



## COVID-19 Origins and Politicized Science

Questions about COVID-19's origins have existed since the beginning of the pandemic. From the outset, Chinese officials intentionally misled the world about the coronavirus outbreak and the dangers it posed. In late 2019 and early 2020, government authorities sought to conceal infections from their own population as well as from global health leaders and media. Then, as the virus became impossible to ignore, Chinese leaders pointed to bats sold at an outdoor food market in Wuhan as the outbreak's source. But local authorities had been ordered to shut down and sanitized the market [without taking biological samples](#) from the animals or workers. This meant key evidence that might tie the virus's origin to the market was eliminated, so outside investigators would likely never be able to prove or disprove the link. Such early steps by the Chinese have left scientists and intelligence analysts unable to determine the source and path of the coronavirus outbreak with certainty. Reports issued by the U.S. Director of National Intelligence in both August and October 2021 were indeterminate, revealing that American intelligence agencies have thus far been unable to reach definitive conclusions and suggesting that analysts may never be able to determine conclusively how COVID-19 originated and spread.

The destruction of critical evidence and the absence of rigorous investigation did not stop some public health officials and much of the media from touting a definitive conclusion. The Washington Post, like many other outlets, claimed that "solid scientific research demonstrates that the virus wasn't engineered by humans and that it originated in bats." CNN insisted that "the bulk of the intelligence gathering and science" that had supposedly been conducted "all seems to point ... to a natural origin for the virus."

Dr. Peter Dazsak, a prominent member of the World Health Organization (WHO) team sent to China to investigate the outbreak, [dismissed](#) a lab-leak scenario immediately because the team found "no evidence" of "a virus like COVID in the lab" at the Wuhan Institute of Virology. "For an accidental leak that then led to COVID, the virus that causes COVID would need to be in the lab," he explained, but there was "absolutely no evidence of that." Even without meaningful access to records and materials at the Wuhan Institute, the WHO team [concluded](#) that a lab leak was "extremely unlikely." Dr. Peter Embarek, head of the WHO mission, [said](#) a brief visit to the laboratory showed it was "very unlikely" that anything could have escaped and that a lab-leak theory was "not in the hypotheses that we will suggest for future studies."

Many became so convinced of the "developed in nature" scenario that they sought to silence proponents of any competing explanation. Mainstream media outlets took to [labeling](#) the lab-leak hypothesis a "conspiracy theory" that had been "debunked" and [chastising](#) public figures who suggested that the possibility was worthy of investigation. Social media platforms like Twitter [pledged](#) to "work in close consultation with global public health authorities" to prevent "coronavirus misinformation" about a possible lab leak and [de-platform](#) those who touted what [experts and commentators](#) had "dismissed as a fringe conspiracy theory." Facebook censored statements that departed from the established orthodoxy, [banning posts](#) that suggested the virus was man-made or did not originate in nature, as among "misleading health claims" that the company does not allow on its site. Many in the media continued to insist that further debate or inquiry should not be permitted until May 2021 when, faced with specific and growing evidence of a likely lab leak, President Biden ordered a [formal investigation](#) of the virus's origins.

This analysis evaluates evidence for each of the two theories about COVID-19's origins and concludes that although destruction of key materials and records may preclude a definitive conclusion, the overwhelming preponderance of the evidence points to its release from a Wuhan lab. The chain of events needed to establish the "natural origin" hypothesis is full of gaps that have remain unfilled despite exhaustive investigation. Many of the individuals and institutions that nevertheless insisted on a natural-origin explanation and denigrated the lab-leak theory had vested interests in that conclusion and in suppressing contrary information.

## The Theoretical Basis of The Two Theories

The [prevailing theory](#) touted by the scientific establishment was that the virus had emerged from nature, likely jumping from bats to some other species before making a leap to humans at the market in Wuhan, where the earliest reported cases had appeared in late 2019. This wet market—which included stalls selling seafood, meat, fruit, and vegetables, as well as some vendors that sold live wild animals—was described [throughout the media](#) as the likely site of initial COVID-19 transmission from a natural source. This narrative was widely reported as having scientific validation. Chinese and WHO investigators [insisted](#) that a supposed pathway from bat caves to wildlife farms to long-haul trucks to a wet market and ultimately to Wuhan residents was "the most likely explanation."

Yet the natural emergence theory violated the core scientific concept known as Occam's razor, which that holds that the hypothesis with the fewest and most reasonable assumptions should be the default unless proven otherwise. Prominent proponents of natural emergence [suggested](#) that the virus originated in bat caves, was transmitted at a nearby wildlife farm, spread as the contaminated animals were shipped to a wet market, and ultimately infected people at the market who handled them. In explaining such a theory, adherents [conceded](#) that animals potentially carrying a virus would have had to come from farms hundreds of miles away, that the animals found at the Wuhan market had tested negative for the virus, and that no testing had revealed a prior outbreak at or near any of the wildlife farms from which the virus had supposedly come. This multi-step hypothesis formed the basis of the natural origin explanation despite lacking supporting evidence for any of the supposed viral leaps.

Bats carrying the original virus (CoV ZC45) that was hypothesized to have ultimately been transmitted as COVID-19 in humans were [found](#) in Yunnan and Zhejiang provinces, both of which are more than 600 miles from Wuhan. No early human infection or transmission was recorded in either province. After nearly two years of investigation, [little progress](#) has been made in establishing a likely natural pathway from infected bats in this region to a market in Wuhan. According to both [municipal reports and interviews](#) with dozens of residents and visitors to Wuhan, bats were never a food source in the city and no bats had ever been traded at its markets.

If not transmitted directly from a bat, the virus would have had to move through a third species, now known as the "missing link," that was infected by the bat and later consumed by humans. Researchers have [tested numerous](#) domesticated, farmed, and wild animals throughout China but found no evidence that any were hosts for the virus. In previous animal-to-human viral transmissions, like the 2003 SARS outbreak in China, researchers [ascertained](#) intermediate animal hosts and serologic signs of infections in animal traders within months of the outbreaks. Despite intensive efforts over the past two years, [no one has found](#) a bat-source population, or COVID-19 circulating in an intermediate species that functioned as a viral conduit between bats and humans, or any evidence that COVID-19 was present anywhere else before it appeared in Wuhan.

For these and other reasons, some observers [noted](#) even in early 2020 that the original story of COVID-19 emerging from a wet market in Wuhan was “shaky” at best. Early [research](#) published in the *Lancet* showed that the first known patient, identified on December 1, 2019, had no connection to the market. Nor did more than one-third of the cases in the first large cluster of infections in Wuhan have [any known contact](#) with the market or people who had. Despite China’s initial narrative of a Wuhan market outbreak, to which many in the media and the global health establishment had faithfully adhered, available evidence pointed in a different direction altogether.

