

House Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic begins political inquisition of scientists

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On Tuesday, the House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic, led by Republican Representative Brad Wenstrup, a podiatrist and former US Army reservist, interrogated two leading authors of the research note titled *Proximal Origin of SARS-CoV-2*, published in March 2020 and well known in the scientific community for being the first significant investigation into where the virus which causes COVID-19 came from.

The purpose of the hearings was intended to discredit Dr. Kristian Andersen, professor in the Department of Immunology and Microbiology at Scripps Research Institute, and Dr. Robert Garry, professor of Microbiology and Immunology at Tulane Medical School, by claiming they “vilified and suppressed the lab leak theory in pursuit of a preferred, coordinated narrative that was not based in truth or science.”

Wenstrup claimed that he had evidence “that the conclusions championed by the co-authors of *Proximal Origin* are not only inaccurate but were crafted to appease a stated political motive.” This involved a supposed cover-up of the real source of the virus, the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV), in which the scientists engaged at the direction of two top health officials, Dr. Anthony Fauci and Dr. Francis Collins.

The Republican-based scenario, initially advanced by fascist Trump counselor Steve Bannon, insists that Fauci and Collins had pushed to publish the paper showing a natural origin of SARS-CoV-2 to escape responsibility for creating the virus. They feared that otherwise they would be implicated in offering millions in grants to EcoHealth Alliance, a US-based global nonprofit scientific research organization, which worked with the Chinese lab to conduct studies on bat coronaviruses.

Dr. Andersen addressed this right-wing conspiracy theory in his prepared testimony to the hearing. He declared, “The title of this hearing, ‘Investigating the Proximal Origin of a Cover-Up,’ is directly targeted at our March 2020 peer-reviewed study in *Nature Medicine* titled ‘The Proximal Origin of SARS-CoV-2.’”

He continued:

It has been alleged that our paper was initiated and orchestrated by Dr. Anthony Fauci to disprove, dismiss, and cover up a lab origin of SARS-CoV-2 as directed at a February 1, 2020, conference call. ... It has also been suggested that a \$8.9 million federal “WARN-ID” grant awarded in 2020 to myself and colleagues from five different countries was a quid-pro-quo we received for changing our conclusions about the likely origin of SARS-CoV-2. Let me categorically say that these allegations are absurd and false.

Throughout the hearing, the two scientists gave calm and measured testimony rebutting the conspiracy theory at every point and arguing that proponents of the “lab leak” had not offered a shred of factual evidence. The Republicans howled and preened before the television cameras, appealing to Donald Trump and his fascist supporters.

And the Democrats contented themselves with a few “for the record” statements of support for the scientists but otherwise did nothing to interrupt the display witch-hunting worthy of Senator Joe McCarthy at his worst. They are far more concerned with maintaining bipartisan support for the war in Ukraine than in fighting a conspiracy theory launched by fascists like former Trump counselor Steve Bannon.

During the hearing, Representative Ronny Jackson (Republican—Texas) told Andersen and Garry, “What a lot of people think is going on here is that Dr. Anthony Fauci and Francis Collins realized that they had been implicated in the creation of the virus, and they were doing everything they could, including getting both of you to come on board as tools or vehicles, to undermine that theory.”

These are, based on accumulated evidence acquired over the last three years that include their own intelligence reports on the subject, bald-faced lies that perpetuate the conspiracy first raised by Bannon and his cronies to shift the blame for Trump’s criminal response to the pandemic onto China.

Dr. Andersen is an internationally renowned researcher whose main work has focused on understanding the complex relationships between human hosts and infectious pathogens. He has conducted extensive work in the genetics of these interactions, as well as field work and computational biology to better elucidate these natural processes. More so, he has been the lead investigator in many international collaborations that not only included SARS-CoV-2, but also the Zika virus, Ebola virus, West Nile virus and Lassa virus.

In late January 2020, after a preliminary review of the SARS-CoV-2 genome, Dr. Andersen and colleagues Dr. Robert Garry and Dr. Edward Holmes (leading researcher on the evolution and emergence of infectious diseases) had contacted Dr. Fauci to discuss their concerns over the mutation seen at the furin site of the coronavirus’ spike protein, which they felt was a possible indicator of bioengineering.

Fauci and the scientists and other health experts discussed this possibility and asked Andersen to get a group of scientists together “to examine carefully the data to determine if his concerns were validated.” Specifically, Fauci had told Andersen then that “if you think it came from a lab, you should write this up as a peer-reviewed paper.”

In others, the email record shows the diametrically opposite of the right-wing conspiracy theory. The scientists were initially concerned about the possible creation of a bioweapon, which would have enormous implications both politically and in terms of health care, and they were

tasked with investigating the issue.

