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'Jarring, unwelcome, and dangerous': Some conservatives are outraged at Trump's claim that his 'authority is total'

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This week, President Trump set off alarms not just among Democrats, from some conservatives and limited government proponents, for his comments that he had "total authority" to "open" the economy by lifting the shutdown restrictions put in place by states and cities to combat the coronavirus.

"For the purpose of creating conflict and confusion, some in the Fake News Media are saying that it is the Governors decision to open up the states, not that of the President of the United States & the Federal Government," he tweeted Monday.

"Let it be fully understood that this is incorrect," he continued, "It is the decision of the President, and for many good reasons."

Trump is wrong; the power remains primarily with the governors who issued the orders. But as critics and news reports pushed back on his authority to command the states to lift their shutdown orders, Trump sought to assert his power and control over the situation.

"I have the ultimate authority," he reiterated Monday's coronavirus task force briefing.

"When somebody is the president of the United States, the authority is total," he said. "And that's the way it's got to be. It's total."

On MSNBC, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo quipped that, "The president basically declared himself King Trump, right?"

But it wasn't just Democrats that pushed back on Trump's rhetorical power grab.

Rep. Justin Amash, who left the Republican Party in 2019 to become an Independent, has criticized the president on several occasions, quickly unleashed a barrage of outrage on Twitter, even tweeting a gif of Star Wars villain Emperor Palpatine in response to a clip of Trump's briefing.

"Americans who believe in limited government deserve another option," he tweeted. When a supporter implied that the alliterative could be Amash himself, the Congressman replied, "I'm looking at it closely this week."

In the National Review, the magazine's editors wrote that "To hear the words 'the authority is total' pass the lips of our chief executive was jarring, unwelcome, and dangerous."

Bill Kristol, founder of the now-shuttered Weekly Standard and now a prominent "Never Trump" conservative analyst, admitted in The Bulkwark that "I am alarmed."

He writes that some of Trump's critics would argue not to take his words too literally.

"But what if alarmism—even a little head-exploding—is warranted?" Kristol continued. "What if the quick dismissal of Trump's silly invocations of authoritarianism is too easy? What if loose authoritarian talk today is a harbinger or serious authoritarian deeds tomorrow? Can't performative authoritarian gestures lay the groundwork for more thoroughgoing authoritarian actions?"

On Fox News, anchor Bret Baier commented, "I think that there's hypocrisy here, in that, one if President Obama had said those words that you heard from President Trump...conservatives' heads would have exploded across the board."

Baier also pointed out that the White House had declined to issue a nationwide stay at home order, instead leaving it up to states, counties, and cities to order their residents to stay home.

But not everyone thought that the president's statements constituted a national emergency.

Baier's colleague at Fox News, Brit Hume, tweeted that Trump's remarks were "constitutional nonsense, another of his serial exaggerations," but criticized journalists for focusing on the statements rather than the government actions.

"This is simply rhetoric. It's political theater," said Josh Blackman, a professor at the South Texas College of Law Houston, who added that he believed people like Amash were "playing politics" by reacting aggressively to the remarks.

Blackman said that Trump was often "extremely effective" at changing the topic with wild remarks, noting that the focus was now on the president's comments rather than the government's actions.

"Maybe this is one of those cases where we're supposed to take him seriously but not literally," said Ilya Shapiro, director of the Robert A. Levy Center for Constitutional Studies at the Cato Institute, a D.C.-based libertarian think tank. "Legally speaking, he doesn't have the power. The question is practically, or for signaling purposes, he certainly does have influence, but it's not as a matter of law."

The president, however, could use other means to pressure the states to ease quarantine and stay-at-home restrictions that the nation's top health experts say are key to stopping the spread of the coronavirus, but also have caused massive unemployment and forced non-essential businesses to close.

"The president certainly has the bully pulpit," Shapiro said, "And whether publicly or behind the scenes, I'm sure he's trying to twist arms to get the states aligned by whatever policy he thinks is best."

When Trump comments about his authority, "we should take a wait and see perspective and see what the government actually does," Shapiro said.