

# The Washington Times

## Virus timeline finds few heroes inside Beltway as impeachment consumed Congress

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China reported to the World Health Organization on New Year's Eve that it was facing a novel coronavirus.

Three weeks later, the first mention of the coronavirus was made on the floor of one of the chambers of Congress. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, Kentucky Republican, interrupted Democrats' impeachment proceedings against President Trump on Jan. 23 to announce a high-level, closed-door briefing the next day. Few senators bothered to attend.

Rep. Roger Marshall, Kansas Republican and a medical doctor, five days later became the first to broach the virus on the House floor. He thought the information he heard coming out of China sounded fishy, and he wanted to sound the alarm.

"There were just too many loose ends," Mr. Marshall told The Washington Times last week, looking back at what prompted him to take the matter to the well of the House.

The finger-pointing in Washington has hit fever pitch. Democrats and the media accuse Mr. Trump of being slow off the mark in confronting the COVID-19 pandemic.

But a Washington Times review of who said and did what and when shows few heroes inside the Beltway in the early weeks of the outbreak. The press and politicians were more consumed with phone calls to Ukraine than a virus killing people in China.

U.S. health officials did move early to try to get on top of the situation and offered assistance to China on Jan. 3. They renewed the offer two days later, according to the president's team.

Those same public health officials spent much of January insisting the danger to the U.S. was minimal and telling Americans not to wear masks. That directive now seems unimaginable, given the current knowledge about the virus.

Mr. Trump made his first public mentions of the coronavirus on Jan. 22 in a CNBC interview and in a meeting with the president of the Kurdistan Regional Government. He downplayed risks to the U.S. and praised China's handling of the outbreak.

“We do have a plan, and we think it’s going to be handled very well. We’ve already handled it very well,” he said. “CDC has been terrific. Very great professionals. And we’re in very good shape. And I think China is in very good shape, also.”

In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention was about to ship tests already tainted with the virus, rendering them uninterpretable.

Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer, New York Democrat, raised the matter at a press conference in New York on Jan. 26. He said the Department of Health and Human Services needed to declare a public health emergency to free up money in the Infectious Diseases Rapid Response Reserve Fund. Five days later, the Trump administration issued the declaration.

The House didn’t hold its first hearing on the virus until Feb. 5, and it took almost another week for House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, California Democrat, to make her first public mention. In a press conference, she complained that the president’s budget proposal envisioned less money for the CDC.

Former Vice President Joseph R. Biden, now the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, weighed in with an op-ed in USA Today on Jan. 27. He said Mr. Trump was the wrong type of person to lead America through a pandemic, though he cast the international outbreak as more of a foreign policy challenge than a U.S. public health threat.

Throughout those early months, the press delivered contradictory coverage of the “Chinese virus,” as The New York Times called it in a Jan. 20 “briefing” article. The coronavirus repeatedly played second chair to impeachment and other Trump-gazing until weeks into the growing outbreak. It wasn’t until early February that the Gray Lady’s briefing scribes began to give the coronavirus top billing on its daily update column.

CNN has been particularly defiant in recent weeks and challenged Mr. Trump’s assertion that the press was slower than he was to spot the dangers. The network ran its first story about a “mysterious virus” on Jan. 6 and reported Jan. 18 that China’s statements were “likely grossly underestimated.”

The network began posting live daily updates on Jan. 22 of what it labeled the “Wuhan virus” deep into February. Like Mr. Trump, Congress and health officials, CNN was limited chiefly to what China was reporting, though it offered more caveats than the president did in trusting Beijing’s statements.

While the coronavirus was spreading in China, the U.S. didn’t have its first confirmed COVID-19 case until Jan. 21. Eight cases had been confirmed as of Feb. 1, and just 15 had been confirmed when Mr. Trump held a press conference at the White House.

Top health officials said they expected the number to rise, though they said the immediate risk was still low.

“Our containment strategy has been working,” said HHS Secretary Alex Azar.

Mr. Trump chimed in: “When you have 15 people, and the 15 within a couple of days is going to be down to close to zero, that’s a pretty good job we’ve done.”

Instead, the U.S. had 98 confirmed cases a week later and recorded its first death in Washington state. It now turns out that two people in California died at the beginning of February, but their deaths weren’t attributed to the virus until this month.

Mrs. Pelosi, while touring Chinatown in San Francisco on Feb. 24, insisted that the risk of infection was low and fears of the virus’ spread were “unwarranted in light of the precautions that are being taken here in the United States.”

Her big gripe against Mr. Trump was over money and his proposed budget for fiscal 2021. Congress had already shelved the document.

