



# NIGHTMARE SCENARIO

Inside the Trump  
Administration's  
Response to the  
Pandemic That  
Changed History

YASMEEN ABUTALEB  
& DAMIAN PALETTA

OF THE WASHINGTON POST

# NIGHTMARE SCENARIO

*INSIDE THE TRUMP  
ADMINISTRATION'S  
RESPONSE TO  
THE PANDEMIC THAT  
CHANGED HISTORY*

**YASMEEN ABUTALEB  
AND DAMIAN PALETTA**



HARPER

*An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers*



# Dedication

*To Ibrahim, Mom, Dad, Ehab, and Maryam*

*To Colleen, Connor, and Megan*

# Contents

*Cover*

*Title Page*

*Dedication*

Prologue: Covered in Death

## Part I

Chapter 1: The Invisible Enemy

Chapter 2: Like Water Through a Net

Chapter 3: Trapped at Sea

Chapter 4: Testing, Testing

Chapter 5: The Panic

Chapter 6: The Shutdown

Chapter 7: Dr. Birx

Chapter 8: Dr. Fauci

Chapter 9: Of Masks and Men

Chapter 10: "Liberate"

## Part II

Chapter 11: Pharmacist in Chief

Chapter 12: Remdesivir

Chapter 13: Jared's Shadow Task Force

Chapter 14: The Downfall of the Health Agencies

Chapter 15: From Bad to Worse

Chapter 16: The Second Wave

Chapter 17: Opening Day

Chapter 18: Atlas, Shrug

Chapter 19: A Shot in the Dark

Chapter 20: Long Live the King

Chapter 21: Judgment Day

Epilogue

Authors' Note

*Acknowledgments*

*Notes*

*Index*

*Photo Section*

*About the Authors*

*Copyright*

*About the Publisher*

# Prologue

## Covered in Death

*August 27, 2020*

CONFIRMED US COVID-19 CASES: **5,800,000**

CONFIRMED US COVID-19 DEATHS: **180,000**

Anthony Stephen Fauci slid the blade of a bronze letter opener under the flap of a white legal-sized envelope and slit it across the top. Inside was a single sheet of paper, folded into thirds. When he pulled it out and opened it, a cloud of white powder wafted into the air. It settled downward, coating his chin, his tie, his suit, and his desk.

Fauci froze in his black leather chair, quickly assessing his predicament. He could be covered in nothing. Or he could be covered in death.

*There are three possibilities here, he thought. This could be anthrax. There's an antibiotic I can take for a month and a half, and I'll probably be fine. This could be a hoax, someone trying to scare me. I'll be fine. But if it's ricin, that's bad. There is no antidote. A dose of purified ricin equivalent to a few grains of salt is enough to kill someone. If it's ricin, I'm screwed. I'm a dead duck.*

Fauci cautiously walked to his office door and yelled for his assistant, Kimberly Barasch, to summon his security detail. Moments later, a security official came barreling down the hallway to find Fauci standing in the doorway, covered in powder.

“Don’t go any farther!” he barked at Fauci. “Stay in the room!” He didn’t want Fauci to contaminate anything or anyone else.

Several other officials clad in hazardous material suits arrived soon after Barasch and one other person nearby had to evacuate, a cautionary step to ensure that no one else got hurt. The team covered Fauci in a

chemical spray to decontaminate his clothing and prevent the mysterious substance from drifting farther into the air. Then they led him into another office, where they had set up a portable shower.

It was August 2020. The seventy-nine-year-old doctor, one of the most famous people in the United States at the time, stripped to his underwear and was doused with chemicals in an effort to save his life. He was then instructed to take off his underwear and finish cleaning the remainder of his body by himself.

This was shaping up to be one of the deadliest years in US history. And each day, thousands of letters addressed to Fauci arrived at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, where he was the director. The vast majority of these letters praised him, while a small number called him some version of Satan and wished him dead.

And then there were the letters sent to his house in suburban Washington, D.C., presumably by internet sleuths who had found his address online. He carried those envelopes to the NIH office each day, placing them in a pile on his desk until he had a brief moment to relax and look at them. This letter had been sitting in that stack, with his home address typed in a strange font.

