

# PolitiFact Health Check Uses Out-of-context Quotations to Create Misleading Narrative

PolitiFact’s published statement of principles does not offer its fact-checkers explicit guidance for respecting the context of political claims. It does, however, implicitly recognize the wrongness of taking claims out of context. We find that implicit recognition in [PolitiFact’s definition](#) of the “Half True” “Truth-O-Meter” rating:

**HALF TRUE** – The statement is partially accurate but leaves out important details or takes things out of context.

PolitiFact says taking things out of context makes them “Half True” (perhaps an understatement).

But it’s clear, on examination, that [a PolitiFact Health Check published on March 18, 2020](#) took two short quotations out of context to create a misleading impression about President Trump.



**Donald Trump**

stated on March 18, 2020 in comments made during a White House media briefing:

**The coronavirus "snuck up on us," adding that it is "a very unforeseen thing."**

NATIONAL PUBLIC HEALTH HEALTH CHECK CORONAVIRUS

DONALD TRUMP



## “Snuck Up On Us”

PolitiFact said Mr. Trump excused poor U.S. preparedness for the coronavirus by arguing the coronavirus came as a surprise (bold emphasis added):

In particular, the president defended his administration on the issue of insufficient testing resources and what experts say is a looming shortage of medical equipment and personnel.

His argument? No one saw this coming.

**"It snuck up on us,"** Trump said at a March 18 media briefing. Later, he added that the virus is "a very unforeseen thing."

Note that PolitiFact presents the other quotation, "a very unforeseen thing" in the same context, as an excuse for poor overall preparedness. I'll address the misuse of the quotations in order.

Though PolitiFact [says](#) it publishes a list of sources with every fact check, it failed to list the March 18, 2020 media briefing on the list. Nor was the briefing hotlinked in the article.

## [The March 18, 2020 Media Briefing](#)

How did Mr. Trump use "It snuck up on us" during the media briefing (highlights mine)?

Q Would you like to see them more than \$1,000?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, we're going to see. I don't want to get into that right now, John. We are looking at different numbers. We're looking at timing that would be different — splitting the times, splitting the payments. We're looking at a lot of different things. It hasn't been determined yet, but it will shortly be determined. And people want to go big, as opposed — everybody seems to want to go big. And they want to get to the recovery.

The big day is — the big thing we can do is get rid of this horrible — I call it the "unseen" — the unseen enemy. You call it — there's a thousand different terms for it, but whatever — it **snuck up on us**. And it's — it did 128 countries, I think. It's in something like that — very close to that. Think of that. So it spreads violently. It's a very contagious — very, very contagious virus.

In Mr. Trump's statement he does not simply emphasize that the coronavirus itself "snuck up on us." Very clearly in the context of his statement he emphasizes the ease of transmission. Given early reports regarding a lack of evidence of human-to-human transmission and the recent realization that the virus spreads surprisingly well in pre-symptomatic carriers, the president's

statement seems reasonable. The fact check entirely ignores both those aspects of viral transmission. As a result, the fact check takes Trump's statement out of context.

## “A very unforeseen thing”

How did Mr. Trump use the phrase “a very unforeseen thing”?

Q I have a question for you and then I have one for Secretary Wilkie, as well. But I'll start with you. You just said there are a tremendous number of ventilators that we have, but, for weeks, hospitals have been worrying about a critical shortage that they say we are not prepared for. So why did it take so long to invoke the Defense Production Act?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, you know, hospitals are supposed to have ventilators, too. And when we have thousands of ventilators — it sounds like a lot, but this is **a very unforeseen thing**. Nobody ever thought of these numbers. Nobody ever saw numbers like this, even with regard to testing. Normally, we wouldn't be doing testing. And they decided to do it. Very, very hard to ramp up. Now we're getting highly sophisticated tests, and it's going very well. But nobody has ever heard of testing in the kind of quantities that you're talking about.

Q But we knew for weeks we needed more ventilators, so why did it take so long?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, we knew — it depends. It depends on how it goes. Worst case, absolutely. Best case, not at all. So we're going to have to see where it goes. But we are ordering thousands and thousands of ventilators. And they're complex. You know, these are complex machines, and — but we're ordering them.

In context, Mr. Trump was talking about an unforeseen need for huge numbers of ventilators, not about an unforeseen virus. And, in retrospect, the preparedness on ventilators appears to have matched the need.

PolitiFact took those two phrases out of context and created a sensational and misleading fact check out of them. It's worth reviewing the headline PolitiFact used: "The coronavirus 'snuck up on us,' adding that it is 'a very unforeseen thing.'"

The fact check focuses on wide public knowledge, including among experts, that the novel coronavirus was known for its potential as a global pandemic. That was not the context in which Trump said it "snuck up on us" and called it "a very unforeseen thing." "Snuck up on us" referred to the virus' surprising ease of transmission (apparently owing to transmission by presymptomatic carriers). That surprising mode of transmission helps explain the growth of this particular pandemic. "A very unforeseen thing" referred to the high demand for ventilators, though the demand appeared higher at that time than it turned out in reality. One could also reasonably say Trump included the demand for masks in his statement. Whether or not the administration had adequate warning on the need for protective masks, PolitiFact did not examine the statement in that context.

Fact-checking journalists should handle quotations with the utmost care, not with the carelessness of the supermarket tabloids. This example shows a failure of the commitment to fairness and impartiality.

Amazingly, the fact check contains yet another example of a quotation taken out of context (bold emphasis added):

Public health researchers have been warning for years about the threat of a pandemic. And members of his administration have been sounding the alarm for months now – even while, just earlier this month, **Trump was** still comparing the virus' severity to the flu, and **arguing that it "will go away" if people "stay calm."**

It's adequately documented that Mr. Trump has said the virus will go away. It is likewise adequately documented that Mr. Trump has advised people to stay calm. Mr. Trump has never, to our knowledge, connected the two propositions with an if/then statement.

I would call that coupling of quotation snippets fact check fabulism.

Thanks for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,  
Bryan W. White  
Editor/Publisher  
Zebra Fact Check  
May 20, 2020