Now Mrs. Pelosi says Mr. Trump is responsible for the deaths of Americans because he reacted too slowly, and the president complains that Democrats fiddled or, more accurately, impeached while he was crafting policy in January.

The public has been left wondering what to make of it all.

### **Blame all around**

Yotam Ophir, a communications professor at the University of Buffalo, said neither the press nor the politicians got it right in the early days, though for different reasons.

Reporters covered the coronavirus “as an external threat,” with headlines calling it “the Wuhan virus.” It’s a mistake news media often make, said Mr. Ophir, pointing to his own research with outbreaks of Ebola, Zika and H1N1.

“So my view on the media is that, as was in the past, it took journalists too long to consider the virus a local problem. It was kept as an international news curiosity at times when major health organizations already warned of an upcoming dramatic outbreak,” he told The Washington Times.

The finger-pointing in Washington, meanwhile, is the latest example of politicizing science, Mr. Ophir said. COVID-19 became yet another issue viewed through the lens of the presidential campaign.

“Right away, it was framed through its potential effects on Trump’s chances in the elections, as it could threaten the economy, which is perceived by some, including the Republican Party, to be one of his advantages ...,” he said. “A few weeks later, not only did the Trump administration and the president himself downplay the severity of the virus, but they also began accusing the media of pushing forward a Democrat plot to overthrow the president.”

Mr. Ophir gave the public health agencies a cleaner bill of health. He said their messages evolved as knowledge of the coronavirus grew.

Early on, officials conveyed low risk to Americans, but their tone changed as the calendar flipped from January to February and person-to-person transmission in the U.S. was detected.

Mr. Trump, he said, was slower on the draw, complaining in late February that Democrats were politicizing the outbreak.

“So as far as I understand, CDC and HHS were waaaaay quicker to identify and warn about the danger of U.S. outbreak that could be severe and dangerous,” Mr. Ophir said. “It took the White House weeks, if not more, to change their tone from ‘it’s a political hoax’ to ‘it’s a public health threat.’ During this time, necessary action was withheld.”

But Dr. Jeffrey A. Singer, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, said the CDC and the Food and Drug Administration didn’t cover themselves in glory.

He said the FDA early on discouraged private laboratories from working on coronavirus tests with rules and decisions that made the CDC pretty much the only resource. In late February, it became clear that the CDC tests were tainted. The U.S. needed to catch up.

Then there was the mask fiasco.

Top government officials in January told Americans not to bother wearing masks. They said the masks weren’t effective and that medical personnel needed the supply.

Dr. Singer said those statements were at odds with each other. “I’m thinking to myself, ‘Wait a minute, if they don’t work, why do I need them?’”

Two months later, the official word changed. Masks were deemed beneficial, and some jurisdictions made them mandatory for some situations.

“The way I see it is our entire bureaucracy that’s supposed to deal with public health responses to pandemics is ossified and sclerotic and really slow,” he said. “It’s a failure of that that’s the main reason we’re playing catch-up now.”

If any institution distinguished itself, it was private business, Dr. Singer said. Sports leagues canceled seasons, Disney closed its theme parks and companies encouraged telework well before governors issued shelter-in-place orders.

“By that time, there was already a de facto lockdown because most of the social distancing we’re attributing to the success of flattening the curve was initiated by the people, by the private sector,” he said.

Even major U.S. airlines canceled flights from China before the president imposed travel limits.

**‘Too much smoke’**

In Congress, some voices called for early action.

Sen. Tom Cotton, Arkansas Republican, demanded a ban on travel from China on Jan. 28 and called for a “Manhattan Project-level effort to create a vaccine.” He also seized on a report in The Washington Times that said the coronavirus may have emerged from a government virology lab in Wuhan, several miles away from the wet market that was thought to be the source.

He was viciously attacked for those statements. “Don’t listen to Sen. Tom Cotton about coronavirus,” said HuffPost, which praised China’s “fairly quick” response to the outbreak and complained about false information.

Months later, the U.S. government is investigating whether the virus did leak from the Wuhan lab.

China sealed off the 11 million people in Wuhan on Jan. 23. Video that leaked to the internet showed officials boarding people into their apartments. The lockdown, which lasted 10 weeks, was imposed a day after Mr. Trump praised the government in Beijing and said it had the situation under control.

Mr. Marshall, a doctor, delivered the first House speech on the coronavirus. He said the information he was reading and hearing in January didn’t jibe. China initially denied human-to-human transmission and suggested that the virus was spreading from infected meat at the wet market.

