

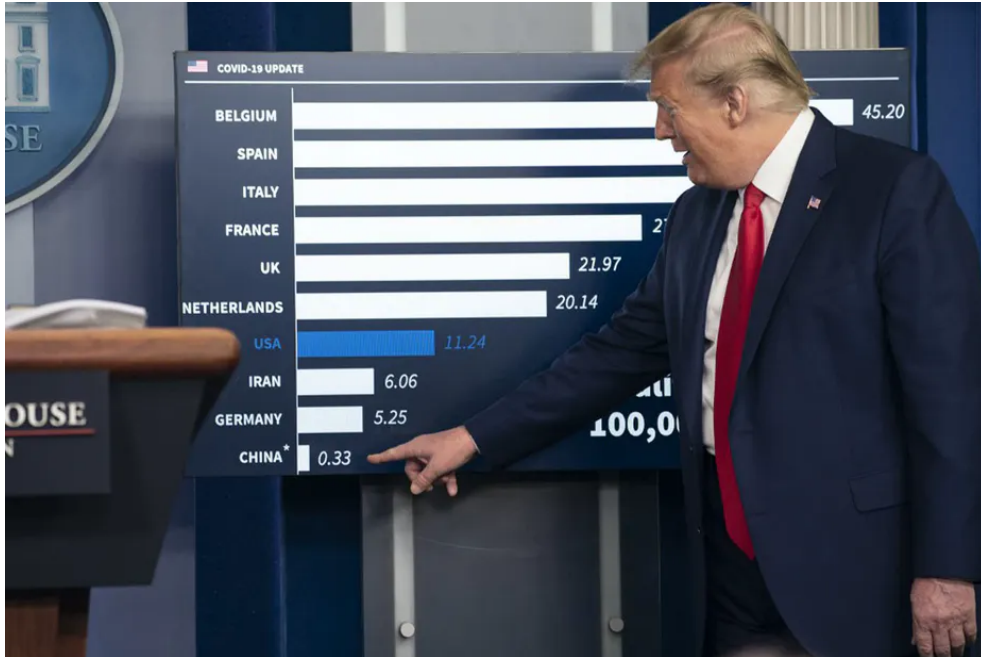
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Donald Trump's 'Chinese virus': the politics of naming

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Donald Trump at a press briefing with members of the White House Coronavirus Task Force on April 18, 2020 in Washington, DC. Sarah Silbiger/AFP

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Languages

- English
- Français

10 times Trump downplayed the coronavirus



It appears that the president dismissed the threat of the coronavirus because he feared the bad news might affect the market and jeopardize his chances of reelection. But as Wall Street dropped further, he finally addressed the nation from the Oval Office on March 11 to announce the suspension of travel “from Europe” as a way to protect Americans from the “foreign virus.”

The politics of the “Chinese virus”

Casting the virus “foreign” was not a simple rhetorical flourish. According to the database website Factbase, the president used the expression “Chinese virus” more than 20 times between March 16 and March 30. The deliberateness of the wording was made clear when a photographer captured the script of his speech wherein Trump had crossed out the word “Corona” and replaced it with “Chinese.”

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo accused China of putting the world at risk for its lack of transparency, even scrapping a joint G7 statement after its members refused to refer to the virus as the “Wuhan virus.”

Secretary Pompeo had a point. By early February, there was already strong evidence of a Chinese cover-up and repression of whistle-blowers ([here](#), and [here](#)), later confirmed by more investigations ([here](#) and [here](#)). Yet rather than criticize China, President Trump heaped praise on the Chinese response, especially following his phone conversations with China’s leader Xi Jinping for whom the president said he had “great respect” (February 7, Feb.10) and who, he claimed, was “doing a good job” (Feb. 18), “a professional job” (Feb.7.), “loves his country” (Feb.23) and is “extremely capable, working hard and professionally” (Feb. 13). This, even when he was asked about how he can legitimately believe the Chinese communiste regime (Feb. 26).

Donald Trump’s well-established, long-time fascination for authoritarian leaders and for power probably played a role in his favorable view of China’s leadership. But one of his concerns was also his fear that upsetting Beijing would jeopardize the US-China trade deal, hence his insistence on the good relationship with China followed by praise of the deal (Feb 7, Feb.10, Feb. 19). According to an investigation conducted by the New York Times, Trump resisted taking the hard line defended by many hawks in his administration (including Secretary Pompeo) – at least, until he was informed that a Chinese official had spread a conspiracy theory that Covid-19 had been imported by the U.S. Army personnel, which clearly upset him ([here](#), and [here](#)).

