

China's Covid-19 Reporting Is Truthful, Birx and Trump Demonstrate-Unwittingly

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Region: [Asia](#), [USA](#)

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[Science and Medicine](#)

At President Trump's April 18 press briefing on the Covid-19 Pandemic, Dr. Deborah Birx, coordinator of the US response to the outbreak, criticized China's reports on the Covid-19 data.

She did so by showing a chart with data from the following countries. (I have [updated the chart with data](#)^[1] from the New York Times of April 19, but the two data sets differ by only a small and negligible amount.)

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Mortality, Deaths per 100,000 population

- Belgium: 49.8
- Spain: 43.8
- Italy: 39.2
- France: 29.4
- UK: 24.2
- Netherlands: 21.4
- USA: 10.9
- Iran: 6.3
- Germany: 5.2
- **China: 0.3**

Dr. Birx called China's low number "unrealistic," saying, "I put China on there so you could see how basically unrealistic this could be." That was after President Trump pointed at China's number and interrupted Birx to ask rhetorically, "Excuse me. Does anybody really believe this number? Does anybody really believe this number?" ([Transcript here](#); see minute 37:08 and following.)

The argument that Blix and Trump were making was clear. China's number was way out of line with the others, lower by more than a factor of 10. Therefore, China's report was a lie.

But in her chart Dr. Birx omitted data coming from countries of East Asia and nearby which have been praised by the US media for their performance and whose data are unquestioned in the West. Here are some relevant omitted data, taken again from the New York Times of April 19, with China included again for comparison

Deaths per 100,000 population

- South Korea: 0.5
- Japan: 0.5
- Australia: 0.3
- **China: 0.3**
- Singapore: 0.2
- Taiwan: <0.1
- Hong Kong: <0.1

China's number falls right into line with that of neighboring countries! Birx's exercise in fact is a classic example of lying by omission, a half truth being a full lie.

Either Dr. Birx was aware of this data and dishonestly withheld it, or she was not aware of it and she is incompetent. Neither conclusion is very comforting. Trump is to be criticized both for his jumping in to bash China and for tolerating someone like Birx with the direction of the government's response to the pandemic.

These data make it quite clear that countries of East Asia and Australia have performed better than the US and Europe. Why is this? Two categories of explanation suggest themselves. First different strains of the virus may differ in lethality. There is no proof for this, but there is some suggestion of it in laboratory tests.

A second reason for the better performance of East Asian countries and Australia is that they paid attention to what China was doing, perhaps because they are neighbors and better informed of what was going on in China. Much news about China is simply not reported by the mainstream media in the US and among US "allies." In this case, however, concern about a developing pandemic right next door may have lofted news from China over information blockade. These countries may have seen that China had accumulated considerable experience with the virus and at great cost in life and suffering was having success in stopping its spread. As a result, they followed what China did in many respects.

But no matter the reason, China's data fall right in line with many of its neighbors. That is the main point. The bottom line is that these data provide us with no reason to doubt China's reporting. And the correspondence between the data China released and other regional data is consistent with the fact that China reported Covid-19 deaths accurately.

Since so much attention is devoted to fact checking Trump's press conferences, I thought surely the press would have picked up on this obvious manipulation of data. I checked on the [fact check of the press conference by CNN](#), no friend of the Trump administration, and there was no mention of this lie by omission. Next, I checked PBS, a pillar of probity and respectability and also no friend of Trump. PBS does a brief online look at each press conference with anchor Hari Sreenivasan and Zachary Green. They showed Birx's chart and noted Trump's comments [but made no criticism](#) of the omitted data. A check of the NYT, another arch-foe of Trump, on the following day disclosed no mention of the Birx-Trump deceit.

How can this be explained? One cannot help but feel that the idea of Chinese malfeasance in all things has become so deeply embedded in the body politic that to challenge charges made against China is now beyond the pale. No charge, no matter how unfounded or contrary to actual fact, is too brazen to report without a moment's consideration. In fact, to tell the truth in such a situation may damage the career of a rising journalistic "star."

Why are we to be concerned about this matter? Because China's experience has had much to teach us. And since China is now emerging from the recession caused by the pandemic, it may have more to teach us as we move to economic recovery. For example, to get back to normalcy, [China has now rolled out large scale testing](#) on a territory roughly the size of the US. How is that working and how might it be improved? To ignore China's experience without careful evaluation at a time like this could well end up as a self-destructive act.

But there is an even bigger danger here. There has been a growing antagonism between China and the US since Obama's ill-advised "Pivot" against China followed by Trump's equally ill-advised trade war. Now we find Trump and Biden competing to be the number one China basher. The press conference of April 18 falls into this pattern, allowing Trump to parade as tough on China and escape from a thrashing by a China-hostile media for his earlier praise of Xi and China for their response to Covid-19. To take the route of hostility to China can lead to a clash between two economic giants and nuclear powers, which could lead to a disaster for all humanity. As Henry Kissinger reminded us some time back, armed conflict between the two giants could bring the same level of devastation to all the world that WWI brought to Europe. And that is likely to be an underestimate. Let us step back from this path before it is too late.

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Note

[1] Data is taken from this site: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/world/coronavirus-maps.html> Data is refreshed several times daily so the latest data will be posted there.

Hold mouse arrow over the country and the deaths per 100,000 will appear. Data is refreshed several times daily.

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