When he found out the U.S. didn’t have scientists in Wuhan in late January, his worries intensified. Then when China was claiming only a few thousand localized cases, but cases were popping up in Japan and Taiwan, he began to question the Chinese data, saying it was such a perfect curve, “it almost looked like they dry-labbed it” — in layman’s terms, falsified it to look plausible.

“These facts just never jibed with me,” Mr. Marshall told The Times. “There was just too much smoke coming out of China for a little food poisoning.”

Yet most lawmakers were slow to spot the danger.

The Jan. 24 coronavirus briefing in the Senate, despite a high-powered set of briefers who included Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, and the CDC’s director, Dr. Robert Redfield, drew sparse attendance. Senators’ attention may have been on impeachment instead, speculated Politico, a website that covers Washington politics.

Politico pointed out that the press, too, was consumed with impeachment, burying coronavirus stories deep in newspapers or relegating them to the last seconds of newscasts focused not on China, but on Ukraine and Trump phone calls.

The pace of congressional activity picked up as impeachment faded. Top Democrats on the House Appropriations Committee wrote to Mr. Trump on Feb. 4 to suggest he make an emergency request for money.

The president would send a request on Feb. 24, asking for \$1.25 billion in new money, while siphoning another \$1.25 billion from existing funds.

Mr. Schumer countered two days later with an \$8.5 billion wish list. He would eventually prevail, with Congress approving \$8.3 billion on March 4.

Within days, all sides realized they had undershot again.

Two weeks later the president was signing the “Phase 2” bill that included Democrats’ wish list for paid family leave, paid sick leave and expanded food assistance, at a cost of nearly \$200 billion. Nine days later, Mr. Trump inked the “Phase 3” bill, a \$2.2 trillion stimulus package.

The fight over money coincided with growing partisanship over the virus, as Mr. Trump fought with Democrats and reporters, who were usually on the same side, over who knew and did what, and when.

Jason Holley, a research assistant and doctoral candidate at Cornell University specializing in science communications in Congress, says with major disasters, a lack of information at the beginning leaves little room to fight.

But as all sides learn more about what they’re facing, the partisan divide is inevitable.

“All risk, disaster or public health events with significant consequences are inevitably interpreted through partisan lenses,” he said. “In the case of COVID-19, the apparent delay of this partisan influx just seemed to be due to a lack of data from which to form positions and arguments on both sides of the aisle.”

By mid-March, the conversation in Washington and capitals across the states had turned poisonous, with finger-pointing and disputes about how to react.

### **Experts stumped**

At every turn, the disease seems to have flummoxed those charged with predicting the path of COVID-19 and those charged with decision-making based on that information.

The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington in late March was projecting a peak hospital bed use of nearly 225,000 as of mid-April. Even a week ago IHME was still projecting the need for 140,000 beds for COVID-19 patients.

In reality, use was closer to about 60,000 beds, the IHME now says.

The same thing happened with projections of ventilators and Intensive Care Unit beds.

The IHME didn’t respond to a request from The Washington Times.

But fueled by those sorts of projections, New York in late March demanded the federal government find 40,000 ventilators. Mr. Trump at the time said that seemed way out of whack, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency shipped 4,400 to New York instead.

The president turned out to be closer to the mark. New York last week said it had surmounted the crisis, and it was sending ventilators to Maryland and New Jersey to help out there.

Mr. Marshall said Mr. Trump has instinctually been ahead of most others on COVID-19, the disease caused by the new coronavirus.

Two weeks before the press was focused on testing, Mr. Trump was “lighting that fire,” the congressman says. He also had his eye on reopening the economy well before it became the hot topic in statehouses across the country.

“President Trump’s intuition — he’s not a doctor, but intuitively he knows we’ve got to have that conversation,” Mr. Marshall said.

“Through all this, through being impeached, he saved maybe millions of Americans’ lives with the travel ban, maybe hundreds of thousands of lives with the testing,” Mr. Marshall said.

Mrs. Pelosi, though, says the president has Americans’ blood on his hands.

In a withering letter to fellow Democrats this month, she said the president “dismantled the infrastructure” designed to handle pandemics, “resulting in unnecessary deaths and economic disaster.”

She repeated a discredited narrative that Mr. Trump called the pandemic “a hoax” — he was referring to Democrats’ carping, not to the virus itself, fact-checkers say — and said he “ignored” warnings in January and bungled the demand for coronavirus tests, and so he bears blame for the tanking economy.

“The truth is a weak person, a poor leader, takes no responsibility,” she concluded. “A weak person blames others.”