

Official US intelligence report finds no evidence for laboratory origin of SARS-CoV-2

Benjamin Mateus
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On March 20, 2023, President Joe Biden had signed into law S.619, the “COVID-19 Origin Act of 2023,” stipulating that the Intelligence Community (IC) had 90 days to declassify and release as much of the information as possible in their investigation into the origins of the COVID pandemic. This would have placed the deadline for the release to June 18, 2023.

Five days late, on June 23, 2023, Friday at 18:25 Eastern Standard Time, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) released its report on “the potential links between the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) and the Origin of COVID-19.” Indeed, Friday evening press releases by government officials on issues that have the potential to undermine their credibility have often been used to avoid immediate media scrutiny.

Not only does the ODNI report offer not one shred of evidence in support of the fascistic right-wing Wuhan lab leak conspiracy, but it goes far to corroborate the earlier statements made by the WIV scientists and World Health Organization (WHO) officials on the topic.

The American ultra-right has sought to cover up the lack of evidence behind its claims that China created SARS-CoV-2 with savage attacks in social media on principled scientists such as Dr. Peter Hotez and the plethora of accusations in right-wing publications such as the *Sunday Times* that the WIV was collaborating with researchers from the Chinese military to weaponize pathogens. This has been supplemented recently by the claim in *Public* by journalist Matt Taibbi that three WIV scientists who were “engaged in gain-of-function research” had fallen ill in November of 2019, supposedly the first victims of COVID-19.

None of these news reports offered any new or relevant information on the origins of the COVID pandemic. They only regurgitated hearsay and lies that have been repeated from the beginning in a campaign led by fascists like former Trump aide Steve Bannon to shift the blame for the pandemic onto Chinese authorities and use the issue as a political weapon to promote anti-Chinese bigotry and prepare for war. They sought to make up in volume and hysteria what they lacked in facts and evidence.

It is notable that the recent ODNI report confirmed what the US intelligence agencies had previously stated as far back as April 2020 when they wrote that “almost all IC agencies assess that SARS-CoV-2 was not genetically engineered ... was not laboratory-adapted ... [and] was not developed as a biological weapon.” These findings have significant implications, as the Republican-led investigation into the COVID origins has repeatedly insinuated that the virus was manipulated through gain-of-function research without evidence to back up these assertions.

The “Proximal Origins” paper

March 30, 2020, by Kristian Andersen and colleagues, in an initial scientific assessment, “The Proximal Origin of SARS-CoV-2,” which remains pertinent and fundamental to the origins question.

At the time, the authors wrote, “The genomic features described here may explain in part the infectiousness and transmissibility of SARS-CoV-2 in humans. Although the evidence shows that SARS-CoV-2 is not a purposefully manipulated virus, it is currently impossible to prove or disprove the other theories of its origin described here. However, since we observed all notable SARS-CoV-2 features, including the optimized RBD and polybasic cleavage site, in related coronaviruses in nature, we do not believe that any type of laboratory-based scenario is plausible.”

That initial report was followed by Dr. Edward Holmes and colleagues’ comprehensive report, “The Origins of SARS-CoV-2: A Critical Review,” published in *Cell* in 2021. The authors of the paper wrote, “There is currently no evidence that SARS-CoV-2 has a laboratory origin. There is no evidence that any early cases had any connection to the WIV, in contrast to the clear epidemiological links to animal markets in Wuhan, nor evidence that the WIV possessed or worked on a progenitor of SARS-CoV-2 prior to the pandemic.”

They then noted, “The suspicion that SARS-COV-2 might have a laboratory origin stem from the coincidence that it was first detected in a city that houses a major virological laboratory that studies coronaviruses. Wuhan is the largest city in central China with multiple animal markets and is a major hub for travel and commerce, well connected to other areas both within China and internationally. The link to Wuhan therefore more likely reflects the fact that pathogens often require heavily populated areas to become established.”

This was followed by Dr. Robert Garry’s letter in *PNAS (Proceedings of the National Academy of Science)* in 2022 titled, “SARS-COV-2 Furin Cleavage Site was not Engineered.” He succinctly explains the numerous features of the coronaviruses furin cleavage site—a hobby horse of the right-wing conspiracy theorists—that demonstrates why it was not engineered.

Because of the highly complex molecular interactions of viruses and their host, allegations of bioengineering must be met with deep skepticism. Reliance on careful analysis and submission to scrutiny by experts in the field is obligatory before any malign conclusions can be drawn. Repeatedly, the principled experts in this field have unanimously rejected laboratory manipulation.

The ODNI press release reaffirms these conclusions, only stating that the researchers at the WIV were conducting “extensive research on coronaviruses,” (which everyone knew) and asserting that “we continue to have no indication that the WIV’s pre-pandemic research holdings include SARS-CoV-2 or a close progenitor, nor any direct evidence that a specific-research-related incident occurred involving WIV personnel before the pandemic that could have caused the COVID pandemic.”

The ODNI statement actually substantiates the evidence provided on

The wildlife trade at Huanan market

The statement is compelling in that since the publication of the “Proximal origin” paper, no scientific evidence has emerged on behalf of the conspiracists that provides the lab-leak hypothesis any credibility. On the contrary, evidence of wildlife trade at the Huanan seafood market and raccoon dog DNA in the COVID-infected western stalls of the market have only confirmed the market was the focal point of the outbreak that led to the COVID pandemic.

That two lineages of the virus were present further undermines the lab leak hypothesis, since this would require two separate leaks, each traveling the 16 kilometers to the market and infecting no one on the way, then radiating outward from Huanan.

