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POLITICO Nightly: Coronavirus Special Edition

Your intelligence briefing on how coronavirus is impacting politics and public policy, the economy and global health.

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A strange, quiet Memorial Day

By **SAM MINTZ, ANTHONY ADRAGNA** and **RENUKA RAYASAM** | 05/22/2020 07:32 PM EDT

Presented by

Humana

NO PLANES, FEW TRAINS, SOME AUTOMOBILES — With planes half full and roads emptier than ever, an unusual Memorial Day weekend looms. Instead of kicking off the summer travel season, this year's holiday serves mostly as an object lesson for just how much the coronavirus has shredded the modes that people use to move around.

“Every year, Memorial Day looks the same. It will not look the same in very many places this year,” Sen. Roy Blunt (R-Mo.) said on the Senate floor this week. That includes the people it will honor, who this year extend beyond fallen soldiers to Covid first responders.

For the first time in 20 years, the AAA offered no official Memorial Day travel forecast, citing the unpredictability caused by Covid-19. But the organization did offer a dismal outlook, saying it anticipates the lowest amount of traffic on planes, trains and automobiles in modern history. This year’s travel is likely to be a record low, said Paula Twidale, senior vice president of AAA Travel.

Airlines for America data shows 73 percent of flights last week were less than half full, although a very slight uptick in bookings from an April nadir offers a speck of hope. Airlines have encouraged passengers to keep flying by instituting a patchwork of safety measures. But new TSA screening figures show passengers screened at checkpoints down more than 90 percent from a year ago.

The overall picture for the travel sector— for finances and employment — is ugly. Fresh U.S. Travel Association estimates show Memorial Day spending this year will be \$4.2 billion, a third of the \$12.3 billion spent in 2019. And 51 percent of the travel sector’s 15.8 million employees are unemployed, more than double the rate seen during the worst year of the Great Depression.

Airports, state transportation departments, transit agencies and tolling authorities are all asking Congress for more money to make up for revenue that has dropped precipitously as people stay home. The latest House bill proposed \$15.75 billion in grants to public transit systems, most of that for urban areas with populations over 3 million and \$4 billion for transit agencies more broadly.

Road travel could be first to recover, with all states having eased stay-at-home orders, at least somewhat, and beaches and parks reopening in patches. Some beach counties have seen a 200 percent increase in vehicle miles traveled since a low point around Easter, according to transportation analytics company Streetlight Data.

The uptick is worrying however, with reports of long lines of cars and crowding in some parks and beaches. House Natural Resources Chairman Raúl Grijalva (D-Ariz.) pressed the Interior Department to exercise “extreme caution” in reopening national parks last week.

Even a relative surge in traffic, however, isn’t likely to match typical crowds. New York State Thruway Authority data for exit plazas on the roads it maintains shows that in April 2019, 12.867 million trips were taken. A year later there were about half as many

trips, POLITICO's Bill Mahoney found by analyzing the authority's database. Safety groups expect the Memorial Day weekend, typically one of the deadliest periods for driving annually, to be the safest on the roads in years.

Gas will be cheap, too: The national average as of the end of this week was \$1.92 per gallon.

Welcome to POLITICO Nightly: Coronavirus Special Edition. Congratulations to your host's husband, Ricardo, who officially graduates from the UT School of Law on Saturday. We'll be celebrating during the school's virtual Sunflower ceremony. Reach out with tips: rrayasam@politico.com or on Twitter at @renurayasam.

A message from Humana:

At Humana, we're committed to helping our members – many of whom are at high-risk for coronavirus – stay healthy and safe by connecting them to the resources they need. [Learn More](#)

FIRST IN NIGHTLY

OFFICE POLITICS — After three weeks in the Capitol, the Senate has not turned into the coronavirus cluster that some feared. At least one staffer has tested positive, forcing Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.) into quarantine. But everyone's worst fears have not been realized, Congress reporters Burgess Everett and Marianne LeVine write. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) is feeling increasingly comfortable that his plan to bring back the Senate is paying off, so much so that he likened Speaker Nancy Pelosi's (D-Calif.) plan to allow some remote voting to "ballot harvesting" in a phone call with House Republicans this week, according to a source familiar with the call.

Whether it was worth it to fly in 100 senators, many elderly and at higher risk of coronavirus, has become almost an entirely partisan question. Democrats say the GOP focus on stocking the judiciary and Trump administration with conservatives — while declining to approve coronavirus relief — is a waste of time that endangers everyone that keeps the building running, from maintenance workers to food workers to the police that guard the Capitol around the clock.

But to McConnell and Senate Republicans trying to defend their majority, it's just one more step toward normalcy.

