



WTH is going on with the toilet paper shortage? You've got questions, and we're flush with information

Episode #44 | April 22, 2020 | Danielle Pletka, Marc Thiessen, and Marc Fisher

Danielle Pletka: Hi, I'm Danielle Pletka.

Marc Thiessen: And I'm Marc Thiessen.

Danielle Pletka: Welcome to our podcast, What the Hell Is Going On? Marc, what the hell is going on?

Marc Thiessen: What the hell is going on is there's a toilet paper shortage. Dany, we're doing an entire podcast on the toilet paper shortage. We are-

Danielle Pletka: Let me just put in a parental warning here. If you hate toilet paper jokes, puns, toilet jokes-

Marc Thiessen: Butt jokes.

Danielle Pletka: ... butt jokes, poop jokes-

Marc Thiessen: Scatological humor.

Danielle Pletka: ... the time to disconnect is now.

Marc Thiessen: Yeah, don't disconnect. This is a great episode, because we've got a great guest coming up. You and I are big fans of Seinfeld, and there's the famous episode called The Stall, where Elaine is sitting in a bathroom stall in a restaurant and she runs out of toilet paper and knocks on the stall to talk to her neighbor and ask for a little help. Here's the sound. (Seinfeld clip)

Marc Thiessen: Dany, we don't have a square to spare in America.

Danielle Pletka: I guess not. There's no toilet paper in my supermarkets. Is there any in yours?

Marc Thiessen: There's no toilet paper in the supermarket, but when I was checking out at the supermarket, the guy said, "They've got it at Walmart." So I went over to Walmart, and they do have it, but-

Danielle Pletka: So you heard about this on your underground toilet paper network.

- Marc Thiessen: Exactly. I've got a guy who knows where the toilet paper is, but they only let you take one package. They will only send you one at a time.
- Danielle Pletka: Is it at least the squishy kind like Charmin?
- Marc Thiessen: It's the good stuff, yes. We were not able to get the good paper towels, though. Only the cheap stuff is there, so-
- Danielle Pletka: Only the one-ply?
- Marc Thiessen: Only the one-ply.
- Danielle Pletka: Not good enough for the Thiessen household?
- Marc Thiessen: Can't spare a ply either. Just a ply. I just want a ply. Can I have a ply?
- Danielle Pletka: I know everybody who's listening is probably going through exactly the same thing. There is no actual toilet paper shortage, but people are causing it by behaving in this hysterical fashion. And it's not just here. I loved this story which was in the New York Post about a family in Australia that thought that they were ordering 48 rolls of toilet paper, but instead they got 48 boxes of toilet paper, and so they built a giant throne out of it because, you know, that's what you do with 48 toilet paper boxes.
- Marc Thiessen: They could make a lot of money off of that 48 boxes. They're lucky. In Hong Kong, armed robbers held up a supermarket, and all they took was 600 rolls of toilet paper.
- Danielle Pletka: Well, I guess it's got great resale value. People are out of their minds. Honestly, what the heck are they doing? This tendency to hoard, and to hoard ridiculous things, is I guess what goes along with every single crisis, but it does cause a lot of toilet paper conversation. The other night at dinner we were talking about toilet paper with the kids, because that's the kind of life we lead at the Pletka household, and the kids were absolutely horrified to learn that toilet paper has only been a thing for like 70, 80 years.
- Marc Thiessen: It started in the 1940s.
- Danielle Pletka: You should have seen their faces when I said to them, "No, people didn't use toilet paper before." They were like, "Oh my God, what did they use?" The place to go, just in case you want to dive deep into this question, is-
- Marc Thiessen: Here come the puns.
- Danielle Pletka: ... the very, very important website toiletpaperhistory.net. The internet is just a gift that keeps on giving, folks. What can I tell you? On toiletpaperhistory.net, you learn that people used grass, fern, and this was the one that really didn't go down well at my house, corncobs. Then, of course, our two art history majors were very helpful in pointing out that Romans were very civilized during the height of the Roman Empire.
- Marc Thiessen: What did the Romans ever give us, Dany?

