

House select committee gives bipartisan approval to the Wuhan “Lab leak” lies about the origins of COVID-19

Part one of two

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On December 5, 2024, at the final meeting of the House Select Committee on the Coronavirus Pandemic, Republican and Democratic members voted unanimously to pass the final draft of the 557-page COVID-19 report, *After Action Review of the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Lessons Learned and a Path Forward*, supposedly investigating the public health response to the pandemic.

Despite Republican Chair Brad Wenstrup’s characterization of report as “the single most thorough review of the pandemic conducted to date,” it is heavy on conspiracy theories and goes out of its way to misrepresent and dismiss the massive accumulated evidence that COVID-19 had a natural origin, first crossing over from animals to humans at the Huanan market in Wuhan, China.

Instead, the report posits that the pandemic was a lab leak at the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV), despite not one shred of evidence to support that conclusion. After two years in which the show-trial proceedings were orchestrated to put the lab-leak scenario on an equal footing with the natural spillover explanation supported by most scientists, the report now declares that the lab leak is the most likely.

A document that purports to be guided by science completely dismisses the mountain of evidence that has been amassed over the last five years identifying the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market as the origin of the pandemic. The market is one of many in China where an active wild-animal trade was taking place.

The committee chair, Republican Representative Brad Wenstrup of Ohio, a medical doctor who will retire in January, has sought from the beginning to legitimize and sanction the fringe conspiracy theory that first emerged in disinformation channels soon after the outbreak in Wuhan was confirmed in the early weeks of January 2020.

The committee’s Democratic vice-chair, Representative Raul Ruiz of California, and the other Democratic members joined with Wenstrup and other committee Republicans, including fascist Marjorie Taylor Greene, in the unanimous vote endorsing the report. Ruiz and another committee Democrat, Ami Bera of California, are both medical doctors, making their collaboration with this anti-science, anti-China provocation particularly disgraceful.

Wenstrup gave a preview of the report when he participated in a July 8, 2024, Heritage Foundation conference on China and the COVID-19 pandemic. The far-right think tank, which initiated and co-wrote the infamous Project 2025 blueprint for the incoming Trump administration, has been openly hostile to the EcoHealth Alliance

(EHA), the US-based public health organization which conducted joint research on coronaviruses with the acclaimed Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV).

EcoHealth Alliance and its director, Dr. Peter Daszak, have been collaborating for years with Chinese scientists at the WIV, located in Wuhan, a city of 13.7 million people in central China. They have sought to address the threat posed by pandemic pathogens and bat coronaviruses, and therefore became a central focus of the right-wing conspiracy theories, first circulated by anti-communist Chinese exiles and one of Trump’s foremost fascist advisers, Stephen Bannon.

The attack on science in general, and the work conducted over several years by EHA, the National Institute of Health, and WIV, specifically, became the primary focus of the House Select Subcommittee on the COVID-19 Pandemic (SSCP), with Dr. Daszak hauled before a hearing and subjected to bullying and witch-hunting.

Refuting the lies of the SSCP report is not difficult from a scientific standpoint, although politically the report has been given credibility by the sheer volume of its falsifications, the embrace of the lies by the Democrats, and the complicity of the corporate media.

The allegations being purported have followed these basic lines: (1) The virus has unusual biological characteristics not found in nature (untrue). (2) Data shows that COVID cases stem from a single introduction into humans (untrue, there were at least two). (3) WIV is located in Wuhan (true but irrelevant) and has a history of conducting gain-of-function research at inadequate biosafety levels (untrue). (4) Several researchers at WIV fell ill with flu-like illness in the fall of 2019, months before COVID was discovered at the Wet Market (untrue and misleading). And (5) The specific natural origin, i.e., what kind of animal last hosted the virus before it crossed over to humans, hasn’t surfaced yet (inconsequential to the natural origin hypothesis and not uncommon with such diseases).

It bears reviewing the evidence of the characteristics of the SARS-CoV-2 virus that have been published. This is certainly not an exhaustive evaluation but lends understanding to the massive body of work that exists that continues to be overlooked by these hearings.

As noted in (1), the SSCP report claims that the virus possesses biological characteristics not found in nature, which has repeatedly been proven false. There have been many examples of bat coronaviruses circulating that can infect human ACE2 receptors directly, and these have been proven by serological studies. These

were the fundamental reasons why Daszak worked with Dr. Shi Zhengli at WIV to address what was then recognized as an existential threat to human populations.