As early as February 2020, researchers from the South China University of Technology [noted](#) that the seafood market Chinese authorities identified as the source of the outbreak was less than 300 yards from the Wuhan Center for Disease Control & Prevention (WHCDC), which houses laboratory research animals—including bats—and specializes in pathogen collection and identification. Researchers from that facility and the nearby Wuhan Institute of Virology had [posted](#) numerous [articles](#) about collecting bat coronaviruses from around China. A scientist at WHCDC, who was publicized throughout the Chinese media for collecting bat coronaviruses, had [previously acknowledged](#) having been attacked by bats at the facility, including direct exposure to bat blood and urine—and having quarantined himself on multiple occasions given the “extreme danger” of the possible infections he had suffered.

It was [widely known](#) that researchers at the WHCDC routinely performed surgery on bats they had brought to Wuhan in order to obtain tissue samples for DNA and RNA extraction and sequencing. At least one team from the WHCDC was also [known](#) to have specifically searched bat caves throughout key provinces in central China for new coronaviruses in 2019. Tissue samples and the dead bats from which they had been extracted [amounted to](#) “contaminated trash” and an obvious “source of pathogens” that was housed literally next door to the Wuhan seafood market and adjacent to the hospital where the first tranche of healthcare workers had been infected with COVID-19. These data points led Botao Xiao, a molecular biomechanics researcher at the South China University of Technology, to [conclude](#) in February 2020 that “the killer coronavirus probably originated from a laboratory in Wuhan.”

Fellow scientists had also [observed](#) that bat coronaviruses were often studied in Wuhan at biosafety level 2 (BSL-2), where researchers simply wear white lab coats and gloves like in a dental office, providing minimal protection compared with BSL-4, where researchers are outfitted in protective suits and take rigorous precautions. U.S. intelligence analysts had [documented](#) several previous accidental lab infections that caused virus outbreaks in China and elsewhere, including a 2004 SARS outbreak in Beijing. American intelligence sources later learned that three researchers from the Wuhan Institute of Virology became sick enough in November 2019 that [they sought hospital care](#) for COVID-like symptoms, perhaps the earliest known cases.

The Wuhan Institute was [actively experimenting](#) on Chinese horseshoe bats associated with the SARS outbreak and had “generated a chimeric virus using the SARS-CoV reverse genetics system, and reported the potential for human emergence.” In 2017, the Institute had [published a study](#) confirming that researchers had manipulated a bat coronavirus and discovered it could be transmitted directly to humans, with novel backbone and spike combinations that do not exist in nature and are capable of replicating efficiently in human cells. This study had prompted U.S. diplomats and scientists to visit the Wuhan Institute, after which they sent a cable to Washington [expressing concern](#) about the facility’s safety standards and warning of “a potential public-health crisis.” Officials at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing had likewise [raised concerns](#) in 2018 about biosecurity at the Wuhan Institute. One State Department

[cable](#) warned about a “a serious shortage of appropriately trained technicians and investigators needed to safely operate this high-containment laboratory.”

After examining all the relevant intelligence, Matthew Pottinger, a fluent Chinese speaker who served as deputy National Security Adviser during the first year of the pandemic, [concluded](#) that even “the circumstantial evidence” for a Wuhan lab leak “far outweighs” any indication that it originated from a “natural outbreak.” He cited “very strong reason to believe that the Chinese military was doing secret classified animal experiments in that same laboratory, going all the way back to at least 2017,” as well as “good reason to believe that there was an outbreak of flu-like illness among researchers working in the Wuhan Institute of Virology in the fall of 2019, immediately before the first documented cases came to light.” It would be a remarkable coincidence if a coronavirus pandemic had emerged from nature on the doorstep of prominent coronavirus research facilities, with the world’s largest collections of bat viruses, that were at work manipulating bat coronaviruses to make them more infectious to humans, and that had a documented record of deficient safety protocols.

Similarly, Dr. Robert Redfield, a virologist who was Director of the Centers for Disease Control at the outset of the pandemic, made clear that he believes the coronavirus [most likely](#) escaped from a lab in Wuhan. Redfield, who was the first U.S. official briefed on the virus by his counterpart in China (before the Chinese had adopted their official narrative about the wet market), noted that “it’s not unusual for respiratory pathogens that are being worked on in the laboratory to infect a laboratory worker.” He expressed doubt that COVID-19 “somehow came from a bat to a human” as “one of the most infectious viruses” in history, [noting](#) that its highly efficient human-to-human transmission is inconsistent with the behavior of other deadly coronaviruses with similar profiles, such as SARS and MERS, which first reached humans through animal contact but spread at a much slower pace. Instead, Redfield concluded, this profile suggests “that it went from a bat virus, got into a laboratory, [and] was taught, educated, and evolved, so that it became a virus that could efficiently transmit human to human.”

## **Chinese Misinformation and Misdirection**

Proponents of the natural origin hypothesis also had no explanation for the obvious Chinese cover-up. If this was simply a natural occurrence, Chinese officials would have nothing to be embarrassed about and could earn global plaudits by sharing information helpful to confronting and stopping the virus. Instead, Chinese officials strictly limited all inquiry into the original source and early transmission of COVID-19. Beijing took [well documented actions](#) from the very start of the outbreak to destroy evidence, disseminate false data, and thwart any meaningful outside investigation of the pandemic’s origins.

Officials imposed a [clampdown](#) on wildlife trade at wet markets beginning on December 23, 2019—eight days before China publicly acknowledged the new virus—and most wildlife evidence was destroyed before the world was even aware that a novel coronavirus existed. At the Wuhan wet market, [authorities](#) immediately sprayed down the entire complex with sanitizer and later incinerated everything that had been inside the precinct.

In early January, the Chinese government also quashed any discussion of research projects at Wuhan’s labs. Yanyi Wang, director of the Wuhan Institute, informed all lab employees [in an email](#) that China’s National Health Commission “unequivocally requires that any tests, clinical data, test results, [or] conclusions related to the epidemic shall not be posted on social media platforms, nor shall [it] be disclosed to any media outlets including government official media, nor shall [it] be disclosed to partner

institutions.” Leaked documents [show](#) that CCP authorities have funded extensive research into the virus’s origins in southern China, often giving grants to scientists affiliated with the military and closely monitoring their findings, having mandated that publication of any research must be approved by a CCP-managed task force and is not to be shared.