- Danielle Pletka: Well, this is what they gave us.
- Marc Thiessen: They gave us the aqueducts and the roads and the bridges.
- Danielle Pletka: A lot of plumbing.
- Marc Thiessen: Did they give us toilet paper?
- Danielle Pletka: No. What they kept was a sponge on a stick in a bucket. Anyway, that got its share of conversation.
- Marc Thiessen: Oh my gosh.
- Danielle Pletka: But we kept coming back to the corncoobs, because what? Apparently, the colonialists used corncoobs. We spent a lot of time talking about that. I'm sorry, people.
- Marc Thiessen: I'm having very, very disturbing visions of George Washington right now.
- Danielle Pletka: Gross. All right, you want an even more hilarious and disturbing vision? Everybody has seen these unbelievably epic Amazon reviews. You know when someone just writes a really, really funny Amazon review, and it goes viral? A review from 2013 went absolutely viral. I've never seen my husband laugh this hard. But it's a [review](#) for a toilet brush. You know, the thing that you find in every bathroom that is used to scrub out the toilet bowl. This guy is commenting on this very innocent white toilet brush and holder in plastic, and he wrote, "I don't know how these things have caught on. Absolute agony and quite disgusting to use. Call me old-fashioned, but I'm sticking with toilet paper." My guess is that's what a corncob felt like.
- Marc Thiessen: Oh my gosh. Okay, so to take advantage of this situation, Amazon has started selling fake prank gift boxes. You can purchase something and send it to somebody and it'll come in a fake box, and then you have your real gift on the inside. One of them is the [Roto Wipe](#), which is a device that says, "Say goodbye to costly toilet paper." It's a little thing that you attach to your toilet seat with a spinning brush.
- Danielle Pletka: I want my next birthday present in that box.
- Marc Thiessen: Oh my gosh. And then, of course, inside you can put whatever it is you purchased from Amazon, but you can send these prank boxes to people. I was wondering if you could actually get actual toilet paper in the box, but apparently not, because you can't buy-
- Danielle Pletka: Because you can't buy toilet paper anywhere.
- Marc Thiessen: You can't buy toilet paper on Amazon as a prank or otherwise.
- Marc Thiessen: What got us thinking about doing this podcast was there was a [fantastic piece](#) in the Washington Post by Marc Fisher, who is a senior editor at the Post, who delved deeply into this piece. The headline was "Cause of TP shortage is threefold."
- Danielle Pletka: And that's the most expensive kind. Marc Fisher's bio at the Post says, "Senior editor