This is when the president started using the expression “Chinese virus.” When faced with accusations of racism, he dismissed its impact on Asian Americans, saying:

“It’s not racist at all. No, it’s not at all. It’s from China. That’s why. It comes from China. I want to be accurate.” (March 18)

This is a seemingly common-sense justification – after all, the virus *did* originate in China. This line of defense was eagerly taken up with by conservative media and Republican officials as another battle against “political correctness” in America’s culture war.

Language matters

President Trump may not have had racist intentions in this case, but the intent matters less than the effect. By early March, racist acts and harassment against Asians had already surged and they continued to spike through March and into April (here, here, here or here). Trump’s own Department of Homeland Security (DHS) issued a warning that white supremacists may exploit the crisis against Asian-Americans. While Donald Trump did not commit these terrible acts, elected officials and scientists have a responsibility for the way they talk about the virus – words matter. That is why the WHO has had a strict guideline since 2015 regarding the naming of diseases, a guideline followed by other world leaders.

The expressions “Chinese virus” and “Wuhan virus” personify the threat. Personification is metaphorical: its purpose is to help understand something unfamiliar and abstract (i.e. the virus) by using terms that are familiar and embodied (i.e. a location, a nationality or a person). But as cognitive linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have long shown, metaphors are not just poetic tools, they are used constantly and shape our world view. The adjective “Chinese” is particularly problematic as it associates the infection with an ethnicity. Talking about group identities within explicitly medical language is a recognized process of Othering (here and here), historically used in anti-immigrant rhetoric and policy, including toward Chinese immigrants in North America. This type of language stokes anxiety, resentment, fear and disgust toward people associated with that group.

Diseases, bodies and disgust

Metaphors also shape our world view by both highlighting and hiding certain aspects of a concept (Lakoff and Johnson). For instance, the expression “foreign virus” implies that the nation is a body facing an external threat identified as foreign. The nation-as-a-body is a common metaphor in the English language (think of expressions such as “head of state,” “head of government,” “long arm of the law”, etc.), but it also a metaphor used in anti-immigrant rhetoric as professor O'Brien has shown in his book, *Contagion and the National Body*. Donald Trump himself has associated immigrants with “disease coming into our country,” (June 11, 2019), “communicable disease” and “tremendous medical problem coming into a country” (Dec. 11, 2018), including during the 2015 primary campaign.

Such language implies that borders will protect an uncontaminated, homogeneous and somewhat “pure” population from the filthy, malignant foreigner. It hides the fact that travel restrictions alone cannot contain an outbreak, especially one that’s already there. They may delay the spread providing

that governments prepare a public health response, something the Trump administration did not do for a whole month, hence the president's anger when confronted by the press on this issue.

Reporter grills Trump: What did you do for entire mo...



