Covid-19: Trump fumes as adviser speaks out against lifting of US lockdowns

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Tension between the Trump administration and its public health officials burst into the open this week, as President Donald Trump openly criticised his top infectious disease specialist, Anthony Fauci, for testifying in Congress against the reopening of states that have not met the administration's published criteria for ending their lockdowns.¹

Dozens of mostly Republican controlled states are lifting restrictions despite failing grades on metrics such as new daily infections and percentage of positive test results. As the US passes 85 000 reported deaths, the president who published those criteria a month ago is now openly supportive of states that defy them.

But the threat has not diminished, Fauci warned the Senate, after Trump blocked him from testifying before the US House. "Needless suffering and death" will ensue if lockdowns are lifted prematurely, he said. The virtual hearing spoke volumes about the readiness of some workplaces to reopen, with both Fauci and the committee chairman, Senator Lamar Alexander, currently self-isolating after potential exposures.

Republican senator Rand Paul—who drew criticism last month for swimming in the Senate pool while waiting for a covid-19 test result that later came back positive—spurred with Fauci over schools reopening, a Trump priority. "We'd really better be very careful, particularly when it comes to children," said Fauci, pointing to cases of Kawasaki-like syndrome in kids.

"I was surprised by his answer," Trump later told reporters at the White House. "To me, it's not an acceptable answer, especially when it comes to schools." He went on to say that testing was "overrated" as a covid-19 intervention.

The next morning, Trump told *FOX News* that Fauci "wants to play all sides of the equation." Asked to explain if Fauci said one thing to him and another to Congress, Trump instead returned to the topic of schools. "We have to get the schools open," he said. "We can't keep going on like this. You're having bedlam already in the streets."

There have been vocal demonstrations against lockdowns, often organised by Trump's political allies and encouraged by presidential tweets. But US polls continue to show strong majority support for prioritising public health demands over reopening.

Also testifying before Congress was Rick Bright, who coordinated the government's vaccine efforts until he was demoted last month. This was done, he alleged in a whistleblower complaint,² in retaliation for his resistance to

"flooding" New York and New Jersey with hydrochloroquine, a drug promoted by Trump as a potential "game changer" in covid-19 treatment.

Bright warned that the US faced the "darkest winter in modern history" with "unprecedented illness and fatalities" if the federal government neglected testing and tracing infrastructure. He said that the 12-18 month timeline often suggested for vaccine development was optimistic. Bright urged the government from January onward to procure N95 masks, he claimed, but had been ignored.

Under a rule imposed on 20 April, US aid to help tackle covid-19 abroad, amounting to about \$900m (£737m; €833m), cannot be spent by recipients on personal protective equipment (PPE) without special permission from the US. Agency for International Development requests for such permission have gone unanswered.

"Right now, given the great need for PPE in our own country, our focus will be on keeping critical medical items in the United States," said secretary of state Mike Pompeo on 7 April. But Mike Bowen, owner of Prestige Ameritech, the country's biggest mask manufacturer, testifying to Congress after Bright, said that he had offered in January to reopen four mothballed manufacturing lines capable of making seven million N95 masks a month, if the government would promise him a long term contract. He was refused, he said.

Maskless revellers filled bars across Wisconsin on the night of 13 May, as the state's conservative dominated Supreme Court struck down a lockdown imposed by Democratic governor Tony Evers. Trump hailed the judgment as a "win" in a tweet. "Just because the Supreme Court says it's okay to open, doesn't mean that science does," Evers tweeted.

"We're the Wild West," Evers told *MSNBC*. "There are no restrictions at all across the state of Wisconsin. So at this point in time . . . there is nothing compelling people to do anything other than having chaos here."

The next day, many Wisconsin bars and restaurants closed again as some municipalities and counties imposed their own restrictions. The result is a patchwork of rules across the state, which could increase travel across county lines and spread the virus.

Trump is also targeting Pennsylvania, another election battleground. "The great people of Pennsylvania want their freedom now, and they are fully aware of what that entails," he

tweeted. Pennsylvania has reported 63 220 cases and 4294 deaths.

Some local authorities are threatening to defy the state's governor, Democrat Tom Wolf, by reopening. Calling those local leaders "selfish and unsafe," Wolf threatened to withhold state funds, tweeting: "I am announcing consequences for counties that do not abide by the law to remain closed."

- 1 Guidelines for Opening Up America Again. White House, April 16, 2020. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/openingamerica/>
- 2 Dyer O. Covid-19: Trump says added deaths are necessary price for reopening US businesses. *BMJ* 2020;369:m1861. 10.1136/bmj.m1861. 32381640

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