

Biden embraces Trump's effort to blame China for COVID-19

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The campaign of Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden has produced a TV advertisement echoing the Trump administration's false claims that China misled the world about COVID-19, and that Beijing bears responsibility for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people.

Over the past two weeks, Trump has accelerated his campaign to blame China for the pandemic. Last week, he called it an "attack" by China and the "worst attack" in US history. "This is worse than Pearl Harbor. This is worse than the World Trade Center," Trump blustered.

Biden's campaign ad, aired on Monday, embraces this narrative, claiming that the United States' belated and chaotic response to the pandemic was the result of Trump's cozy relationship with Chinese President Xi and his acceptance of false statements by the Chinese government.

The ad begins, "Early January. Donald Trump is first warned of the virus. He ignores it ... defends the Chinese government instead."

It goes on to condemn Trump for being insufficiently deferential to Peter Navarro, his trade adviser and the most consistent China hawk within his administration, who urged Trump in an internal memo to use the coronavirus outbreak to implement a total ban on travel from China.

The ad states: "January 30. Trump's own cabinet secretary warns of a pandemic, raising concerns that the Chinese government isn't being transparent. Trump calls him an alarmist."

It continues: "Desperate to protect the stock market from sliding further, Trump continues to deny the threat and praise the Chinese government."

The ad is totally incongruous. It makes no effort to explain the purported relationship between Trump's efforts to play down the pandemic in order to boost the

stock market—which is no doubt the case—and his supposed willingness to go along with China's alleged disinformation.

The new ad follows an earlier one released by the Biden campaign on April 18, which declared, "Trump rolled over for the Chinese. He took their word for it. ... And the travel ban he brags about? Trump let in 40,000 travelers from China into America after he signed it. Not exactly air tight."

These ads mark a significant shift by Biden, who in March and early April condemned Trump's efforts to blame China for the pandemic as "casual racism and regular xenophobia." At that time, Biden declared that Trump "only ever seeks to place blame, instead of claiming responsibility."

Biden added that "Trump's attempts to deflect responsibility away from his own failures in addressing this pandemic by calling the coronavirus the 'Chinese Virus' during the White House press briefings stoked feelings of hatred and anger" toward Asian Americans.

Trump has repeatedly cited such statements by Biden's campaign. "I had Biden calling me xenophobic," Trump said on Sean Hannity's Fox News prime time show March 26. "He called me a racist because of the fact that he felt it was a racist thing to stop people from China coming in."

Now Biden has fully adopted not only Trump's doctrine of "great-power competition with China," but the false claim that China somehow bears responsibility for the pandemic. By condemning Trump for failing to heed Navarro's advice against China, the ad constitutes an implicit endorsement of Trump's travel ban, which was publicly condemned by the World Health Organization, and, according to Trump himself, criticized by Dr. Anthony Fauci.

Biden's statements are part of a deepening

orientation of all sections of the US political establishment toward conflict with China, which is only being intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

To give just one example, Kathleen Parker, the *Washington Post* columnist who in 2016 called for electors in the Electoral College to vote against Trump, recently wrote: “The novel coronavirus has helped us and our international partners to finally see the communist nation’s malign instincts.”

She concluded: “By now, even President Trump’s critics may be willing to concede that he was right on this one. If he was elected partly to end China’s unfair trade practices, his reelection could depend on how successfully he navigates the China-Pandemic Problem.”

Biden’s embrace of Trump’s anti-Chinese narrative—and attempt to turn it against Trump himself—is a variation of the right-wing political line the Democratic Party has pursued since Trump’s election. In 2016, the Democrats centered their criticism of Trump on the charge that he was insufficiently aggressive against Russia.

After the election, they promoted the Mueller investigation into supposed Russian interference in the 2016 campaign and US political life more generally, and alleged collusion between Trump and Russian President Putin. After the collapse of the Mueller probe, they went on to impeach Trump on the grounds that he withheld weapons from Ukraine in the midst of its “hot war” with Russia.

The Democrats throughout were concerned not only with differences over foreign policy, but just as importantly with attempting to subordinate domestic political opposition to a right-wing, prowar agenda.

The bipartisan campaign to blame China for the COVID-19 pandemic is aimed at deflecting mounting social tensions outward through the creation of a common enemy.

Last year, writing in the *Financial Times*, Janan Ganesh noted that “a common enemy could heal the US political divide.” He concluded: “For the first time since at least the 1980s, Americans face the kind of economic, ideological and military challenge that can make domestic antagonism seem beside the point, if not unconscionable.”

He observed that “Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor” tamped down the Depression-era “class war” that was

raging in the United States, and he suggested that the US-China conflict might do the same today.

Even as the US continues its missile buildup in the Asia-Pacific after withdrawing from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, Senator Tom Cotton has proposed an additional \$43 billion in military spending targeting China as part of the next phase of the COVID-19 bailout.

Under conditions of the greatest social, political and economic crisis since the Great Depression, the bipartisan effort to deflect internal tensions outward carries with it immense dangers.



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