

Peter Navarro Is the Worst Possible Person to Be in Charge of Pandemic Supplies

“Perhaps Trump thought an arrogant bully could kick 3M into submission.”



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How badly does the United States need medical supplies? So badly that a Republican White House—which pays obeisance to free market orthodoxy—is deploying the interventionist Defense Production Act (DPA) to force the private sector to snap to it. This exercise of naked executive power during a medical crisis requires someone at the top with an even temper, extensive experience in the private sector, and a deep understanding of the country’s supply chains.

So President Trump tapped Peter Navarro for the job.

Dubbed “Trump’s looniest economic adviser” by the Wall Street–focused *Dealbreaker*, Navarro is an academic who famously made up a fake expert to quote in his books. A five-time failed political candidate in San Diego, Navarro is widely known there “as a nut,” says one veteran California GOP political consultant. Navarro’s views on trade are considered so fringy that, for years, reporters covering him have been trying unsuccessfully to find a credible source who may agree with him. Nonetheless, since 2016, Navarro has been advising Trump on trade policy, first on the campaign trail and then in the White House as the director of the newly created Office of Trade and Manufacturing Policy. And on March 27, Trump appointed Navarro to enforce

the DPA, the Korean War–era law that allows the administration to force a company to prioritize government orders in production.

The new job gives Navarro immense power to order supplies like ventilators and masks, block exports, and even commandeer products made overseas by US companies to ensure delivery to American hospitals. It's a massive logistical undertaking involving federal central planning, production, and distribution, and one urgently needed to combat shortages and prevent states and hospitals from competing for scarce supplies. Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) told Trump in a letter last week that Navarro was “woefully unqualified for this task,” and pleaded with the president to appoint someone who knows what they're doing.

Trump had a lot of people to choose from, says Yossi Sheffi, director of the MIT Center for Transportation and Logistics and a supply chain expert. “There are many, many competent people around,” he says. “We have some of the largest companies in the world who are running global supply chains [and] have contractor relationships all over the world. There are literally thousands of them. Any of them would be doing a better job than a crackpot economist.”

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But Trump loves Navarro, whom he refers to as “My Peter.” As he told the *Washington Post* in early 2017, “I read one of Peter's books on America's trade problems years ago and was impressed by the clarity of his arguments and thoroughness of his research.” Navarro has been Trump's trade whisperer, encouraging him to slap high tariffs on imported steel and aluminum despite warnings that tariffs will slow the economy and hurt consumers. His extreme views on multilateral trade deals and China also align perfectly with Trump's, making him popular with the president, if not with most of the administration's other economic experts.

Schumer isn't the first person to try to get Navarro out of White House policy making. Over the past three years, a number of people have tried to minimize his influence over Trump, notably former White House Chief of Staff John Kelly. Kelly shut him out of key policy meetings in the Oval Office and forced Navarro to copy Trump's former economic adviser Gary Cohn on all his emails to the White House to prevent him from circumventing proper channels to push his agenda with the president. After Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin had

an E-bomb-laden shouting match with Navarro on a 2018 trip to Beijing, *Bloomberg* reported, some people in the White House tried unsuccessfully to exclude him from future trade negotiations with the Chinese.

Often sidelined, Navarro wandered the West Wing at night and on weekends in hopes of finding a moment to slip into the Oval Office to talk trade with Trump, undetected by his colleagues. A *Daily Beast* reporter ran into him one day in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building walking around in workout gear, toting one of his own books and a box of cereal. But Navarro managed to outlast his foes, including both Cohn and Kelly, and now Trump has chosen him to marshal the power of the federal government to force a massive, national production and distribution of medical equipment to try to prevent thousands of deaths from the virus.

Navarro's professional history does not inspire confidence in his ability to wrangle national supply chains into a well-oiled machine. He has a Harvard PhD in economics and worked for decades as a professor at the University of California, Irvine. He has no private sector background to draw from, nor any research or consulting experience that would lend itself to supply chain management. Trump singled him out to be a trade adviser because of his supposed expertise on China. Yet Navarro doesn't speak Mandarin, he has apparently spent little time in the country, and his China work has never been cited in scholarly journals or peer-reviewed publications. China experts don't consider him one.