The new information-control regime is under direct orders from President Xi, who has [emphasized](#) internal Chinese “coordination” of coronavirus research and demanded that any presentation of results must be orchestrated like “a game of chess” and involve propaganda and public opinion teams to “guide publication.” Among the new guidelines is a specific requirement that “academic papers about tracing the origin of the virus must be strictly and tightly managed.” One Chinese researcher [described](#) the closely supervised restrictions as “a coordinated effort from the Chinese government to control the narrative, and paint it as if the outbreak did not originate in China,” noting that officials throughout the Communist Party hierarchy would “not tolerate any objective study to investigate the origination of this disease.”

Much of this government control and secrecy has revolved around the Wuhan Institute of Virology. Dr. Shi Zhengli, a leading virologist at the Institute [often called](#) China’s “bat woman” or “bat lady” by colleagues because of her virus-hunting expeditions in bat caves over the past two decades, had for many years engaged in research focused on enhancing the communicability of bat viruses to humans, ostensibly to learn how to prevent future outbreaks. As the Institute’s deputy director, Shi had long [warned](#) about the danger of epidemics from bat-borne viruses but “never expected this kind of thing to happen in Wuhan, in central China” since her studies suggested subtropical areas in the south had the highest risk of transmission from bats to humans. Such natural zoonotic transmission seemed far less likely in a place with a climate like Wuhan, so her [first instinct](#) upon learning of coronavirus infections in Wuhan was to wonder, “could they have come from our lab?” Shi also [acknowledged](#) that her Wuhan research group had sometimes used low-safety level BSL-2 and BSL-3 facilities for their coronavirus experiments, but began to confine their bat research to BSL-4 laboratories, in accordance with new government regulatory requirements, after the pandemic outbreak.

Upon receiving extensive [backlash](#) throughout Chinese media and society for suggesting a possible lab leak, Dr. Shi later reversed course and insisted that the outbreak “has nothing to do with the lab.” Her comments turned [explicitly political](#) as she repeated CPP talking points while contending that “President Trump’s claim that SARS-CoV-2 was leaked from our institute totally contradicts the facts” and insisting that “he owes us an apology.” Shi’s hastily revised stance, however, has drawn skepticism. Gao Yu, a Chinese journalist eventually freed after 76 days of detention in Wuhan, [reported](#) that Shi had in fact been “muzzled” by government officials. Many of Shi’s later statements not only contradicted her earlier suggestions but are also at odds with known facts. In July 2020, for example, Shi [told](#) *Science* magazine that “to date, there is zero infection of all staff and students in our institute.” But American intelligence sources [confirmed](#) that several researchers inside the Wuhan Institute became sick in autumn 2019, before the first identified case of the outbreak, with COVID-19 symptoms. At least one young researcher from the Wuhan Institute—Huang Yanling, a graduate student [rumored to be patient zero](#)—was [scrubbed](#) from the Institute’s [website](#).

Declassified intelligence information has also [revealed](#) that after learning of the outbreak Beijing sent a direct order for the Wuhan Institute to destroy key viral samples; that virologists were collaborating with the Chinese military on undisclosed research projects; and that authorities actively hid the fact that several of the Institute’s researchers had come down with COVID-like symptoms. Notably, the day after

CCP officials acknowledged the possibility of human-to-human transmission in January 2020, the Institute [applied](#) for a Chinese patent to use Remdesivir as a treatment for the new coronavirus.

Although scientists at the Wuhan Institute had [almost immediately](#) mapped the virus's genome and knew it was both dangerous and highly contagious, Chinese officials ordered Institute staff not share anything with American or other foreign researchers. Instead, Major General Chen Wei, the Chinese military's "[ultimate expert](#)" in biological weapons, was [assigned](#) to take over the Institute's operations. Early information about the virus's genome was critical to containing its spread, but Chinese authorities continued to withhold the data. On January 5, the Shanghai Public Health Clinical Center alerted Chinese authorities that it had also successfully identified and mapped the genome of the new virus. Beijing forbade that agency from sharing the information as well. Six days later, the Shanghai researchers defied that order and [released the genome publicly](#). The lab was shut down the following day for "rectification."

More than a year after the initial outbreak, the typically diplomatic U.S. State Department [formally asserted](#) that the Chinese government had "systematically prevented a transparent and thorough investigation of the COVID-19 pandemic's origin," noting that officials had instead devoted "enormous resources to deceit and disinformation." Jake Sullivan, the new National Security Advisor, likewise [complained](#) that the Chinese had "not offered the requisite transparency that we need." Nearly two years into the global pandemic, China [has resisted](#) global pressure to cooperate with meaningful investigation into its origins or provide access to genetic sequences of coronaviruses kept at the Wuhan Institute.

Instead, Beijing has engaged in a propaganda and misinformation offensive. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian [characterized](#) suggestions of a possible Wuhan lab leak as made "simply to confuse the public, divert attention, and shirk responsibility" in other quarters. Zhao and his colleagues offered wild allegations against other countries to obscure China's role in the outbreak. An editorial in the CCP-controlled *Global Times* [described](#) proponents of a lab leak as "extremely paranoid" and insisted that the virus reached Wuhan on frozen meat from South-East Asia. In one [tweet](#) Zhao suggested that "it might be [the] US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan." He also [retweeted](#) an [article](#) that claimed, without evidence, that U.S. troops could have spread the virus when they attended the World Military Games in Wuhan in October 2019. Chinese scientists even submitted a paper to the *Lancet* claiming that "Wuhan is not the place where human-to-human Sars-CoV-2 transmission first happened" and suggesting instead that the virus may have originated "in the Indian subcontinent."

### **Concealing Early Signs of the Outbreak**

Not only did Chinese officials suppress or destroy evidence as to COVID-19's origin, they initially sought to hide the fact that the virus existed at all. As Chinese scientists worried over the possibility of a lab leak, the government's first line of defense was simply to deny there was any problem. Officials in Wuhan and beyond [knew](#) by early December 2019 that local citizens and medical personnel were getting sick with a new coronavirus. Even at its earliest stages, the virus was [spreading](#) to people with no wet market exposure, a clear indication of human-to-human transmission. Yet even by the end of the month, an official statement from the Wuhan branch of the National Health Commission [insisted](#) that its investigation had "not found any obvious human-to-human transmission or infection of medical staff" and asserted that the mysterious malady was "preventable and controllable." By January 2, the Wuhan Institute of Virology [had](#) identified and mapped the new virus's genetic sequence—an important step toward containing the epidemic and designing a vaccine—but Chinese officials continued for weeks to sow confusion about the virus and deny its capacity to spread.

