

California governor orders statewide lockdown as US coronavirus deaths top 200

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California Governor Gavin Newsom issued a statewide “stay at home” order effective Thursday midnight, requiring the state’s 40 million residents not to leave their homes except in cases of necessity—to work in certain vital occupations, or obtain food and medical care.

Newsom acted after state health officials projected that 56 percent of California residents will contract the coronavirus which causes COVID-19 over the next eight weeks, or a total of 25 million people. The number of those whose infections cause critical illness requiring treatment in an Intensive Care Unit is far greater than the number of such beds in state hospitals.

The governor also asked President Trump to send a US Navy hospital ship, now docked at San Diego, to the port of Los Angeles “immediately.” The ship would not treat coronavirus patients, but would take in patients facing other life-threatening conditions who would be displaced from hospitals to make room for those hit by COVID-19.

Newsom had announced Tuesday that he was putting the National Guard on alert, and would invoke martial law if it became necessary to do so under conditions of quarantine. Six counties in the San Francisco Bay area had already imposed a “stay at home” lockdown at the weekend.

California is one of the three current epicenters of the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States, along with New York state and the state of Washington. By far the largest number of coronavirus patients is in New York state, mainly in New York City and its near suburbs to the north, in Westchester County.

While Mayor Bill de Blasio has sought a “stay at home” order for New York City, Governor Andrew Cuomo has opposed such an action, telling CNN on Wednesday, “I am not in favor of quarantining a city. I am not in favor of imprisoning people.” On Thursday, however, Cuomo ordered all businesses to operate with only 25 percent of their workforce, leaving 75 percent at home. This was an

increase from the 50 percent limit set the day before.

There is undoubtedly heavy pressure on Cuomo not to permit a lockdown of the most important financial center in the world, which includes Wall Street and the New York Fed, which carries out the interventions of the Federal Reserve in the financial markets.

Meanwhile a report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), released Wednesday, rebuts suggestions that COVID-19 is a serious threat only to the elderly. Analyzing all US cases from February 12 through March 16, 4,226 in all, the CDC found that only 20 percent of those who died were under 65, but in cases of diseases requiring hospitalization, 55 percent were under 65, as well as 47 percent of those sent to ICUs. “These preliminary data also demonstrate that severe illness leading to hospitalization, including ICU admission and death, can occur in adults of any age with COVID-19,” the study found.

As the epidemic continues to spread, there are mounting reports of shortages of supplies and vital equipment at hospitals, particularly in the three epicenters. The CDC even issued an advisory that healthcare personnel should use “homemade masks (e.g., bandana, scarf) for care of patients with COVID-19 as a last resort,” if needed N95 masks were not available.

There are also shortages in the chemical reagents used to test samples from patients who report symptoms suggesting coronavirus infection. This has resulted in longer turnaround times for obtaining lab results, leading to a vicious circle: during the time that patients are in the hospital waiting for results, nurses and doctors must wear protective gear for longer periods since they don’t know if their patients are infected.

On Tuesday, reported COVID-19 cases in the state of Florida rose by 50 percent in a single day, and state officials asked the federal government for 500,000 protective gowns, gloves and test collection kits, as well

as two million face masks and 5,000 ventilators. This request from a single state exceeds the entire federal emergency stockpile.

President Trump denied any responsibility for the growing gap between hospital needs and what is available, during a more than hour-long press briefing at the White House Thursday. “The federal government is not supposed to be out there buying vast amounts of items and shipping them. The governors are supposed to be doing that,” he said. He was repeating his sneer of the day before, when he told a similar briefing that the federal government “is not a shipping clerk.”

Trump’s daily press briefings have become ever more insufferable displays of ignorance and self-praise in the face of mounting human tragedy, to which the “commander-in-chief” is completely indifferent. These have been combined with arrogant dismissal of any suggestion that his performance in overseeing an unprecedented social disaster could be subject to criticism.

At Thursday’s briefing, Trump’s main targets were the media and the Chinese government. He began the briefing by reiterating the phrase he has used repeatedly, referring to COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus.” Video footage shot from behind Trump showed that the text that had been prepared by his aides referred to the infection correctly as the “corona virus,” and that Trump had crossed out “corona” and written in “Chinese” by hand.

Trump gloated about the effect of social distancing in reducing the number of journalists in attendance, since every other seat was kept vacant to separate reporters from each other. He suggested, “We should get rid of about another 75 percent or 80 percent of them,” and nominated two by pointing at them derisively.

Then, towards the end of the briefing, there was a stage-managed provocation against both the press and China. Trump called on a supporter planted in the press corps and she asked him why the US media “have teamed up with the Chinese Communist Party narrative and they are claiming you’re racist for making these claims about Chinese virus. Is it alarming that major media players are consistently siding with foreign state propaganda, and they work right here—and have direct access with you and your team?”

This extraordinary suggestion—that US journalists are working for the Chinese government and could represent a physical threat to Trump—touched off a further diatribe from the US president in which he denounced the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington*

Post by name, concluding, “If we had an honest media in this country, our country would be an even greater place.”

In all his public appearances, Trump puts forward variants of the claim that “no one could have foreseen” the outbreak of the coronavirus epidemic. This has been repeatedly debunked, with ample documentation going back to the global response to the SARS epidemic in 2002, and subsequent outbreaks of avian flu, swine flu, MERS, and Ebola.

On Thursday the *Washington Post* reported that Senator Richard Burr, chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, had warned a group of business cronies weeks ago about the likely impact of COVID-19, at a point when Trump was still giving empty reassurances to the American public that there was nothing to worry about.

Burr told a luncheon meeting of business supporters on February 27 that, while he could not divulge any details from what he had learned from intelligence briefings, “There’s one thing that I can tell you about this: It is much more aggressive in its transmission than anything that we have seen in recent history.” He continued, as attested by a recording of the lunch obtained by National Public Radio, “It is probably more akin to the 1918 pandemic,” a reference to the global outbreak of influenza that killed more than 50 million people.

Burr evidently had acted on the warning already—on February 13, he sold off between \$582,000 and \$1.56 million in his personal stockholdings, in 29 separate transactions, the bulk of his personal wealth. Not only did he unload his stocks a week before the Wall Street plunge triggered by the coronavirus crisis, but these included \$150,000 in shares of Wyndham Hotels and Resorts, down two-thirds in value since then, and \$100,000 in shares of Extended Stay America, another tourism stock, now down to half its former value.

The senator’s office has, of course, denied any connection between his sudden withdrawal from the stock market and any advance knowledge he had of the likely impact of the coronavirus outbreak.



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