These were extraordinary times, and Fauci was omnipresent in public six months into the novel coronavirus pandemic. Bespectacled and bookish, for months he had been explaining to Americans that yes, this virus was very much something to worry about, even as President Trump and his top aides had insisted it would all go away and everything would be fine. Fauci had never been more loved. Or more hated. He had become America's doctor but also a foil to the mercurial and tempestuous president who was waging a war against science, a war that the United States was losing badly. The virus had killed more than 180,000 Americans as of that day, and close to 6 million others had become sick.

Fauci's public and private pleas for the American people—and the White House—to take the virus more seriously had made him an acutely polarizing figure. It was a far cry from the dark days of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, when Fauci had become the target of activists' ire. Back then, protesters outside his office window had shouted, "Fire Fauci! Fire Fauci!" but those same protesters had believed deeply in science.

This was something entirely different. Now he was receiving death threats. His wife and daughters were receiving various forms of harassment, including obscene texts and letters. So there he stood in something that looked like a swimming pool for toddlers, naked and stunned, unsure as to how it would all end.

Fauci had no idea that another envelope with white powder had arrived in the mailbox of Robert Redfield, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. And between ten and twenty letters were arriving each week at the home mailbox of Deborah Birx, the White House's Coronavirus Task Force coordinator. Some of them instructed her to hang herself. The existence of these letters, however, was kept confidential.

How had it come to this? What had happened to the country?

After Fauci finished the decontamination process, he was given a hazmat suit to wear. He is five feet, seven inches tall, but the suit had been designed for someone 7 inches taller. As he made his way down the hallway to the elevator and into the basement to go to the NIH showers to further rinse off the decontaminant he had been sprayed down with in his office, the legs of the suit dragged on the floor behind him.

After a twenty-five-minute shower, Fauci put on surgical scrubs and a coat. He called Dr. Christine Grady, his wife, best friend, and confidante. "Please don't get upset," he told her, explaining the situation. "Don't panic."

A scientist and medical expert herself, Grady knew, just as Fauci did, that there were only three options: anthrax, ricin, or a hoax. Her husband could either be completely fine or soon fall fatally ill.

Fauci's security detail drove him back home, where he waited with Grady for the toxicology results.

A few hours later, his phone rang and he was given the all clear. No proteins had been detected in the powder. That meant it wasn't anthrax or ricin or anything else poisonous. It appeared to be a hoax, some sort of cosmetic or makeup powder.

Fauci took a deep breath and exhaled. His office was being decontaminated. So he continued his work from home.

Ever since Trump had heard about the coronavirus in January, he had been determined to will it away, as he had—often successfully—willed away so many other problems in his presidency. There were brief flashes of humility, when he and his top aides would tell people to brace for a hard few weeks and promise that the country would come out stronger afterward. But these moments were few and far between, drowned out by the drumbeat of misinformation and dangerous proclamations that the virus was no big deal and people should go about living their lives.

Instead of emphatically recommending that people wear masks to

protect themselves and others—a simple act that studies predicted could have saved tens of thousands of lives—Trump eschewed them, viewing face coverings as a sign of weakness and some kind of political symbol. Instead of heeding the advice of top scientists and public health officials, he and his aides took their willingness to change recommendations as they learned more about the never-before-seen virus as an opportunity to discredit and ignore them. And instead of uniting the country to fight a common enemy—a microscopic assassin threatening to destroy the country’s health, economy, and well-being—he used it as a wedge to further divide an already deeply fractured nation.

Trump did not act alone. He was enabled by a cadre of advisers, cabinet members, friends, and family who shared his view about the virus and in some cases harbored an even greater disdain for the government’s scientific and public health experts than the president himself did. Even those who knew the right thing to do lost sight of the bigger mission—protecting the country against the virus—and instead became consumed with trying to keep their jobs and win the November presidential election, no matter the cost.

By the time this book was published, more than 550,000 Americans had died from the coronavirus—far more than the number of Americans who died in World War II and nearly 200 times more than died on 9/11. Another 30 million became infected, some with health complications that will stay with them for the rest of their lives. More than 20 million people lost their jobs, forcing many out of their homes and rendering them unable to put food on the table. Many of those jobs will never come back.