Navarro is close to former Trump adviser Steve Bannon, another China hawk. In Navarro's books, he portrays China as a country that has cheated its way to global dominance by manipulating currency, abusing workers and the environment, and stealing intellectual property. He has insisted that the US and China were headed toward armed conflict. In 2011, Trump listed Navarro's book *The Coming China Wars* as one of his favorites on China. In another, called *Death by China*, Navarro argued that China was enriching itself by selling cheap, dangerous goods and becoming "the planet's most efficient assassin." When *Death by China* was turned into a film in 2012 (narrated by Martin Sheen), the promotional material for the movie included a blurb from Trump praising it.

Navarro's assessment of China wasn't entirely wrong, though critics say his accusations of China's currency manipulation are outdated. The coronavirus

pandemic is also vindicating some of his long-running warnings that moving all US manufacturing abroad could threaten critical supply chains at home. The problem is that his message came packaged in polemical books long on apocalyptic language and short on research—and they included a fake expert.

In five of Navarro's 13 books, reports the *New York Times*, Navarro quoted a source called Ron Vara—a sly scramble of Navarro's name—who made such statements as: "Only the Chinese can turn a leather sofa into an acid bath, a baby crib into a lethal weapon and a cellphone battery into heart-piercing shrapnel." Vara wasn't a real person, but he apparently accompanied Navarro to the White House, where last year "Vara" used his own email account to send out a memo showing public support for stiffer tariffs.

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Navarro has blamed every problem in America, including abortion, on trade issues and the death of manufacturing, which he sees as China's responsibility. A *Salon* writer once said that the film version of *Death by China* went "right to the brink of xenophobic hysteria." More importantly, Navarro's protectionist solutions flew in the face of all mainstream economic theory. He called for massive tariffs on imports and an escalating trade war with China as a way of trying to bring manufacturing back to the US—all policies that experts said would backfire badly on US consumers.

Even some conservatives who are part of Trump's base think Navarro is a little out there. Two years ago, John Tamny, director of the Center for Economic Freedom at FreedomWorks, a right-wing group that grew out of the Trump-loving tea party movement, wrote a column headlined "Hoping UC Irvine Will Do the World a Favor, and Take Peter Navarro Back."

Yet Navarro's obsession with China is one reason that early on he was among the few people in the administration warning—correctly—about the potential threat of the novel coronavirus coming from China. In a January 29 memo, Navarro urged the administration to impose a travel ban on China to head off economic disaster from a virus that could kill more than half a million people. But his years of making similarly dire warnings about the evils of China likely contributed to the fact that no one listened to him.

On Wednesday, the House Oversight and Reform Committee released new data showing that more than a month into the pandemic, the federal government was still failing to distribute personal protective equipment and critical medical supplies to hospitals and first responders, and was “leaving states to fend for themselves,” said committee chair Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D-N.Y.). It’s not clear how Navarro is remedying the problem.

In the two weeks since his appointment as the DPA policy coordinator, he has spent much of his time antagonizing big businesses and lashing out at US firms, notably 3M, which had come under fire for exporting some of its masks abroad rather than sending them to US hospitals. “Let me just say that 3M needs to stop whining and just produce masks and get them to the American people,” Navarro told *Fox News*’ Tucker Carlson last week. Navarro was also tasked with forcing GM to produce ventilators after Trump had been bashing the company on Twitter for what he saw as a sluggish response. (On Wednesday, nearly two weeks after his appointment, the Trump administration finally placed an order for 30,000 ventilators, which GM had already been working on before Navarro got onboard.) Navarro was also charged with following up on one of Trump’s controversial pet causes: procuring more supplies of the anti-malaria drug, hydroxychloroquine, which Trump believes without evidence to be a “game changer” for the virus.