NIGHTLY NUMBER

\$4.9 billion

The amount of provider funds being sent to skilled nursing facilities by the Trump administration, HHS said Friday. Each nursing home will receive \$50,000, as well as \$2,500 per bed. Every certified facility with six or more beds is eligible for the funds. (h/t health care reporter Rachel Rouben)

PALACE INTRIGUE

LET THERE BE LIGHT — Trump today commanded America's governors to immediately reopen churches and other places of worship shuttered by the coronavirus pandemic, threatening to "override" state leaders if they refused to follow his directive. (It's unclear whether he has the legal authority to do so.) The CDC issued guidance for houses of worship trying to reopen, deeming them essential services. Public health officials have raised concerns about the risks of in-person religious services, but Trump was aiming to win over religious groups who've been less than pleased with his handling of the pandemic.

White House reporter Gabby Orr writes that Trump's standing with the Christian right is triggering alarm bells inside his reelection campaign. Top aides have long banked on expanding the president's evangelical base as a key part of their strategy for victory this November. A pair of surveys by reputable outfits earlier this month found waning confidence in the administration's coronavirus response among key religious groups, with a staggering decline in the president's favorability among white evangelicals and white Catholics. Both are crucial constituencies that supported Trump by wide margins in 2016. If their turnout shrinks this fall, it could sink his reelection prospects.

FROM THE HEALTH DESK

TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS — Results of new studies today signaled progress on work toward a Covid vaccine and therapeutics. Results from another provided damning evidence against a drug Trump has boosted (and that he says he's been taking for the last two weeks).

Promising outlook: A trial of a potential coronavirus vaccine developed in China indicates it's safe and produces virus-specific antibodies and T cells, health care reporter

Ashleigh Furlong writes. However, the authors warn that the results, published in the Lancet, must be “interpreted cautiously.” A New England Journal of Medicine study also found remdesivir “was superior to placebo in shortening the time to recovery in adults hospitalized with Covid-19.”

Warning signs: A large observational study showed no evidence that the antimalarial drug hydroxychloroquine treats the coronavirus, but it showed the possibility for harm. Health care reporter Rachel Rouben writes that the study involving 96,000 patients, also published in Lancet, found that using chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine was linked to increased rates of mortality and heart rhythm complications among hospitalized Covid-19 patients. The researchers suggested that the drugs shouldn’t be used to treat coronavirus patients outside of clinical trials for now — the same advice several medical groups have given. Trump said this week he was taking hydroxychloroquine as a preventive measure, and that the “great” and “powerful” drug showed “some very strong signs” of fighting the virus.

Mea culpa — In Thursday’s edition, we misstated the timeline for positive Covid-19 test results. Three or four weeks could pass from the moment someone is exposed to the virus to when a state logs a positive test result.



PUNCHLINES

WHAT A WEEK — Matt Wuerker goes through the week that was in cartoons, memes and other satire in the latest edition of Punchlines, covering the discussion around “Obamagate,” masks and hydroxychloroquine.

ASK THE AUDIENCE

Nightly asked you: Memorial Day weekend is almost here. How has the pandemic changed your plans for the summer? Below are some of your responses, lightly edited for style and clarity.

“I am a professional pet sitter all over the Bay Area. I was booked solid through the end of July. People book me in a year in advance. Everyone has canceled. My summer will be a

staycation.” — **Cory Colligan, pet sitter, San Mateo, Calif.**

“We won’t be hanging out with friends having backyard barbecues. We won’t travel to see family. We are thinking of purchasing a motor home so we can travel around to more isolated spots in Wyoming.” — **Ruth Moran, business owner, Casper, Wyo.**

“There are no plans. Just staying home and social distancing very quietly, no driving at all.” — **Robert Schloss, chef, Saluda, N.C.**

“Well, I’m still going to have hot dogs, and I’ll have to go to the grocery store to get them. But it will be a barbecue for one — me — in my backyard.”

— **GENE GORRIN, ATTORNEY, UNION, N.J.**

“Instead of going to Disney World, my mom and I are planting a thousand flowers in our front yard! Going on long car rides to outdoor markets and garden centers has become our new hobby.” — **Holly Anne Jones, student, Washington, D.C.**

“Our twice-annual trips to the USA have been suspended until there is a viable vaccine available.” — **Harry James, retired, Adelaide, Australia**

“I’m not even supposed to be in the States now. I’m supposed to be cycling from Berlin to Prague. Then I’m supposed to meet my son in Budapest. He isn’t there, either.” — **Claire Toth, wealth manager, Summit, N.J.**

THE GLOBAL FIGHT

VOICES OF THE CRISIS — Around the world, while some people remain in lockdown, many are starting on the road to reopening their homes, businesses and lives. The latest episode of POLITICO Dispatch talks to people the world over about how the pandemic, and the move to reestablish old patterns, has affected them. Some of their thoughts: “I’m tired of being scared of other people.” “I think I’m angry because my illusion of control is completely shattered.” And “Maybe my biggest worry is that we as a civilization won’t learn anything from this pandemic.”

