COVID-19 cuts a swath through official Washington

A reporter
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While President Trump declares his own infection with COVID-19 a "blessing from God," the coronavirus is cutting a swath through official Washington, hitting dozens of White House aides, the entire Joint Chiefs of Staff and well over a hundred members of Congress and their staff.

Trump posted a five-minute video presentation Wednesday in which he appeared like a snake-oil salesman for Regeneron and Eli Lilly, two of the giant drug companies seeking to cash in on the market for coronavirus therapeutics. In an obvious attempt to deflect attention from the million-dollar treatment he received over the weekend, Trump claimed that he would make Regeneron and similar drugs available free to all Americans.

Ignoring the fact that the vast majority of coronavirus patients cannot hope to receive the level of care he received—including dozens of doctors, an entire floor of the Walter Reed Medical Center, and a battery of drugs, including some still experimental—Trump presented his own disease and apparent recovery as divinely ordained.

Presumably God has also chosen to infect every one of the dozens of White House officials and other Republican Party operatives who likely contracted coronavirus at one of several "superspreader" events at the White House.

The September 26 announcement of Trump's nomination of Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court was attended by some 200 people, nearly all unmasked and none observing social distancing. Among those infected subsequently are Trump, his wife Melania, top aides including Kellyanne Conway and Stephen Miller, US senators Thom Tillis and Mike Lee, the president of Notre Dame University, where Barrett is a law professor, and several others.

By Wednesday, the count of White House personnel testing positive for the coronavirus reached 19, including four members of the White House press office, who deal with reporters every day and are generally not masked.

A second White House event attended by Trump the following day is the apparent source of the infection's spread through the military brass. Admiral Charles Ray, vice-commandant of the US Coast Guard, was among those present at a reception for the families of American soldiers killed in battle. He has now tested positive for the virus.

All members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff have been quarantined because they attended a meeting with Ray at the Pentagon on October 2. These include the chairman, Gen. Mark Milley; the vice chairman, Gen. John Hyten; Army Chief of Staff James McConville; Chief of Naval Operations Michael Gilday; Air Force Chief of Staff Charles Q. Brown; Marine Corps Commandant David Berger; CyberCom Commander Paul Nakasone; Space Force chief John Raymond and Gen. Daniel Hokanson, chief of the National Guard. Army Secretary Ryan McCarthy is also quarantined.

A Pentagon spokesman was at pains to declare there had been "no change to the operational readiness or mission capability of the US Armed Forces," and that "Senior military leaders are able to remain fully mission capable and perform their duties from an alternative work location."

Coronavirus is spreading through Capitol Hill as well, at least in part through Republican senators visiting the White House: three of them, Thom Tillis, Mike Lee and Ron Johnson, have now tested positive.

The latest member of Congress to contract the virus is Representative Salud Carbajal, a California Democrat who was tested after he was exposed to the coronavirus

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through Senator Lee. A total of 13 other House members, five Democrats and eight Republicans, have tested positive, as well as two more Republican senators.

According to the House Administration Committee, there are 123 employees or contractors of the legislative branch who have tested positive. This includes 46 employees of the Capitol Police, 42 employees of the Architect of the Capitol and 35 contractors working on the renovation of the Cannon House Office Building.

The biggest danger to federal employees is the brazen denial of scientific and public health considerations by the Trump administration, which is echoed by the conduct of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi towards employees of Congress. She has flatly rejected universal testing for Capitol Hill workers.

Trump has continued to cover up the circumstances of his own infection, which has clear implications for all these workers. The White House has refused to divulge when Trump last tested negative for the virus, which is essential to determine the length of time he should be quarantined. Trump has, of course, already broken that quarantine by returning to the White House Monday and the Oval Office on Wednesday, and he has declared his intention to participate in the next presidential debate on October 15.

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