In the meantime, thousands of sick patients had [overwhelmed](#) Wuhan-area medical clinics and healthcare facilities. Videos and photographs circulated on Chinese social media [showing](#) hospital corridors lined with patients, some of whom appeared to be dead. Government officials moved quickly to contain the domestic unrest and hide the true extent of the situation from onlookers. Chinese internet censors [erased references](#) to things like “Wuhan unknown pneumonia” and “SARS variation,” and [blocked](#) anything critical of the government’s response from communications apps like WeChat. Although on-the-ground experience (as well as what we now know about COVID-19 hospitalization rates) suggested there were likely tens of thousands of cases in Wuhan at the beginning of January, official [government data](#) showed a total of 27 infections and no deaths from what it described as isolated instances of “viral pneumonia.”

As Wuhan doctors learned enough to sound the alarm, their efforts were stymied by both national and local officials as the crisis became enmeshed in geopolitical considerations. In an effort to cover up the escalating outbreak, CCP leaders silenced healthcare workers and punished those who tried to warn the public. A Wuhan doctor, Li Wenliang, who raised early alarms about the developing outbreak in a group chat with former medical school classmates, was [swiftly interrogated](#) by hospital managers and party disciplinary officials. He was [accused](#) of “making false comments” that had “severely disturbed the social order”—for noting several cases of a SARS-like virus and encouraging fellow doctors to wear protective clothing to avoid infection. Shortly before he was silenced and forced to write a public statement criticizing himself and admitting to “illegal behavior,” Li [explained](#) to the *Beijing Youth Daily* that authorities “told me not to publish any information about [the virus] online.”

Li, who ultimately died of COVID-19, was one of at least [eight people](#) in Wuhan who police were investigating for “spreading rumors” about the virus. Twitter posts praising Li as a “whistleblower” [were deleted](#) within hours and CCP-aligned editors at the Global Times sought to obscure the circumstances of his subsequent death from the virus. Officials also [issued](#) a discipline notice for a nurse in Taizhou who was punished for discussing the COVID-19 outbreak with classmates and family via WeChat, revealing the widespread nature of the government’s crackdown on medical professionals. “We knew then that the government was lying, but we didn’t know why they needed to lie,” a Wuhan doctor [told](#) *Wall Street Journal* reporters.

Chinese government authorities wouldn’t even publicly confirm the outbreak of a new coronavirus until January 9, two days after it was [definitively reported](#) by American media outlets. Only after a WHO official told the press on January 14 that there could be “limited human-to-human transmission, potentially among families,” did Chinese officials adjust their language—while still [insisting](#) that “the risk of human-to-human transmission is low.”

Senior Chinese leaders, [aware](#) of the virus weeks before they acknowledged the outbreak or warned the public, allowed community activities that accelerated likely transmission. Even after Chinese President Xi Jinping had [privately ordered](#) officials on January 7 to control what they knew was a growing contagion, authorities reassured the public that the virus could not spread between humans and went ahead with large-scale meetings and celebrations. Hubei province and its capital, Wuhan, [continued holding](#) annual sessions of their local legislative and advisory bodies between January 6 and 17. Government officials announced no new cases of the virus during that period, typically a time when local authorities seek to suppress bad news, and [seemed](#) “more focused on the success of a key Communist Party meeting” than concerns over the virus.

In accord with national directives, local officials [went ahead](#) on January 18 with a city-wide Chinese Lunar New Year banquet involving tens of thousands of families in Wuhan posing together for group photos and using chopsticks to share dishes. According to Lianchao Han, a prominent [commentator](#), “they thought it could be controlled, and also President Xi Jinping demanded not to spoil the Chinese New Year.” Throughout December and January, national authorities also [allowed](#) roughly [five million](#) people to leave Wuhan without any health screening, in part because Beijing waited until January 20 even to [acknowledge](#) that the virus was spreading between humans. As a result, it had been transmitted far and wide by the time officials [locked down](#) Wuhan and three other cities on January 23. Travel restrictions and lockdowns within China, which at the time amounted to the largest quarantine in history, [appear](#) to have slowed the coronavirus spread inside the country’s borders. But the global consequences of China’s early actions were severe, [especially](#) as international flights from Wuhan remained [plentiful](#) even as Beijing imposed strict domestic travel restrictions to protect its own population.

Chinese disinformation and deception was so stark that the *New York Times* [concluded](#) on February 1 that “officials chose to put secrecy and order ahead of openly confronting the growing crisis to avoid public alarm and political embarrassment.” In April 2020, the Five Eyes intelligence consortium—comprised of the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand—offered a [scathing assessment](#) of the Chinese coronavirus response as “an assault on international transparency.” The European Union issued a [similarly critical report](#) detailing numerous actions that amounted to “a global disinformation campaign to deflect blame for the outbreak of the pandemic and improve its international image,” before bowing to pressure from Beijing, a key trading partner, and revising the report. A highly regarded epidemiology expert, Zhong Nanshan, likewise [criticized](#) his country’s official response and suggested that if the government had been forthcoming with accurate information, “the number of sick would have been greatly reduced.” Some U.S. analysts have even [suggested](#) that the global pandemic “could have been prevented if the CCP acted in a transparent and responsible manner” at the outset.

## **A Complicit World Health Organization**

World Health Organization (WHO) leaders likewise downplayed the virus and were slow to acknowledge evidence of its severity and transmissibility. In late January 2020, as cases ravaged Wuhan and began to spread far beyond China, WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus [insisted](#) that it had “not yet become a global health emergency” and argued against restricting travel. For months in the spring and summer of 2020, WHO officials [dismissed](#) the risk of asymptomatic coronavirus spread, instead pushing what commentators described as “misleading and contradictory claims” in the face of significant evidence otherwise. WHO representatives were also inexplicably [reluctant](#) to accept mounting indications that the virus was airborne, vigorously promoting handwashing rather than facemasks or ventilation as a primary prevention strategy, despite limited evidence (then and now) for transmission via surfaces. Such baffling behavior left even the *New York Times* to [acknowledge](#) that many of the WHO’s pronouncements were “never based on hard science.”

While praising Beijing’s response to the coronavirus outbreak, the WHO also kowtowed to Chinese officials and sacrificed opportunities to examine key evidence of the virus’s origins. In mid-February 2020, a WHO team arrived in China to study the spate of illnesses and investigate how the virus was transmitted to humans. Although the team’s director declared that his priority was to determine the virus’s “source,” WHO leaders quietly sidelined their own experts and [agreed to China’s terms](#): investigators would not question Beijing’s initial response and there would be limited inquiry into the virus’s origins. After spending 14 days in quarantine upon arrival in China, the WHO team was [limited](#)

to less than two weeks of on-site investigation. Investigators [reportedly](#) spent only three hours at the Wuhan Institute and were not given access to records or samples or key personnel. Nor were scientists [permitted](#) to visit the Wuhan market where the outbreak was supposed to have originated.

