

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

Part two of two

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To read part one, click here.

The role of the Heritage Foundation

Given the central role the Heritage Foundation has played in directing the various lines of arguments on the COVID-19 Lab-Leak conspiracy and, through their Project 2025 initiative to dismantle all federal regulations including aligning scientific research under the diktat of the state, their COVID-19 report, “a blueprint” for legislative action, and the hearing they held on July 8, 2024 bears discussion. It provides important context to the SSCP’s (House Select Subcommittee on the COVID-19 Pandemic) final report.

The opening comments given by Derrick Morgan, executive vice president for the foundation, sets the stage to codify the Wuhan Lab Leak conspiracy theory and blame China for the pandemic. After annotating the economic and human toll of COVID-19, Morgan outlined the scope of actions against the Chinese government the next administration would take.

It’s critical that the US take the leadership role and hold the Chinese Communist Party accountable for one of the most catastrophic cover-ups in human history. It has been nearly five years since the outbreak in Wuhan, China, and nothing has been done to hold China accountable. They believe they have gotten away with it. But, in action, it incentivizes the CCP to persist in secretive and aggressive and dangerous behavior. The commission has worked diligently over the last eight months to produce a report with actionable recommendations for the president and legislative branch of government to implement right now. This commission report brings today facts and a blueprint to begin.

In his introductory remarks at the Heritage Foundation gathering, Representative Brad Wenstrup, chair of the House Select Sub-Committee on the COVID-19 Pandemic, promised to accept his marching orders, despite admitting we would “never know with certainty what took place.” Like every previous speaker, he made references to “new evidence,” when in reality these are nothing but suggestions and innuendos proffered as talking points for the right-wing, anti-China and anti-science campaign.

Instead of informing the audience that EcoHealth Alliance (EHA) was submitting a rebuttal to the SSCP’s May 1, 2024, hearing, and that this would have to be taken into consideration before reaching any final conclusion on their role in the pandemic, Wenstrup assured his audience that EHA and its director Dr. Peter Daszak would be debarred and would never see another dollar from US taxpayers. Punishment first, before examining the evidence, EHA and WIV found guilty of conducting gain-of-function research that created the SARS-CoV-2 virus, case closed.

Present at the meeting was the former Director of National Intelligence John Ratcliffe, who had claimed that COVID-19 was a bioweapon produced by the Chinese and served as the chair of the Heritage Foundation commission on the pandemic. During the panel discussion, he asserted that the CIA’s inability to reach a conclusion blaming China for COVID “reflects political and financial imperatives that have prevented that.” Five months after the Heritage Foundation event, Trump nominated Ratcliffe as CIA director, putting him in position to enforce the anti-China witch-hunt.

Michael Hiltzik of the *Los Angeles Times*, one of the few media commentators who has criticized the travesty conducted by the SSCP, took issue with how the intelligence on the pandemic has been played out by these conspiracists. He wrote:

The [SSCP] report does mention six scientific studies of COVID’s origin in peer-reviewed journals. Every single one supports the zoonosis theory. The Republicans cite assessments by some U.S. intelligence agencies favoring a lab leak, but no agency has ever disclosed what made them think so. A declassified report issued in June 2023 by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, or ODNI—which oversees the entire intelligence community—found no evidence that a “research-related incident” at WIV “could have caused the COVID pandemic.”

Hiltzik then cites the ODNI conclusion: “While several WIV researchers fell mildly ill in Fall 2019, they experienced a range of symptoms consistent with colds or allergies with accompanying symptoms typically not associated with COVID-19, and some of them were confirmed to have been sick with other illnesses unrelated to COVID-19.”

Former Trump CDC Director Robert Redfield also addressed the Heritage panel. His role was by reverse engineering the disparate and sparse pieces of information available about the events of later 2019 and

early 2020 sick people, when the Chinese public health system moved swiftly to detect the outbreak and identify its cause, information, including the entire genome of the virus, which it shared with scientists around the world. He spoke as follows:

The COVID virus really learned how to infect humans rather quickly. And I think it was a direct consequence of scientists ... scientific arrogance. Scientists working there were intentionally teaching this virus how to infect humans, never recognizing that something might go wrong. And unfortunately, this virus did escape—not intentionally—probably in the fall of 2019 and the rest is history. The other reason it is preventable, and this is part of what Dr. Ratcliffe alluded to for holding China accountable, we now know with a high degree of certainty that the Chinese understood they had a new pandemic probably in August or September of 2019. Unfortunately, they didn't tell the world. But they knew this epidemic was starting.

