

Why the Ohio Train Derailment Is Becoming a Bigger Story

February 22, 2023 9:39 AM

Sorting Fact from Fiction in East Palestine

Late yesterday afternoon, I received a press release from CNN about a special the network is airing tonight at 9 p.m. Eastern:

Following the disastrous train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio, CNN will host a special hour in CNN Primetime focused on the calamity, hosted by CNN anchor and chief Washington correspondent Jake Tapper who will interview residents in East Palestine who have been impacted. CNN's chief climate correspondent Bill Weir and CNN correspondent Jason Carroll will contribute special reporting on exactly what happened and where we go from here.

The train derailment occurred on February 3, nearly three weeks ago. This is the rare disaster that is getting more media attention in its third week than it received in its first week.

The fairest complaint from the locals is that because the derailment occurred in East Palestine, Ohio — 20 miles south of Youngstown and 40 miles northwest of Pittsburgh — it did not immediately become big national news, [despite some thoroughly apocalyptic-looking images](#) that were available within a day or two, and the menacing-looking dark cloud of the controlled burn in the first few days. (Last week, our Dominic Pino [laid out a detailed rundown of the known facts of the derailment.](#))

The mainstream media does not pay as much attention to the rest of the country as it pays to New York, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, San Francisco, and maybe Chicago and a couple of other big cities. If this train crash had occurred on a [Norfolk Southern line](#) near, say, Trenton, N.J., or Wilmington, Del., or Alexandria, Va., the coverage would have been immediate and intense. The people of southeastern Ohio have good reason to contend that the national media were slow to realize how consequential this disaster was — another case of “flyover country” being, if not completely ignored, then largely overlooked and disregarded.

The national media and the federal government have a symbiotic relationship. If the media acts like something is a big deal, then the government will almost always act like it is a big deal, and vice versa.

This particular disaster has an unusual wrinkle in that, because it isn't entirely “natural” like an earthquake, hurricane, or tornado, apparently many within the federal government believe that the operator of the train, Norfolk Southern, should pay the entire cost of the cleanup. This led to an initial denial of assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Back on February 16, [Ohio governor Mike DeWine issued a statement](#) declaring that he had spoken “with officials at the White House early this morning to address the need for federal help. As a result of this

conversation, the governor has requested assistance from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health and Emergency Response Team, and the CDC to provide on-the-ground assistance in East Palestine. The DeWine administration has been in daily contact with FEMA to discuss the need for federal support, however FEMA continues to tell Governor DeWine that Ohio is not eligible for assistance at this time.” A day later, DeWine offered an update:

East Palestine currently does not qualify for FEMA assistance. Although FEMA is synonymous with disaster support, they are most typically involved with disasters where there is tremendous home or property damage such as tornadoes, flooding, and hurricanes. However, to ensure that East Palestine can receive assistance from FEMA should this disaster qualify for FEMA aid in the future, Governor DeWine is preemptively filing a request with FEMA to preserve these rights.

A few hours later, DeWine and FEMA Regional administrator Thomas C. Sivak [issued a joint statement announcing](#) that “FEMA will supplement federal efforts by deploying a senior response official along with a regional incident management assistance team to support ongoing operations, including incident coordination and ongoing assessments of potential long term recovery needs.”

But by then, the damage was done; the initial denial and delay of FEMA assistance quickly created a narrative that an administration that constantly boasts of its empathy and care for ordinary Americans was withholding help when it was needed most. Throw in President Biden’s traveling to Kyiv and announcing \$500 million more in weaponry for Ukraine, and it offered an all-too-easy target for Biden’s critics. These critics claim that Biden and his administration care more about Ukrainians than they do about poor Ohioans who had their hometown, in the words of one local firefighter and hazmat technician, [“nuked with chemicals.”](#)

Perhaps that description is hyperbolic; Governor DeWine and the EPA administrator sipped local tap water in front of the cameras to demonstrate that it is safe. The Ohio state EPA concluded that its testing “results confirm that there is no indication of risk to East Palestine Public Water customers” and that “treated drinking water shows no detection of contaminants associated with the derailment.” The [Ohio EPA concluded](#) that its tests found no butyl acrylate or vinyl chloride in the Ohio River, but they did detect very low levels of two contaminants, butyl acrylate and ethyl hexyl acrylate, in local waterways Leslie Run and North Fork Little Beaver Creek.

