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The president went to Kenosha, Wisconsin, today, against the wishes of both the governor and the Kenosha mayor, ostensibly to express sympathy, but really to try to change the narrative from the almost 185,000 Americans dead from the coronavirus and more than 6 million infected.

I want to pause here for a second. I try to write these Letters as if they are sort of a flowing report on the news. But I just can't flow over this number once again. We have lost almost 185,000 people to Covid-19. That number is a 9-11 attack every day for two months. It is flying a full 737 airplane into a mountain every single day for more than two years. I cannot fathom why combatting this disease is not an all-hands-on-deck national emergency.

Anyway, Trump was in Kenosha to change the subject from coronavirus and the stumbling economy to the idea that somehow the unrest in cities is the fault of Democrats, and to hammer home his message that he will be the candidate of "law and order."

That message didn't necessarily play well with people there. Trump wanted a photo-op in front of a burned-out camera shop, but the owner, Tom Gram, refused to participate because he said Trump was using his tragedy for his own political gain. "I think everything he does turns into a circus and I just didn't want to be involved in it," Gram said. He was surprised when Trump nonetheless showed up with the previous owner of the store, and implied it was still his. "I just appreciate President Trump coming today, everybody here does," the former owner said. "We're so thankful we got the federal troops here. Once they got here things did calm down quite a bit." Gram's response? "I think he needs to bring this country together rather than to divide it."

The idea that the unrest in cities is the fault of Democrats is a hard sell, because of course Trump, not Joe Biden, is currently president, and it is terribly hard to show images of today's America and warn that what someone is seeing is what will happen in the future if a different president takes office.

The visit did not garner the news attention it might otherwise have done, first because of the story from last night's interview by Laura Ingraham of the president, in which he alleged that a plane full of "thugs" wearing "black uniforms" were secretly directing Biden. This is apparently a reworking of an online rumor from June that suggested "Antifa" was coming to rural towns.

Even more headline-grabbing today, though, was the story from a new book written by New York Times reporter Michael Schmidt saying that Vice President Mike Pence had been asked to stand by, possibly to assume presidential powers, when Trump was rushed to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center last November. That story broke last night and it was not, it seemed to me, well enough sourced to mention it in these letters. And there it might have stood, except for the fact that Trump could not seem to help himself from tweeting about it repeatedly today, giving it far more credence than it would otherwise have had.

The initial story did not suggest a diagnosis for the president in that hasty visit, but Trump provided one himself: "It never ends! Now they are trying to say that your favorite President, me, went to Walter Reed Medical Center, having suffered a series of mini-strokes. Never happened to THIS candidate - FAKE NEWS. Perhaps they are referring to another candidate from another Party!"

Suddenly, mini-strokes, which in my layman's understanding are brief interruptions of blood to the brain or spinal cord, were on the table. Midday, Trump tried to suggest that stories that he was trying to hide a mini-stroke were either fake or really about Biden. Then, tonight at 10:27, he tweeted: "Mike Pence was never put on standby, & there were no mini-strokes. This is just more Fake News by [CNN], a phony story. The reason for the visit to Walter Reed, together with the full press pool, was to complete my yearly physical. Short visit, then returned (with press) to W.H..."

When Bret Baier of the Fox News Channel asked Pence about the event, Pence said he didn't "recall" if he had been asked to be on standby.

There was other news as well.

The White House has announced that the U.S. will not join a group of more than 170 countries who agree to develop, manufacture, and distribute fairly a coronavirus vaccine. Germany, Japan, and the European Union are all on board with the Covid-19 Vaccines Global Access (Covax) Facility, but the U.S. is going it alone. The White House says it objects to partnering with the World Health Organization (WHO) on which it has tried to pin the blame for our government's languid response to the coronavirus, saying WHO leaders were too ready to accept China's reassurances about the dangers of the virus.

White House spokesman Judd Deere said, "The United States will continue to engage our international partners to ensure we defeat this virus, but we will not be constrained by multilateral organizations influenced by the corrupt World Health Organization and China." This decision means that the U.S. will not have access to vaccines developed within the pool, but Trump is betting that the U.S. will come up with its own vaccine, first. Assistant Professor at Dartmouth's Geisel School of Medicine told Emily Rauhala and Yasmeen Abutaleb of the Washington post that opting out of Covax was like opting out of an insurance policy. "Just from a simple risk-management perspective, this [decision] is shortsighted," she said.

There are also legal decisions in the news. Yesterday, a federal appeals court turned down the request of Michael Flynn and the Department of Justice to shut down Flynn's case. Trump's former National Security Advisor, Flynn pleaded guilty to lying to federal investigators about his contacts with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak shortly before Trump took office. But between that plea and his sentencing, Trump loyalist William Barr took over as Attorney General, putting him in charge of the Justice Department.

In May, the Department of Justice filed a motion to dismiss the case against Flynn, arguing that his lies had not been material to the inquiry in which he made them. That inquiry was about Russian interference in the 2016 election.

Faced with the unusual situation of the DOJ dropping a case when the defendant had already pleaded guilty, U.S. District Judge Emmet G. Sullivan held the case to let others weigh in. He also appointed a retired judge, U.S. District Judge John Gleeson, to present arguments against the dismissal, and planned a hearing on the case. In June, Gleeson said the DOJ's argument for dismissing the case was a pretext, and that "there is clear evidence of a gross abuse of prosecutorial power." In June, the DOJ replied that even if Gleeson was right, the DOJ had the authority to drop the case anyway. In June an appellate court panel headed by a Trump appointee agreed to grant the DOJ's motion to dismiss the case, but Sullivan filed a petition to have the entire court hear it.

It did, and on August 31, it ruled 8-2 to deny the request to dismiss the case. It also left Sullivan in charge of it, permitting him to conduct his hearing. According to constitutional scholar Laurence Tribe, emeritus professor at Harvard Law School, Sullivan's exploration of why Barr tried to get the case dismissed will be at least as important as what it uncovers in its examination of whether Flynn should be permitted to withdraw his two guilty pleas.

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Notes:

Gram: <https://www.tmj4.com/news/local-news/kenosha-business-owner-declines-president-trump-photo-op-former-owner-replaces-him>

Visit to Walter Reed: <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2019/11/18/yes-its-ok-to-speculate-on-the-presidents-health-071399>

<https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/514710-pence-says-he-doesnt-recall-being-put-on-standby-during-trump-walter>

<https://www.msnbc.com/rachel-maddow-show/trump-s-latest-weird-theory-involves-plane-loaded-thugs-n1238969>

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/31/politics/michael-flynn-court-case/index.html>