He concluded that the CCP was using the Huanan wet market as a ruse and cover-up.

These remarks would be preposterous if they weren't from a man of his credentials speaking at a meeting setting the stage for confrontation with a nuclear-armed world power. There was no skepticism on the part of Redfield about unproven assertions about the virus and the Wuhan lab, as one would expect from a scientist. Furthermore, he didn't even bother engaging in the various lines of evidence that refuted or challenged his hypothesis, as a scientist should.

It was impossible for SARS-CoV-2 to be present in August or September of 2019, as claimed by Ratcliffe and other purveyors of anti-China propaganda. But the suggestion of an earlier introduction was necessary to keep the threads of their narrative from completely unraveling.

Dr. Jonathan Pekar, evolutionary biologist at the University of Edinburgh and lead author of the critical study that determined there had been two introductions of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, with molecular clock analysis placing the timing of both in November 2019. This finding was a devastating blow to the lab-leak claims, since it would be statistically impossible that a lab leak occurred twice, and each time the leak affected the same market in the city of 13 million people, miles away from the lab, rather than among researchers or the population living near the WIV.

And adding more weight to the ongoing accumulation of evidence for natural origin, Débarre, from Sorbonne University, published a report in the journal *PLOS Computational Biology* in March 2024, employing a stochastic population dynamics approach using a larger set of viral genetic data, calculated that the first date of a SARS-CoV-2 infection occurred on November 28, 2019 (ranging from November 2 to December 9, 2019). These findings fall within the range of previous estimates.

Imperialist geopolitics vs. international collaboration

Aside from the willful bafflement of the science of the pandemic, at the heart of the panel discussion was the critical issue of government funding of research and the concerns about the security threats such international collaborations pose for the military-political hegemony of the United States.

Speaking to these points, David Feith, former deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs under the first Trump

administration, called China an “unwilling transparent partner of the United States or anyone else around the world in public health cooperation. Our systems need to be much better prepared for this kind of pathological response out of the Chinese communist system, frankly, better prepared than we were. We should have expected a greater degree of obfuscation, cover-up, and dishonesty than we were actually postured for at the time.”

He continued:

It can be done through Congress and the executive branch through various ways, for the US government to perform an audit on all US government funded biomedical and related research in China, and that this audit place a strict one-year deadline establishing a presumption that this research, because of the nature of the Chinese political system is going to be nontransparent and unsafe, and a net negative for international scientific cooperation ... it would establish essentially an audit and a rebuttable presumption that would hopefully have a very dramatic effect in cutting down on research cooperation with China which the US government and the US universities and also US corporations have shown not to be able to properly monitor.

Such intrusions on open collaboration between international scientists are well under way. In an interview with the *New England Journal of Medicine* in September 2023, Salim Abdool Karim, a clinical infectious diseases epidemiologist and a professor for Global Health in the Department of Epidemiology at Columbia University and director for the AIDS research in South Africa, discussed the negative impact of NIH policies for research collaboration:

The NIH is one of the world's leading authorities and funders of research on global health who has investigators all over the world who are either directly funded by the NIH or are indirect funders through subcontracts between US institutions. Traditionally, the NIH has had certain requirements for its international investigators. Those requirements relate to certain audit requirements and information sharing requirements. What the NIH has proposed to do in these new rules and set of regulations it has created is that it requires international investigators to now provide a very detailed documentation on a regular basis—quarterly or semiannually—depending on which source you look at in terms of the regulations.

Why is that a problem? Well, the problem is that they are requiring a level of information that would just not be onerous, but also difficult to comply with in many settings because it is asking for notebooks, it is asking for individual patient data, and studies that involve thousands of pages of patient information that would need to be shared. And this poses a real challenge especially in settings where local laws don't allow it, or, in the case of certain settings, it also changes the relationship between international investigators and US primary recipients.

First and most pernicious of the problems that is going to emanate from this is that the whole world has been moving towards collaboration on the basis of mutual respect and mutual trust. Those are fundamental to global collaborations. This new rule is one that requires unilateral sharing of information. So, it doesn't require domestic US institutions to share this information, but only international investigators to share this information.