Instead, WHO leaders agreed that in most instances Chinese officials would do the primary investigation and share their findings with the international experts—even though China had formally ruled out a lab leak long before the WHO team arrived in Wuhan. This concession shaped the composition of WHO personnel assigned to the investigation. Although there had been several prior accidental lab leaks of viruses in China, some of which had led to infection and even death, [no one](#) on the WHO team was trained in formal methods to investigate a lab leak. Dominic Dwyer, an Australian member of the WHO team, later [confirmed](#) that “the group wasn’t designed to go and do a forensic examination of lab practice” and, given severe limitations on the scope of its investigation, team members could “never know” if information and analysis from the Chinese was complete or accurate.

The WHO research team’s perceived lack of independence and its “enthusiastic praise” for Chinese officials led [many to wonder](#) whether the agency was simply acting on China’s behalf. Some [suggested](#), citing intelligence reports, that WHO Director-General Ghebreyesus had effectively been “bought by the Chinese government.” Ghebreyesus, the first Director-General who is not a medical doctor, had been [widely accused](#) of covering up at least three cholera epidemics for political reasons during his tenure as Ethiopia’s Health Minister and had ascended to head the WHO only with vigorous [support](#) from China. From the outset, Ghebreyesus and his staff [effusively lauded](#) China for “setting a new standard” in response to the coronavirus outbreak.

The WHO’s eventual investigative report, which was subject to pre-approval by Chinese authorities, largely conformed to China’s coronavirus narrative and public messaging. Most notably, the report [dismissed](#) the notion that the virus could have accidentally leaked from a Wuhan laboratory as “extremely unlikely.” The joint WHO-China team of researchers also indicated it [would not recommend](#) further investigation into the possibility of a lab leak. At the time the report was released to the public, Peter Embarek, the Danish food safety expert leading the WHO team, [said](#) he and his colleagues were “satisfied with answers about safety” at the Wuhan Institute and did not believe additional inquiry was warranted. Even skeptics of the lab-leak theory [found](#) its outright dismissal in the WHO report “a surprise” and 18 leading scientists [signed a letter](#) in the journal *Science* rejecting the report’s conclusions and calling for further investigation.

Several months after the report’s public release, however, Embarek [acknowledged](#) that Chinese researchers on the team had strenuously resisted linking the pandemic’s origin to a research laboratory in Wuhan. Chinese officials “didn’t want anything about the lab” to be part of the investigation, he confirmed, and insisted that since in their view a lab leak “was impossible” there was “no need to waste time on that.” Embarek later [told](#) Danish reporters that Chinese scientists had pushed not to include any mention of the lab-leak theory in the report, but that his Chinese counterpart eventually agreed to include some discussion of such a possibility “on the condition we didn’t recommend any specific studies to further that hypothesis.” During a [separate interview](#) with *Science* magazine, Embarek noted that “politics was always in the room with us on the other side of the table,” and hinted at the immense pressure he and other WHO researchers felt with as many as 60 Chinese colleagues pushing the investigation in preferred directions.

Leading commentators have [described](#) the WHO effort as a “charade” and “essentially a highly-

chaperoned, highly-curated study tour” rather than a meaningful investigation. Even those experts who may have wished to examine COVID’s origins in a rigorous or systematic way only saw what the Chinese government wanted them to see. David A. Relman, a microbiologist at Stanford University, was among many scientists to [note](#) that an investigation in which “the only information you’re allowing to be weighed is provided by the very people who have everything to lose by revealing such evidence” does not “come close to passing the sniff test.” Even media outlets that initially provided WHO pronouncements with favorable coverage later [acknowledged](#) that the organization’s posture was “about politics and economics more than public health.”

## The American Scientific Establishment’s Self-Interest

Throughout much of the American scientific community, there was an unmistakable resistance to the idea that COVID-19 may have originated at a research laboratory in Wuhan near where the first cases were observed. The pressure on researchers in the global health community to toe this line in public, especially for those whose jobs or grants depend on government funding, was enormous. Veteran science reporter Nicholas Wade, who served as both a writer and editor at *Nature*, *Science*, and the *New York Times*, [put it plainly](#): “Careers can be destroyed for stepping out of line. Any virologist who challenges the community’s declared view risks having his next grant application turned down by the panel of fellow virologists that advises the government on grant distribution agency.”

Kristian Andersen, an infectious-disease expert at Scripps Research who began tracking the virus in January 2020, found the rate of transmission [extremely unusual](#) for something Chinese scientists claimed had developed in the wild. “This, almost from Day One, appeared like a human virus.” On January 31, he [wrote an email](#) to Dr. Anthony Fauci and others at the National Institutes of Health, noting that the genome had “unusual features” that enhanced transmissibility among humans. These characteristics seemed “inconsistent with expectations from evolutionary theory,” he wrote, “and (potentially) look engineered.” Despite such private observations, however, Anderson and his colleagues [said publicly](#) that COVID-19 could not have been engineered in a lab and must have emerged from nature.

Chinese efforts to distract from a possible Wuhan lab leak benefitted from this immediate [insistence](#) by leaders of the American scientific community that COVID-19 had emerged from nature. Among the most outspoken was Peter Daszak, the Canadian-born president of EcoHealth Alliance and a Chinese-approved member of the WHO investigative team. In February 2021, Daszak [personally](#) organized a [prominent letter](#) published in the *Lancet*, signed by a collection of scientists and public health professionals, condemning “conspiracy theories suggesting that COVID-19 does not have a natural origin” and dismissing suggestions of a possible lab leak as “misinformation.”

The early *Lancet* letter established the scientific community’s conventional wisdom about the virus’s origins. It also defended China’s “remarkable” response, claiming that Chinese officials had “worked diligently and effectively to . . . share their results transparently with the global health community.” The signatories emphasized standing “in solidarity with all scientists and health professionals in China who continue to save lives and protect global health.” In an [opinion piece](#) in the *Guardian* newspaper, Daszak personally implored the public to “ignore the conspiracy theories” about the Wuhan Institute since “scientists know COVID-19 wasn’t created in a lab.” He [told Science](#) magazine he felt duty-bound to “stand up and support colleagues who are being attacked and threatened daily by conspiracy theorists.”

