Trump clings to bogus claim that he saved 2.2 million Americans from death by COVID-19

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For months, President Trump has pushed the idea that he and his administration have saved the lives of "potentially 2.2 million people" during the pandemic, a claim based on an early estimate by British researchers on the deaths that could result if the U.S. government and its citizens did absolutely nothing to respond to COVID-19.

While the president regularly tosses out that claim in an effort to defend his administration's handling of the pandemic that has so far killed more than 212,000 Americans, on Thursday he found a way to turn it against former Vice President Joe Biden, who continues to build on his lead over the president in most polls.

Trump based his argument on a comparison to the epidemic of H1N1 swine flu in 2009, when Biden was vice president. Approximately 60 million Americans contracted the virus that year and around 12,500 died.

"If he were in charge, perhaps 2.2 million people would have died from this much more lethal disease!" Trump wrote.

The single biggest problem with Trump tossing out the grim 2.2 million estimate is the rather preposterous idea that Americans, or citizens of any other nation, would not seek to change their behavior at all even though hundreds of thousands of their fellow citizens were dying around them.

In fact, the Imperial College of London authors noted as much when they released their report on March 16.

"In the (unlikely) absence of any control measures or spontaneous changes in individual behavior, we would expect a peak in mortality (death rates) to occur after approximately 3 months. In such scenarios, given an estimated R0 [reproduction number] of 2.4, we predict 81% of the [Great Britain] and U.S. populations would be infected over the course of the epidemic," the report stated, adding, "In total, in an unmitigated epidemic, we would predict approximately 510,000 deaths in G.B., and 2.2 million in the U.S., not accounting for negative effects of health systems being overwhelmed by mortality."

While the report and its staggering hypothetical death figures are reported to have helped convince Trump of the seriousness of the threat of the pandemic, the president's misappropriation of its findings are telling.

In a piece posted to the Cato Institute's website, economist Alan Reynolds notes that in the model researchers used, "the reproduction rate is not a constant, but a variable that depends on many other things." The biggest variable, as has been seen over the past nine months, is how human behavior can affect the spread of the virus.

"The worst-case Imperial College estimate of 2.2 million deaths if everyone does 'nothing' did not simply mean no government lockdowns, as a March 31 White House graph with two curves implied. It meant nobody avoids crowded elevators, or wears face masks, washes their hands more often, or buys gloves or hand sanitizer. Everyone does literally nothing to avoid danger," Reynolds wrote.

Trump, of course, left coronavirus restrictions up to state governors, and for months has pushed them to be lifted, so he is in a poor position to claim credit for deaths prevented by such measures. What the president most often takes credit for in terms of saving American lives, however, is his implementation of a partial travel ban that prevented most, but not all, travel from China to the U.S.

"By closing up, we saved millions — potentially millions of lives," Trump said in July. "It could be 2 to 3 million lives."

As the Wall Street Journal noted on Thursday, by the time the ban went into effect, the virus had already begun spreading rapidly in the U.S., especially in California and New York.

Whether Trump could have stopped the spread of COVID-19 by acting quicker is debatable, but asserting that he somehow saved more than 2 million American lives is pure fiction. So far, the pandemic has so far claimed just over 1 million lives worldwide. That's likely because people, and sometimes governments, actually take action when they suspect they are at risk of death.