

WHAT A “REOPENING THE ECONOMY STORY” WOULD LOOK LIKE

The WaPo has a remarkable 2,400-word story that purports to explain how the White House plans to reopen the economy.

Nine paragraphs into the story, it includes this factually erroneous paragraph that also points out that’s not what this story is doing.

The White House cannot unilaterally reopen the country. Though the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has issued federal guidance advising people to avoid social gatherings, work from home and use pickup and delivery options for food, it is state officials who have put the force of law behind those suggestions.

The paragraph is factually erroneous because the guidelines released by the White House are not the basis for the state-by-state shutdown orders and in fact fall far short of what all but a handful of states have in place. The governors have put the force of law behind *more stringent* measures, that rightly treat the White House ones as inadequate.

But once you’ve acknowledged, as this paragraph does, that the governors – not Trump – will decide when to reopen the economy, then an editor should remove virtually all the rest of the paragraphs in the story as access journalism fluff that dangerously misrepresents the state of things.

Paragraph 16, though, is a keeper. It describes the things that Trump has some control over that still haven’t happened – most notably, far more testing.

Health experts say that ending the shutdown prematurely would be disastrous

because the restrictions have barely had time to work, and because U.S. leaders have not built up the capacity for alternatives to stay-at-home orders – such as the mass testing, large-scale contact tracing and targeted quarantines that have been used in other countries to suppress the virus.

The story doesn't describe that the Federal government just inexplicably ended, rather than expanded, testing. Nor does it reference a very good WaPo story from earlier this week, on which Josh Dawsey, who is bylined in this story, is also bylined. That story describes the utterly inconceivable fact that the White House was *just this week* beginning to debate what a national testing strategy would look like.

In recent days, the White House coronavirus task force has begun debating what a national testing strategy would look like, according to several senior administration officials. Leading that effort are Deborah Birx, White House coronavirus response coordinator, and Brett P. Giroir, the assistant secretary for health at the Department of Health and Human Services.

At a Monday task force meeting, according to a participant who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations, Birx and Giroir debated where to send the newest coronavirus tests – a version produced by Abbott Laboratories that can deliver results on-site in as little as five minutes, as opposed to tests that can take hours and must be processed by a laboratory.

Back on March 31, Dr. Birx suggested that states were just sitting on Abbott testing capacity that the government had already gotten to states, not using it.

DR. BIRX: So, even today – which is, I have to say, coming out of laboratories and developed tests and worked on vaccines and then gone to the field to actually combat epidemic – it is disappointing to me right now that we have about 500,000 capacity of Abbott tests that are not being utilized. So they are out. They're in the states. They're not being run and not utilized.

So now we have to figure out how do we create awareness, because sometimes when you put an early platform out – like our first platform out when the high speed was Roche – so you get that out, people get dependent on that, and then don't see that there's availability of other tests.

So right now, there's over a half a million tests sitting – capacity – that are not being utilized. So we're trying to figure out: How do we inform states about where these all are? How do we work through every laboratory association so they're aware? And how do we raise awareness so people know that there's point of care, there's Thermo Fisher, there's Abbott testing, and there's Roche? And if you add those together, that's millions of tests a week.

[snip]

Q So why aren't they being used?

Q What's the reason they're being used?

DR. BIRX: Because when people get used to a single platform, they keep sending it back to that lab. So it's getting in a queue to wait to get on a Roche machine, rather than being moved to this other lab that may have Abbott capacity. Because they're all in different laboratories. And so –

Q So how do you break that bottleneck?

DR. BIRX: I think – well, actually, Admiral Giroir is figuring it out, to really create some kind of visual so that every governor and every health commissioner can see all of their capacity in their countries – I mean, in their states, county by county, so that they know where the tests are.

So we pushed a lot of tests out, but they're not all being utilized. And so –

But a week after that, per the WaPo article on testing, Birx was still just debating a plan on how to use the Abbott capacity?

A tenth of the work force has applied for unemployment benefits, millions more are not working right now, small businesses are going under, all to give the federal government (or barring that, our states) time to develop a plan to get people back to work, safely. And only two weeks *after* the stay-at-homes went into place was the White House trying to devise a national strategy? Are you fucking kidding me?!?!?!?!?

And yet the failures of the White House to do the single most important thing it can do to get the country back to work doesn't show up in this story until paragraph 16.

That failure is important background for another detail in this story: That Jared Kushner, after promising yet failing to get testing into Big Box parking lots, will now have a key role in getting the economy back together again.

Trump is preparing to announce this week the creation of a second, smaller coronavirus task force aimed specifically at combating the economic ramifications of the virus, according to people familiar with the plans.

The task force is expected to be led by Mark Meadows, the White House chief of staff, and include Larry Kudlow, the president's chief economic adviser, and Mnuchin, the treasury secretary, along with outside business leaders. Others expected to play a role are Kevin Hassett, who has been advising Trump on economic models in recent weeks, and the president's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, administration officials say.

You can't combat the economic ramifications until you fix the problem that Kushner was put in charge of but then failed to fix – testing. Putting him a key role to fail yet again will do real damage to this country.

Ultimately, this story could – and should – look like this:

1. Trump wants to get the country back to work
2. But it's not up to him, it's up to the Governors
3. Trump has failed, miserably, at the one thing he should be doing – rolling out widespread testing
4. Trump now wants to put the guy who failed to fix the testing problem in charge of economic recovery

I don't mean to be an asshole about this, but Trump uses national media stories about him as a mirror, to gauge his own performance. The last thing he needs to see is a mirror that utterly distorts the things he can control – testing – and instead allows him to focus on the things he can't control – ending stay-at-home orders.