The critical work conducted by Dr. Michael Worobey, evolutionary biologist from the University of Arizona, bears reviewing again. Using data obtained from the WHO’s phase one study on COVID’s origin in 2021, he found that early cases in December 2019, connected with and without links to the market, for both lineages of the virus circulating at the time, centered to a high statistical degree around Huanan market and not the WIV.

The witch-hunt against WIV researchers

In this regard it has been central to the right-wing conspiracy, whether SARS-CoV-2 was bioengineered or not, that the virus was released from the WIV. The claims by the Republican-led investigation that several WIV researchers fell ill from COVID in the autumn of 2019 are the most recent effort to bolster the case. This culminated in the naming of Ben Hu, Yu Ping, and Yan Zhu, according to “sources within the US government,” as researchers suspected of having leaked the virus from the WIV and therefore being responsible for the deaths of tens of millions.

Without even speaking to these scientists, who continue to work on critical issues of pandemic potential pathogens, if such allegations are real or considering the potential dangers and harm, right-wing outlets like *Public*, *The Wall Street Journal* and others subjected them to monstrous libels.

As evolutionary biologist Dr. Florence Débarre, who has been tracking the evidence behind the COVID origin, recently noted, “You can also consider the ethics in naming people, of suspecting or even accusing them without evidence (so far) of being the source of the pandemic. They are human beings, not just characters in your story.”

As to the supposed sickened researchers, the ODNI report offers no names. It does acknowledge that the “supposed” sickened researchers had symptoms that could have been caused by several diseases and “some of the symptoms were not consistent with COVID-19.” They go on to note, “consistent with standard practices, those researchers likely completed annual health exams as part of their duties in a high-containment biosafety laboratory. The Intelligence Community assesses that the WIV maintains blood samples and health records of all of their laboratory personnel—which are standard procedures in high-containment laboratories.”

The report added, “We have no indications that any of these researchers were hospitalized because of the symptoms consistent with COVID-19. ... According to WHO’s March 22021 public report, WIV officials including Shi Zhengli—who leads the WIV laboratory group that conducts coronavirus research—stated lab employees all tested negative for SARS-CoV-2 antibodies.” This would mean, of course, that lab employees could not have transmitted the virus into the general population. The WHO also

acknowledge that they could not confirm if the sickened researchers had handled live viruses before falling ill.

On the same evening that the ODNI report was released, Jon Cohen, of the journal *Science*, who has been writing with care and intelligence on the Wuhan lab leak conspiracy and providing much needed objective reporting on the subject, published his follow-up report. Cohen wrote he had received an email from Ben Hu denying he ever became sick in late 2019. “The recent news about so-called ‘patient zero’ in WIV are absolutely rumors and ridiculous,” Hu said to Cohen in an email. “I did not get sick in Autumn 2019 and did not have COVID-19-like symptoms at that time. My colleagues and I tested for SARS-CoV-2 antibody in early March 2020 and were all negative.” Yu Ping corroborated these in another email stating these charges were “fake news.”

The brief ODNI report also addresses issues regarding biosafety and collaboration with the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). In this regard, the assessments made corroborate the findings observed by the American Embassy in Beijing in a cable sent to Washington dated January 19, 2018, “China Opens First Bio-Safety Level 4 Laboratory.”

According to the embassy cable, the WIV scientists were working on coronaviruses, and they had assistance from the international community in bringing their laboratories up to code. Additionally, they were encouraged to continue research into potentially pandemic pathogens, they were precluded “from studying human-disease-causing SARS coronaviruses” in their new labs until such permissions were granted through approving authorities.

The collaboration between the military and nationally recognized laboratories are longstanding and not unique to China, as evidenced by the integrated work between the US Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases, the National Institutes of Health, and other institutions.

The ODNI report states, “... some of the research conducted by the PLA and WIV included work with several viruses, including coronaviruses, but no known viruses that could plausibly be a progenitor of SARS-CoV-2. For example, PLA researchers have used WIV laboratories for virology and vaccine-related work.” As the report notes, the collaborative work was intended for public health needs to enhance China’s knowledge of pathogens and early disease warning capabilities. The few live viruses they did possess “were too distantly related to have led to the creation of SARS-CoV-2.”

The witch-hunt against American researchers

It is clear that the ODNI report will have little influence on the witch-hunt being led by leading Republicans with the support of their Democratic colleagues. Even as the ODNI report was being released, Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic Chairman Brad Wenstrup (R-Ohio) announced the first subpoena against Dr. Kristian Andersen to gain access to his private communications and Slack messaging channels.

Wenstrup wrote, “We are following the breadcrumbs of a COVID-19 cover-up straight to the source. Dr. Kristian Andersen played a pivotal role in potentially suppressing the lab leak hypothesis, and Americans deserve to know why this happened, who was involved, and how we can prevent the intentional suppression of scientific discourse during a future pandemic.”

He continued, “It is clear that the authors of ‘Proximal Origins’ may have possessed conflicts of interest for supporting a zoonotic origin of COVID-19. Fully investigating the internal messages between the co-authors and contributors is a crucial step to inform future legislation and

hold guilty parties accountable.”

The ODNI report only confirms that the entire conspiracy that has been ongoing for more than three years was woven out of whole cloth and lacks any basis in any factual, objective evidence. In short, it was politically motivated and functioned as a mechanism of US imperialist foreign policy. The subpoena against Andersen and colleagues only means that science itself is now under assault and being criminalized if it doesn’t suit the purposes of the state.



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