reporting on a wide range of topics," which is absolutely-

- Marc Thiessen: Range has grown immensely as a result of this.
- Danielle Pletka: Absolutely true. He's been at the Post for 30 years. He's written pieces that have won the Pulitzer Prize. But this really must've been his most challenging assignment, and you folks are lucky because you're about to hear our interview with Marc Fisher, senior editor on a wide range of topics.
- Marc Thiessen: Marc, welcome to the podcast.
- Marc Fisher: Good to be with you.
- Marc Thiessen: You had a great piece in the Post the other day which is probably a candidate for headline of the year, which is "Cause of TP shortage is threefold." Tell us, why are we having a toilet paper shortage?
- Marc Fisher: Well, it's a good question, and it's the one that was nagging at me for several weeks now because it doesn't seem to make a whole lot of sense. Now, on the one hand, we heard early on that, well, there's no toilet paper in the stores because people are hoarding it. Everyone's going out and buying a whole bunch, just as they would before a hurricane or a snowstorm, those kinds of events where people think, "Oh, I'm going to be cooped up for a while. I'd better stock up. I don't want to run out." Okay, fine, that makes some sense.
- Marc Fisher: But we're now five weeks into this, and the toilet paper shortage is not going away, so that explanation doesn't seem to cover the whole waterfront. So I started talking to people in the toilet paper industry and in the grocery industry and so on, and there's another explanation, which is we're using a ton more toilet paper than normal. Now, that doesn't mean we're using the facilities any more than we normally would, but we are using different facilities. If you think about your life, most people spend some portion of their day, in normal times, not at home, at work, at school, at restaurants and other public places, and when the call comes, they use the facilities there.
- Marc Fisher: There is a separate, and in fact, the more I reported this, the more shockingly separate it seemed to be, a separate industry that handles those commercial and industrial toilet paper needs than there is for the home use, the kind you get in the supermarket. If you think about it, we already know this. That scratchy one-ply stuff that you find in the office washroom-
- Marc Thiessen: That our cheap employers make us use, right?
- Marc Fisher: Exactly. That comes from a different manufacturer, it goes through a different distribution system, and it's a different quality of product. It also comes in larger rolls. If you think about the rolls that you see at work or at restaurants-
- Danielle Pletka: Marc and I are sitting here looking at each other and just laughing.
- Marc Fisher: Once you start down this road, you get deep into stuff that you maybe don't want to get into.

- Marc Thiessen: You get into deep doo-doo.
- Marc Fisher: Yeah, exactly.
- Danielle Pletka: We're flush with information.
- Marc Fisher: We're here all day.
- Danielle Pletka: Every single day, all day.
- Marc Fisher: Every day. Right, exactly.
- Danielle Pletka: And that's the problem, of course.
- Marc Fisher: I'd spent weeks writing all these stories about death and doom and just the horrible things that are going on, and I just needed some relief, so to speak. So I started down this road, and once you start with the puns, it just can't stop.
- Marc Thiessen: You were talking about the industrial roll. You would think in a normal crisis like this, if you have industrial products, you would divert them to commercial use, right? That's what a flexible industry would do. You'd say, "Okay, well, I've got these rolls that are set going for businesses. I'm going to send them now to Safeway so we could buy them." But you were pointing out in your piece that the industrial ones don't have barcodes on them, so they had to come up with like stickers like you put on your fruit and stuff like that. Why is our toilet paper industry so inflexible?
- Marc Fisher: Well, they're actually rolling this stuff out very nicely in that they did see that there was an opportunity here, and so the companies that produced the commercial stuff said, "We've got warehouses full of this stuff that no one's using now because no one's going to the office, no one's going to work, and so we can divert those to supermarkets and other places where people buy the home product."
- Marc Fisher: But as you said, it's not easy. First of all, there's the size difference. Those industrial rolls don't fit on most homes' toilet paper holders. Also, they're packaged differently. When a store buys a whole bunch of toilet paper, they buy it in bulk. They buy a pallet. Some people who go to grocery stores were buying pallets, but we don't want them to do that because it means the rest of us don't get it.
- Marc Fisher: They literally had to repackage the commercial rolls for home use, and as you say, they had to put on those little stickers that you find on pieces of fruit in order for the very highly automated systems at supermarkets to be able to understand what this product was that was going past the scanner. That is happening. There were deals being made and arrangements being made between one industry and the other, but it takes time and it's not easy. And the distribution channels are different. Even though the parent companies, companies like Georgia-Pacific that make toilet paper, the parent company may be the same, but they have separate factories that make the commercial stuff and the home stuff.
- Marc Fisher: This is all spooling out in real time, and it's taking a while, in addition to which, once you have a shortage, the shortage tends to re-up itself in this circular pattern, because you go to the store and there's no TP, you go to the store and there's no TP, and then finally you see some, well, you're going to grab it all because you don't

know when it'll be there next. That's where the hoarding comes in and exacerbates the problem and extends the problem.

