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Trump, the media, and the COVID-19 disaster

On Saturday, the *New York Times* published a lengthy exposé documenting the failure of the Trump administration to act on repeated warnings from within the federal government that the United States was facing an imminent disaster that threatened hundreds of thousands of lives.

The *Times* noted, “The National Security Council office responsible for tracking pandemics received intelligence reports in early January predicting the spread of the virus to the United States, and within weeks was raising options like keeping Americans home from work and shutting down cities the size of Chicago. Mr. Trump would avoid such steps until March.”



President Donald Trump speaks during a coronavirus task force briefing at the White House, Friday, April 10, 2020, in Washington. (AP Photo/Evan Vucci)

These warnings were repeated by the National Institutes of Health, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and even cabinet-level White House officials. Yet despite these warnings, the Trump administration failed to carry out the most basic measures to contain the pandemic. On March 2, nearly two months after Trump received initial warnings that the pandemic would strike the United States, less than 500 people had been tested for COVID-19 throughout the country. By that time, it had been spreading uncontrolled for over a month.

In public, Trump deliberately downplayed the severity of the disease, falsely claiming the pandemic was no worse than the flu. He argued that it would go away by itself and declared that the disease was a “hoax.” On Sunday, Trump retweeted a posting urging him to fire Dr. Anthony Fauci, his leading scientific advisor, who publicly stated that initiating measures earlier would have saved lives.

Clearly unnerved by the exposure of his administration’s incompetence, Trump as usual lashed out wildly at the press on Monday, insulting reporters in another display of ignorance, brutality, backwardness and self-aggrandizement. As usual, Trump spent most of his press conference praising himself and denying all responsibility for the disaster now unfolding.

While the *Times*’ report presents an important account of the Trump administration’s incompetent response to the pandemic, a very significant part of the picture is left out. It does not explain why the ruling class as a whole was so unprepared to deal with the pandemic.

Trump’s disastrous series of mistakes flowed naturally out of policies adopted by the whole political establishment and prior administrations. After all, the Bush and Obama administrations gutted public health preparedness, slashing funding year after year. Despite warnings of the danger of a pandemic for at least two decades, no action was taken to build up stockpiles of necessary equipment.

From January to the present, moreover, no section of the US political establishment seriously called for a major expansion of public health spending and a massive program of testing, quarantining and contact-tracing that could have stopped the pandemic and saved tens of thousands of lives. And yet, in a matter of just weeks, both parties were able to work together to secure a multitrillion-dollar bailout of Wall Street and major corporations that sent the stock market soaring, even as millions lost their jobs.

Nor does the *Times*' account explain the fact that the record of the *Times* and other major media outlets is just as miserable as that of Trump.

Despite numerous warnings of the novel coronavirus in the international media, beginning in early January, the *New York Times* did not devote its first editorial to the topic until January 29. The newspaper that so often serves as a conduit for "anonymous sources" within the intelligence apparatus did not report the "intelligence reports in early January predicting the spread of the virus to the United States" as one of the "bombshells" it has so often emblazoned in banner headlines.

In its January 29 editorial, the newspaper warned that "distrust" in "institutions"—a word the newspaper uses to refer to both itself and US intelligence agencies—is the greatest risk factor for the spread of COVID-19. It did not call for any emergency measures to combat the disease, or for an expansion of testing, quarantining and contact tracing capabilities.

Then, a general silence took over for an entire month, during which the *New York Times* did not write a single editorial on the pandemic. It was not until February 29, when there were 63 documented cases in the United States and confirmed community transmission, that the *Times* editorial board revisited the issue.

During the intervening period, which spanned the conclusion of the abortive efforts to impeach Trump on the basis of false allegations of "collusion" with Russia, the *Times* presented its readers with the usual fare of allegations of "Russian meddling" in American society, prowar propaganda, #MeToo hysteria and demands for expanding the power of the US intelligence agencies.

During the month of February, US stock markets continued to hit new highs. Trump has repeatedly made clear that his primary concern in dealing with the pandemic was its impact on the economy, and in particular, the stock markets. It is not difficult to surmise that similar concerns motivated the *Times* editorial board in seeking to downplay "bad news."

