

## Absent Changes at the Very Top, the U.S. Government Will Continue to Impede a Proper Inquiry into Whether Covid-19 Leaked from a Laboratory

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From the onset of being declared a pandemic, certain members of the scientific community and public officials suppressed efforts to determine whether the covid-19 virus was leaked from a laboratory, insisting it was passed to humans by animals.

“We stand together to strongly condemn conspiracy theories suggesting that COVID-19 does not have a natural origin,” 27 researchers from the U.S., Europe and Asia said in a February 2020 [edition](#) of the *Lancet*, which has been ranked as high as [second among leading scientific journals](#).



Source: Shutterstock.

The tide turned by the spring of 2021, when scientific journals began publishing reports supporting an investigation into the lab leak theory, a position further buttressed by President Joe Biden.

“I had my National Security Advisor task the Intelligence Community to prepare a report on their most up-to-date analysis of the origins of COVID-19, including whether it emerged from human contact with an infected animal or from a laboratory accident,” President Biden said of his March presidential directive.

By May President Biden narrowed his focus on China, calling on its leaders to provide access to laboratory personnel and records from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, which had conducted extensive research into coronaviruses and is located where the first cases of COVID-19 were reported.

China took a mirrored position, insisting that an investigation of U.S. labs involved in coronavirus research, including some in collaboration with the WIV, was the key to exploring the lab leak theory.

The stalemate has prevented any real progress on the investigation.

Despite the lack of progress to date, the Biden administration has the power and ability to advance an investigation by collecting potentially critical information from the many researchers outside of China who collaborated with the WIV on coronavirus research. But it has refused to do so, driven in large part by a fear that a broader investigation may expose the potential role that U.S. federal agencies, including the National Institutes for Health, played in coronavirus research at the WIV and at home. Whether that fear can be overcome, allowing for a full investigation and willingness to look inward, may depend on multiple factors, including whether one of the NIH’s most notable employees, Dr. Anthony Fauci, leaves his current office before mid-term elections.

*A house divided*

Authors of an April 2020 letter in Nature Medicine, another highly ranked scientific journal, echoed the authors of the Lancet article, concluding that “we do not believe that any type of laboratory-based scenario is plausible.”

Not only were scientific journals publishing these views despite the lack of supporting data, many were apparently rejecting studies that supported the call for an investigation of the lab leak theory.

One of those studies, conducted by Dr. Nikolai Petrovsky and Dr. David Winkler, produced data showing that it was nearly impossible for SARS-CoV-2 to have been transmitted by bats to humans directly, a common theory proposed by researchers who rejected any chance of a lab leak.

“We were quite stunned,” Dr. Petrovsky, a professor at Flinders University medical school in Australia, told [Yahoo News](#) in July when discussing what he called “blanket rejections” by publishers.

The research community was a house divided.

The rejections may have been, in part, a reaction to then President Donald Trump’s criticism of China during the early stages of the pandemic, Co-author Dr. Winkler, a professor at La Trobe University in Australia with over 250 published reports, said in an interview

By the spring of 2021, the research community began to accept calls for a proper investigation into the lab leak theory, and respected journals began publishing studies that provided data supporting the possibility of a lab leak. One of those studies was that of Dr. Winkler and Dr. Petrovsky, finally [published](#)

in the highly regarded Nature Scientific Reports in June 2021, over a year from when the study was first submitted.

A variety of factors may have contributed to the turning of the tide.

The inability of scientists to identify any animal that could have directly transferred the virus to humans is one factor, according to Dr. Winkler. Absent that date, one can't rule out the potential that the virus made a pit stop in a laboratory.

President Joe Biden's call for a proper investigation, even though it too focuses on China, may also be less offensive to the research community compared to President Trump's efforts to blame China, Dr. Winkler said.

However, despite his public messaging, the reality is that leaders in the White House and Congress have not shown a willingness to get to the truth even though they have the means to do. That may remain the case unless certain changes are made in Washington.

*The U.S. government wants a proper investigation, as long as the focus is on China*

President Biden's specific focus has been on pushing China to provide full access to the WIV and its researchers, as reflected in a White House statement in May:

"I have asked for areas of further inquiry that may be required, including specific questions for China,"

President Biden said about the efforts by his administration to investigate the lab leak theory.

Nowhere in the May statement did President Biden mention the potential role of the U.S. in the SARS-COV-2 outbreak.

His hesitancy to look inward may be explained by facts reported by Vanity Fair in June, which found that U.S. federal agencies provided funding for coronavirus research at the WIV and at U.S. labs.

The funding was the focus of a July hearing on Capitol Hill, which included a heated exchange between Senator Rand Paul and Dr. Anthony Fauci, the government's leader in the fight to end the coronavirus pandemic. While that debate focused on whether the funding went to controversial "gain-of-function studies," which involve genetically modifying viruses to enhance their infectivity or replication, it appeared that Dr. Fauci was familiar with the details of the research and the funding.



