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VIEWPOINTS

What Happened When the Georgia Governor Tried to Open the State?



President Donald Trump greets Georgia Governor Brian Kemp and Georgia First Lady Marty Kemp upon exiting Air Force One at Dobbins Air Reserve Base, in Marietta, Ga., on Sept. 25, 2020. (Evan El-Amin/Shutterstock)

By Jeffrey A. Tucker

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Print

Commentary

The journalists have fallen down on the job. To say the least.

Three years ago, all normal rights and liberties of the people were trampled on by governments everywhere. It was all for naught. The virus came and became endemic as it always would in any case. And as societies opened up gradually, we were left with unbearable carnage: economic, cultural, and public health. The damages continue to hammer the world in the form of health and economic losses, and now we face a growing financial and banking crisis.

One might assume that professional journalists would be all over this, digging into every nook and cranny to discover precisely how all this came to be. Alas, there is a weird game of pretend going on in the mainstream press: pretend lockdowns were fine, pretend the shots worked, and pretend that today's shattered politics and economics have nothing to do with the outrageous actions that were perpetuated on people the world over.

As a result of this tremendously odd conspiracy of silence, the journalistic duty has fallen to people independent of the mainstream, writing for Brownstone, Substack, and a handful of other venues.

And yet, every once in a while, something does leak through in a large venue. That happened last weekend in the Wall Street Journal. The opinion page editor James Taranto took a trip to Georgia to talk with Governor Brian Kemp. The result is "Brian Kemp, Georgia's Affable Culture Warrior."

The thesis is that Kemp has been battling woke culture longer than anyone else while rarely getting the credit.

That's interesting but not the real revelation of the piece. What it really does is dig deeply into the most interesting aspect of the last three years: how it came to be that Georgia was the first state to open following lockdowns and how the White House responded. On this subject, the piece absolutely breaks new ground, so much so that it is worth quoting the relevant passages here.

In April 2020, businesses in Georgia were shuttered by government decree as in most of the rest of the country. Mr. Kemp was hearing from desperate entrepreneurs: “‘Look man, we’re losing everything we’ve got. We can’t keep doing this.’ And I really felt like there was a lot of people fixin’ to revolt against the government.”

The Trump administration “had that damn graph or matrix or whatever that you had to fit into to be able to do certain things,” Mr. Kemp recalls. “Your cases had to be going down and whatever. Well, we felt like we met the matrix, and so I decided to move forward and open up.” He alerted Vice President Mike Pence, who headed the White House’s coronavirus task force, before publicly announcing his intentions on April 20.

That afternoon Mr. Trump called Mr. Kemp, “and he was furious.” Mr. Kemp recounts the conversation as follows:

“Look, the national media’s all over me about letting you do this,” Mr. Trump said. “And they’re saying you don’t meet whatever.”

Mr. Kemp replied: “Well, Mr. President, we sent your team everything, and they knew what we were doing. You’ve been saying the whole pandemic you trust the governors because we’re closest to the people. Just tell them you may not like what I’m doing, but you’re trusting me because I’m the governor of Georgia and leave it at that. I’ll take the heat.”

“Well, see what you can do,” the president said.
“Hair salons aren’t essential and bowling alleys, tattoo parlors aren’t essential.”

“With all due respect, those are our people,” Mr. Kemp said. “They’re the people that elected us. They’re the people that are wondering who’s fighting for them. We’re fixin’ to lose them over this, because they’re about to lose everything. They are not going to sit in their basement and lose everything they got over a virus.”

Mr. Trump publicly attacked Mr. Kemp: “He went on the news at 5 o’clock and just absolutely trashed me. ... Then the local media’s all over me—it was brutal.” The president was still holding daily press briefings on Covid. “After running over me with the bus on Monday, he backed over me on Tuesday,” Mr. Kemp says. “I could either back down and look weak and lose all respect with the legislators and get hammered in the media, or I could just say, ‘You know what? Screw it, we’re holding the line. We’re going to do what’s right.’ “ He chose the latter course. “Then on Wednesday, him and [Anthony] Fauci did it again, but at that point it didn’t really matter. The damage had already been done there, for me anyway.”