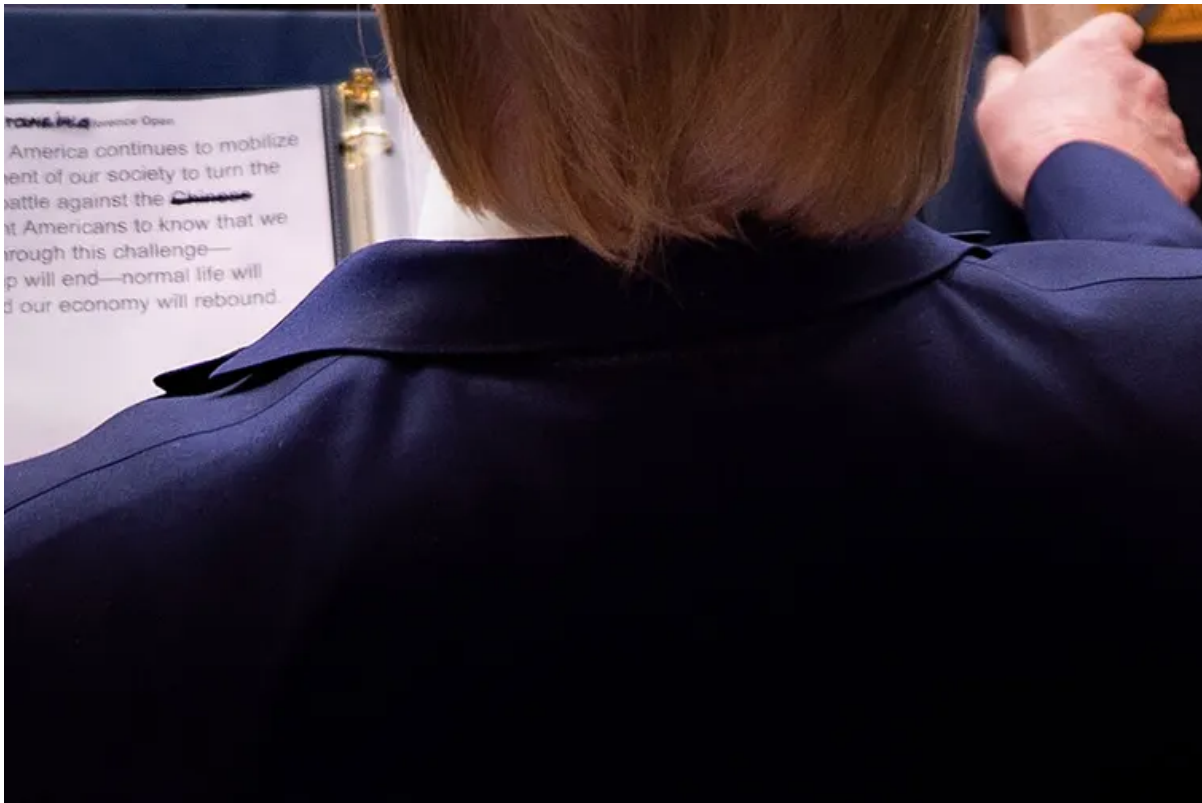
Similarly, while the red states were quick to support closing foreign borders, they were reluctant to impose social distancing within, and while these measures were in place in the Blue states, in accordance with the White House's own guidelines, the president eventually encouraged protests against democrat governors of those states.

Associating the virus with foreigners also plays to his supporters' cognitive bias against outsiders and immigrants and their fear of contagion – racial, social, cultural or otherwise. Academic studies (here and here) have shown a correlation between anti-immigration views, political conservatism and disgust sensitivity.

Communication scholar Michael Richardson has convincingly argued that disgust has been one of the primary affective drivers of Trump's success. The psychology of disgust is important here: its primary function is precisely to help us avoid diseases. It is concerned with what comes OUT OF the body, but also with what goes IN. It is also learned in early childhood. Problems arise when the psychology of disgust is directed at innocent groups or behaviors and passed off as "natural." Blaming a clichéd version of the Asian diet for the virus betrays a willful ignorance. Trump, himself, is a noted germaphobe, one who supported the anti-vaccine movement because he didn't like the "idea of injecting bad things into your body".

The war metaphor

President Trump abruptly stopped using the expression "Chinese virus" after China promised to send medical supplies, and turned his attack on the WHO instead, attacking them out for praising China.



Donald Trump looks at his notes where the word **Chinese** is circled. Photo by Brendan Smialowski/AFP

Not quite ready to apologize, the president issued a series of statements via **Twitter** and in his briefings asking for the protection of “our Asian community”.

He seems to have finally settled on the use of “the invisible enemy,” which he has used **more than 50 times from March through Mid-April**. This is part of his use of the war metaphor. Of course a pandemic is not war, and much has been much written about ([here](#), [here](#), or [here](#)), including on *The Conversation* ([here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)).

But what distinguishes President Trump from other leaders who have used the same war analogy to mobilize their countries is that he has largely dismissed the painful aspect of the “war” by focusing directly on the “great victory” which, according to him, “will happen much earlier than expected” ([March 22](#)) and “will take place quickly” ([March 18](#)).


Tump and Coronavirus - Wartime President



Meanwhile he has continued to pit people against each other, ignoring that a pandemic requires global cooperation and medical solutions, not national and military ones, or even local ones where states compete with each other for medical supplies in an “eBay” style bidding war encouraged by the Federal government. By presenting himself as a “wartime president” (March 22) against a willful enemy who is “brilliant” or “very smart” (April 10), Donald Trump has externalized responsibilities, blamed the media, international institutions, political correctness and the governors.

So while the wording has changed, the intent has not. Each new metaphor allows him to change the narrative, deflect blame and cast himself as the Savior-in-Chief who has saved “tens of thousands of lives” from the “foreign enemy.” Reality TV needs heroes. Trump desperately wants to be that hero. This script, though, doesn’t seem to fit that storyline despite his best efforts.

This article was originally published in French

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