The government was supposed to be prepared for something like this. There were playbooks, strategy sessions, and briefing papers. None of them took account of the scale of the devastation the coronavirus would cause. The United States has some of the top minds in the world on pandemic preparedness. Beyond Trump, there were systemic issues that plagued the response from the outset: chronic underinvestment in public health, a depleted Strategic National Stockpile of emergency medical equipment, a decentralized health care system with little flexibility, understaffed and underresourced hospitals and communities, and an economy without the safeguards needed to protect against a massive shutdown.

But there were unforced errors, petty rivalries, and dangerous attitudes toward the virus that devastated the government’s response. Perhaps most dangerous was the administration’s assault on science and those who defended it.

By pushing back on the president's misstatements and obfuscations about miracle cures and how quickly a vaccine would become available, Fauci had drawn the ire of Trump, his aides, and his legions of followers. Fauci and others on the task force were not always perfect, and they sometimes misspoke. Some of their statements and assumptions about the virus were later disproven, often because the novel coronavirus upended scientists' understanding of how these viruses behaved.

And some health advisers contorted themselves to avoid rebuking Trump in public, either cowed by the president or because they had convinced themselves that the only way to remain influential was to bite their tongues. They wanted to serve as a check against the misinformation that often began in the White House and then took on a life of its own. But for many Americans, refusing to speak up more vociferously and refusing to correct and challenge the president at every turn was an unforgivable act of cowardice and an act of betrayal to the United States.

The puff of powder that floated into the air that August day in front of Fauci's face was the physical manifestation of this year from hell. Trump had had enough of Fauci, and so had his followers. The nation was so divided that people could no longer agree on a basic set of facts. Either you were with Trump and trusted that the coronavirus could be ignored, or you listened to the experts and thought that Trump was an archvillain.

As the nation's leader, Trump played a key role in the disastrous response. But the failures extended far beyond him. There were imperfect government officials, trying their best against a dysfunctional federal bureaucracy to lead the country out of the morass and save lives. There were also officials who cast themselves in Trump's image, adopting his bullying and self-preservation tactics to survive the year. And there were still more who were well intentioned but simply weren't the right leaders for this moment.

We have tried to document it all here: the government leaders who played critical roles and the decisions, meetings, and moments that shaped one of the worst years in US history. We have tried to give readers a full account of how the response unfolded and the myriad decisions and missteps along the way that led us to this point. Eighteen months after the US government received its first official warning about the virus, the country still has not returned to normal. The death and infection tolls have shattered the early forecasts. Hundreds of thousands of family members are dead. Millions of families will never be the same. And the long-term ramifications of this disease are still unknown. Will it haunt its survivors for another year? Another decade? Forever?

Scientists and historians will debate for decades what caused this particular coronavirus, in this particular year, to kill with such reckless abandon. The impact was uneven across the world. Numerous countries in Europe, for example, suffered greatly even though their leaders lacked Trump's autocratic bent and, in many cases, followed the science and urged residents to wear masks and social distance. South Korea, meanwhile, deftly dodged the brunt of the virus's terror.

But there was something much different about the way the tragedy unfolded in the United States. Political leaders not only failed, but they managed to turn the country against itself with disastrous consequences. People weren't just sick or scared. They were angry and hostile. They didn't know who to trust. The virus fed off of this. There were many other reasons the US was ill-equipped to protect its citizens against the coronavirus. This book focuses on the political leadership and decisions that exacerbated an already enormous challenge.

The outcome speaks for itself. The country that was supposed to be the world's leader in public health and science was brought to its knees and ripped apart by a virus, enduring the worst casualties of any developed nation. Instead of being a model, the United States became a nightmare scenario, a cautionary tale, an example of exactly what not to do in the face of a pandemic.

# *Part I*

## Chapter 1

# The Invisible Enemy

*January 24, 2020*

CONFIRMED US COVID-19 CASES: 2

CONFIRMED US COVID-19 DEATHS: 0

Alex Azar quietly backed out of the Oval Office and then sprinted across the West Wing, trying to outrun President Trump's tweet. The fifty-two-year-old health and human services secretary burst into national security advisor Robert O'Brien's White House workroom. "Robert, you've got to stop this," Azar told him. "You can't let him tweet praising President Xi. It's premature. It's not accurate. We can't do this."

Just minutes earlier, Azar had sat across the Resolute Desk from Trump, hoping to finally convince him that the new virus in China was a major problem. "Mr. President, this is really bad," he had said. "This is getting really bad in China, and this is coming to us."