- Danielle Pletka: I don't know where people are putting all of this toilet paper. In your piece, though, the numbers I just found incredible. You wrote that Americans have spent \$1.4 billion on toilet paper in the previous four weeks, a 102% increase from the same period a year before. What we are spending as a nation on toilet paper is just... I was gobsmacked.
- Marc Fisher: Well, I managed to find the one guy in the country who has written a book about the history of toilet paper. He's also written books on sweat and pee, but to each his own.
- Danielle Pletka: Well, you never know.
- Marc Fisher: He had looked into this whole question of we think of toilet paper as a necessity, and whenever there's a forecast of snow, especially here in the Washington area, one flake of snow can cause a complete wipeout of toilet paper on grocery shelves, along with milk and bread. I get the milk and bread. Why is toilet paper part of that holy trinity of supermarket wipeouts?
- Marc Fisher: Well, the answer is that the industry has persuaded Americans that you cannot live without their product. Their product is only about 50 or 60 years old. You go back before 1940, and Americans were using newspaper and Sears Roebuck catalog pages and so on. It really is a shockingly recent invention, or marketing success, and it's been such a success in our country that we think it's an absolute necessity. Around the rest of the world, it's just not. People use bidets. People use lower-quality paper products. But here, it does seem to be one of the few things that Americans are willing to get out and hoard in that powerful way.
- Danielle Pletka: I do have to say that calling it a marketing success is not entirely fair, because when I look at the option between the soft, fluffy Charmin and the Sears catalog, or any other catalog, I should add, I don't really have to be persuaded by intelligent advertising that that's the right choice for me in my bathroom. That's not why we put a magazine in the bathroom.
- Marc Fisher: Well, that's true, but I think that just shows how it has been deeply ingrained in our psyches over these last several decades. If you go back to the 1940s and look at some of the advertisements that the industry was putting out to try to persuade people to give toilet paper a try, they thought that they had a really tough sell, originally. There are these hilarious ads where you see very serious doctors and surgeons leaning over a patient and then telling the wife of the patient that if only there had been proper hygiene used at home, they might not be in this position. It became almost a life and death matter of whether you choose to use toilet paper or not.
- Marc Thiessen: One of the things that we've learned during this pandemic is that where there have been shortages of a lot of things like N95 masks and hospital gowns and all these things, and part of the problem is that we'd outsourced the production of all these very critical items, but the toilet paper is all made in the Pacific Northwest, isn't it?
- Marc Fisher: It's made around the country. There are several plants in the South as well. But it is

very much an American product from start to finish. These are American or Canadian trees that are being felled to make the paper. The slurry, which is the soup of wood chips that are boiled down to become soft paper, that process all takes place here in our country. So this is not one of those cases where we're hugely dependent on China, and so we can't blame another country for this. This is our own distribution issue and it will eventually get fixed. But one other recent change in how we buy things in this country is responsible for the shortage of toilet paper right now, and that is the whole just-in-time phenomenon, where companies are only making as much as the market normally calls for, so there really isn't much of a stock in warehouses when a crisis hits like this.

Marc Thiessen: So we don't have a national stockpile of toilet paper?

Marc Fisher: There is not, apparently, a national stockpile.

Marc Thiessen: Well, that's something President Trump should change as we revisit our pandemic preparedness strategy.

Marc Fisher: Yes, but then he would remind us that the federal government is not an order clerk, and thus, he'd keep it for himself.

Marc Thiessen: The states should do it.

Marc Fisher: Right. They have tried to gear up and produce extra, but there just isn't that much more inventory to be had because they were already working the full shifts. They were already working seven days a week. So the result of this downsizing of many American industrial processes in recent years to be able to meet that just-in-time demand from merchants means that there just isn't as much capacity out there to rev up the production at a time like this.

