

Wuhan lab conspiracy theory parallels Washington's "yellow rain" lie of the 1980s

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Since the May 23 publication in the *Wall Street Journal* of an article titled "Intelligence on Sick Staff at Wuhan Lab Fuels Debate on Covid-19 Origin," all the outlets of the US media establishment and political and intelligence apparatus have sought to rehabilitate the claim that the COVID-19 pandemic came from a lab in Wuhan, China, even they themselves decried it as false just six months ago.

There is no factual, let alone scientific, basis for the lab allegations. The best that the entire US intelligence community has been able to produce is a claim that several employees at the Wuhan Institute of Virology came down with an illness in November 2019 with symptoms that are "consistent with ... common seasonal illnesses."

The lie also attempts to defy the mass of evidence presented by the World Health Organization in March, which declared that a man-made origin of the virus is "extremely unlikely." In promoting these falsehoods, those who have crafted and are now participating in this propaganda campaign are committing an arguably greater fraud than the Bush administration's baseless claims about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction nearly two decades ago.

This is not the first time that the American government has lied about a massive public health threat to demonize a geopolitical rival and to direct mass internal social anger outward. To understand how US imperialism works to create pretexts for war and attempt to deflect away from its own criminal activity, it is instructive to remember the case of "yellow rain" in the 1980s.

The "yellow rain" campaign began in 1981, when then Secretary of State Alexander Haig gave a speech to the Berlin Press Association on September 13, where he alleged that the Soviet Union was supplying mycotoxins to Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia for use against pro-US insurgencies and of employing the same toxins in Afghanistan. Haig claimed, "We have now found physical evidence from Southeast Asia which has been analyzed and found to contain abnormally high levels of three potent mycotoxins—poisonous substances not indigenous to the region and which are highly toxic to man and animals."

Like today, sweeping statements were made with only minimal evidence and had vast implications. The Reagan administration was directly implying that, by developing a new dimension in chemical and biological warfare through the use of mycotoxins, that the Soviet Union was violating both the 1925 Geneva Protocol and the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention. The former banned the use of chemical and biological weapons in war, after the deployment of various chemical gas agents in World War I, and the latter prohibits the development, production, stockpiling and transportation of biological and toxin-based weapons.

In other words, if such allegations were true, the Soviet Union would have been responsible for war crimes across Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Such actions could have been used as a *casus belli* justifying imperialist war against the USSR.

The origins of Haig's claim date back to the end of the Vietnam War and US imperialism's politically embarrassing retreat from the region. While US forces withdrew, the Central Intelligence Agency established a secret army of Hmong tribesmen in the mountains of Laos, led by a local chief, General Vang Po. While Po was eventually forced to flee to the United States, the army that he led on behalf of the CIA remained and fought against the Soviet-supported Lao and Vietnamese governments. Refugees from those conflicts described to various officials what seemed to be "yellow" chemical weapons dropped from low-flying aircraft.

The Carter and Reagan administrations seized on these reports to produce a hypothesis over the next several years that the Soviet Union had developed mycotoxins for use in warfare. A Special National Intelligence Estimate (reports ordered by the Director of National Intelligence) issued under Reagan claimed, "The one hypothesis that best fits all the evidence is that the trichothecene toxins were developed in the Soviet Union, provided to the Lao and Vietnamese either directly or through transfer of technical know-how, and weaponized with Soviet assistance in Laos, Vietnam,

and Kampuchea.”

In fact, another hypothesis that fit the evidence even better had been developed. Starting four months after Haig’s initial public statements, scientists at the British Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment began performing their own independent examination of the “yellow rain” samples. They found that instead of toxin-based chemical weapons, these consisted mainly of pollen. When US officials began to claim that the pollen was being used by the USSR as part of the toxin’s delivery mechanism, Matthew S. Meselson, a professor of biochemistry at Harvard University, looked more closely at the origin of the pollen and realized that the most likely source was actually bees.

To investigate further, Meselson gathered botanists and pollen experts from Harvard, Yale and the Smithsonian Institute to analyze the pollen itself and the liquid in which it was contained. Using a scanning electron microscope, Meselson’s colleague Joan W. Nowicke found that the “yellow rain” on leaf samples had nearly identical properties, including shape, size, color, texture and pollen content, to droppings left by Southeast Asian honeybees.

The “honeybee droppings” finding was further confirmed when Meselson traveled to the region and discovered that local bees do in fact take part in collective “cleansing flights” that produce showers of yellow droplets—bee feces—that can last for several minutes over an acre or more. And because they fly high enough and fast enough, the bees are difficult to see, even more so when one is not actually watching and waiting for that event.

Meselson furthermore uncovered that the intelligence gathered by the US was highly suspect at best, and that the testimonies gathered from locals were highly inconsistent in the accounts of the “attacks” and the “symptoms” they came down with. Moreover, there was no evidence of the necessary high concentrations of toxins to cause the earlier reported symptoms, nor were any fragments of dispersal mechanisms found.

Just as the Biden administration dug its heels in when the WHO findings came out against the suggestion of an artificially made coronavirus, the Reagan administration doubled down when Meselson published his findings, releasing a statement reasserting, “Our conclusion that chemical weapons use has occurred in Southeast Asia is based on evidence collected several years prior to 1984.” Intelligence reports also acknowledged that while “evidence on the Soviet role does not constitute proof in the scientific sense, the Intelligence Community finds the case to be thoroughly convincing.” One could substitute “Soviet” for “China” and have the arguments being put forward today.

Significantly, the Reagan administration was at the time facing its own public health crisis among Vietnam veterans

caused by the US military’s use of Agent Orange. The herbicide and forest defoliant had been in use since President John F. Kennedy authorized its use in Laos and Vietnam in 1962, when an estimated 20 million gallons were sprayed over rural villages in an attempt to starve the populations of those countries during “Operation Ranch Hand.”

The side effects on humans, however, were only brought into the American public’s eye after soldiers sprayed with the dangerous chemical came home and began to exhibit mental health problems, as well as numerous instances of their wives having miscarriages or children born with birth defects. Veterans began to file for disability claims related to Agent Orange in 1977, and were routinely denied because they could not “prove” the connection between the production of the weapon, its use in Vietnam and their current condition years later. Such callousness sparked immense outrage among the former soldiers, most of them drafted into the military.

Their unrest intersected with the broader developments in the class struggle, including a wave of strikes and protests by workers, under the impact of both rapid price inflation and a severe recession in industry provoked by the Federal Reserve, which pushed up interest rates to more than 20 percent. Haig gave his initial “yellow rain” speech only a month after Reagan’s mass firing of the PATCO air traffic controllers and only a week after the mass rally of nearly a million workers on Solidarity Day in Washington, the biggest ever demonstration by American workers. American capitalism was in crisis and seized on any opportunity to conceal or justify its immense crimes.

One major difference between the yellow rain and Wuhan lab propaganda campaigns, however, is the role of the US print and broadcast media. By the late 1980s, as “yellow rain” was further and further exposed to be an outright lie, the *New York Times*, for example, ran several articles with headlines such as “Still Caught in the Yellow Rain” and “Yellow Rain Falls,” noting that the entire affair was a “fiasco” and that, “Yellow rain is bee dung.”

Now, amid a pandemic that has killed more than 610,000 men, women and children in the US alone, for which the US government bears chief responsibility, the *Times*, *Post* and every other outlet are aligning themselves with an even more unbelievable lie. And it is one they themselves thoroughly debunked last year!



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