In fact, when its editorial board returned to the subject on March 3, it was with a new focus: "If the federal government fails to contain the spread of the coronavirus, and the economic outlook darkens, such a broad-based stimulus may well become necessary."

While the *Times* was silent on the COVID-19 pandemic, Democratic and Republican politicians were preparing a bipartisan stimulus bill that included \$450 billion in corporate bailouts and financed the Federal Reserve's \$5 trillion payouts to Wall Street and major corporations.

The silence of the Trump administration and the Democratic Party contrasts with the extensive warnings by the *World Socialist Web Site*.

A January 24 **article** by Benjamin Mateus noted that “evidence has emerged that person-to-person infection is occurring,” and that “cases have now been confirmed in Thailand, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, Singapore, Saudi Arabia and the United States.”

In a January 28 Perspective column titled, “The Wuhan coronavirus outbreak and the global threat of infectious diseases,” the WSWS noted: “The outbreak has exposed the enormous vulnerability of contemporary society to new strains of infectious disease, dangers for which no capitalist government has adequately prepared.”

The WSWS stated, “While the situation in China is dire, the so-called first-world countries are no more prepared to deal with an outbreak on the scale currently occurring in Wuhan.”

The perspective continued:

Put another way, while the governments of the world, particularly the United States, have made meticulous plans for large-scale war during the past quarter-century, no such resources or forethought have been devoted to combatting the rash of epidemics that have plagued the planet over the same period. Since 1996, there have been 67 epidemics across the world, including the outbreak of mad cow disease from 1996 to 2001, influenza in 2009, Zika in 2015-2016, and the continuing HIV/AIDS epidemic, which has killed at least 30 million people since it first emerged in 1960.

These disasters are at every turn preventable. Medical science has advanced to the point where it is capable of identifying new viruses within weeks and developing vaccines within months. And yet, as then-WHO Director General Dr. Margaret Chan noted in 2014 in relation to the Ebola outbreak, “a profit-driven industry does not invest in products for markets that cannot pay.” ...

The short-term, mercenary profit schemes that are inherent to capitalism are incapable of allocating the resources necessary to plan ahead and prepare for global risks.

Over the next month, in the period during which the *New York Times* editorial board was silent, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote four major statements on the pandemic in addition to its daily news coverage.

In “The coronavirus pandemic: A global disaster” on February 11, the *World Socialist Web Site* **condemned** the nationalist and xenophobic policies of the Trump administration and the statements of Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross that the pandemic will “accelerate the return of jobs to North America.” It warned, “As with every other social problem—

including the ever-widening social inequality, accelerating climate change and the heightened threat of war—the coronavirus epidemic is a global problem that requires an international solution.”

On February 27, the WWS published a Perspective titled, “The coronavirus pandemic and the need for global socialized medicine.” Alex Lantier wrote, “It is critical that the world’s health system be able to isolate patients, limit the speed of the disease’s spread, and devote the necessary resources to provide intensive care for those patients who develop pneumonia from the infection.”

The next day, the WWS published a statement by the International Committee of the Fourth International that declared, “The US government is completely unprepared for a major outbreak. There is no system in place to even systematically test for the virus.”

It concluded: “The working class must demand that governments make available the resources required to contain the spread of the disease, treat and care for those who are infected, and secure the livelihoods of the hundreds of millions of people who will be affected by the economic fallout.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* does not have the vast financial resources available to the *New York Times*. And yet we were able to warn the public about the disaster that was about to unfold.

This is because the WWS is motivated by an entirely different political orientation. The preoccupation of both the Trump administration and the *New York Times*, the main media outlet of the Democratic Party, is the preservation of the financial and economic interests of the ruling elite. The concern of the WWS is the defense of the working class and the broad mass of the population.

Just as they failed to warn the public about the dangers posed by the coronavirus as it was spreading throughout the country, both the Trump administration and the *New York Times* are seeking once again to downplay the pandemic to create a climate for a premature return to work. The *World Socialist Web Site* is focused on warning against such moves, arguing that human lives must take precedence over the profits of the ruling elite.

For more than two decades, the *World Socialist Web Site*, the publication of the International Committee of the Fourth International, has proven itself an indispensable tool in defending the social and political interests of the working class.

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