

## Transcript

### NPR's Mary Louise Kelly and Sen. Alexander

**Kelly:** Before we get into it, may I ask how you're doing? I know you're quarantining at home after you were exposed to the virus.

**Alexander:** I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm not infected so far and I'm doing what Americans should do if you're too close to somebody who tests positive. That is, take two weeks and separate yourself from everybody else, which is what I'm doing. I had a test last Thursday and I tested negative.

**Kelly:** I am glad to hear that. And can I pass along my greetings to your dog, Rufus, who became quite the star after his cameo on camera while chairing this hearing from home?

**Alexander:** Yeah, he sleeps behind me in my office on a table until he gets bored and then he goes to take a walk.

**Kelly:** Is he there now?

**Alexander:** He's there now.

**Kelly:** Well give him our best. Let me ask about some of the things that Dr. Fauci said when he was testifying to you and the rest of your committee. He expressed concern about kids returning to school in the fall before there is a vaccine. The president, as you know, scolded him for those remarks. So schools should be opening, kids should be going back in the fall. I mean, your committee oversees public education in this country. What do you think should happen?

**Alexander:** Well, if I were still president of the University of Tennessee, the questions for me would be not whether to go back to school, but how? I think we should go back to school for the benefit of the students. And I think we'll have the tools to do it. And Dr. Fauci, I think was misinterpreted. He was saying that vaccines wouldn't be ready by then. We all knew that, in fact, we're on the fastest track we've ever been to get a new vaccine, maybe by the end of the year and we'll have a few treatments by then. But then he turned it over to Admiral Giroir, who said they will likely have four to five times the number of

diagnostic tests that we have today. And that ought to be sufficient to allow the principal of a middle school to test every student if she wants to. So that is the key.

**Kelly:** Testing is the key. And you would be okay with kids being back in classrooms without a vaccine in the fall. I mean, I'm pushing you on this because Fauci also warned kids are not immune. Some of them are getting very sick.

**Alexander:** What he actually said was that he agreed that, generally speaking, children haven't haven't been getting sick. But the virus is new and there are a few studies that show some unusual effect and we need to be careful with it. So I think we all know we need to be careful, but I think any principal, any chancellor of a university can say, all right, we'll take testing, we'll take pneumonia shots, we'll try to keep people as separate as possible. We'll keep administrative staff at home, we'll develop a strategy for going back to school and to college that is safe. That may take staggered weeks of schooling and they'll take more flexible days. A number of changes. But I think the question is not do we go, I think it's how we go.

**Kelly:** How we go. And just wondering how you factor in some of the news out of New York. The stories of children who are very sick, toxic shock, multi-system inflammatory syndrome. We heard from the mayor of New York, Bill de Blasio today saying, a hundred children diagnosed with that. Should we be worried about that? Should that be factored into decisions?

**Alexander:** Of course we should. But let's remember, there are a hundred thousand public schools, 50 million children, there are 6,000 colleges, 20 million students. We have to think about the impact on those children of not going to school for a year. And I think part of our leadership responsibility is to not just throw up our hands and say, no we can't do it. It's to say we're going back, but we're going to make every effort to do it safely. A pediatrician on your program this morning talked about the damage that could be caused to children if they have to miss a whole year of school. I think it's unnecessary for them to do that, in most cases. It'll have to be watched carefully and it'll vary by school. I mean, New York City, Brooklyn may be different than Nashville. Maryville, where I'm from, may be different from Sacramento.

**Kelly:** Okay. Do we need to pause and let you feel that? Okay. Do you mind just restating that sentence because the phone was ringing? It could be different in Nashville.

**Alexander:** Okay. Of course we'll have to do it state by state, community by community. Brooklyn is different than Nashville. Maryville, where I live, is different than Sacramento. The principal and the teachers and the parents in that community will have to make a decision about balancing the risks. There's a great risk to children not going to school and there's some health risk if they do. That's what wise leadership is about.

**Kelly:** Broadening out to the tension that I laid out at the beginning, the chair of the fed warning a permanent damage to the economy and yet the virus still not under control. Do you have any concern that the white house and the president are moving too fast to reopen the country?

**Alexander:** No, I think it's not really up to the president to reopen the country. It's up to the governors and the communities. For example, in our state, in Tennessee...