Azar stressed that the Department of Health and Human Services and the White House National Security Council were doing everything they could to prevent the virus from spreading in the United States. He ticked off what the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other agencies had already done: they were screening travelers, working to bring home Americans from China. But the virus was presenting an enormous challenge.

Trump paused. "Well, how's China being?" he had asked Azar. "Are they cooperating?"

The answer was more complicated than what Trump wanted to hear. Yes, Azar explained, China was cooperating somewhat. It was doing more than it had done during the SARS outbreak in 2003, when it had concealed virtually all information about the outbreak for months. But that was a low bar. The Chinese still wouldn't let the CDC enter Wuhan to understand the

outbreak. They weren't sharing samples of the virus with the United States that would allow scientists to study it and accelerate the development of diagnostics and treatments. Without the CDC on the ground, the US government had little visibility into what was actually happening and what the risks were. They couldn't understand how it was spreading and how aggressive it was. All they had were half-truths from the Chinese government, which was already silencing Chinese doctors and citizens who were trying to speak out.

Trump thought out loud, "I'm going to put out a tweet praising Xi."

"For the love of God, don't do that," Azar responded immediately.

The United States needed to squeeze China for more cooperation. If President Xi Jinping thought Trump was happy with the way things were going, China would clam up, feeling it had fulfilled its obligations with the tiny bits of information it had put out. The proposed tweet would be a huge gift that Xi didn't deserve and that would only further empower the Chinese president.

But Trump wanted to butter Xi up. The two countries had signed a trade deal just nine days earlier, and Trump saw the economic pact as critical to his reelection. He thought China was going to purchase tens of billions of dollars' worth of soybeans and corn, which would help him lock up political support in midwestern states.

Brushing aside Azar's protests, Trump summoned his social media guru, Dan Scavino, to begin drafting the tweet. When Scavino entered the Oval Office, Azar took the opportunity to duck out. And run.

When O'Brien heard what was happening, he dropped what he was doing and rushed into the Oval Office. Azar stopped for a moment. Who else could he get to intervene? Mike Pompeo!

Secretary of State Pompeo was also in the West Wing that day, and Azar rushed to find him to deliver the same message. But by the time he made it back to the Oval Office, it was too late; the tweet had been sent.

"China has been working very hard to contain the Coronavirus," Trump wrote. "The United States greatly appreciates their efforts and transparency. It will all work out well. In particular, on behalf of the American people, I want to thank President Xi."

Twenty-one days earlier, on January 3, Azar had first heard about the virus when CDC director Robert Redfield had recounted a disturbing phone call he had just had with his Chinese counterpart, the director-general of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, George Gao.

Redfield and other top CDC leaders had known that something was amiss on December 31, when they had read a report in a medical journal about twenty-seven cases of an unidentified pneumonia outbreak linked to a wet market in Wuhan, China. The CDC had a team on the ground in Beijing, and Redfield was trying to send twenty or thirty more people into the country to investigate what was going on. Shortly after reading the report, he had spoken with Gao, whom he knew well. Both men were virologists, and they held each other in high regard.

During the January 3 call, Gao assured Redfield that the Chinese had the outbreak under control. Chinese health officials didn't believe that there had been any human-to-human transmission. The virus, they believed, would burn itself out. When Redfield asked who was officially being classified as sick from the virus, Gao replied that the government was looking for people with unidentified pneumonia who had visited the wet market. Redfield pressed him: What about people with unidentified pneumonia who hadn't visited the market? Gao had said he would look into it.

When the two spoke a couple days later, Gao's story changed slightly; he told Redfield that there were clusters of infection within families. Redfield pushed Gao again; he simply didn't believe that there had been no human-to-human transmission. What was the likelihood of an entire family visiting the same food market and all of its members catching the same virus from animals? It didn't make sense. They had to be spreading it to one another. Gao would have to expand the case definition, Redfield urged, and look for people with unspecified pneumonia, people who hadn't visited the wet market.

A few days later, when the two spoke again, a distraught Gao broke down on the phone. "We're in trouble," he told Redfield, his voice cracking. He had initially been confident that there had been no transmission in the hospital and that the disease would not be very contagious. But he now knew that was wrong; the virus was on the move.