'A faceless threat': How coronavirus is f



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PARTING WORDS

BAD RECEPTION — At the end of April, your host gave in to the inevitable: The long-ago scheduled May 30 wedding reception wasn't going to happen. My husband and I got married at the Travis County Courthouse on April Fool's Day (also Easter Sunday) two years ago. We wanted to wait for the big party with friends and family until after he was done with law school. The event included a rehearsal dinner on a boat in downtown Austin and a short (ha!) Hindu ceremony performed by a family friend. By March, we knew a wedding would be impossible, but it wasn't until the end of April that we sat down to write a note to our friends announcing the party was off. (My husband then spent the next few weeks buying himself pots and pans from our registry.)

We're not the only ones. Memorial Day kicks off the summer wedding season, but many couples are rethinking their nuptials, dealing a financial blow to the \$74 billion wedding industry. In some states, like Texas, event restrictions have lightened up. But wedding worries have entered a whole new era, with feuding relatives or a too-drunk party guest giving way to fear of hosting a super spreader event. About 450,000 weddings were scheduled in the U.S. in March, April and May of this year. Unlike us, about 96 percent of couples are postponing their celebrations, according to a March survey from wedding website The Knot.

Your host spoke with event planner Bryan Rafanelli, who planned ceremonies for Chelsea Clinton and Matt Damon and seven state dinners for the Obamas, about social distance dancing and why Fridays are the new Saturdays. This interview has been edited.

Are you planning any weddings this year?

Every project I have in 2020 has been postponed or canceled. Of 78 events this year, I still have nine left in the fall. I am doing my niece's wedding on Sept. 12. She is the only wedding we're moving forward with. She very much wants to have a family, so she is like, I don't want to wait.

Any high-profile clients?

I can't say, but you're onto something there. This has affected everybody.

How will your niece's wedding look?

She decided that she would do a small family wedding for 60 people and then they are going to do their big celebration next year. My wedding gift to them is the flowers and linens. I'm laughing, but I'm crying. My niece's wedding is going to be a lunch, no dancing of course. We're talking with the country club about a 200-person ballroom that will have 60 people in it. It's probably good that it's my niece, so I can be honest and straightforward.

Any virtual weddings or events?

I certainly have with my nonprofit work. But not private events, not other than my mother's 85th birthday, which was fun. I'm testing my family with all these schemes!

How has Covid affected your business and industry?

I furloughed half my staff. I think I can weather this storm, although even I am looking at between October and next April and thinking, "Wow those will be really interesting months."

These are a lot of two- to five-person shops, whether you are a stationery provider or a wedding cake provider or a photographer. I have a friend in the music business, and he had 363 dates canceled, those are bands or trios he provides for cocktail parties or wedding ceremonies. Most wedding cake bakeries — if they push out five cakes a weekend it's a big deal. My business is just really, really slammed.

If everyone is postponing to next year, does that mean we will see more people get married on a day other than Saturday?

In 2021, there are just so many dates. But in our industry to get into the New York Public Library or the Met, some of these coveted locations that you want to get married in, people have shifted to Fridays and Sundays. People are going to be so happy to celebrate family

occasions, they will say Friday, let's do it. Now you could leave for a Friday wedding and not have to give up a day of work because you are working virtually. That's the silver lining.

How will weddings change at least in the short term?

There will definitely not be buffets, no more shared plates. I'm so thrilled about that part. No more family style, you just can't. For my niece's wedding, the lunch is going to be this beautiful box lunch. There will be individual containers for cocktail parties for the hors d'oeuvres. Mini champagne splits and rosé in a can — those are going to be super popular. We've been working with hotels to lay out dance floors to say this is what six feet apart looks like. It seems weird, but maybe?

A message from Humana:

At Humana, we're experts at helping our members achieve better health and recognize our unique role in supporting them during this unprecedented time. That's why we're:

- 1) Waiving all member medical costs for coronavirus testing and treatment
- 2) Waiving copays for primary care and outpatient behavioral health visits, including telehealth, for Medicare Advantage members through 2020
- 3) Proactively mailing members safety kits with masks and encouraging the use of mail order pharmacies to help people access the resources they need from the safety of their homes.

Humana is committed to doing all that we can to protect our members' health during the coronavirus. [Learn More](#)

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