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OPINION

Op-Ed: Trump's coronavirus failures? Thank Ronald Reagan



The skepticism toward science that has driven President Trump's coronavirus response is part of a conservative tradition dating back to President Reagan. (Los Angeles Times)

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A few days ago, Dr. Anthony Fauci called for a nationwide stay-at-home order to slow the spread of the deadly coronavirus. "I don't understand why that's not happening,"

said the country's leading expert on infectious disease, although he did acknowledge "the Trump administration's [hesitance to encroach](#) upon local authorities."

Many Americans share the good doctor's confusion. Why won't President Trump use his authority to issue a national stay-at home order? Or use his influence to persuade governors to do so? And, above all, why did President Trump [downplay the threat](#) of the coronavirus and refuse to act on the advice of his experts while there was still a chance of containing the virus and saving tens of thousands of American lives?

To many people, the president's actions appear inexplicable. But to those of us who have studied climate change denial, they seem all too familiar. Trump's response was, in fact, almost inevitable given three things we know about this administration and the policies it represents: a habit of hostility toward science and other forms of expertise, a worldview that prioritizes the economy above all else, and adherence to an ideology of "limited government," which has made conservatives belligerent toward the federal government for decades, even while they are running it.

Many people see Trump as an aberration from past Republican presidents, but his actions on COVID-19 are entirely consistent with the dominant worldview of American conservatives since Ronald Reagan. Reagan ran for office insisting that "government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem." He made that slogan the centerpiece of his [inaugural address](#), and once in power tried to limit the size and import of the federal government by decreasing tax revenues and rolling back federal workplace and environmental protections.

As governor of California, Reagan was no liberal, but neither did he seem hostile to science. Then, as president, he faced a conundrum: The emerging science on a set of issues — acid rain, the ozone hole and human-caused climate change — suggested the need for firm federal action to avoid serious, perhaps even catastrophic, damage.

In the months before Reagan took office, the Carter administration had begun negotiations with Canada to control air pollutants that caused acid rain, and was moving toward a treaty that would severely limit air pollution from power plants. Reagan's response upon winning the White House was to instruct his science advisor to alter the findings of a major report on acid rain to make the science seem more uncertain, and therefore [justify delay](#).

Some of Reagan's advisors and Cabinet members disputed the science behind stratospheric ozone depletion, too, though Reagan eventually agreed to sign an international treaty — the Montreal Protocol — that controlled ozone-destroying chemicals. But his administration established a precedent: To be a conservative hostile to federal power and regulation meant skepticism toward environmental science.

Reagan's successor, George H.W. Bush, more than any other Republican president since Reagan, tried to balance the demands of environmental protection and the marketplace. He championed the 1990 Clean Air Act's emissions trading mechanism — emissions trading. He also established the U.S. Global Change Research Program.

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understanding of climate change, and agreed to a complete ban on production of ozone-depleting chemicals.

But Bush was a one-term president, in part because his moderate and fact-based positions were out of step with an emerging Republican ideology that took no prisoners when it came to climate change. Most Republican leaders since the late 1990s have downplayed, misrepresented or rejected the scientific evidence of man-made climate change, and some have gone so far as to ridicule and harass climate scientists for telling the truth.

What began 40 years ago as ideology is now pathology. An ideological commitment to “limited government” has caused conservatives to drag their feet on climate change, healthcare, the opioid crisis, and other problems that the private sector has been unable to solve, and that are too big for individuals or even the states to fix on their own. This ideology has caused conservative leaders to discard scientific findings, even when delivered by their own expert advisors, and even when lives are at stake. The tragic consequence, as we are seeing now, is that lives are lost that could have been saved.

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