Thus empowered, over the weekend Navarro clashed with Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation’s top infectious disease expert, who has been a reassuring public face during the pandemic. Fauci has disagreed with Trump publicly about touting the malaria remedy as a treatment for COVID-19 because the evidence for its effectiveness is purely anecdotal. Navarro has been in Trump’s camp, pushing the administration to talk up the drug’s potential, as well as to procure more of it for the national stockpile.

Axios reported that Fauci and Navarro had butted heads over how much the administration should focus on the potential of the anti-malaria drug. Navarro went on CNN Monday and escalated the conflict. When host John Berman pressed Navarro in an interview why anyone should listen to him and not to Fauci, Navarro responded, “My qualifications, in terms of looking at the science, is that I’m a social scientist. I have a PhD.” Lest that not be sufficiently impressive, he added, “And I understand how to read statistical studies, whether it’s in medicine, the law, economics, or whatever.” Berman exclaimed, “That doesn’t qualify you to treat patients!”

Navarro's encounter with Fauci should come as no surprise for anyone who has followed Navarro's career, which has been characterized by his polarizing and combative personality. Not to mention his history of playing dirty—in fact, dirty fighting is a point of pride for him. He has run five times for local office in San Diego, as a Democrat, Republican, and Independent. In 1996, he ran for Congress as a pro-choice, environmentalist Democrat. (First lady Hillary Clinton even campaigned for him.) Initially, Navarro was something of a local hero for his work fighting deep-pocketed developers looking to pave over green space—people a lot like Trump. And Navarro attracted some of the smartest people in town to his anti-development campaigns. But his nasty tactics soon eclipsed whatever virtuous causes he championed.

During a televised debate with his mayoral opponent in 1992, Navarro's negative attacks—focused on her ex-husband—made his opponent, Susan Golding, cry. He threw temper tantrums during newspaper editorial board interviews. Navarro failed to ever get elected mainly because he earned a reputation as “the cruelest and meanest son-of-a-bitch that ever ran for office in San Diego,” he brags in his 1998 book, *San Diego Confidential*. He explained that he has “absolutely no moral qualms about throwing mud at an opponent—but only if they throw mud at me first.”

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“I still have some principles,” Navarro allowed. “But not as many as you might think because I don't have any concern at all about making stuff up about my opponent that isn't exactly true—I know that bastard running against me doesn't have any scruples either (at least, this is my experience to date). So you see how far I've sunk.”

Lisa Ross worked on three of Navarro's San Diego political campaigns, including his run for Congress. Back in August 2016, after Navarro first joined the Trump campaign as a trade policy adviser, Ross observed in an op-ed in the *San Diego Union Tribune* that despite their policy differences on the environment and development, Trump and Navarro have a lot in common. “Like Trump, Navarro had the singular ability to use witty, digestible and sharply pointed bites, tailor-made for television and radio consumption,” she wrote. “Grabbing media attention by getting in politicians' faces was a snap. He was great television.”

But now, Ross said in an email to *Mother Jones*, many people in San Diego are baffled at Navarro's rise to the critical White House post at a time when so many lives are at stake. "I'm having a difficult time understanding where his resume and skill set would include working with businesspeople, who are used to collaborating, to get something done," she said. "For one thing, he never could suffer fools, managing to alienate a wide variety of folks from former campaign workers, to print media and ultimately voters in San Diego. He is combative and abrasive if frustrated, and he believes, and often he is, the Smartest Guy in the room. Perhaps Trump thought an arrogant bully could kick 3M into submission."

The supply chain management of the sort needed from the federal government isn't about bullying but about relationships, says MIT's Yossi Sheffi, especially relationships with China, Navarro's mortal enemy. Much of the material that the US needs right now still will need to come from China. "Trump just doesn't understand it," he says. "He probably thinks GM can make everything. But we need parts, we need supplies, and in many cases, they just don't exist anymore in this country." If the Trump administration is going to succeed in bringing critical medical supplies to hard-hit communities, it needs to deploy someone who knows how to get along with people, including the Chinese—whose government Navarro has spent the last decade demonizing. But in this administration, Navarro has cultivated the only relationship that matters. As the president's son Donald Jr. told the *Washington Post* in June, "His only agenda is my father's agenda and the White House is lucky to have him."