Danielle Pletka: The whole phenomenon of hoarding is really fascinating. Once you open this Pandora's box of hoarding investigation, you find that, first of all, everybody is hoarding toilet paper in particular parts of the world, like the Anglosphere. In Australia, there's the same rush on toilet paper that there was in the United States, and I think in the UK and in parts of Europe as well. It somehow goes to your feeling of security in an insecure time that you have enough water, you have enough toilet paper, and just speaking for my own Fairfax County, and that you have enough flour and yeast, both of which are absolutely unbuyable at this point. I don't know what all these people are going to do with all that flour and yeast, or all that toilet paper, frankly.

Marc Fisher: Yeah, there are certain things that give people a sense of control, and I think really that's what this is all about. Any of these hoarding behaviors really boils down to we are in a situation where people feel like they don't have as much control over their lives as they normally do, and they're right. They don't. Any small thing that you can cling to that gives you a sense of "Well, I've got this piece of my life under control. I've got some security there" is going to be beneficial to people's emotional health.

Marc Fisher: While we can make fun of those folks who are hoarding toilet paper, the fact is that they're probably feeling a little bit more secure sitting at home now because they were able to take care of something in that way. That's something that I think a lot of the political leaders in the country haven't really grasped, is this craving that people

have for some sense of security, some sense of everything's going to be okay at some point. There aren't many people speaking to that in any effective way, and so you see people acting out in what may seem like funny and ridiculous ways, but what lies behind it is something very serious, which is "I want to be able to gain some control over my life in this very disturbing time."

- Danielle Pletka: Right. No, I think that's absolutely true. In doing research for this podcast, Alexa, our producer, upended a cartoon which I know everybody will immediately get. It's a man standing by a doctor, and the doctor says to him, "Unfortunately, the test came back positive for COVID-19. You have coronavirus." And he responds, and he looks at her and he says, "That can't be correct. I have over 40 cases of Costco water and 200 rolls of toilet paper." But I think that exactly goes to your thinking, which is that "I won't get sick because I've now reasserted control over my life with these 200 rolls of toilet paper."
- Marc Fisher: Right. We haven't gotten to the point yet in this country where it's being used as currency, but that could happen, and it has happened in some places. In Australia, there was a cafe that started accepting rolls of TP as payment. You could pay three rolls for a cup of coffee. It's a little bit more cumbersome than a dollar bill, but-
- Danielle Pletka: Wait, let me take this roll of toilet paper out of my pocket.
- Marc Fisher: Yeah, exactly.
- Marc Thiessen: Well, you were pointing out in the piece that this is not the first time that toilet paper hoarding has been used. In the 1990s, you told the story about a manager at Philadelphia Veterans Stadium who stole a lot of toilet paper. Can you share that story with us?
- Marc Fisher: Sure. This was, as you said, at the Vet, which was the old stadium where the Eagles played football and then the Phillies played baseball. One of the guys who ran the stadium had been in charge of ordering supplies. He ordered a double supply, essentially, of toilet paper. He'd done this for more than a year, and he had amassed hundreds and hundreds and thousands of rolls of toilet paper.
- Marc Fisher: An auditor finally figured this out, that they were ordering way too much, and fans were complaining that there was nothing available in the bathrooms. It turns out that he'd been ordering these loads and then reselling it, and he stole like \$34,000 worth of toilet paper. He was caught. He was fired. This led to one of the city auditors giving a reporter in Philadelphia one of the great quotes of all time when he said, "Man, he really wiped that stadium clean." It's just one of those topics that never stops giving.
- Marc Thiessen: CBS News Sunday morning show had a great story about how there was a toilet paper shortage in the 1970s because some congressman said there could be a toilet paper shortage, and then Johnny Carson, back when everybody tuned in for The Tonight Show, said in his monologue that there was a toilet paper shortage, and all of a sudden everybody ran out and wiped all the shelves clean. (Johnny Carson clip)
- Marc Fisher: That's exactly right. That is a very famous story in the toilet paper industry.
- Danielle Pletka: About which you now are replete with information. No, in fact, Johnny Carson had to

go back on air on a subsequent night and issue a correction and say, "I was just joking, people."