Over the course of his public relations efforts, however, Daszak did not disclose that EcoHealth had

[received](#) \$3.7 million in NIH grants to fund intensive coronavirus research at the Wuhan Institute. Instead, he gave [interviews](#) to multiple Chinese state-run outlets, often repeating CCP talking points. Eager to convey that the virus may have come from outside China, he [retweeted](#) the claim that “global experts are looking at Southeast Asia, including Cambodia, for potential origins of coronavirus.” He went on the China Global Television Network (CGTN) to [suggest](#) there was “good evidence” for the [largely discredited](#) “cold chain hypothesis” that COVID might have arrived in Wuhan on frozen wildlife imported from abroad—a claim touted by Chinese government officials. Daszak also [told](#) the *Global Times* that “there was a virus from Thailand close to the SARS-CoV-2, and also Japan and Cambodia,” claiming that EcoHealth was “already starting our work in tracing their origins” in those countries. During an interview in Wuhan, he [told the BBC](#) that extensive surveillance work in China made a domestic source of the outbreak less likely and that “if you map that back it starts to point towards the border and we know that there is very little surveillance on the other side in the whole region of South East Asia.”

In [interviews](#) with American media after EcoHealth’s involvement in coronavirus research at the Wuhan Institute had been made public, Daszak explained that a lab leak would have required that “the virus that causes COVID be in the lab,” but he insisted that no such viruses had ever been present at the Wuhan Institute. EcoHealth [claimed](#) it was not involved in any work that included potential pandemic pathogens or viruses that carry a risk of uncontrolled spread between humans, and its leaders specifically denied having participated in studies of “human viruses.” Throughout the first year of the pandemic, Daszak campaigned tirelessly to convince people that COVID-19 did not come from the Wuhan Institute but evolved naturally from animal-to-human transmission.

Many American public health officials followed this lead and some even appear to have coordinated messaging with Chinese authorities. A February 2020 [email](#) sent to NIH staff members interfacing with global outbreak officials at the WHO included a stark warning about information sharing: “IMPORTANT: Please treat this as sensitive and not for public communications until we have agreed communications with China.” NIH officials [tailored](#) confidentiality forms to correspond to China’s terms and allowed Chinese officials to control the information flow. Emails from February 2020 also show that senior NIH officials continued to highlight likely COVID emergence at the Wuhan wet market despite having been [made aware](#) of a diagnosed case in early December 2019, something inconsistent with the Chinese narrative that the outbreak started at the market in late December.

## **Anthony Fauci’s Involvement**

Amid the initial search to determine the source of COVID-19, two of the U.S. government’s top public health officials, Dr. Francis Collins and Dr. Anthony Fauci, consistently asserted that the virus had almost certainly emerged from nature. From his perch as head of the National Institutes of Health, Collins repeatedly sought to “debunk” suggestions of a Wuhan lab leak and [touted](#) “scientific evidence that this novel coronavirus arose naturally,” insisting that genomic comparisons left “little room to refute a natural origin for COVID-19.” As longtime director of the NIH’s National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), Fauci toed the same line. In an early [interview](#) with *National Geographic*, he was [definitive](#) about coronavirus origins, insisting that the scientific evidence “very, very strongly” supported the notion that “this virus could not have been artificially or deliberately manipulated.” Fauci stated emphatically that “everything about the stepwise evolution over time strongly indicates that [COVID-19] evolved in nature and then jumped species.”

Despite this steadfast public posture, the reality behind the scenes was more complicated. The January 2020 [email](#) from Kristian Andersen—noting that the virus had “unusual features” that seemed “inconsistent with expectations from evolutionary theory” and “(potentially) look engineered”—meant that Fauci knew from the outset that experts had significant doubts about the virus having emerged naturally. Scientists have since [noted](#) the unique furin cleavage site between the S1 and S2 subunits of COVID-19’s spike protein, enabling the virus to bind more efficiently to human cells and release its genetic material into them—a key [reason](#) the virus is so easily transmissible. The cleavage site is found nowhere else in the entire genus of SARS-related beta coronaviruses, only in COVID-19, [strongly suggesting](#) it did not arise naturally.

Fauci’s response to Anderson’s cautionary email about the virus’s seemingly engineered characteristics has [struck some](#) as curious. He [sent](#) his deputy, Hugh Achincloss, a paper on gain-of-function research coauthored by Ralph Baric and Shi Zhengli of the Wuhan Institute, along with an [email](#) message expressing urgency: “It is essential that we speak this AM. Keep your cell phone on ... read this paper ... you will have tasks today that must be done.” Auchincloss responded that the referenced research, which NIH had helped fund, had not gone through established safety protocols for “potential pandemic pathogens.” The next day, Fauci organized a conference call with 11 virologists including Anderson who did work with—and were often funded by—NIH and NIAID. (A FOIA release of emails in the chain immediately resulting from the call are completely redacted.) Following the discussion, Andersen—who had raised the original warning to Fauci—did a complete about-face, [emailing](#) colleagues about the need to be “more firm” in rejecting the notion of “engineering” and suggesting that the lab-leak theory was being used by “crackpots.”

The *Lancet* [letter](#) asserting COVID’s natural origins soon followed, according to a carefully coordinated script. [Emails](#) from Peter Daszak to Ralph Baric, a leading gain-of-function researcher and co-author of the paper Fauci referenced, reveal a concerted effort to obscure the group’s interest in diverting attention away from research at the Wuhan Institute. Daszak, Baric, and his Chinese co-author Shi Zhengli—each of whom had direct ties to gain-of-function research in Wuhan—“should not sign this statement,” Daszak wrote, “so it has some distance from us and therefore doesn’t work in a counterproductive way.” The letter, which [characterized](#) suggestions of a possible lab leak as “misinformation” and “conspiracy theories,” was to be [publicized](#) “in a way that doesn’t link it back to our collaboration,” according to Daszak, so that the group could maximize the impression that it represented “an independent voice” confirming natural origins.

For well over a year, Fauci and his NIH/NIAID grantees maintained [more or less unequivocally](#) that the virus had emerged naturally, effectively ruling out a lab leak. Over the course of the summer of 2021, however, evidence began to appear in the public record that raised grave doubts about this position—in particular, [confirmation](#) that at least three researchers from the Wuhan Institute became sick enough with COVID-like symptoms in November 2019 that they sought hospital care. As the country’s lead spokesman on issues relating to the pandemic, Fauci subtly [shifted his public rhetoric](#) to allow for the possibility of a lab leak. At a White House briefing on May 25, two days after the new reporting on Wuhan Institute illnesses, he [suggested](#) it was still “more likely” that the virus originated as a “natural occurrence,” but conceded that “we don’t know 100 percent what the origin is.” Government officials, including Fauci, [were aware](#) many months earlier that staff at the Wuhan Institute had shown symptoms consistent with COVID-19 in late 2019, but it was only when this information was later made public that Fauci [backed away](#) from characterizing a potential lab leak as a “conspiracy theory” and conceded that

the matter should be investigated. Still, he emphasized during a June 3 [interview](#) on CNN that in his mind “the most likely origin is from an animal species to a human.”