That means international investigators will be sharing their

information with US colleagues but not vice versa. That undermines at a really fundamental the nature of scientific collaborations, and the nature of how we build relationships on global health. That kind of openness and honesty and accountability between partners is pretty standard practice. This rule challenges that and undermines that by creating a unilateral relationship that is imbalanced between US and international institutions.

Disarming the world against the next pandemic

As for keeping the world safe from the next pandemic, in the last SSCP hearing on November 14, 2024, Representative Raul Ruiz (D-California) asked the acting director of the NIH, Lawrence Tabak, how to balance the continued need for research and identifying getting ahead of future viruses with the imperative of doing research safely and transparently.

Before the latest witch-hunt, Tabak had denied any gain-of-function research had been conducted through federally funded grants. But he reversed himself and unceremoniously threw Daszak and EHA under the bus on May 16, 2024, by declaring the work being done by EHA was “gain-of-function,” irrespective of the precise definition of the term. Now he tried to walk this back, offering:

Steps need to be taken to do such research in a safe and efficient manner. But I think we need to continue to make long-term investment in basic discovery. Without the fundamental knowledge of different viral families, for which we have less information, we would be working blind should one of those escape to be a new emergent pathogen. We also have to continue to build on the infrastructure we have in place to ensure that we are ready for the next pandemic. And that includes pathogen surveillance and genomic sequencing and informatics and structural biology, such that we have a better understanding of what targets might be. Finally, we have to maintain a flexible domestic and global clinical trial network infrastructure so that we can rapidly deploy potential countermeasures.

Ruiz then asked, “What would be the ramifications of cutting funding to this research as a knee-jerk reaction to the possibility that the novel-coronavirus emerged from a lab incident?”

Tabak admitted, “The need for basic discovery is essential. We need to understand who the pathogens are. We need to understand how the pathogens transmit. We need to understand what their mechanisms of action are; What type of disease and pathology do they cause. And we need to support the key infrastructure that is essential going forward if we are to defeat any potential emerging pathogen.”

Ruiz then asks about how to work with adversarial countries to ensure they are up to code and transparent. Tabak once more admitted, “As you know, international collaboration and research is essential. The pandemic underscored that!” To be precise, this was exactly what EHA and WIV were engaged in, which has all been undone, thus making the world woefully unprepared for the next pandemic.

On the heels of the approval of the SSCP’s report, Dr. Shi Zhengli, who was participating in a virology-based pandemic preparedness conference in Awaji, Japan, on December 4, 2024, addressing questions from her peers, reiterated that among all the viruses they collected between 2004 and 2021, “We didn’t find any new sequences which are more closely

related to SARS-CoV-1 and SARS-CoV-2.”

Dr. Jonathan Pekar told *Nature* that the results to date have supported Dr. Shi’s previous assertions that the WIV did not possess any “bat-derived sequences from viruses that were more closely related to SARS-COV-2 than were any already described in scientific papers.” Indeed, the closest known viruses to SARS-CoV-2 have been found in Laos and Yunnan, Southern China, which the recent finding of SARS-CoV-2 and raccoon dog DNA at Huanan are linked to these regions.

The recent *Nature* report goes on to add, “Over the years, the collaboration between Shi and Daszak collected more than 15,000 swabs from bats in the region. The team tested these for coronaviruses, and resequenced the genomes of those that tested positive. The collection expands the known diversity of coronaviruses. ‘She found sequences that can at the very least provide more context to our understanding of coronaviruses,’ says Pekar. In a larger analysis of 233 sequences—including the new sequences and some that had previously been published—Shi and her colleagues identified seven broad lineages and evidence of viruses extensively swapping chunks of RNA, a process known as recombination. Daszak says the analysis also assesses the risk of these viruses jumping to people and identifies potential drug targets; ‘information of direct value to public health’.”

All these advances are now at risk. As Shi said in 2021 when speaking with the *New York Times*, referring to demands that she prove that the WIV was not the source of the coronavirus pandemic: “How on earth can I offer up evidence for something where there is no evidence? I don’t know how the world has come to this, constantly pouring filth on an innocent scientist.”



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