it could be... And we think we have it very well under control. We have very little problem in this country at this moment — five. And those people are all recuperating successfully. But we're working very closely with China and other countries, and we think it's going to have a very good ending for it. So that I can assure you.¹⁷

In the following days, despite the fact that the number of confirmed cases kept growing, Trump con-

tinued with his optimistic speeches and declarations on how the situation in the U.S. was under control and how by April the virus will be totally gone. He blamed the Obama administration for the current situation, and stated that a new vaccine would be available very soon. He praised his administration by saying that the U.S. actions are "the most aggressive [actions] taken by any country."¹⁸ Of course, such a statement is highly arguable. Trump's stance was the same for the greater part of March as well when he argued that COVID-19 was less serious than the normal flu. Trump even claimed that "anyone who wants a test can get a test,"¹⁹ a statement that - as will be explained below - is wrong on many levels. Until March 11, Trump never warned Americans about the potential threat that COVID-19 poses, people - especially the elderly - were not encouraged to be careful, and no statements were made on the importance of personal hygiene.

These inconsistent statements and in many cases false information confused the American public that should have started to stay at home and be careful since the end of January. Only on March 31, did Trump accept the gravity of the situation and during his Coronavirus Task Force briefing argued, "This is going to be a rough two weeks. As a nation, we face a difficult few weeks as we approach that really important day when we will see things get better."²⁰ This statement came after approximately 4,000 Americans lost their lives as a result of COVID-19.

These announcements are not the only mistakes by the Trump administration. Back in 2018, John

16. Donald Trump, *Twitter*, 12:18 AM, January 25, 2020, retrieved from <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1220818115354923009?lang=en>, (emphasis added).

17. "Remarks by President Trump at a USMCA Celebration with American Workers | Warren, MI," *The White House*, (January 30, 2020), retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-usmca-celebration-american-workers-warren-mi/>.

18. "Remarks by President Trump, Vice President Pence, and Members of the Coronavirus Task Force in Press Conference," *The White House*, (February 29, 2020), retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-members-coronavirus-task-force-press-conference-2/>.

19. Noah Weiland, "Anyone Who Wants a Coronavirus Test Can Have One, Trump Says. Not Quite, Says His Administration," *The New York Times*, (March 7, 2020), retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/07/us/politics/trump-coronavirus-messaging.html>.

20. Steven Nelson, "Trump: America Faces 'Rough Two Weeks' in Coronavirus Battle," *New York Post*, (March 31, 2020), retrieved from <https://nypost.com/2020/03/31/trump-america-faces-rough-two-weeks-in-coronavirus-battle/>.

Bolton, then Trump's national security advisor, was authorized to shut down the National Security Council's global health office which was in charge of pandemic response.²¹ Furthermore, the White House repeatedly called for budget cuts in the CDC and other disease security programs.

This brings us to the second issue: the failure of the CDC to create an effective policy. Even while the number of positive cases and deaths in the US were rapidly increasing, the CDC, one of the main institutions dealing with the virus, did not have a strong and effective policy. On the contrary, as the CDC Director Robert Redfield stated on March 10, their strategy was "to take rigorous, aggressive public health - what I like to say, block and tackle, block and tackle, block and tackle, block and tackle.... That means if you find a new case, you isolate it."²² This would have been a good strategy in January when the first case appeared but not in mid-March when a minimum of 190,000 people were infected.

Without a good strategy the system in the U.S. was doomed to fail. The aforementioned problems resulted in one big failure: the U.S. did not develop and/or use a test that would help in controlling the virus. To contain such a pathogen, the U.S. needed to test as many people as possible, to trace the positive cases, and isolate them as soon as possible before they came in contact with more people. Hence, the reason why the confirmed cases were at a low for approximately two months (as seen in Fig. 2) is not because the U.S. effectively controlled the situation but because not enough tests were conducted to track the infected people. This testing fiasco created a false sense of security among citizens which later turned out to undermine the measures that were later taken.

21. Lauren Weber, "Sudden Departure of White House Global Health Security Head Has Experts Worried," *Huffpost*, (May 10, 2018), retrieved from https://www.huffpost.com/entry/tim-ziemer-global-health-security-leaves_n_5af37dfbe4b0859d11d02290.

22. Sheri Fink and Mike Baker, "It's Just Everywhere Already: How Delays in Testing Set Back the U.S. Coronavirus Response," *The New York Times*, (March 10, 2020), retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/10/us/coronavirus-testing-delays.html>.

As a result, soon enough hospitals found themselves unprepared and overwhelmed with people who were ill. Currently there is a lack of medical supplies such as masks, gloves, and medical gowns. According to experts if the increasing trend continues, soon there will not be enough beds or ventilators to provide oxygen to patients. Furthermore, the lack of tests has obliged the hospitals to start implementing strict rules on who qualifies for a test. The rules required for someone to be tested are that s/he should have traveled abroad recently and should have had contact with a COVID-19 positive patient. As can be imagined this policy is totally ineffective as the virus has been in the U.S. for a long time now. It is important to mention here that the U.S. refused to use the WHO test kits and focused on using the tests developed by the CDC. Not only did the approval of these tests from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) lasted for a couple of days, but many of the CDC test kits failed to assess whether the person was infected or not.