Around the same time, Fauci came under increased scrutiny over having approved funding for controversial research conducted in Wuhan. Throughout the first year and a half of the pandemic, Fauci [denied](#) in both media interviews and congressional testimony that the NIH/NIAID had funded gain-of-function research at the Wuhan Institute. During a May 2021 congressional hearing, Fauci [repeated](#) in unequivocal terms what he had claimed on numerous prior occasions: “The NIH and NIAID categorically has not funded gain-of-function research to be conducted in the Wuhan Institute of Virology.” But extensive documentation of longstanding collaboration between NIH/NIAID and the Wuhan Institute has led many to [suggest](#) that his statements were highly misleading and perhaps knowingly false.

Much of the scientific community has [long worried](#) over gain-of-function research aimed at making viruses better able to infect human cells, largely given the risk that an enhanced virus that has “gained function” could escape the lab and wreak havoc on public health. Responding to these concerns in a 2011 Washington Post [op-ed](#), Fauci and Collins argued that “important information and insights can come from generating a potentially dangerous virus in the laboratory” and that “benefits of such research outweigh risks.” The pair suggested that “high-security” facilities could protect “against the potential accidental release or deliberate misuse of [such] pathogens.” In 2014, following [laboratory biosafety incidents](#) at several facilities, the Obama administration overruled the Fauci-and-Collins policy and halted funding for gain-of-function research with coronaviruses. Amid the 2017 presidential transition, however, NIH officials [lifted](#) the moratorium—without signoff from the incoming administration—and instituted what they described as “rigorous” oversight [guidelines](#) for use of potential pandemic pathogens (PPPs) that Collins promised would “help to facilitate the safe, secure, and responsible conduct of this type of research.” Despite such precautions, the *New York Times* [warned](#), “researchers risk creating a monster germ that could escape the lab and seed a pandemic.”

Beginning in 2014 and continuing through 2020, Collins’s NIH and Fauci’s NIAID [funded](#) the EcoHealth Alliance with annual grants for studies involving the risk of bat coronavirus emergence, much of which went to labs in Wuhan and three other Chinese institutions, with the Wuhan Institute expressly specified “as a subrecipient on the grants.” From 2016 until the pandemic outbreak in late 2019, researchers at the Wuhan Institute [conducted experiments](#) involving the bat coronavirus RaTG13, which it sampled from a cave in Yunnan Province in 2013 after several miners died of SARS-like illness, and which has since been identified as 96.2 percent similar to COVID-19.

Documents ultimately released under court order, including [annual grant reports](#) from EcoHealth Alliance, likewise show that NIH and NIAID funded bat coronavirus studies at the Wuhan Institute. One of the proposals, [titled](#) “Understanding the Risk of Bat Coronavirus Emergence,” details [dangerous experiments](#) involving thousands of bat tissue samples and novel coronaviruses. The research included building “chimeric SARS-like bat coronavirus” and “chimeric MERS-CoV” and “chimeras based on SARS-CoV-1, SARS-CoV-2, and MERS-CoV” by means of “altering . . . mutant viruses.” The [reports](#) describe experiments on mice that were genetically engineered to contain an enzyme receptor found in human cells. These “humanized mice” were infected with bat coronaviruses containing elements from other viruses that reproduced far more quickly in the mice and were also more pathogenic, [clearly meeting](#) the NIH’s definition for gain-of-function research.

It was not until October 2021 that NIH ultimately provided a [missing grant report](#) for May 2019, which described an experiment in Wuhan involving infectious clones of MERS-CoV, the virus that caused a deadly regional outbreak in 2012 and had a [case-fatality rate](#) as high as 35 percent. Scientists swapped out parts of the deadly virus's spike protein that enables it to enter a host's cells and replaced them with various coronavirus strains previously identified in bats from provinces in southern China. The research plainly sought to increase the transmissibility or virulence of pathogens by giving the virus a new receptor, a new host range of species and cell types it was able to infect, and unpredictable properties. EcoHealth had [expressly denied](#) having participated in studies of "human viruses," but MERS-CoV is known to infect and spread in humans, and was specifically designated under the NIH's [former pause](#) on funding gain-of-function research.

After this previously missing report was made public, Fauci sought to "clarify" his prior representations about not having funded such research. In the course of a [television interview](#) with a friendly network anchor, Fauci acknowledged having provided "funding at the Wuhan Institute" and claimed that the research was supervised "very strictly" to ensure that the studies "did not constitute gain-of-function research of concern." During an [interview](#) with MSNBC's Rachel Maddow, Fauci dismissed criticism of his many misleading statements as "nonsense" and characterized questions about his conduct and honesty as "really very much an attack on science." In a [separate interview](#) with NBC News anchor Chuck Todd, Fauci again insisted that "attacks on me are, quite frankly, attacks on science."

Several reports to NIH about bat coronavirus research in Wuhan, however, [make clear](#) that everyone involved knew that the experimental work was extremely dangerous. Specifically, they [reflect an awareness](#) of the potential for researchers to be bitten by the subject bats and the need to keep records of individuals who were in fact bitten. The documents also show that EcoHealth leadership and NIH officials had good reason to take the lab-leak theory seriously. In the absence of records detailing instances of bat bites at the Wuhan Institute, which have never been made public and appear to have been destroyed by Chinese officials, neither NIH leadership nor the WHO investigative team was in any position to rule out a research-related accident.

Both congressional investigators and scientific experts have [long disputed Fauci's claim](#) that NIH had never funded gain-of-function research at the Wuhan Institute as "demonstrably false" since artificially engineering novel SARS-related coronaviruses to make them more transmissible and dangerous to humans "epitomizes" the definition of such research. As one leading biosafety expert [noted](#), the recently disclosed documents "make it clear that assertions by the NIH Director, Francis Collins, and the NIAID Director, Anthony Fauci, that the NIH did not support gain-of-function research or potential pandemic pathogen enhancement at [the Wuhan Institute] are untruthful."

In an [October 2021 letter](#) to congressional investigators, NIH principal deputy director Lawrence Tabak confirmed that the agency had indeed funded EcoHealth research—conducted by the Wuhan Institute during 2018 and 2019—that manipulated a bat coronavirus called WIV1. The Wuhan research, which NIH had reviewed in advance, tested "if spike proteins from naturally occurring bat coronaviruses circulating in China were capable of binding to the human ACE2 receptor in a mouse model" —the same receptor to which COVID-19 binds. The Tabak letter confirmed that the experimentally modified virus reproduced more rapidly and the humanized mice "became sicker than those infected with the [unmodified] WIV1 bat coronavirus." Given this outcome, NIH protocols required EcoHealth to report the enhanced virus results immediately and evaluate "new biosafety measures."

