

April 27, 2020

The President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President,

First, I want to thank you for appointing me to the Economic Recovery Task Force; the task ahead of our country as a result of the battle we are now waging with COVID-19 is daunting and unprecedented, and I am honored to have the opportunity to make a contribution to this effort. I will try to provide you with honest and straightforward advice, based upon my research on the current crisis as well as my experience as a Senator, Governor, and entrepreneur.

All of us are aligned in the pursuit of two goals: the control and eventual elimination of the virus, and the repair and rebuilding of the severe damage to our economy occasioned by the virus. Unfortunately, it now appears that final victory over this disease will not be possible until a cure or vaccine is found, which all indications are unlikely until sometime in 2021 at the earliest. It is of course possible that a medical breakthrough will be found sooner, but the consensus of the scientific community seems to be that this is unlikely. If this is the case, our only current option to control the spread of the highly contagious virus from person to person is strict social distancing as has been established in most sections of the country.

Although highly disruptive (that's an understatement), these steps seem to have made a substantial difference. The spread of the disease in those areas that put the earliest and most severe restrictions in place has been slower and appears to have peaked sooner than in areas with less stringent restrictions. The danger, as you yourself have recognized, is that the success of these programs can create a sense of complacency, leading to premature easing, in turn leading to a resurgence of the virus.

But the problem with the current stay-at-home rules is that they are a blunt instrument which impose a greater penalty on the economy than is strictly necessary to contain the virus. Millions are effectively quarantined in order to protect against the risk of spread posed by thousands. The problem is that we can't pick out the risky thousands among the safe millions, so all must remain in lock-down. If you know that two or three apples in a bushel contain a deadly poison, you would leave them all alone. But if the poison ones, and only them, were green, and all the rest red, safely choosing one to eat would be easy. And this brings us to the value of massive and repeated testing along with contact tracing, far beyond the level now underway.

I believe the greatest danger we face is a second coming of the virus in late summer or fall, leading to even greater and more long-lasting health and economic damage, which makes finding the right formula for reopening without triggering a resurgence all the more urgent. The basic question, in other words, is how to mitigate the current economic impacts without increasing the longer term risks.

As suggested above, I have two interrelated proposals to help solve this dilemma, both of which you, and only you, can set in motion in a matter of days.

The first is a massive expansion of testing capacity (to identify the green apples); I'm not qualified to suggest an exact number, but somewhere in the neighborhood of a million or more tests a day is in line with many of the scientific estimates I have seen. You are right that the administration of the tests is not a federal responsibility; structuring that process is properly the responsibility of the states and local health officials. But the development of the tests and supplies (which involves a complicated supply chain of chemicals, swabs, vials, analytic capacity, packaging, and the like) is something the federal government is uniquely suited to do and is beyond the capability of the states. Only you have the authorities of the Defense Production Act and the overview of the national (and international) supply chain necessary to quickly (we're talking weeks here, not months) ramp up this capacity to the extent necessary.

My specific suggestion is that you appoint a single, highly capable individual to oversee and ramrod this essential mission. During World War II, when Roosevelt became convinced that the development of the atomic bomb could be essential to Allied victory, he did not leave that task to the normal agencies of the government; instead, he created the Manhattan Project, with a singular focus, strong leadership, and an urgent timeline. While the person selected is clearly within your authority, it strikes me that someone with substantial leadership and management experience, a national reputation, and non-partisan credentials would strengthen their hand in mastering this important task. The type of person I have in mind is someone in the mold of General Joe Dunford, former chair of the Joints Chiefs of Staff, who is known to you and is one of the most thoughtful and capable people I have ever encountered. As I said, this is clearly your call, but someone with the stature of General Dunford would serve you well.

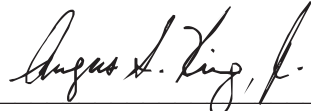
One of the realities of such a testing program is that it must be on-going. A person testing clear today could pick up the virus tomorrow, so there must be repeated testing at regular intervals. This is why the number of tests must be so large.

My second suggestion is the creation of a massive track and trace capability to follow-up on and compliment the testing project. Once positive cases are identified, it is necessary and prudent to determine who these people have been in contact with, so any of those who have been infected can also be isolated and treated. Obviously, in a country of 330 million people, this is a massive logistical and manpower challenge. But the one thing we have right now, unfortunately, is unemployed people who could be mobilized for this task, given federal funding for salaries and supplies and capable leadership. Call it the COVID Contact Corps and set them to work in every community in the country.

This program of comprehensive testing and tracking would address both of the goals I stated above—it would limit the spread of the virus, and allow the safe (and sooner) reopening of the economy. To reopen without something along these lines substantially increases the likelihood that the current crisis will be longer and deeper—and more damaging to our country—than necessary.

Again, I appreciate your invitation to contribute my thoughts to this critically important task; I hope that they prove helpful as you work to chart the course of our response.

With respect and best wishes,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Angus S. King, Jr." The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Senator Angus S. King, Jr.