But locals [worry about their livestock](#), thousands of [fish have died](#) in the waterways affected by the spill, there’s a strange and unpleasant smell in the air, and those who use private wells for their water are being warned to have that water checked for safety.

There is a whiff of opportunism in the complaints that Biden hasn’t visited East Palestine; the town’s mayor, Trent Conaway, told MSNBC’s [Katy Tur](#) on February 17 that:

I think if the president came, it would do more harm than good. There’s a lot of security details that need to be around him, ambulances following him and stuff, and I think it would just be a burden on our residents, honestly. If he would like to come, I mean, I’m definitely not going to stop him, you know, but what we really need is, we need people who are going to come here and do something for us, help us out. And if they’re not, then no, we don’t need anyone around here.

Four days later, the mayor appeared on [Jesse Waters's program on Fox News](#) and complained that Biden's trip to Ukraine

was the biggest slap in the face. That tells you right now he doesn't care about us. He can send every agency he wants to, but I found that out this morning in one of the briefings that he was in the Ukraine, giving millions of dollars away to people over there and not to us, and I'm furious. . . . On Presidents' Day in our country, he's over in Ukraine, so that tells you what kind of guy he is.

Transportation secretary Pete Buttigieg — who is rapidly accumulating a reputation for being in over his head and [promising more than he can deliver](#) — conceded a few days ago that he wishes he had [addressed the public more quickly about the derailment and its consequences](#):

HUEY-BURNS: And I just have to ask, because it did take you a couple of days to respond publicly or several days to respond publicly to this particular incident. Do you wish you would have spoken out sooner?

BUTTIGIEG: Yes, I was focused on just making sure that our folks on the ground were all set, but could have spoken sooner about how strongly I felt about this incident. And that's a lesson learned for me.

Buttigieg's first public comments about the derailment, [a series of tweets, came ten days after the disaster](#).

A Bloomberg headline declared that "[Buttigieg Bashing Over Response to Ohio Derailment Turns Bipartisan](#)," but it's worth noting that the Democrat they cite, David Sirota, is a former speechwriter for Senator Bernie Sanders, who has been a vociferous critic of Buttigieg since Day One. Then again, just because Sirota has a beef with Buttigieg going back to the 2020 presidential primary doesn't mean that his criticisms aren't valid. Sirota points out that Buttigieg's public statements flipped pretty quickly from [insisting he was "constrained" in regulating safety on railways to announcing a slew of new rules](#).

[Dominic examines those proposed](#) rules and concludes that they "include demands that environmentalists and unions have made for years, and none of them would have prevented the East Palestine crash." The most reasonable one is bringing Class I freight railroads into an existing federally run whistleblower-protection program that applies to other types of railroads, but, as Dominic notes, there is "no evidence so far that nonparticipation in this program had anything to do with the East Palestine crash."

The attention to the Ohio train derailment meant that [a train derailment in Nebraska received more national attention](#), as well as [one in Texas](#) and one in South Carolina. It turns out that the U.S. experiences 1,500 to 2,000 train accidents per year; thankfully, injuries are relatively rare and fatalities are even rarer, [according to the U.S. Bureau of Transportation Statistics](#). That means the low end of the average would be 125 accidents per month and about 28 per week.

Much like the [alleged pattern of fires in food-processing plants last year](#), this is a semi-regular occurrence that is usually ignored but seems to be happening frequently because people are now attuned to stories about train derailments. This is the "[Baader-Meinhof Phenomenon](#)," a.k.a. "frequency illusion" — when

you hear a term and then feel like you're suddenly seeing it everywhere. In reality, whatever you're observing is occurring at the same frequency, it's just that you didn't notice it or ignored it before.