Fauci and Collins were merely facilitators in organizing the international investigation without once indicating any particular conclusion should be arrived at or forced. This was an open collaborative process free from any form of coercion, deceit or ill intentions. A February conference call among leading scientists demonstrated this, as Andersen noted in his testimony:

There is clearly much to understand in this. This call was very helpful to hear some of our current understanding and the many gaps in our knowledge. I do not believe this is a question of a binary outcome, it is more a question of “What are the evolutionary origins of 2019-nCoV, important for future risk assessment and understanding of animal/human coronaviruses.”

We on this call are not the only ones with scientific expertise in this area, and this was an ad hoc group that came together to air some thoughts. It is clearly not the sole group to take this forward, that will need a broader range of input and a respected international body to ask an expert group to explore this, with a completely open mind. In order to stay ahead of the conspiracy theories and social media, I do think there is an urgency for a body to convene such a group and commission some work to “Understand the evolutionary origins of 2019-nCoV, important for this epidemic and for future risks assessment and understanding of animal/human coronaviruses.”

In other words, a completely open minded and neutral question bringing the best minds and under the umbrella of a respected international agency. I hope this is a reasonable approach, please send any thoughts or suggestions.

In a matter of a few days in February 2020, after studying the virus’s genome and the available literature on coronaviruses in bats and their spillover into human populations, and entertaining various lab leak accident scenarios, Andersen and his colleagues arrived at an “agnostic” consensus, stating in their Letter published in *Nature Medicine*: “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 [various hypotheses of how the virus made its way from the animal reservoir to human beings]. However, since we observed all notable SARS-CoV-2 features, including the optimized RBD [Receptor Binding Domain] and polybasic cleavage site [Furin Cleavage Site], in related coronaviruses in nature, we do not believe that any type of laboratory-based scenario is plausible.”

They added, “More scientific data could swing the balance of evidence to favor one hypothesis over another. Obtaining related viral sequences from animal sources would be the most definitive way of revealing viral origins.”

Since that publication, the weight of the evidence has only given further support to their “proximal” conclusions. Four publications in particular are relevant to the examination of these and have been linked here for the reader’s review:

- The origins of SARS-CoV-2: a critical review (September 16, 2021)
- The Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan was the early epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic (July 26, 2022)
- SARS-CoV-2 furin cleavage site was not engineered (September 29, 2022)
- COVID-origins study links raccoon dogs to Wuhan market: what scientists think (March 22, 2023)

And these are only a few in a long list of publications in high visibility journals that include most recent evidence of SARS-CoV-2-like viruses

have emerged as well as bat coronaviruses that harbor FCS and most recently work by Dr. Edward Holmes and his group that found a recombinant “SARS-1-like and SARS-2-like viruses [that has] a receptor binding domain that is as close as any to SARS-CoV-2.”

On the side of the lab leak conspiracy, not one piece of even circumstantial evidence has come to light in defense of their hysterical allegations. Not even the US intelligence services, with a vested interest in spreading anti-Chinese propaganda, have been able to reach any consensus or offer more than a “low confidence” assessment—little more than speculation.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted last month after 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, “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 the WHO officials on the topic.”

Despite the oft inflammatory remarks made by various Republicans, including the outright fascist Marjorie Taylor Greene, not once did they offer any evidence to the allegations that Andersen and colleagues changed their views from a bioengineered to zoonotic origin hypothesis because of political coercion or bribery. Nor could they refute the science as it was presented during the testimony.

As Andersen quietly observed, unfazed by the attacks, “[it seems we are] pawns in a political game.” Despite these, he continued to patiently explain when he was given an opportunity to get a word in edgewise. “I think it’s important that we take a step back and focus on what’s possible versus what is probable. ... We conclude that the virus very likely emerged as the result of a zoonosis, that is, a spillover from an animal host. This remains the only scientifically supported theory for how the virus emerged. If convincing new evidence were to be discovered, suggesting otherwise, we would, of course, revise our conclusions. This is science.”

Later he noted, “If there were any new evidence that were to be unearthed suggesting that this could potentially have been associated with a lab, of course, we will consider that.”

Dr. Andersen explained that the threats to himself and his colleagues had reached a fever pitch, so much so that he has found his name on various kill lists posted by right-wing Trump supporters and other fascists.

As Wenstrup brought the hearings to an end, he defended the two federal agencies that supported the lab-leak hypothesis—the FBI and the Department of Energy—for their positions, and he warned that he was going to investigate the other intelligence units for not reaching similar conclusions. This is McCarthyism in a nutshell.

One can assume that Eco Health Alliance and Dr. Fauci will be next on the subcommittee hit list. These proceedings only underscore the deeply reactionary and degenerated state of US politics and global capitalism, where science is deeply maligned and mistrusted if it does not adhere to the demands placed on it by political reaction.



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