The damage healed quickly once businesses began reopening on Friday, April 24. Mr. Kemp quotes a state lawmaker who said in a phone call: “I went and got my hair cut, and the lady that cuts my hair wanted me to tell you—and she started crying when she told me this story—she said, ‘You tell the governor I appreciate him reopening, to allow me to make a choice, because ... if I’d have stayed closed, I had a 95 percent chance of losing everything I’ve ever worked for. But if I open, I only had a 5 percent chance of getting Covid. And so I decided to open, and the governor gave me that choice.’ “

At that point, Florida was still shut down. Mr. DeSantis issued his first reopening order on April 29, nine days after Mr. Kemp’s. On April 28, the Florida governor had visited the White House, where, as CNN reported, “he made sure to compliment the President and his handling of the crisis, praise Trump returned in spades.”

Three years later, here's the thanks Mr. DeSantis gets: This Wednesday Mr. Trump issued a statement excoriating "Ron DeSanctimonious" as "a big Lockdown Governor on the China Virus." As Mr. Trump now tells the tale, "other Republican Governors did MUCH BETTER than Ron and, because I allowed them this 'freedom,' never closed their States. Remember, I left that decision up to the Governors!"

What's utterly remarkable here is that readers gain an inside look into the difficult spot into which Trump's White House had placed Republican governors. The whole machinery of D.C. had been marshaled with Trump's approval. The order read: "indoor and outdoor venues where people can congregate should be closed." He issued this order on March 16 and expected full compliance, and then lobbied for trillions in welfare to the states to make sure they stayed locked down.

Only South Dakota with Kristy Noem refused. And for that she was dragged through the mud of media lies for two years because she allowed motorcyclists, for example, to organize and ride in her state. The fake studies coming out about the Sturgis bike rallies set a new low standard for real-time science.

Georgia is important because it was the first state to open. Trump tweeted his opposition to this move both in general and then, two weeks later, in opposition to Kemp's opening.

For the purpose of creating conflict and confusion, some in the Fake News Media are saying that it is the Governors decision to open up the states, not that of the President of the United States & the Federal Government. Let it be fully understood that this is incorrect....

– Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) April 13, 2020

I (or @VP) never gave Governor Brian Kemp an OK on those few businesses outside of the Guidelines. FAKE NEWS! Spas, beauty salons, tattoo parlors, & barber shops should take a little slower path, but I told the Governor to do what is right for the great people of Georgia (& USA)!

– Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) April 24, 2020

Every bit of documentation absolutely contradicts Trump's claim that he "left that decision up to the Governors" as a matter of his own intention. It was his intention to achieve what he later bragged he had done, which is "turned it off."

Somebody please explain to @MichelleObama that Donald J. Trump would not be here, in the beautiful White House, if it weren't for the job done by your husband, Barack Obama. Biden was merely an afterthought, a good reason for that very late & unenthusiastic endorsement.....

– Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) August 18, 2020

I won't belabor this anymore because we've covered this in more detail [here](#) and [here](#).

And yet for weeks now, Trump has been telling visitors to Mar-a-Lago, and his coterie has backed him up, that he never locked down and only people like Kemp and DeSantis did this over his objections. Daily I get calls from people who are stunned that this outright attempt to falsify history is happening. But these days, it is just part of public life, I suppose.

This is why we must be grateful for people like Taranto for digging more deeply into the actual history of what happened in those fateful months from 2020 when life itself was completely upended by dreadful decision-making from the White House. If we had more journalists interested in what actually happened, rather than just pretending that either what happened was perfectly normal or that it didn't happen at all, we would be far closer to getting to the truth, and making sure that such a calamity never repeats itself.

From the Brownstone Institute

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