Redfield needed to get a CDC team on the ground to assess the situation and provide assistance. He wrote a formal letter on January 6, after one of his earlier conversations with Gao, expecting an invitation. But even as China was dealing with the virus, it was reluctant to allow entry to foreigners. Beijing ignored the CDC request, as well as subsequent requests from both the United States and the World Health Organization. The Chinese government did not have a reputation for transparency or collaboration when it came to infectious disease outbreaks that originated there, and this was no exception.

Instead, as the outbreak grew, US officials received only spotty and selective information out of China. There were reports of the country quickly building giant hospitals and workers on airplanes in full hazmat suits screening passengers, even as the government insisted that human-to-human transmission was not happening.

Back in Washington, a small group began working on how to address the outbreak. Azar had instructed his chief of staff, Brian Harrison, to inform the National Security Council after the January 3 call between Redfield and Gao. There was little recourse possible for the limited information the administration was getting out of China. The United States couldn't exactly invade the country. So Azar and Matt Pottinger, the deputy national security advisor, began convening daily meetings with their teams to share what little they knew and to discuss steps to prevent the virus from spreading in the United States.

At first Azar felt that the small group was handling the situation well. On January 17, the CDC activated its emergency response center and began screening travelers from Wuhan. It activated the entire agency on January 19. During past crises, such initial steps might have proven sufficient.

Perhaps no one in the Trump administration had more enemies than Alex Azar. He had served in the George W. Bush administration as general counsel, and then deputy secretary, of Health and Human Services, and his past experience dealing with health outbreaks gave him some authority in this moment. But his personality (his few allies would call it confidence and competence; his many critics called it unchecked arrogance) was a major problem. And during those days in January, he was clinging to political life support. The president was still livid that Azar had convinced him to propose banning most flavored e-cigarettes a few months earlier, an idea that Trump's conservative base had revolted against. Ever since that blowup, Azar had done his best to claw back into Trump's good graces, trying to wrap both arms around whatever the White House was working on. But by the time the coronavirus hit, Azar, who seemed to be perpetually on the brink of being fired, had a major credibility deficit within the administration.

In addition to the e-cigarette fiasco, Azar's bitter rivalries consumed an inordinate amount of time and energy. His ongoing feud with Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services administrator Seema Verma, one of his subordinates, was proving a particular headache for the White House.

Someone had leaked damaging reports to the media about Verma's alleged use of taxpayer money to pay outside contractors with the purpose of boosting CMS and its work. White House officials were convinced that the leaks had come from Azar's team, and Verma's own staffers had concluded that only HHS possessed some of the emails leaked to reporters. Having that petty stuff come out in the media was embarrassing. Azar had been especially angry at Verma for opposing one of his signature drug pricing policies in 2019. The White House had hoped to present a unified health care plan to voters but instead had a health policy team whose members were constantly at one another's throats.

In November 2019, Verma told Trump that she and her staff felt bullied by Azar and that his behavior was interfering with the president's health agenda. Things got to the point that President Trump, Vice President Mike Pence, and acting Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney all had to intervene. In an attempt to broker some sort of truce, Pence told the two, "we all just have to make it for eleven months together."

Being HHS secretary was Azar's dream job, and he fought like hell to keep it. Some associates observed that he was enamored with the perks that came with being a cabinet official: the White House events, the security detail and limousine service, the regular access to the president. He knew that his survival in the job depended on his relationship with Trump, and he was willing to go to extensive lengths to butter the president up and keep him happy, even when his demands were unreasonable—which they often were. Still, Azar frequently served as a punching bag for Trump, being yelled at over bad health care polling numbers and Trump's perception that the health agencies weren't moving fast enough to implement various policies. Azar took it and his subordinates in turn often felt bullied by him in his desperate attempts to deliver for the president.

With Trump not taking him seriously, Azar felt compelled to play the game and used his Twitter account to promote Trump-related propaganda. On January 13, Azar's account posted a flattering article about the president's daughter Ivanka. Three days later, he posted a picture of himself on Twitter smiling alongside a Fox News host touting "Religious Freedom Day." Azar still hadn't spoken publicly about the virus. He might have been panicking about the virus in internal meetings, but he was shilling for Trump on Twitter. And people were noticing.

On January 18, Scott Gottlieb, a former FDA commissioner under Trump, texted Joe Grogan, the director of the White House Domestic Policy Council. Grogan was another of Azar's bitter rivals. Grogan's