In a 2018 study by Dr. Shi and colleagues, they wrote, “Our study provides the first serological evidence of likely human infection by bat SARS-CoVs or, potentially, related viruses. The lack of prior exposure to SARS patients by the people surveyed, their lack of prior travel to areas heavily affected by SARS during the outbreak, and the rapid decline of detectable antibodies to SARS-CoV in recovered patients within 2–3 years after infection strongly suggests that positive serology obtained in this study is not due to prior infection with SARS-CoV.”

And still another study from 2023, found that between 2017 and 2020, 12 percent of 693 people screened for SARS-related viruses (SARS-CoV-1 and SARS-CoV-2) were seropositive to these viruses. In particular, work in the extractive industries (logging, hunting, or harvesting of forest products) increased the chances of these exposures.

They then proceed to denounce the Proximal Origins of SARS-CoV-2 study, the first accurate analysis of the new pandemic, not by discrediting it scientifically, but merely by linking it, however, distantly, to former official Anthony Fauci, as though that alone was enough to condemn it. It is worth noting that the findings of the report continue to stand the test of time and political scrutiny. During the Heritage Foundation hearing on COVID-19, Dr. Robert Redfield, Trump’s former CDC chief, asserted that the paper ought to be retracted, which underscores to what lengths this cabal of right-wing reactionaries will go to falsify history and politicize the peer review processes for scientific investigations.

But the heart of their conspiracy is to malign the EcoHealth Alliance and Dr. Peter Daszak for supposedly conducting dangerous gain-of-function research and violating their NIH grants. Irrespective of the thorough investigation conducted by the National Academy of Medicine and the Office of Inspector General into EHA’s conduct, which exonerated them of any wrongdoing or malicious intent, the SSCP, exerting pressure on NIH and HHS, is calling for the debarment of EHA from receiving any federal grant, essentially destroying the group’s ability to conduct research.

At a May 1, 2024 hearing, Daszak was grilled by the SSCP and courageously stood his ground, maintaining a dignified presence and speaking not only in the name of science, but to the interests of all humanity. Neither his SSCP inquisitors nor the mainstream media have responded to the substantive September 24, 2024 rebuttal by EHA of the fascistic hysteria directed against it. The detailed report numbers 146 pages, with more than 110 appendices. It provides a unique perspective on the sometimes mundane and very tedious work that such activity requires. It also is a weighty defense of science and counters all the fallacious statements made by the SSCP’s final report.

What emerges from a careful review of the document is a clear discussion on the numerous attempts made by EHA to submit their year five report to the NIH through its arcane database. The reader can review the dozens of emails that went back and forth between NIH staffers and EHA employees, including those from Daszak. The attempt by the SSCP to malign EHA and characterize it as irresponsible is completely unjustified.

More so, the report goes into detail explaining the federally regulated definitions of “gain-of-function” research, and how they were to be applied to their investigations. An in-depth analysis of biosafety rules demonstrated that WIV was operating under

regulations that were borrowed from their US counterparts. The purpose of having these regulations is that it allows the scope of the work to be defined to minimize “lab errors” and provide swift corrective actions if they do.

The report also goes into exhaustive detail on the work conducted between EHA, the lab of Dr. Ralph Baric at the University of North Carolina, and WIV, underscoring that none of the viruses used were pandemic potential pathogens, nor did the results of their investigation merit the term gain-of-function. Ignoring all this critical evidentiary material demonstrates the concocted character of the whole SSCP report.

As EHA noted in their defense:

For over two decades, EcoHealth Alliance (EHA) has pioneered groundbreaking discoveries in disease ecology—discovering natural animal reservoirs for viruses, repeatedly sounding the alarm since 2004 about the likely emergence of a highly contagious bat-origin coronavirus from China or Southeast Asia and publishing a hotspot map of emerging diseases that governments and non-governmental organizations across the world have used to establish pandemic prevention plans. More recently, EHA’s work aided in the development and testing of COVID-19 vaccines and treatments.

EHA has been a responsible steward of federal funds for over 25 years and received competitive grant awards from a variety of federal agencies, including USAID, the Department of Defense, the Department of Homeland Security, the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation.

Despite these accomplishments, EHA has become one of several scapegoats for the COVID-19 pandemic. This spring, the House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic (SSCP) homed in on EHA, calling for a public hearing on May 1, 2024. The SSCP was ostensibly established with the goal of uncovering the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, but it was clearly political in practice. In fact, even before the hearing even began, the SSCP released a report calling on the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to “immediately commence suspension and debarment proceedings against both EcoHealth and Dr. Daszak”—in other words, permanently cut them off from federal funding—an action typically reserved for criminal activities related to grants.

To be continued



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