- Marc Fisher: Right. No, people are very sensitive about their toilet paper, and I saw this in the reaction to the story. I got hundreds and hundreds of emails and notes from readers, some of whom were very upset about this shortage, and some of whom were also so particular even in the shortage that they said, "Look, they can put all that one-ply commercial stuff into the stores, but I'm not buying it, just not happening." People are very loyal to their brands and to... It's kind of like the razor industry. You keep adding plies and making things more plush, just like you keep adding blades to men's razors, and there doesn't seem to be an end in sight.
- Marc Thiessen: Well, this has been absolutely fascinating.
- Danielle Pletka: You're really flush with information.
- Marc Fisher: Yeah, but my supply is almost bare.
- Marc Thiessen: Yeah. Well, thank you for helping us get to the bottom of it.
- Danielle Pletka: Oh my God.
- Marc Fisher: You sure you don't want to do another episode with more puns?
- Danielle Pletka: We probably could do an entire episode with only puns. The only problem is... Actually, Marc and I have an explicit rating because of the word hell in the name of this podcast, so there's an entire-
- Marc Thiessen: Another episode we could do with-
- Danielle Pletka: With bad language. But this-
- Marc Fisher: Oh, wow. So you're saying we could go full X-rated on the TP.
- Marc Thiessen: We could, absolutely.
- Danielle Pletka: We could. Thank you so much for this moment of light relief. Keep it up.
- Marc Fisher: All right, thanks very much.
- Marc Thiessen: Take care, Marc.
- Danielle Pletka: Take care.
- Marc Thiessen: Dany, do you think Marc is got to get another Pulitzer Prize for this one?
- Danielle Pletka: Well, he deserves one, honestly. There's been so much depressing talk that this is one of the reasons why we wanted to do this podcast, or as we ought to appropriately call it, revisiting second grade, is because everything has been so somber, so worrying. We've been talking death, disease, war, national security. It is

awesome to talk about toilet paper. I actually remembered another story.

Marc Thiessen: Oh, go ahead. Tell us.

Danielle Pletka: You know who the kings of the toilet are? It's the Japanese.

Marc Thiessen: Yes, that is true. Yes.

Danielle Pletka: Right. The French invented the bidet, which is all good and fine, but of course-

Marc Thiessen: The Japanese took it to another level, right?

Danielle Pletka: Really, they took it to the sky.

Marc Thiessen: But do they have the Roto Wipe?

Danielle Pletka: We have to post a [link](#) to that on the transcript if you need to find it.

Danielle Pletka: TOTO is the big Japanese toilet maker, and they have-

Marc Thiessen: Not the band.

Danielle Pletka: No, not the band, the toilet, although the band is really good too, but that's another podcast. Anyway, they make these very fancy toilets. They need to be plugged in. They've got music. They've got little fountains and sprays and deodorizers and light.

Danielle Pletka: Anyway, years ago, we're staying in a hotel, actually, in Shanghai, and it's very nice. It's just been built, and in it was the most advanced, the latest TOTO toilet. God, I wish I could post this for you folks, because I was able to watch this, actually, recently again. My youngest daughter, who at that time was probably about 10, took a full three-minute video of this toilet because when you walk towards it, it greets you. The lid opens slowly and the light comes on, and your toilet greets you. She was so entranced by this that often she didn't want to go out. She just wanted to stay in the room and play with the toilet.

Marc Thiessen: Oh, that's awesome. When I was growing up as a kid, I loved to listen to something called the Dr. Demento Show. I would stay up late at night with my transistor radio under my covers listening to this, and he had all these ridiculous songs. He had the fantastic song by the band named Styx, and it was called "Don't Sit Down on the Plexiglass Toilet." As our exit, we will leave you with that song.

Danielle Pletka: Thanks for joining us. We hope you enjoyed this deep dive into toilet and toilet paper history. See you soon.

Marc Thiessen: Bye.

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