Tabak's letter seemed to suggest that NIH had not contemporaneously been aware of the problematic research results, [claiming](#) that "EcoHealth failed to report this finding right away, as was required by the terms of the grant." But the 2018 research he described is similar to earlier Wuhan Institute studies, funded in part by NIH grants, that modified viruses related to SARS to determine if they could infect human cells. Publications of these studies in [2016](#) and [2017](#) were the subject of a [contentious Senate hearing](#) in which Senator Rand Paul pressed Fauci to admit that they constituted gain-of-function research, prompting another of Fauci's unequivocal denials. For many, NIH's blame-shifting has been unconvincing—many virologists [consider](#) much of the Wuhan Institute experimentation to qualify as gain-of-function research, originally [defined](#) as "any modification of a biological agent that confers new or enhanced activity"—and EcoHealth [maintains](#) that it *did* report the problematic results to NIH in its April 2018 writeup.

Recently disclosed documents also show that two NIAID officials [raised specific concerns](#) in May 2016 that a grant to EcoHealth included gain-of-function experiments on bat coronaviruses at the Wuhan Institute. NIAID later dropped the issue after Peter Daszak downplayed potential risks associated with the study, arguing that the proposal was not technically gain-of-function research because the WIV1 bat coronavirus that Wuhan scientists planned to use as the basis of their lab-made chimeric viruses "has never been demonstrated to infect humans or cause human disease." But Daszak's collaborator, Ralph Baric, had helped publish a [study](#) three months earlier that found WIV1 posed an "ongoing threat" to humans because it "readily replicated efficiently in human airway cultures and in vivo, suggesting capability of direct transmission to humans."

Remarkably, NIAID simply accepted Daszak's flawed assertions and allowed the Wuhan Institute study to proceed without oversight or reporting requirements until the lab-created viruses had been enhanced by over one log (or ten times) compared to the natural strain. As one scientist [explained](#), Fauci's team "in effect, delegated to EcoHealth Alliance the authority to determine whether its research was, or was not, gain-of-function research" and to evade applicable restrictions. Over the course of his correspondence with NIAID, Daszak acknowledged that his team would have "no [direct] oversight of the chimera work, all of which will be conducted at the Wuhan Institute," and that he was reliant on Shi Zhengli to notify him if the lab-created viruses exhibited enhanced replication. In a final July 2016 [email](#) to NIAID officials, Daszak expressed excitement upon learning "that our Gain of Function research funding pause has been lifted."

The steady stream of documents and damning revelations about Fauci, Collins, Daszak, and other leaders in the public health establishment has drawn harsh criticism in some quarters. "This is a pattern of dishonesty," [according](#) to Alina Chan, a molecular biologist and author of a book on the pandemic's origins. "It should be clear now that we cannot take the word of conflicted parties in the search for the origin of COVID-19." Richard Ebright, a professor of chemical biology at Rutgers University and prominent critic, [put it even more bluntly](#): "Collins and Fauci lied to Congress, lied to the press, and lied to the public—knowingly, willfully, and brazenly."

## **Motive, Means, and Opportunity**

Extensive evidence shows that Chinese authorities and at least some American public health officials knew from the very beginning about possible links between the Wuhan Institute of Virology and the COVID-19 outbreak. The blatant coverup by China is well-documented and its motives are obvious. In Anthony Fauci's case, the evidence includes both private emails with colleagues and subsequent actions he and others took to provide the American public with misleading information directing

attention away from a potential lab leak. Fauci had reason to obscure the fact that he funded, through EcoHealth, controversial and dangerous gain-of-function research involving bat coronaviruses at the Wuhan Institute. He also had motive to protect other research funding that his agency provided. Had the American public known that NIH funded research that may have led to COVID, the backlash would have been swift and overwhelming. His public statements and congressional testimony were deceptive at best.

The motives for EcoHealth founder and leader, Peter Daszak, to spearhead a coverup are also obvious. He was directly responsible for funding bat coronavirus research at the Wuhan Institute despite the lab's problematic safety record. He had personally given NIH officials assurances to evade gain-of-function research protocols and had a duty to notify the agency of any dangerous results. It was Daszak who mobilized fellow scientists and public health officials to denigrate evidence of a lab leak as amounting to a conspiracy theory. In doing so, he made sure that colleagues with direct ties to gain-of-function research in Wuhan were publicly obscured. The 11 people who signed the Daszak-engineered letter rely on Fauci and the NIH for research funding.

The mainstream media embraced the public health establishment's narrative about COVID's origins, with Dr. Fauci as the main celebrity and hero at the center of their reporting. This posture was natural as Fauci had become a useful foil to then-President Trump. Commentators at CNN [gleefully pronounced](#) that "Anthony Fauci just crushed Donald Trump's theory on the origins of the coronavirus," ridiculing Trump's suggestion "that the coronavirus originated not in nature but in a lab in Wuhan." Debate over the virus's origin was politicized and largely dismissed in the media, as reporters [insisted](#) that "most people in a position to know are very, very skeptical of the Trump narrative that the virus came out of a lab—whether accidentally or on purpose." Outlets that had [referred](#) to COVID-19 as the "Wuhan coronavirus" in their initial reporting, based on longstanding naming conventions for public health outbreaks, began to object when Trump and his cabinet referred to the "[Chinese virus](#)" or the "[Wuhan virus](#)." The *New York Times* [denounced](#) suggestions of Beijing's deception and culpability as "a wave of xenophobia and anti-Chinese racism."

By May 2021, however, new evidence brought about a sea-change in the conventional wisdom about coronavirus origins. *The Washington Post*, for example, [noted](#) that "efforts to discover a natural source of the virus have failed" and that the likelihood "it emerged from the Wuhan Institute of Virology—once dismissed as a ridiculous conspiracy theory—has gained new credence." Some outlets [suggested](#) that early discussion of a possible lab leak got mixed up with speculation that the virus was deliberately created as a bioweapon, making it easier to reject both theories as "tin-hat nonsense." Media [observers](#) also [acknowledged](#) that many outlets were biased against the lab-leak scenario because it was championed by Trump, which "made it easier for skeptics to ignore." As one veteran journalist at NPR [put it](#), "as with so many things connected to the former president, it generated a backlash" and was discounted or dismissed altogether simply because of its association with him. Many outlets and social media platforms had actively worked to [suppress](#) individuals advancing evidence of a lab leak.

The media narrative has now shifted and substantial evidence of a Wuhan lab leak is taken seriously in most quarters. The extent of Chinese propaganda and WHO misinformation has been widely acknowledged and criticized. The question remains what will be done about the abrogation of public trust by the health officials and institutions who likewise misled the public.