

Democrats join with Republican fascists to witch-hunt scientist Peter Daszak

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On Thursday, Dr. Peter Daszak, one of the world's leading experts on the origins of infectious diseases, testified before the House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic.

Dr. Daszak was not called to speak on the emerging threat of the H5N1 avian flu, or on other new diseases that threaten to kill millions, or even on the enormous strides that have been made in determining the animal origins of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19.

Rather, he was subjected to a bipartisan inquisition, in which Democrats vied with Republicans to promote the conspiracy theory, concocted by the fascist January 6 coup plotter Steve Bannon, that Daszak and his fellow scientists created SARS-CoV-2.

For three hours, one politician after another either asserted or insinuated that this courageous scientist, who has devoted his life to saving the lives of others, was a witch, a traitor, a liar, or even all three.

Daszak, confident in the knowledge that he was speaking not only in the name of science, but the interests of all humanity, defied his inquisitors with courage and dignity, in the process making them look like the liars and fools they are.

Dr. Peter Hotez, a molecular virologist and dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, condemned the hearing, declaring,

The chilling message from both GOP and Democrats in the US Congress to young Americans: 'Scientists are enemies of the people, you have options in life, don't throw your opportunities away by becoming a scientist, at least not in America.' Honestly, I'm beyond disgusted.

He added in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*:

We now have zoonotic threats emerging at an accelerating cadence. This is the time when we need to be doubling down and expanding our global virus surveillance networks. By making up allegations, [the subcommittee is] ... undermining the work of EcoHealth and other organizations committed to understanding how viruses are jumping from animals into humans.

The truth was the casualty in this ignoble hearing, whose sole purpose was to incite anti-Chinese sentiments and redirect the social anger for the criminal handling of the pandemic, which has claimed close to 30 million lives globally, against China.

As Daszak noted in a statement that he issued to the journal *Science* upon concluding the three-plus hours of bipartisan grilling,

It appeared the Committee had decided to declare EcoHealth Alliance guilty until proven innocent. It's shocking and disappointing that they are now threatening to debar our organization, throw our staff out of work, and undermine 20 years of world leading research.

After four years of the COVID-19 pandemic, not one shred of evidence on a lab-leak origin has been produced by any principled scientist who has taken the question seriously. On the contrary, evidence in support of a natural origin has continued to accumulate on a weekly basis that include epidemiologic, forensic, and zoonotic

information that SARS-like and SARS-CoV-2-like bat viruses are common in Southeast Asia, showing that the robust wildlife trade in the region contributed to the development of the COVID pandemic.

So, what political purpose did these discussions serve? What is behind defaming Daszak and calling for his organization's debarment and his criminal prosecution?

When one reviews Daszak's and his organizations accomplishments, they cover every conceivable pathogen known across the globe. EcoHealth has published nearly 1,500 articles in their journal, almost all original contributions. Besides bat viruses, they include mosquito-borne diseases, Lyme disease and other tickborne viruses, Brucella exposure in Bangladesh, as well as zoonotic disease in wild-animal trades and impacts associated with urbanization and climate change. Dr. Daszak has close to 56,000 citations and is recognized as the foremost scientist in pandemic potential pathogens and coronaviruses.

In his written testimony to the subcommittee, Daszak explained the important work EcoHealth Alliance has performed for the US and the world community in the last two decades:

EcoHealth Alliance scientists have worked in partnership with US Federal Agencies since the early 2000s, with significant funding support from dozens of leading government and philanthropic donors.

With NIH funding, we mapped the global spread of highly pathogenic avian flu and showed its potential to enter the US via trading partners in Canada – information that the Government Accountability Office used to better target strategic surveillance.

With support from the Department of Homeland Security we mapped the likely introduction of emerging viruses via air travel and trade, and the threat they represent to US public health and agriculture.

With funding from the National Institutes of Health, we identified the origins of the highly lethal Nipah virus and discovered that bats are the wildlife reservoirs of MERS, SARS, and of a new viral disease that threatens global swine production.

In all our federally funded projects, we have maintained open, transparent communication with

agency staff, rapidly provided information critical to public health and agriculture, uploaded data, and genetic sequences into the NIH Genbank database, and published our analyses in scientific journals so that scientists everywhere can use this information.

Fundamentally, pandemic preparedness and prevention functions globally on an international footing. As events in Wuhan in late 2019 demonstrated, an infectious outbreak in one place will quickly lead to a global conflagration of disease.

The political backdrop to the inquisition of Daszak is one of escalating global war. Unlimited billions are being funneled to the war in Ukraine, the genocide in Gaza, and preparations for direct military conflict with Iran and China. In this context, Daszak's insistence that COVID has a natural origin, and that collaborative work is necessary with China and all countries, places him under tremendous scrutiny and derision.

The debarment and cutting off of funds for Daszak and EcoHealth Alliance would only make the world more vulnerable to emerging infectious pathogens, as highlighted by the rapidly evolving H5N1 avian flu that has widely spread among dairy cows and infected workers handling the animals.

Nearly a century after high school teacher John T. Scopes was criminally prosecuted for teaching evolution, the entire US political establishment has embraced anti-scientific bigotry and fascist conspiracy theories in the name of promoting nationalism and war.

The witch-hunt against science and scientists is an attack on the working class, which all class-conscious workers must condemn and oppose.



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