**United States Capitol. Shutterstock.**

The Vanity Fair piece also reported that across town, within the Department of State, officials were explicitly told by colleagues not to explore the WIV's coronavirus research because it would bring unwelcome attention to the associated U.S. funding.

"That laboratory research in Wuhan was a cooperative venture of the United States," Dr. Richard Ebright said in an interview, referring to the funding provided by U.S. federal agencies, including the National Institutes of Health, which employs Dr. Fauci.

Dr. Ebright, a professor of Chemical Biology at Rutgers University, believes the Democrat leadership in Congress will resist any investigation into the role of the U.S. in the origin of covid-19 while Dr. Fauci remains the White House's scientific leader in the effort to stem the pandemic.

"The majority leadership has blocked it precisely and entirely on the issue of sensitivity to concerns that this would involve attacking Fauci and thereby would involve interfering with our COVID response," Dr. Ebright said.

In contrast to the majority's position, in an August minority [report](#) Republicans on the House Foreign Affairs Committee were not hesitant to investigate Dr. Fauci's role, if any, in various aspects connected to the lab leak theory.

While Congress remains another house divided, but controlled by Democrats, the maintenance of the current majority doesn't automatically mean Dr. Fauci will remain in his position through the rest of President Biden's term, according to Dr. Ebright.

Dr. Ebright believes that given it is now undisputed that federal funds had made their way into the WIV to support coronavirus research, and that Dr. Fauci knew of those activities, Dr. Fauci may be removed or retire before federal midterm elections in 2022.

"The moment it becomes clear he's politically toxic and an electoral liability and the albatross around the administration's and the majority's neck, then he's gone," Dr. Ebright said. "He'll be spending more time with family."

Regardless of Dr. Fauci's future, from a practical perspective a broader investigation into the lab leak theory is still possible despite the passage of time and China's unwillingness to cooperate, according to Dr. Ebright.

But the clock is ticking.

#### *Exploring the lab leak theory without China's cooperation*

The window of opportunity to do a proper investigation into the lab leak theory is closing, according to an August report in Nature, as files and related data have almost certainly been destroyed at the WIV and other labs. And China's lack of cooperation is not going to change, according to China itself.

But those factors don't prevent the Department of Justice from initiating a meaningful investigation, according to Dr. Ebright, if permitted by those in the White House and the majority in Congress.

That investigation could involve gathering information from the various federal agencies that provided funding for coronavirus research, all of which have proposals, progress reports, letters and incident reports related to work at the WIV and collaborating laboratories.

Most of the journals that have published reports on coronaviruses from the WIV and U.S. labs have a U.S. office, meaning they can be forced to produce similar information including original manuscripts, according to Dr. Ebright.

The scientists from U.S. labs who authored those papers or otherwise conducted related viral research could be forced to produce information. The August minority report from the House Foreign Affairs Committee pointed in the direction of one lab of particular interest.

"American scientist, Dr. Ralph Baric, assisted in creating a method to leave no trace of genetic modification as early as 2005," the report said. "And as early as 2016, scientists working at the WIV were able to do the same. This makes it clear that claims by the scientific community that SARS-CoV-2 could not be man-made because it has no genetic modification markers are disingenuous."

Dr. Baric has co-authored papers on coronaviruses with WIV researchers, including a 2015 publication in Nature [titled](#) *"A SARS-like cluster of circulating bat coronaviruses shows potential for human emergence."*



Dr. Igor Rozenvald, a professor at the University of Massachusetts medical school, believes an investigation of U.S. labs, particularly that of Dr. Baric, is essential and of high priority.

“In order to start a real investigation, the western labs, the Baric lab in the USA to start with, should be turned upside down and inside out,” Dr. Rozenvald said in a recent interview, referring to viral research conducted by Dr. Baric at his University of North Carolina lab in Chapel Hill.

Neither Dr. Ebright nor Dr. Rozenvald suggested that Dr. Fauci, Dr. Baric or any other U.S. researcher who studied coronaviruses did anything improper in their work. Instead Dr. Ebright and Dr. Rozenvald believe that a full investigation should take place, one that covers all labs engaged in coronavirus research, particularly those that involve genetic engineering of viruses.

Neither Dr. Fauci nor Dr. Baric agreed to requests for an interview.

If against the odds a full investigation finally takes place, and it concluded that the virus was leaked from a lab, never mind one supported by U.S. funding, the ramifications could be significant.

“It would shatter the scientific edifice top to bottom,” Antonio Regalado, senior editor of biomedicine for the MIT Technology Review and a former Wall Street Journal science reporter, [said](#) in a recent email exchange.