**Kelly:** But they are listening to guidance from the White House, which is pushing.

**Alexander:** They're listening to the guidance, but I used to be a governor. I didn't want the president telling me what to do. I don't think governor Cuomo wants President Trump telling him what to do. He might give him his advice, but he has the police power. He has the responsibility. Our governor in Tennessee is testing every prison, testing every nursing home, offering weekend testing. We're moving in a deliberate, cautious way. I talked to our university presidents this morning. They're developing strategies for helping the students come back to school so they can be safe, which might include testing every student and every faculty member the day before they come back.

**Kelly:** What about the warnings from the ousted vaccine chief, Rick Bright, testifying today. I know you'll be paying attention to that. He's been talking about how the country's running out of time and it's facing the darkest winter in modern history. What do you make of those warnings? Has enough been done to build a coordinated response to the virus?

**Alexander:** Well, I think everyone underestimated this virus. The New York Times wrote on March 1<sup>st</sup> that quote, "most experts agreed the United States was as well prepared as any country to deal with it." But we underestimated it. I think the key now is testing, treatments and vaccines. And on testing we're doing more than any country, a lot more, and we'll have enough for widespread testing when school starts. Treatments are beginning to emerge and we're building manufacturing plants for vaccines before we know whether they'll work, even. That's the fastest we've ever gone and we wouldn't be able to do any of those things if we hadn't done some of the preparation before.

**Kelly:** Let me turn you into the economics at stake. The House as you know, is working on and has put out a fifth rescue package. In the Senate, Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has said he would like to wait and see, and spend all the funds from the last rescue package for before looking into a new one. Where do you come down on another, on a fifth rescue package?

**Alexander:** It's pretty disconcerting to spend three trillion dollars, you know, by telephone, which is sort of what we did before. Although some of the programs have been very helpful. The program for small business, the \$1,200 check, the \$600 per person addition to unemployment compensation, which goes through July. I think all of those are helpful, but there's not enough money to end this virus. It's testing, treatments and vaccines, and as long as we're moving at a record pace on testing, treatments, and vaccines, and are isolating those people who are sick and those who are exposed like I was last week, then the rest of us, which are almost all of us can begin to go back to work and back to school. So before we spend trillions more, I think we should focus on testing, treatments and vaccines.

**Kelly:** How should we square that with, as we mentioned, the warning from the chairman of the fed of possible permanent damage to the economy? That seems to suggest that whatever Congress is going to do, it needs to go ahead and do it.

**Alexander:** Well, the chairman of the fed needs to be listened to, but what I think about this is a different economy problem than we had, for example, in 2008 when we just had a bad economy. We had a great economy three months ago and then here came the virus. So I see no reason why, as long as we get a

vaccine and get treatments and get comfortable with working a little differently, our economy can't be strong again. I'm not the chairman of the Federal Reserve board, but I see a difference between this economy restoring and the one restoring in 2008 which took many years.

**Kelly:** So if I were to just ask point blank, if Congress moving fast enough on this, It sounds like your answer is yes?

**Alexander:** My answer is yes, I mean, holy smokes, we spent \$3 trillion in about three weeks. And testing ,I don't mean to be repetitive, but we're doing twice as many tests as any country, after a bumpy start. Treatments are coming out faster than ever before because of work done prior to this. And we're building manufacturing plants for vaccines before we even know whether they'll work. We've never done that before. And we're only able to do that because of preparations that were made by President Obama and President Bush and earlier congresses as well as this president.

**Kelly:** Okay. Before I let you go, Senator, there was news overnight that your colleague, Senator Richard Burr, had his phone seized by the FBI. This has to do with an investigation into stock sales he made after receiving a classified briefing about the virus should he stepped down as Chair of the Senate intelligence Committee?

**Alexander:** I'm not going to say that. I work along with him. I don't know of any information that Senator Burr had that the rest of us didn't have and that the country didn't have. In fact, on one occasion we had a confidential briefing about coronavirus and one of the Senator asked the question, is there anything in here that we shouldn't say when we go outside because it's a secret? And the answer was no. There's nothing that we know that the public doesn't know.

**Kelly:** Should he step down while this investigation plays out, while they look into it?

**Alexander:** I don't have any reason to suggest that.

**Host:** Tennessee Republican, Lamar Alexander, he chairs the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee. Senator, thanks so much for your time. Stay well.

**Alexander:** Thank you very much, and you too.

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