The reasons for the U.S. failure are many, yet the Trump administration, understandably, is held as the main culprit for the current situation while the testing fiasco is seen as the Achilles' heel that brought the U.S. and its health system to their knees. What the U.S. is facing today will scar its future in many different ways; however, the U.S. economy and politics will be the most affected areas.

COVID-19 AND THE U.S. ECONOMY

Currently the U.S. economy is in shock and under risk of collapsing as the coronavirus spreads through the country. This comes at a time when Americans hold the highest household debt in history.²³ It is hard to believe but it is estimated that in a matter of days, more than 18% of workers in the U.S. lost their jobs.²⁴ Based on the official data from the U.S. De-

23. Linette Lopez, "The World's Massive Debt Pile Is Making a Coronavirus Chock Especially Dangerous Right Now," *Business Insider*, (February 29, 2020), retrieved from <https://www.businessinsider.com/tump-debt-make-coronavirus-worse-global-economy-stock-markets-2020-2>.

24. "NPR/Marist Poll," p. 21.

partment of Labor on the unemployment insurance claims between March 14 and 21, 2020 more than 3 million people claimed to have lost their jobs as a result of the spread of the coronavirus (March 14: 282,000 unemployed; March 21: 3,283,000 unemployed).²⁵ The same trend continued in the following week (March 21-28) and the number of unemployed increased to 6,648,000.²⁶ The situation becomes more dire when we see that these numbers will most probably surpass the highest recorded unemployment rates that were registered during the Great Recession and the Great Depression. Some forecast at least a 10% unemployment rate by this summer,²⁷ while economists from the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis have projected total employment reductions of 47 million, which means a 32.1% unemployment rate (compared to 10% during the Great Recession and 24.9% during the Great Depression).

Unemployment is not the only thing that the U.S. government has to worry about right now. Due to the pandemic, the stock markets in just three weeks have lost 20% of their value. This is “the fastest and the sharpest bear market on record”²⁸ for the United States. Furthermore, many businesses are closing and many of these may never reopen. This would translate into a drop in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and its impact on the U.S. economy would be severe. As a result, societal inequalities will widen even more, and people with low income who live paycheck-to-paycheck will be the most affected.

COVID-19 AND U.S. POLITICS

The upcoming elections have been one of the main reasons behind Trump’s hesitation to accept the grav-

25. “Unemployment Insurance Weekly Claims,” *U.S. Department of Labor*, (March 26, 2020), retrieved from <https://www.dol.gov/ui/data.pdf>.

26. Unemployment Insurance Weekly Claims,” *U.S. Department of Labor*, (April 2, 2020), retrieved from <https://www.dol.gov/ui/data.pdf>.

27. Ben Casselman, Patricia Cohen, and Tiffany Hsu, “It’s a Wreck: 3.3 Million File Unemployment Claims as Economy Comes Apart,” *The New York Times*, (March 26, 2020), retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/26/business/economy/coronavirus-unemployment-claims.html>.

28. Annie Lowrey, “This Is Not a Recession. It’s an Ice Age,” *The Atlantic*, (March 20, 2020), retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/quantifying-coming-recession/608443/>.

ity of the domestic situation earlier. This pandemic will serve as a test for the Trump administration and citizens will voice their verdict with their votes. As mentioned above, the White House’s ineffective response might result in the U.S. hitting one of its greatest economic crises to date in the following months. In situations like this, the economy plays a crucial role and directly affects citizens’ votes. At a time when Trump’s approval rates rely strongly on how he handles the economy, a possible economic crisis would prove detrimental for his re-election. It is too early to make predictions on this matter, but Trump’s opponents - Joe Biden and Bernie Sanders - are making sure to use this situation against Trump and gain points from these developments.

CONCLUSION

As many other states in the world, the United States is facing a disastrous humanitarian crisis, namely the spread of the coronavirus. More than 46,000 people have lost their lives all over the world and the U.S. is soon expected to be the new epicenter of the pandemic.

The U.S., a superpower that praises itself as “the best, most efficient, and most technologically advanced society in the world,”²⁹ is about to face one of its lowest points in history. Meanwhile, many other smaller or weaker states seem to be handling the spread of coronavirus better. The way the Trump administration responded to - or more accurately did not respond to - the crisis seems to be one of the main reasons behind the shock that the U.S. experiences today. As a result, the United States is expected to face one of its greatest economic crises and, at the same time, Trump’s re-election is highly questioned.

For a long time now, scholars have been questioning the U.S. hegemony and many have argued that the United States’ power is in decline. The current situation in the United States proves there is

29. Anne Applebaum, “The Coronavirus Called America’s Bluff,” *The Atlantic*, (March 15, 2020), retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/coronavirus-showed-america-wasnt-task/608023/>.

truth to these opinions as the U.S. government did not only not take any steps to prevent the spreading of the virus across the world -as a hegemon would

do- but could not manage to protect the lives of its own citizens by undertaking the necessary actions in its homeland on time.