

Trump Signals He Backs Protests to End Safety Guidelines

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10-13 minutes

In a series of tweets on Friday, Mr. Trump highlighted three states—Michigan, Minnesota and Virginia—that have Democratic governors and where protests, organized in part by conservative groups, have taken aim at social-distancing measures. The U.S. death toll from the virus climbed to more than 34,000 Friday, with reported cases reaching more than 684,000, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

“LIBERATE MINNESOTA!” Mr. Trump [wrote](#), using similar language about the other states.

Mr. Trump has shifted his stance several times this past week on who is ultimately responsible for [the coronavirus response](#), first saying [he would make the call on reopening the country](#), but then deferring to the states.

The Latest on the Coronavirus

- Confirmed cases world-wide have passed 2.2 million, and deaths have topped 150,000, according to data from Johns

Hopkins University.

- China revised up its official coronavirus death toll by almost 40% to 4,632.

Prominent public-health doctors have said that even as the U.S. builds its capacity to test for cases of the virus, far more testing is needed before the U.S. should lift stay-at-home restrictions. Mr. Trump was told by several business executives at the White House this past week that before the public would be confident enough to engage in economic activity, his administration needed to dramatically increase the availability of coronavirus testing, which they called inadequate.

Mr. Trump on Friday announced plans to expand nationwide testing, stating at the daily White House briefing that his administration was sending 5.5 million testing swabs to states in the coming weeks. Governors, business executives and lawmakers have all called on the president to expand testing before reopening the country.

“We have to get even better,” Mr. Trump said during the Friday briefing, even as he put the onus on governors to tap into what he characterized as “a tremendous amount of unused [testing] capacity.”

“The governors are responsible for testing,” said Mr. Trump, who once again defended his administration’s response to the pandemic. “Following the announcement of our reopening guidelines, there have been some very partisan voices in the media and politics who have spread false and misleading information about our testing capacities.”

“I think the surge seems to be over,” Mr. Trump added.

Mr. Trump estimated that the nation’s death toll will reach 60,000 to 65,000.



Medical workers take a break at Maimonides Medical Center in Brooklyn, N.Y. Photo: Caitlin Ochs/Reuters

Between 8 p.m. Thursday and the same time Friday, 3,856 people in the U.S. died from Covid-19, according to a Wall Street Journal analysis of data from Johns Hopkins University. That was the second-highest number of deaths recorded in a day, bringing the nation’s total deaths to 36,773. The highest number of deaths was recorded on Thursday, when 4,591 died, according to the data. There were 31,905 new cases of the disease reported in the U.S. on Friday.

“You’re going to call your own shots,” Mr. Trump told governors

on a Thursday afternoon videoconference, according to a recording reviewed by The Wall Street Journal.

During a Friday afternoon call between Vice President Mike Pence and Senate Democrats, Sen. Tim Kaine (D., Va.) brought up Mr. Trump's tweets and accused the president of inciting division in the middle of a global pandemic, according to a person familiar with the call.

Mr. Pence said the administration is working respectfully with governors, the person said, and Mr. Kaine responded that the tweets weren't respectful. A spokeswoman for Mr. Pence didn't respond to a request for comment.

Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam, responding to the president's tweets, told reporters Friday that he was "fighting a biological war. I do not have time to involve myself in [Twitter](#) wars."

Mr. Trump said during the Friday briefing that he isn't advocating that the states fully lift their stay-at-home bans, but took issue with measures that he said are too restrictive. He didn't specify which provisions he opposed, aside from raising concerns about the Second Amendment.

Asked if he is concerned that the protests could spread the virus, Mr. Trump said: "These are people expressing their views. They seem to be very responsible people to me. They've been treated a little bit rough."

1. confirmed cases in the U.S.
2. total deaths in the U.S.

Source: Johns Hopkins Center for Systems Science and

Engineering

Earlier this week, protesters gathered at statehouses and governors' residences in a bid to amplify pressure on governors to ease stay-at-home orders.

The largest rally so far, in Lansing, Mich., drew more than 3,000 people, many in cars to bring traffic to a standstill in protest. The protest was organized by the Michigan Conservative Coalition, a group founded by a pro-Trump state representative, and the Michigan Freedom Fund, a conservative advocacy group with backing from the DeVos family, which includes Mr. Trump's education secretary, Betsy DeVos.

The protest in Michigan targeted Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer for her stay-at-home orders, which protest organizers said was overreach.

Tiffany Brown, a spokeswoman for Ms. Whitmer, said the governor supports the right to protest but that participants shouldn't put themselves or others at risk.

"It is disappointing to see people congregating without masks, and without practicing social distancing," she said in a statement. "This kind of activity will put more people at risk, and it could mean that more people will die."

The president has toggled between criticizing governors and arguing he has a good relationship with them.

He has repeatedly said states should take responsibility for obtaining crucial medical equipment and coronavirus testing supplies, arguing that the federal government is a backup.

Around the world, health-care professionals are lining up to applaud patients recovering from the new coronavirus. Photo: Juan Carlos Cardenas/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

The protests came as a record-shattering [22 million workers have sought unemployment benefits](#) during a month of coronavirus-related shutdowns, and many employees and business owners have grown frustrated with forced shutdowns of businesses, especially those that don't require large gatherings.

In Texas, Republican Gov. Greg Abbott set the nation's second-largest state on a path to reopening, saying shopping, hiking and some medical procedures may restart as soon as next week.

Stores closed due to the [pandemic](#) would be allowed to reopen April 24 on a to-go or delivery basis, similar to restaurants, so employees can run items to customers at the front doors to the shops, at their car windows or at their homes, Mr. Abbott said.

"We've been going for more than a month now with strategies showing businesses have been able to provide food and other supplies and products by delivery to cars, by delivery to homes," Mr. Abbott said. "We can at this time conclude that such businesses can be expanded."

Texas has a relatively low Covid-19 infection rate, with just over 17,300 people testing positive in a population of 29 million. It also has among the lowest [testing rates](#) in the nation, leading some public-health experts to caution that the virus's spread in the state remains unclear.

Mr. Abbott's announcement came after heavy pressure from the business community to get people back to work again. Business leaders said if a business is able to protect its employees, it should be able to reopen.

"If we waited until everybody has adequate testing, we'd still be two or three months down the road," said Steve Ahlenius, chair-elect of the Texas Chamber of Commerce Executives.



Stores in New York City's Harlem section closed as retail sales suffer a record drop during the coronavirus outbreak.

Photo: bryan r smith/Reuters

California Gov. Gavin Newsom, a Democrat, urged his fellow governors to avoid lifting restrictions too early.

"Do the right thing. Don't play politics, don't do the expedient," he said Friday. "We're all in this together, none of us are

Democrats, none of us are Republicans.”

Pressure from Mr. Trump to reopen their states comes as many governors have been [forced to cancel or freeze billions of dollars in spending](#) as states plan for economic fallout from the pandemic.

Mr. Trump also announced on Friday a \$19 billion relief program for the agriculture sector, which has been hard hit by economic fallout from the virus. Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue said the program will include \$16 billion in direct payments to farmers and ranchers, and \$3 billion in mass purchases of dairy, meat and produce.

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