

In His Own Words, Trump on the Coronavirus and Masks

During the pandemic, the president has expressed confidence that the virus would quickly go away and skepticism over the effectiveness of face coverings.

By Daniel Victor, Lew Serviss and Azi Paybarah
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President Trump — who insisted when the coronavirus first emerged that it would not be a threat in the United States — spent months playing down the effectiveness of masks, initially refused to be photographed with one on and this week mocked former Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. for wearing one.

He has softened his tone on masks and has been seen wearing one with a presidential seal, and in the summer he began encouraging Americans to wear them. But even his endorsements of masks — which health officials say are a key way to slow the spread of the virus — have come with caveats that have muddled the message.

One example: At the presidential debate on Tuesday, after saying that he wore masks “when needed,” Mr. Trump claimed that Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, the leading U.S. official on infectious diseases, had initially said that “masks are not good — then he changed his mind.” (Dr. Fauci rejected the claim, saying on Thursday that he had long been “begging people to wear masks.”)

It was the latest in Mr. Trump’s pattern of playing down the seriousness of the coronavirus. Here are some of his most notable statements since the beginning of the pandemic.

On his own use of masks and their effectiveness.

April 3, at the White House: “The C.D.C. is advising the use of nonmedical cloth face covering as an additional voluntary public health measure. So it’s voluntary. You don’t have to do it. They suggested for a period of time, but this is voluntary. I don’t think I’m going to be doing it.”

“I just don’t want to be doing — I don’t know, somehow sitting in the Oval Office behind that beautiful Resolute Desk, the great Resolute Desk. I think wearing a face mask as I greet presidents, prime ministers, dictators, kings, queens — I don’t know, somehow I don’t see it for myself. I just, I just don’t.”

May 21, touring a Ford plant: “I wore one” — a mask — “in the back area. I didn’t want to give the press the pleasure of seeing it.”

July 19, to the Fox News host Chris Wallace: “I don’t agree with the statement that if everybody wears a mask, everything disappears.”

Aug. 13, at the White House: “My administration has a different approach: We have urged Americans to wear masks, and I emphasized this is a patriotic thing to do. Maybe they’re great, and maybe they’re just good. Maybe they’re not so good.”

Sept. 7, asking a reporter to remove a mask while asking a question: “If you don’t take it off, you’re very muffled.”

Sept. 29 at a presidential debate: “I think masks are OK. You have to understand, if you look — I mean, I have a mask right here. I put a mask on when I think I need it. Tonight, as an example, everybody’s had a test, and you’ve had social distancing and all of the things that you have to.”

He continued: “When needed, I wear masks. I don’t wear masks like him,” he said of Mr. Biden. “Every time you see him, he’s got a mask. He could be speaking 200 feet away from them, and he shows up with the biggest mask I’ve ever seen.”

Early predictions that the virus would not be a threat.

Jan. 22, asked by a CNBC reporter whether there were “worries about a pandemic”: “No, not at all. We have it totally under control. It’s one person coming in from China, and we have it under control. It’s going to be just fine.”

Jan. 30, in Warren, Mich.: “We have very little problem in this country at this moment — five. And those people are all recuperating successfully.”

Feb. 14, addressing the National Border Patrol Council: “There’s a theory that, in April, when it gets warm — historically, that has been able to kill the virus. So we don’t know yet; we’re not sure yet.”

Feb. 24, in a tweet: “The Coronavirus is very much under control in the USA. We are in contact with everyone and all relevant countries. CDC & World Health have been working hard and very smart. Stock Market starting to look very good to me!”

Feb. 26, at a White House news conference, commenting on the country’s first reported cases: “We’re going to be pretty soon at only five people, and we could be at just one or two people over the next short period of time. So we’ve had very good luck.”

Feb. 26, flanked by top health officials from government agencies: “The risk to the American people remains very low. We have the greatest experts, really in the world, right here.”

Feb. 27, at a White House meeting: “It’s going to disappear. One day — it’s like a miracle — it will disappear.”

March 7, asked at Mar-a-Lago whether he was concerned that the virus was getting closer to the White House and Washington: “No, I’m not concerned at all. No, I’m not. No, we’ve done a great job.”

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